

Awakening and Castrating: Gender Narratives in the Debut Works of Emerging Female Directors

Zhao Zheng

Shandong University of Arts Changqing District, Jinan, Shandong, 250300 China

Abstract: *In the past decade, a group of female film directors have emerged, and they have all chosen women as the main subject in their debut works. Through a unique female perspective, they have deepened the exploration of gender in domestic women-themed films and opened up new expressive spaces on social realities and women's struggles. By portraying strong-willed female protagonists as narrative focal points through bodily narratives, they showcase women awakening from the male gaze and ultimately achieving a castration of male images. The gender narratives of emerging female directors enrich the representation of women in domestic films, addressing the challenges faced by young women today and promoting the development of related genres, injecting new vitality into Chinese cinema.*

Keywords: *Female directors; Debut works; Male gaze; Castration of masculinity; Female consciousness*

1. Introduction

With the increasing self-consciousness of contemporary women, a growing number of Chinese film directors are choosing to explore feminist films related to women's survival and characterized by a distinctive and vivid female consciousness, conveying the values and ideas of the current era through unique artistic expressions. In recent years, a new generation of female directors has emerged in the film industry. They reflect on their own unique life experiences and delicately portray the survival scenarios of women, presenting diverse yet converging gender expressions in their films. This serves as a significant force in promoting the advancement of women's films.

This article focuses on the converging gender narratives in the debut works of three emerging female directors: Wang Yichun, the director of "What's in the Darkness"; Bai Xue, the director of "The Crossing"; and Teng Congcong, the director of "Send Me to the Clouds," aiming to witness the contemporary brilliance of Chinese women's films.

These three directors, born in the 1970s and 1980s, all grew up in the same historical era and shared similar life experiences. "Female directors of the new century live in a diverse cultural background, and the modern context provides them with the right and space to fully express themselves. Therefore, they are able to extend their thoughts and ideas to any era and place, and boldly describe the characters and emotions on the edge."^[1] With keen sensitivity to real-life, and independent and insightful thinking in film creation, these directors successfully demonstrate their understanding of gender identity in their debut works, while collectively rejecting the image of the traditional "good wife and mother," aiming to break the stereotypical gender roles of "men working outside and women managing inside." Instead, they highlight female subjects with strong individual consciousness while weakening the portrayal of male characters.

2. Awakening of self-consciousness of the female Other under the male gaze

According to Lacan's theory that "women are the 'castrated' Other," men, in order to solidify their subjective status and attain symbolic power, may take actions to expel the symbolic anxiety and traumatic memories caused by women. This is achieved by objectifying and idealizing the female body, endowing it with mystical allure and associations of desire. The extensively objectified female body is on longer seen as a distinct Other in relation to men, but rather as an alien Other, an object of observation or desire.^[2]

In the film "Send Me to the Clouds," Liang Meizhi plays the role of Sheng Nan's mother and serves

as the main female character. She is depicted as someone who is passionate about beauty and skincare, a charming woman who, despite being in her fifties, maintains a "pure" and innocent image. Throughout the film, she is often objectified and viewed through the male gaze.

When she was young, Liang Meizhi worked as an apprentice in a factory. Her exceptional beauty caught the attention of a promising young man, and they married when she was only 19 years old. From then on, she lived a life that many envied as a wealthy wife. Liang Meizhi played the role of a dutiful wife and mother, leading a seemingly respectable life. However, when faced with her husband's infidelity, she felt helpless and eventually grew emotionally distant. After her husband and their puppy left, Liang Meizhi began searching for new connections. The character of Liang Meizhi embodies the traditional image of women as objects to be "observed," "consumed," and "dependent on men."

However, the film also portrays the awakening of female self-consciousness through the story of Liang Meizhi. As a woman who has always depended on others, she decides to accompany her daughter after a dispute with her husband. On the journey, she meets Lao Li. Although she initially considers taking revenge on her husband by cheating with someone, and even becomes the object of Lao Li's "gaze" for a brief period, her pain after Lao Li's death reveals her desire for true love. This longing represents an awakening of self-consciousness, breaking free from the traditional societal expectation of being a "wife and mother".

In "The Crossing," Peipei's mother engages in relationships with men but is repeatedly left behind, seeking pleasure but also yearning for freedom. She successfully breaks free from the traditional roles of a virtuous wife and devoted mother but struggles to overcome her habit of relying on others.

