

Visual Methods and Critical Research for ‘Girls’ Day’ in China

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Abstract: *Girls’ Day is a new form of International Women’s Day (IWD) in China, celebrated by Chinese female colleges students. This article uses visual methods to analyse images of Girls’ Day’s slogan and women’s stereotype, and raises concerns related to the gender identities, gender discriminations, gender stereotypes, and feminine internal divisions. Findings show that ‘Girls’ Day’ enhances hidden gender discrimination by dividing female into two groups. One relates to those young, well-educated, beautiful unmarried women who celebrate Girls’ Day, others are associated with elder (usually over 30 years old), less charming, uneducated married women who celebrate IWD. In this way, IWD is growingly stigmatised and departure from its original intention.*

Keywords: *Girls’ Day, gender discrimination, International Women’s Day, women stereotype*

1. Introduction

The sociological imagination is instructive for the interpretation of social phenomenon. Visual methods play a vital role in the exploration of social experience and images is valuable to define our sense of self and life [1]. These thoughts are beneficial to start researching the nature and reality of women’s stereotype even stigmatization in China with visual way. It does not merely display outward gender discrimination, such as women have lower social status than men in many aspects or the gender wage gap, rather, it shows hidden discrimination when part of women get preferential treatment because of the gender advantages to some extent. This article attempts to address on internal differentiation of female and the stigmatization of elder women, and by doing so to represent the new form of gender discrimination.

There is a special day for Chinese female college students, namely Girls’ Day (nv sheng jie). Girls’ day begins at the late 1980s, generally on March 7th. Launched by Shandong University in China, it become an important festival in most Chinese universities [2]. The original Girls’ Day is regarded as is another form of International Women’s Day (IWD). It intends to give care and love for college girls and to offer opportunities for girls to show the elegant demeanour. However, in current society, it has divided women into two groups: ‘girls’ and ‘women’. In this circumstance, a great number of young women decline to be called ‘women’ and prefer celebrating Girls’ Day to IWD.

In China, ‘woman’ not only means gender, but also represents a group that composed of middle-aged married women. Compared to ‘girl’, the impression of ‘women’ (fu nv) for Chinese public is associated with elder housewife who is untidy and less attractive, paying all attention to her husband and children [3]. Impacted by Confucianism, traditional family division emphasise patriarchal familial relations. The value of women is usually restricted in domestic sphere, and women are expected to take more responsibility on taking care of family members and managing matters within the family [4].

2. Methods

In this research, I will use semiotic analysis and discourse analysis to find out denotation and connotation of several images associated with women.

Chandler (1994) clarifies his understanding of the semiotics. It is the meaning of symbols and the recognition of structured language, but all the meaning is a part of a relational system [5]. Anything can be a sign, if someone interprets it as the expression of something to refer to or represent something other than oneself. By linked to familiar conversations, they are interpreted as signs.

There are two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. It addresses on the Intertextuality

of signs because our sense of reality is fundamentally relational, and reality is framed within systems of analogy. Meanwhile, the distinction between signifiers is the key to structuralist semiotic analysis. 'These two dimensions are often presented as 'axes', where the horizontal axis is the syntagmatic and the vertical axis is the paradigmatic [5]. Paradigmatic relation could be understood as contrastive, like analysing the choice of words, dance steps, while syntagm is a combination of meaningful and integral signifier within a text, such as analysing sentence and dance performance.

Otherwise, semiotic analysis plays an important role in sociological research [5]. It has positive impact on denaturalizing academic assumptions into mundane and finding the hidden meaning of the obvious content. The meaning of signs is linked with power and inequality in our society [6]. Semiotic analysis reminds us of something we take for granted in life, since we always deal with signs, rather than unmediated reality. The culture value and our sense of word is not natural, on the contrary, they are contrived and constructed socially, with significant difference on time and culture [5].

Discourse analysis emphasizes how power and ideology influence the society, for the purpose of understanding the political nature of 'visual texts', which it considers as a broader aspect of the system of representation [7]. It links margin elements within images or text to wider social context [8]. Van Dijk defines the critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the ways in which social power abuse, dominance, and how inequality is generated, reproduced, and resisted through text and discourse in social and political contexts [9]. Critical discourse analysts have adopted a clear position in such studies with different attitudes to understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequality.

Visual discourse analysis has an obvious immediacy and realism. Images could directly present on screen as perception to researchers and it has different 'interiority' of what we think when read books [10]. Compared with content analysis, it saves a lot of time because researchers do not need to revise sets of categories for multiple times.

3. Finding

While selecting and viewing images associated with Girls' Day, it becomes clear that the slogan and posters in Girls' Day reflect masculine perspective. Some of slogan keep traditional expectation on women, however most female college students fail to be aware of that.

It is popular for college students to use all kinds of banners to celebrate Girls' Day. The content of banners is often designed by male students, and the more novel the content is, the higher satisfaction girls have. However, numerous banners in Girls' Day exists gender stereotype on women.

The banners are usually hanged near dormitory, as a profession of friendship for female students. These banners reflect what a perfect woman is in male perspective, and women become the object in the festival whose original intention is to show girls' ability and talents, as well as to promote gender equality within campus. There are three most popular banners in Girls' Day. The first banner admires girls' beautiful appearance and wish them keep young and energetic. The second banner said that 'it is enviable that educated girls could bring good luck to their husbands'. The third banner compares girls with two female characters in a Chinese famous novel, namely The Legendary Swordsman, that these girls are more graceful and gentle.

