

# The Development and Evolution of Chinese Feminist Television Drama since the Reform and Opening Up

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**Abstract:** The development of feminist television dramas in China since the reform and opening-up has exhibited a trend of diversification with shifts in women's economic status. By examining the content, themes, and character construction of representative dramas from three distinct periods, this study delineates the evolutionary trajectory of Chinese feminist television drama in the context of social and cultural changes. The process of Chinese feminist television dramas from their initial germination to gradual development, and then to diversified exploration, reflects the awakening of women's consciousness and changes in women's status in Chinese society. Simultaneously, feminist dramas have continuously adapted themselves in response to market imperatives and evolving social values, yielding rich and diverse forms of expression. Since the reform and opening up, the development of Chinese feminist themed television dramas has roughly gone through four stages: "image awakening - pluralistic exploration - market backlash - rational return", presenting an overall trajectory of "spiral upward and tortuous transformation".

**Keywords:** Reform and opening up; Feminist television dramas; Development; Evolution

## 1. Research Background and Significance

Since the reform and opening up, Chinese society has undergone tremendous changes, with profound changes in women's social status, ideological concepts, and lifestyles. As an important form of popular culture, television dramas reflect the reality of society and people's ideological concepts. Feminist television dramas focus on women as the main subject of expression, paying attention to their living conditions, emotional needs, and self-realization, and have become an important carrier for reflecting women's issues<sup>[1]</sup>. Studying the development and evolution of Chinese feminist television dramas since the reform and opening up can help to gain a deeper understanding of the development of women's consciousness in Chinese society, as well as the role of television dramas in disseminating feminist ideas.

## 2. Early Period of Reform and Opening-Up (1978-Early 1990s): "Wifely-virtue Ideal" and "Rural Migrant Women" under Traditional Constraints

### 2.1 Social Background and Awakening of Female Consciousness

In the early stages of reform and opening up, Chinese society began to transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Rural laborers streamed into the cities. The slogan "gender equality" still circulated at the institutional level, yet the domestic sphere remained stubbornly patriarchal. With the spread of education and emancipation of thought, women's self-awareness and sense of independence began to awaken. Certain literary and cinematic works started to foreground female fate and feeling, laying the groundwork for the emergence of feminist television drama<sup>[2]</sup>.

### 2.2 The Characteristics of Early Feminist Television Dramas

#### 2.2.1 Theme of Conflict between Women's Family and Career

The television dramas of this period centered on the dilemma of women between family and career, reflecting their struggle between traditional social roles and modern career pursuits. In Kewang, for example, Liu Huifang—kind, industrious, and impeccably traditional—is nonetheless trapped by the double bind of domesticity and wage work.

### **2.2.2 Role Building of Traditional Women**

The female characters in the drama are mostly traditional women who are gentle, virtuous, and patient. They prioritize their families and sacrifice their own interests for the sake of their families and husbands. Although these images embody the virtues of women, they also reinforce traditional gender concepts to a certain extent. Women were encoded as the moral high ground of endurance under humiliation, their value still tethered to self-sacrifice and the husband-guiding, child-rearing mandate<sup>[3]</sup>.

### **2.2.3 A Plain Narrative Style**

Employing a realist narrative mode, the dramas situated ordinary lives at the center, offering simple, transparent plots that stayed close to viewers' everyday experience. This narrative style makes television dramas easier for audiences to accept, but also lacks in-depth exploration of feminist ideas. Female characters functioned chiefly to "preserve the family" and "set off the male". Their subjectivity remaining in a state of "being spoken for"<sup>[4]</sup>.

## **2.3 Analysis of Representative Works: Kewang**

Kewang is one of the most representative television dramas in the early stages of reform and opening up, with the theme of family ethics, showcasing the sacrifices of women in the family. Liu Hufang in the drama is a typical traditional woman who is kind, tolerant, hardworking, and silently dedicates herself to her family. Yet her goodness reaped no due reward and instead suffered a lot of grievances and hardships. The success of Kewang reflects the recognition of traditional female virtues in society at that time, and also triggers the audience's attention and reflection on the fate of women.

## **3. Mid to Late 1990s to 2008: "Career Women" and "Cinderella" under the Catalysis of Market Economy**

### **3.1 Social Transformation and Advancement of Women's Status**

In the mid-1990s, with the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and the influx of foreign enterprises, the education level and employment rate of women significantly improved; Consumerism has begun to shape popular culture, and Chinese society has entered a stage of rapid development. The prosperity of the market economy and the diversity of society have provided women with more opportunities for development. The social status of women has further improved, and their participation in the workplace, politics, and cultural fields continues to increase. At the same time, the rise of consumer culture has had a profound impact on women's lifestyles and values.

