

A Comparative Study on the Characteristics of Female Characters in Chinese and Korean Modern Films Since the New Century

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the new century, both Chinese and Korean modern-themed films have experienced rapid development, not only in terms of quantity and diversity of themes but also in the depth and quality of their content. Women, as indispensable characters in modern films, vividly reflect the aesthetic ideals, reception characteristics, and image expectations of their respective audiences. However, the cultural backgrounds, national characteristics, and social conditions in China and Korea lead to differing representations of female characters in their films.

Keywords: Chinese and Korean modern films, female characters, cultural differences

1. Introduction

The film industries of China and Korea show different characteristics and developmental trends in shaping female characters in modern-themed films. Female characters in Chinese films are gradually shifting from traditional portrayals of gentleness and dependence to more independent and diverse roles. These films often explore women's roles within the family and society, as well as their self-realization, reflecting Chinese society's reevaluation and expectations of female roles. In contrast, Korean films have gone further in exploring women's self-awareness and independence. As society progresses and the status of women rises, the portrayals of female characters in films from both countries continue to evolve, reflecting different cultural

understandings and expectations of women.

2. Development of Chinese and Korean Modern Films Since the New Century

At the start of the new century, China's accession to the WTO intensified competition in the domestic film industry, prompting reforms in film group structures and cinema chains, leading to the marketization of the film industry. Investments became diversified with the participation of private and foreign capital, especially from Hong Kong, which helped mitigate the high costs and risks of filmmaking. In 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) introduced a policy aimed at accelerating the development of the film industry, which promoted innovation and reform. Over the past 20 years, China's film

industry has transitioned from focusing on quantity to emphasizing quality and efficiency, respecting the essence of local culture and refining its craftsmanship. This shift has produced numerous outstanding modern-themed films such as *The Piano in a Factory*, *If You Are the One*, *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, *So Long, My Son*, and *Return to Dust*.

Korean cinema, on the other hand, experienced different historical phases. Before 1945, the industry was strictly controlled under colonial rule. From 1945 to 1979, it entered a period of authoritarian suppression, followed by a reform phase from 1980 to 1999, after several government changes. In the new century, Korean cinema saw rapid development. During Kim Dae-jung's presidency, the government implemented a "support but don't interfere" policy, prioritizing cultural industries, including film. This fostered the industry's growth, improved the investment system, and laid the foundation for international success. Subsequent presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak focused on diversifying cinema and internationalizing the film industry, particularly supporting CG technology, which significantly strengthened Korea's film export capabilities. Under Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in, the industry maintained a clean market environment and nurtured a healthy film industry, producing a series of acclaimed modern-themed works like *Memories of Murder*, *Silenced*, *Parasite*, *New World*, and *My Sassy Girl*.

3. Characteristics of Female Characters in Chinese and Korean Modern Films Since the New Century

3.1 Role Positioning of Female Characters

Women play a crucial role in modern-themed films. The differing cinematic motives and creative intentions in China and Korea have resulted in distinct ways of positioning female characters. In Chinese films, female characters often serve in auxiliary, cooperative, and supportive roles, working alongside male characters to convey themes related to society, psychology, emotions, and beliefs. Chinese directors typically adopt an "extroverted" perspective when designing female characters. For example, in *The Piano in a Factory*, the characters Shu Xian and Xiao Ju represent contrasting emotional stances towards the male protagonist, Chen Guilin, amplifying his struggles. In *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, the character

Wu Zhizhen, played by Gwei Lun-mei, embodies both good and evil, intensifying the exploration of the darker aspects of humanity.

In contrast, female characters in Korean films are more often portrayed as independent individuals, with a focus on their emotions and experiences within specific social contexts. Korean directors tend to employ an "introverted" lens, delving deeper into the inner thoughts and emotions of female characters. This approach often leads to unconventional and subversive storytelling, as seen in *My Sassy Girl*. The female lead, portrayed by Jeon Ji-hyun, is outwardly elegant but inwardly rebellious, reflecting the independence and emotional depth of modern women. Many Korean films present similar female characters who are strong-willed, individualistic, and self-determined, embodying the evolving role of women in Korean society.

3.2 Representation of Female Characters

The representation of female characters in Chinese films emphasizes "realism," aiming to authentically reflect the behavior and characteristics of women in real life. This creates a narrative that allows audiences to deeply connect with the lived experiences and emotional journeys of these characters. For instance, in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Gwei Lun-mei's portrayal of Wu Zhizhen eschews glamorous makeup and elaborate costumes, instead relying on her cool demeanor to convey an allure that influences the male protagonist's actions.

In contrast, female characters in Korean films are often portrayed with an emphasis on physical beauty, fashion, and behavior designed to captivate the audience's imagination. This aesthetic approach enhances the immersive experience for viewers and highlights the attractiveness of the female characters, as seen with Jeon Ji-hyun in *My Sassy Girl* and Song Ji-hyo in *New World*. These portrayals contribute to a distinctive cinematic style that contrasts sharply with the more realistic depictions found in Chinese films.

3.3 Function of Female Characters

In Chinese films, female characters are often portrayed as bearers of life's hardships, quietly enduring societal pressures and personal struggles. Though these characters may resist or adapt, their resilience is often tinged with helplessness, as seen in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, where Wu Zhizhen cannot escape her tragic fate,

or in *So Long, My Son*, where Wang Liyun silently supports her husband's decisions. Similarly, in *Return to Dust*, Cao Guiying's quiet suffering underscores the burdens that women face in life.

In contrast, Korean films highlight the rebellious spirit of female characters, portraying them as assertive and independent, challenging traditional norms and societal expectations. This spirit is exemplified in films like *National Team*, where the female lead, Soo-yeon, challenges societal limitations, and *Punch Lady*, where the character Yun-ha defies male authority. Such portrayals resonate with contemporary audiences and reflect evolving attitudes towards women's roles in society.

Overall, the differing historical and cultural contexts of China and Korea have led to distinct cinematic traditions in the representation of female characters. Films in both countries serve as cultural mirrors, providing unique and profound insights into the changing roles and perceptions of women.

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