She places her hope for a fulfilling life in men, seeing herself as a mere pawn in the game of life. She repeatedly puts herself in a vulnerable position to be taken advantage of. In the three brief encounters with her lover, it's clear that she is very concerned about how she appears to men, trying to attract their attention through her external appearance. Typically, the way a character is introduced in a scene reflects the author's deliberate intention. The mother's entrance is set in a mahjong parlor, sitting closely with her lover. She is wearing bright red lipstick, a slightly revealing V-neck top, and vividly painted nails while holding a cigarette – a vivid portrayal of a woman who is eager to be looked at. The colorful outfits during her dates with her lover and in the breakup scene follow a similar pattern. The movie does not give much information about Peipei's family background. Based on the plot and Jo's insults towards her, it can be inferred that Peipei might have been an unintended outcome of a shameful relationship or a transaction for survival purposes. This indirectly suggests that the portrayal of Peipei's mother is not solely intended to showcase women's charm to the audience, but rather to cater to male perspectives. It also aims to illustrate the current situation where some modern women, lacking a strong sense of individuality, willingly conform to male preferences and become dependent on men or their families.

As the film nears its conclusion, Peipei's mother undergoes a transformation. She evolves from her past romantic disappointments and starts to identify with Peipei's strong sense of self. From drunkenly sleeping in her daughter's arms to excitedly declaring, "This time, the two of us will definitely change our luck in Spain!" and finally, smiling meaningfully as they reach the summit of Tai Ping Mountain to overlook Hong Kong, it seems as though a deep connection is forming between the two women. The mother gradually adopts Peipei's way of life and attempts to embrace a new chapter in her own life.

As seen through the characterizations and storylines of Liang Meizhi and Peipei's mother, the creators hold hopeful expectations for the awakening of female consciousness in the intricate life journeys of these two women. During the early years after the foundation of China, women had a relatively vague awareness of gender differences, and collective consciousness was lacking. It was only after the reform and opening up that women's autonomous consciousness gradually began to resurface. However, due to the prolonged being "scripted" of their roles, their consciousness mostly remained at a superficial level. Currently, there is a complex situation where old and new consciousness coexist, with varying degrees of awareness among women from different social groups or strata. Liang Meizhi and Peipei's mother, as representatives of women entangled in the lingering constraints of "old consciousness", are constantly struggling between dependence on others and the pursuit of self-awareness. This setup reflects a critical examination by female directors of the male gaze, resistance against outdated norms, and a call to women lacking self-awareness in the present era.

3. Female subjects with strong individual consciousness

In today's society, women play an equally significant role as men in various aspects, including education and employment, as the individual consciousness of women has grown increasingly strong. The term "individual consciousness" refers to a conscious characteristic wherein women deliberately shed dependence on men across economic, psychological, spiritual, personalistic, and societal dimensions, moving towards self-governance, self-reliance, and self-improvement.^[3] Those leading characters or main female images, shaped by female directors, whether it is Peipei in "The Crossing," Sheng Nan in "Send Me to the Clouds," or Qu Jing and Zhang Xue in "What's in the Darkness," embody a distinct and strong individual consciousness.

Sheng Nan, in "Send Me to the Clouds," is an independent, ambitious, and progressive modern woman, who, despite her yearning for genuine love, remains single due to not encountering the right man. However, she still boldly pursues love even when suffering from cancer.

The societal prejudice against single women in their late twenties or older is especially evident in a conversation among passersby: "Twenty-seven is an important starting point for women as they will be labeled as 'leftover' after that age...What about men? Men are golden bachelors..." Sheng Nan, viewed as a "leftover woman" by others, dismisses this biased dialogue with a sense of disregard. She is used to the public's opinion. However, she does not desperately explain herself or submit to the arrangements of others because of the growing age. Instead, she remains steadfast in her own principles. "Send Me to the Clouds" introduces Sheng Nan at the beginning of the story as a young girl diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Learning about the potential impact on her physical needs from her male friend Si Mao, she embarks on a journey of physiological self-rescue and emotional self-fulfillment, confronting fate both psychologically and physically.