### **3.2 New Changes in Feminist Television Dramas during this Period**

#### **3.2.1 Expanding the Theme to Women's Self-growth and Emotional Independence**

TV dramas began to probe women's inner worlds and emotional needs, foregrounding self-worth and independent personhood. In Pink Ladies, for instance, the "marriage maniac," "tomboy," "man-killer," and "naïve ingenue" each embody distinct personalities and aspirations, realizing self-growth and emotional autonomy through their own efforts.

#### **3.2.2 More Diversified Character Development**

Alongside the stock figure of the virtuous wife and mother, the screen now featured self-directing, high-profile modern women who refuse male dependency and openly pursue their own desires and happiness. In Never Close the Eyes, for instance, Ouyang Lanlan—passionate yet calculating—embodies female resilience and strategic intelligence. The introduction of Qiong Yao style romance and commercial war drama has given rise to the "Cinderella + tycoon" template, where women leap at the chance through love, seemingly taking the initiative but actually relying on it.

#### **3.2.3 More Diverse Narrative Techniques**

In Wai Lai Mei, Zhao Xiaoyun threads individual striving into the southbound migrant wave, making economic independence the primary narrative line of female development for the first time. Television dramas have begun to use various narrative techniques, such as suspense, conflict, and reversal, to enhance the attractiveness and viewing value of the plot. At the same time, some television dramas also incorporate elements of fashion, entertainment, etc., meeting the diverse needs of the audience. The

discourse of “economic self-reliance” has emerged, but gender equality still lacks reflection on its structure and desires.

### **3.3 Analysis of Representative Works: *Pink Ladies***

*Pink Ladies* presents the life stories of four different types of women in a humorous and witty manner. This drama breaks the narrative mode of traditional TV dramas and adopts the form of unit dramas, with each unit having an independent theme and plot. The four female protagonists in the drama have different personalities. They also have experienced various setbacks and difficulties in their pursuit of love and career, but always maintain an optimistic and upward attitude. The success of *Pink Ladies* marks the beginning of feminist television dramas moving towards diversification and entertainment.

## **4. 2009 to 2018: “Mary-Sue Figure” and “the Leading Female Role” during the Capital Boom Period**

### **4.1 The Arrival of the New Media Era and the Rise of Female Audiences**

Since the 2010s, rapid advances in new-media technologies have reshaped both the way television dramas are disseminated and the viewing habits of its audience. With the popularization of the Internet and the wide application of mobile terminals, the audience of television dramas is expanding, and women audience has become the main force of the television drama market. Female audiences have more diverse demands for television dramas. They not only focus on the excitement of the plot, but also pay attention to the values and emotional resonance conveyed by the television drama. TV ratings are directly linked to online clicks, and IP plus traffic has become the industry’s hard currency; Weibo and forums provide real-time discussion platform for female audiences.

### **4.2 Diversified Forms of Expression in Feminist Television Dramas**

#### **4.2.1 The Popularity of the Leading Female Dramas**

The main leading female drama features women as the protagonists, showcasing their growth and struggles in power, career, and emotions. For example, historical dramas such as *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *The Legend of Mi Yue* showcase the resilience and courage of women in ancient palace by portraying female characters with strong vitality and wisdom. Modern urban leading female dramas such as *Ode to Joy* and *All is Well* focus on the difficulties and challenges faced by women in the workplace and at home, reflecting the real life of contemporary women. Packaging female power grabs as “level-up” spectacle offers surface catharsis yet ultimately replicates masculinist scheme.

#### **4.2.2 The Rise of Female Group Portrait Dramas**

The female group portrait drama revolves around multiple female characters, showcasing the friendship, love, and competitive relationships among women. For example, television dramas such as *Nothing But Thirty* and *Twenty Your Life On* reflect the diverse values and lifestyles of contemporary women by depicting the living conditions and emotional experiences of women of different ages.

#### **4.2.3 Subdivision and Deepening of Women’s Themes**

In addition to the leading female dramas and female group portrait dramas, there have also been some television dramas that focus on specific female groups, such as workplace women dramas, single mother dramas, and elderly women dramas. These television dramas delve into the life needs and emotional pain points of different female groups, providing a new perspective for the development of feminist television dramas. The female-advantage discourse emerges: women are urged to trade on normative femininity to secure resources, yet by sidestepping any critique of patriarchal structures they fall into a pseudo-empowerment trap.