It is obvious that the three banners pay attention to girls' appearance and morality, even the benefit they can bring to families, rather than girls' personal ability and their contribution to society. The word 'yao tiao shun nv' represent traditional requirements on women which is described those beautiful females with virtue. This word is adopted from an ancient Chinese book, called 'The Book of Songs'. The next sentence following 'Yao tiao shu nv' is 'jun zi hao qiu' which means that a gentle man would like to marry such a good girl. Meanwhile, the two female characters in the third banner have been the representation of ideal wife for several decades. Thus, college female students remain a position of male gaze. They are the only audience of these banners, young and attractive, and pleased by traditional feminine words.

Meanwhile, the majors of the three colleges mentioned in banners focus on science, in other words, males significantly outnumber females. This factor may impact discourse power of women in theses colleges.

Compared with 'girls', the public impression on 'woman' (fu nv) is associated with elder housewife who is plainly dressed, out of fashion and lack of sex attractive. Horsetail, normal black pyjamas, non-makeup, and slippers, all the signs are related to traditional portrayal of women who is not charming but

take good care of other family members. It reflects a very common phenomenon in traditional Chinese families. A woman is washing dishes while her husband and child are watching TV, without showing any desire to help her. However, she has accustomed to the phenomenon. The nature of the image is gender division. Under the model of 'men outside and women stay', women's value are inclined to embody household. However, the value of housework can hardly be evaluated in economic way.

This image is described by one of my friends who is born in an ordinary family that follow traditional gender division. As she said, 'woman' (fu nv) reminds her of her mother who always chatters about trivial things of life, is family-centred and lack of sense of achievement. She prefers to be called as 'little elder sister' (xiao jie jie¹), rather than 'woman', since the impression of 'woman' is negative.

4. Discussion

The main goal of this study is to analyse the hidden gender discrimination in Girls' Day. In fact, the festival has become man-dominated entertainment activities, rather than being regarded as warm-up of IWD. During this day, there are some activities designed for girls, like 'sending breakfast' and special gifts [11]. The core of the drama is banners which show love to girls.

However, the way to celebrate Girls' Day has enhanced the gender discrimination and tried to divide women into two groups: one is young women with higher education level, the other is lack of sex attractive and undesired elder women in man perspective. Altermatt et al. argue that women stereotype consists of several subgroups, such as 'housewives' and 'career women', instead of simply being described as 'women' [12]. In China, women stereotype is presented as the separation of women's camp. Young and educated women enjoy illusory priority, like receiving gifts from men, while women in other class, age, and educational level are suffering from all kinds of discrimination. The division among female subgroups is related to the ways that women threaten men's power. The threat could come women directly competing for higher positions or indirectly manipulating sex attraction of women [13]. Thus, as analysed above, the banners in Girls' Day focus on women's sex attraction, as well as describe young 'girls' as beauty with good virtue. However, when draw an image of 'women', people tend to use more negative signs, like non-makeup, plainly dressed.

It seems that elder women are paying for the priority that young women get from men, which is far from the significance of IWD. The theme of IWD in 2018 draws attention to the right and activism of rural women, trying to empower women in all settings, rural and urban (UN Women, 2018), while Girls' Day only benefits those young and beautiful and apply the expense on women from other class, age and educational background.

Meanwhile, Girls' Day also strengthens gender stereotype by tagging women and setting standard in relation to what good women should be. Traditional stereotypic expectations on women is often associated with their maternal role, no matter what positions they are [14]. Impacted by Confucianism, traditional social expectations on women are the Three Obedience and Four Virtues (san cong si de) that women's main duty is to help the husband and teach the children [15]. As a result, women can hardly get rid of the role of mother and wife. Through analysing banners in Girls' Day, the content remains admiring women's appearance, rather than their ability and talent. In other words, women are still in male gaze, not in equal position with men.

The key of promoting gender equality lies in dismissing privileges. Although a part of young women could enjoy the favour from men, the current ways to celebrate Girls' Day restrict women's discourse power, since women just need to wait for and receive the margin benefit, rather than displaying their own opinion. However, there are numerous forms that gender discrimination could take. Benevolent sexism consider that women are delicate and need to be protected and taken care of by men. Women are more sensitive and not necessary to become the leader of government or vital social institutions, on the contrary, women should be protected since they could meet men's romantic needs [16]. The protective attitude of benevolent sexism toward women often hides how it reinforces gender inequality. Under this circumstance, women are considered weak and lack of competence. Benevolent sexist managers tend to appoint women fewer challenging positions [17]. As a result, the priority in Girls' Day could be paid back in more expensive way in terms of lower social status for all women, because young women are spoiled as princess by men.

¹ Xiao jie jie: a girl who is elder sister but still young. Usually, xiao jie jie is aged from 20 to 30.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to analyse the gender discrimination embodied in Girls' Day. In this study, I use two major visual methods-semiotic analysis and discourse analysis to find out gender inequality in the banners of Girls' Day and the drawing of 'women' (fu nv). As mentioned above, the three banners focus on admiring young women's appearance and good virtue, instead of their ability and contribution to the college as well as society. Otherwise, the image of elder woman is closely associated with housewife who is family centred, non-makeup and plainly dressed.

Comparing the two images, the result shows that women has been divided into two camps: young and educated women, as well as elder women with other educational level and class. The women stereotype is responsible for the division. Traditional Chinese society require women to concentrate on families, however the value of women's contribution inside household can hardly be evaluated. Compared to IWD, Gils' Day only benefit those young and beautiful women, but women with other age and class must pay for it.

Gender equality does not mean gender privileges. Benevolent discrimination could hardly be recognised because it tries to protect and take care of women. In addition, benevolent sexists believe that that women are weaker with less ability, as a result, women are likely to be assigned to lower positions than men.

Above all, current Girls' Day are reinforcing gender discrimination, rather than promoting gender equality as IWD. It cannot replace IWD. Government as well as organisations should think highly of IWD and make difference in dismissing gender discrimination.

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