The widespread topic on this film is rooted in its exploration of women's physiological needs while addressing their emotional needs. In the past, discussing "sex" was considered taboo for women, and societal expectations urged them to maintain purity without providing guidance on facing their desires.^[4] However, this film doesn't shy away from discussing women's physiological features and desires. On the contrary, it openly and authentically portrays women's physical demands, enabling the audience to connect with an adult woman or a grown-up possessing a strong sense of individual consciousness.

"Viewed from the feminist perspective, the absence of male parental figures and the emergence of castrated men becomes reflections of female anxiety and anger."^[5] In "The Crossing," the consistent absence of Peipei's father sheds light on the frustrations and concerns of women portrayed in the film. Despite Peipei's compliance in response to her father's attempts to rebuild his new family, her actions convey not submission to patriarchal norms but rather an acquiescence and understanding of her father. In the narrative of Peipei's father, women are no longer dominated by male. Although Peipei desires a close relationship with her father, she refuses to be a subordinate and, seeing a joyful scene behind a glass window at a restaurant, Peipei actively chooses understanding, withdrawal, and self-assertion. Through the reconstruction of female images and relationships, the film overturns traditional narrative subjects and objects and challenges male authority.

Additionally, in comparison to the depiction of the protagonist Qu Jing, the portrayal of Zhang Xue by Wang Yichun in "What's in the Darkness" more effectively communicates the creator's bold assertion of women's self-consciousness. Unlike the symbolic teenage girl, Zhang Xue is bold, progressive, and mature. She appears to reflect Qu Jing's suppressed self-expectations, embodying Qu Jing's inner self, and serving as an idealized representation of what adolescent girls aspire to become. Zhang Xue's entrance into the narrative is accompanied by male gazes. Her beautiful face and graceful figure seem to be reminiscent of the traditional objectified female figure. However, this time it's different—she fights and retrogrades. She courageously challenges paternal authority and the system, questioning, "Do you resemble your father? What does it even mean if you do?" While her aspirations for freedom may deviate from traditional virtues, director Huang Shuqin remarked that "Female consciousness must involve self-demands, self-awareness, and self-development of women. The protagonist should be active or exhibit active behavior." This embodies a girl with a healthy gender awareness and clear individual consciousness.

4. Castration expression of the male characters

In the Confucian ethical philosophy in China, ideas such as "Man is superior to woman" and "The

Three Cardinal Guides and the Five Constant Virtues" view women as sacrificial figures. The ideologies of paternal and marital authority determine that women's roles should be scripted as entities catering to and pleasing men, which, over time, is solidified into a collective unconsciousness within the masses. Early Chinese-language films took on the challenge of deconstructing the male images on screen, sparking a significant movement to undermine paternal authority. For example, in the film "My Father and I," directed by Xu Jinglei, the traditional authoritative image of a father is subverted. Lao Yu is depicted as a "rogue" father wandering in bars. "Dam Street," directed by Li Yu, puts an end to the fate of the culprit who caused unmarried pregnancy for women in an accident. In "Perpetual Motion," directed by Ning Ying, the consistently mentioned male character never shows up, presenting a polarization of gender relations leaning towards radical feminism. As female consciousness awakens and matures, films like "Take Me to the Moon," "The Crossing," and "What's in the Darkness" depict a shift in gender relations. However, the castration expression of male characters remains the most direct expression employed by these three emerging female directors to collectively deconstruct paternal authority and resist patriarchy.

Teng Congcong, in particular, undermines the male characters in "Take Me to the Moon." Sheng Nan's friend, Si Mao, is portrayed as secular and materialistic, valuing everything in monetary terms. Sheng Nan's "boss," Mr Li, is depicted as an uncultured nouveau riche. The "soul mate" Liu Guangming appears refined but is, in reality, an undignified live-in son-in-law. Even the wisest character, the old gentleman Mr Li, faces a swift reversal by the "incarnation of sensuality," Liang Meizhi, through a satirical portrayal technique.