### **4.3 Analysis of Representative Works: *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *Nothing But Thirty***

*The Legend of Zhen Huan* is a deeply influential ancient costume drama featuring a leading female. Set in the imperial harem of the Qing Dynasty, it portrays Zhen Huan’s journey from a simple and kind young girl to a scheming and skillful empress dowager. The drama showcases the helplessness and struggle of women in power struggles through rich plot and exciting performances, while also emphasizing women’s wisdom and resilience. *Nothing But Thirty* focuses on the lives of three women

in their thirties who face different challenges and choices in their careers, love, and family. The drama truthfully reflects the living conditions and psychological pressures of contemporary women, triggering strong resonance among the audience.

### **5. 2018 to Present: “She Series” and “the Compound New Women” under the Resonance of Social Media**

Female audiences have become the main paying members, and platforms are beginning to pay attention to the “her economy”. “Her dramas” have become a hot topic in creation, with the series narrating from a female perspective, focusing on multidimensional topics such as women’s growth, emotions, and workplace. The image of the compound new women portrayed in the drama combines independent spirit and gentle traits, capable of overcoming obstacles in the workplace while also understanding how to manage emotions and life. They are no longer defined by a single label, but exhibit rich and diverse personality charm. For example, in some television dramas, the female protagonist is able to achieve success in the business field through her own abilities, while also managing family relationships and balancing career and family. These dramas resonate widely with female audiences through delicate plots and genuine emotions, and also promote society’s recognition and recognition of the diverse values of women.

Group portrait “her dramas” such as *Ode to Joy* and *Bei Zhe Nan Yuan* attempt to present women from different social classes, different views on marriage, and career paths, emphasizing “freedom of choice”. Workplace women’s dramas such as *Beijing Women’s Portfolio* use the perspective of “Beijing drifters” to discuss class mobility and gender ceilings, but still slide towards the safe zone of “buying a house and getting married” at the end, exposing the value division at the creative level.

These dramas depict multiple female characters, showcasing their choices and growth in their respective lives. Women from different social classes face different challenges and opportunities, such as gender discrimination in the workplace and the distribution of responsibilities in the family. They are no longer bound by traditional concepts when facing major choices such as marriage and career, but bravely pursue the life they truly want in their hearts. This group portrait style presentation allows the audience to see the diversity and complexity of the female population, and also provides more emotional projection and self-identity samples for female viewers.

The series is not only satisfied with telling women’s life stories, but also delves into a series of social topics related to women. Such as gender equality, workplace discrimination, reproductive rights, women’s self-awareness, etc. By developing the plot and shaping the characters, it triggers the audience’s reflection and discussion on these topics, promoting social attention and resolution of women’s issues. For example, some television series showcase the unfair treatment women face in the workplace, calling for society to eliminate gender discrimination and provide more equitable development opportunities for women; some aim to raise awareness of women’s right to independent reproduction by exploring women’s reproductive choices. The characters in these dramas have shifted from being “single-faced career female” to “multi-faceted ordinary female”, starting to touch on structural issues such as reproductive punishment, workplace discrimination, and age anxiety. However, the capital safety cushion has limited the criticism and is often criticized as “slogan-style feminism”.

## **6. The Evolutionary Logic and Determinants of Chinese Feminist Television Drama**

### ***6.1 Theme Evolution: from Family to Society, from Emotional Appeals to Self-realization***

The themes of Chinese feminist television dramas have evolved from focusing on family conflicts to social issues, from expressing emotional appeals to pursuing self-realization<sup>[3]</sup>. Early television dramas mainly focused on women’s family life, emphasizing their family responsibilities and traditional virtues. With the development of society, the themes of television dramas have gradually expanded to include women’s career development, social participation, and personal value realization, reflecting the continuous awakening of women’s consciousness and the gradual improvement of their social status.

### ***6.2 Role Building: from Singular to Diverse, from Passive to Active***

In terms of character development, Chinese feminist television dramas have evolved from a single image dominated by traditional women in the early days to diverse and personalized female images

today<sup>[5]</sup>. Early female characters were mostly passive and dependent on men, while today's female characters are more proactive, independent, and have a strong sense of self-awareness and enterprising spirit. This change reflects the society's redefinition of the image of women and affirmation of their value.

### ***6.3 Narrative Style: from Plain to Diverse, from Realism to the Fusion of Romanticism and Fantasy Elements***

In terms of narrative style, Chinese feminist television dramas have gradually shifted from early plain and realistic to diversified. In addition to traditional realism narrative techniques, elements such as romanticism and fantasy are also incorporated to enhance the attractiveness and viewing value of the plot. At the same time, the narrative structure of television dramas is also more flexible and diverse, using techniques such as multi-line narration, reverse narration, and interludes to make the plot more compact and tense.

### ***6.4 Analysis of Influencing Factors***

#### ***6.4.1 Sociocultural Factors***

The changes in social culture are an important driving force for the development of feminist television dramas. With the progress of society and the improvement of women's status, there have been significant changes in women's lifestyles, values, and aesthetic needs. As a reflection of social culture, television dramas must adapt to these changes and focus on women's real lives and inner worlds.

#### ***6.4.2 Economic Factors***

The development of the market economy has provided a material foundation for the prosperity of feminist television dramas. As a cultural industry, television dramas require market support and promotion. With the increasingly fierce competition in the television drama market, producers have launched television dramas targeting women as the main audience in order to attract viewers, thus promoting the development of feminist television dramas.

#### ***6.4.3 Technical Factors***

The development of new media technology has changed the way television dramas are disseminated and produced. The popularity of the Internet and mobile terminals has made the spread of television dramas more convenient and extensive, and the audience's viewing habits have also changed greatly. At the same time, advanced filming and special effects production techniques provide more possibilities for the production of television dramas, making the visuals more exquisite and the plot more exciting.

## **7. Problems and Development Trends of Chinese Feminist Television Dramas**

### ***7.1 Existing problems of Chinese Feminist Television Dramas***

#### ***7.1.1 The Superficiality of Feminist Expression***

Some television dramas, although claiming to be feminist, only focus on women's issues in form, lacking in-depth exploration and true expression of feminist ideas. The female characters in the drama are often only shaped to meet market demand, lacking genuine emotions and personality. The "leading female role" often relies on male power grafting to achieve a leap forward, lacking institutional and collective breakthrough imagination. Although the proportion of female screenwriters and directors has increased, the decision-making level is still dominated by men, and the dual ceiling of themes and censorship suppresses radical expression.

#### ***7.1.2 Remnants of Gender Stereotypes***

Although feminist television dramas have made great progress in character development, there are still some remnants of gender stereotypes. For example, some television dramas still depict women as weak and dependent on men, or attribute women's success to men's help and support. Love remains the ultimate destination for female characters, and "unromantic" narratives are scarce.

#### ***7.1.3 The Imbalance between Market Orientation and Artistic Value***

Under the influence of the market economy, some television dramas overly pursue commercial interests and neglect the pursuit of artistic value. The plot of television dramas is becoming increasingly

routine and homogeneous, lacking innovation and depth.

### **7.2 Development Trends of Chinese Feminist Television Dramas**

#### **7.2.1 Pay More Attention to Women's Real Lives and Emotional Needs**

Future feminist television dramas will be closer to women's real lives, focusing on their emotional needs and psychological changes at different stages. By showcasing the joys, sorrows, and growth experiences of women, it will evoke resonance and emotional identification among the audience.

#### **7.2.2 Cross Cultural Communication and Integration**

With the development of globalization, Chinese feminist television dramas will strengthen their communication and cooperation with the international market. Drawing on the creative experience and expressive techniques of excellent feminist television dramas abroad, while spreading Chinese cultural characteristics and female images to countries around the world.

#### **7.2.3 Diversified Development Trend**

Customized dramas on future platforms may be segmented into tracks such as "married and childbearing women" "unmarried women" and "the middle-aged and the elderly" seeking breakthroughs through typification. From "topic explosion" to "structural reflection", the audience has become desensitized to the "readerly cathartic points" routine and is more looking forward to seeing institutional dilemmas and collective action. Feminism may shift from "symbolic consumption" to "reality intervention".

#### **7.2.4 Deep Integration with New Media**

The development of new media technology will bring more opportunities for the development of feminist television dramas. Television dramas will pay more attention to interaction and feedback with the audience, and promote and advertise through social media, short videos, and other platforms. At the same time, new media will also provide more materials and inspiration for the creation of television dramas, promoting the innovation and development of feminist television dramas.

## **8. Conclusion**

Over the past forty years of reform and opening up, Chinese feminist television dramas have repeatedly oscillated between the tension of marketization and ideology: from "moralizing virtuous wives" to "consumerizing Mary Sue", and then to "issue-based her group images", female images have completed a difficult transformation from "objects of viewing" to "subjects with limited voice". However, true structural criticism and diverse gender imagination have not yet been fully implemented. As a popular ideological device, television dramas are still seeking the next breakthrough in their female narratives between "commercial security" and "gender pioneers". With the progress of society and the development of technology, Chinese feminist television dramas are expected to have broader development prospects and bring more excellent works to the audience.

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