Liu Guangming, Sheng Nan's idealized type of boyfriend, initially seems refined and artistic. However, beneath this facade, he is riddled with flaws. The dramatic reversal of his image is a typical example of the castration mode. In his first appearance, he embodies a compassionate male figure with an artistic temperament. Moved by an elderly woman mourning a lost coffin board, he repeatedly offers money to "heal" her wounds. He is interested in capturing clouds in the sky and engaging in philosophical discussions using numbers and units of measurement. In essence, he is portrayed as kind, indifferent, and cultured. Nevertheless, when Sheng Nan discloses her illness and professes her love for him, Liu Guangming hastily retreats. His escape is not merely due to cowardice but rather a result of being trapped—he is a live-in son-in-law already committed to a family. His identity as Mr. Li's son-in-law unveils his life choices. His ability to generously help others, take photos of clouds and talk about philosophy comes at the cost of his marriage. He has become a plaything and reproductive tool for the wealthy. He recites pi at his father-in-law gatherings as a peculiar performance while people watch his performance as if observing a monkey show. His life is lamentable and regrettable. Facing an absolute patriarchy, he endures his circumstances, gnashing his teeth, but is unable to openly rebel. He pursues a sense of superiority through aiding the weak and engaging in trivial schemes. His final jump embodies an act of defiance, only resulting in a laughable and embarrassing outcome. He is unable to dictate his own destiny.

In "What's in the Dark," Qu Jing's father, Qu Zhicheng, stands as a principled and stubborn figure. While facing unfulfilled aspirations due to societal constraints on one hand, he represents the embodiment of the system through his influence on his children on the other.

Qu Zhicheng works as a forensic doctor at the local police station. He is introduced in a market setting, showing off his medical knowledge while purchasing pork, which lays bare the awkward situation in his profession. In contrast to his colleagues who extract confessions by torture for the sake of "efficiency," his unyielding quest for truth renders the so-called intellectuals the subject of ridicule and animosity among peers, struggling to advance in the workplace. At home, his wife complains. When Qu Jing brings home an award, his wife cynically roasts, "If your dad possessed half your prowess, he wouldn't be nobody as always." As Qu Jing watches a crime TV series, she questions her father's role as a police officer, asking: "How did you become a cop? Where is your gun?" Qu Zhicheng finds himself at a loss for words but preemptorily change the channel. "When a policeman does not act like a policeman, a man does not act like a man, and a father does not act like a father, how can you expect a student to act like a student, a girl to act like a girl, and a daughter to act like a daughter?"^[6] When Qu Zhicheng instructs Qu Jing to sit properly on the bicycle seat, closing her legs, she counters with, "Who said so?" prompting him to assert with heightened voice, "I did." Their dialogues, marked by questions and defiance, transit from probing complaints to overt questioning and defiance. The gap between father and daughter remains unbridgeable, with paternal authority diminishing and the paternal myth gradually descending from its pedestal.

In the film "What's in the Darkness," there's another noteworthy character, Zhang Xue's farther. While Qu Zhicheng embodies a sense of unfulfillment, Zhang Xue's father, Zhang Shulin, can be

identified as a "successful person." He is a genius renowned for solving crimes by studying the tabloid newspapers, a good police officer who understands and benefits from the intricacies of the system, a father who covets petty gain and liberally spends on confiscated stolen goods, and a people's hero who, despite solving perplexing cases, loses his daughter. As described above, Zhang Shulin is not portrayed as a father with positive attributes like stature, dignity, and rectitude; instead, he is depicted as a speculator whom everyone can despise.

For those three directors, their debut works serve as a test paper of special significance, marked by sharp narrative styles and distinct perspectives. "What's in the Darkness" discusses the pains of growing up under the domestication of family and societal systems through the sexual enlightenment of adolescent girls; "The Crossing" contemplates issues of belonging and growth through the narrative of a girl who lives in Shenzhen and attends school in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, "Send Me to the Clouds" directly criticizes the deleterious impact of a materialistic worldview on human nature through the story of women pursuing love and sex. The innovative styles and strong feminist consciousness of these three female directors are vividly evident on the screen.

5. Conclusions

Huang Shuqin, a female director, believes: "If the south window represents the male perspective shaped by millennia of societal values, then the female perspective is akin to the east window. It is from there that sunlight first permeates, offering a sideways view of gardens and roads – a distinct perspective characterized by sensitivity, allure, softness, strength, and resilience." Female directors uphold their unique viewpoints and attitudes and seamlessly integrate invaluable ideological attitudes into their film creation, enriching the films with a profound temperament and charm. It is hoped that in the days to come, these directors will freely express their sentiments, and deliver their increasingly sophisticated film concepts and compelling women's stories.

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