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A Study on Cultural Differences Among China, Japan, and Korea: Perspectives from 21st Century (2000-2024) Feminist Films

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Abstract: This paper examines feminist-themed films from China, Japan, and Korea produced in the 21st century (2000-2024). By analyzing representative works from these countries, it explores the portrayal of female characters, feminist themes, and gendered cinematic language. The study aims to identify differences in how each country addresses women's issues, highlighting both shared East Asian characteristics and unique national perspectives in their cinematic representations.

Keywords: Sino-Japanese-Korean Culture; East Asian Cultural Differences; Feminism; Feminist Film

1. Introduction

As women's participation in political, economic, and cultural spheres has expanded, their social status has improved, bringing increased attention to feminist studies with both theoretical and practical significance.

Current feminist research remains largely dominated by Western perspectives, with limited systematic analysis of feminist cinema across China, Japan, and Korea. This study addresses this gap by examining films from these three nations, analyzing their feminist elements and distinctive female characters to illuminate cultural interactions and the development of feminism within East Asia. This approach enriches theoretical frameworks for East Asian feminist cinema and offers new perspectives for understanding its unique place within global feminist discourse.

Furthermore, studying feminist films across these cultures enhances our understanding of both shared traditions and distinct variations within the East Asian cultural sphere. Through cinema, we can trace feminism's influence on each country's film industry, fostering cultural exchange while providing cross-cultural insights for advancing gender equality. This research may also offer valuable references for developing feminist cultural initiatives in China.

Core Concept

Feminist film refers to works that center women's perspectives, focusing on issues like women's lived experiences, gender equality, and female consciousness. These films not only address women's emotions, experiences, and demands in their content but also demonstrate women's agency in creative roles (directing, screenwriting, production), challenging the male-dominated perspectives of traditional cinema and subverting gender stereotypes.

2. Everyday Resistance and the Counter-Gaze: Subjectivity and Gender Discourse in Chinese Feminist Films

Shao Yihui's "Good Stuff" presents three women-Wang Tiemei, Xiao Ye, and Wang Moli-whose lives intersect, painting a nuanced portrait of contemporary womanhood. Moving beyond simple gender commentary, the film delves into women's search for identity and inner strength within complex social networks. Their relationship evolves not through idealized sisterhood, but through misunderstandings, conflicts, and mutual support, forming an authentic, resilient female alliance suited to modern life. The film's subtle audiovisual language (including spatial composition and symbolic props) externalizes psychological transformation, prompting viewers to reflect on female self-awareness, identity formation, and personal autonomy. Unlike earlier films that often tragicized female protagonists to highlight oppression ("Raise the Red Lantern," "Ju Dou"), from Ren Gui Qing (Woman, Demon, Human) to domestic female-themed films in the early 21st century, although greater attention has been paid to women’s intrinsic traits and life predicaments, and the portrayal of female groups has become more nuanced, most of these works still take tragedy as their underlying tone. They confine women within the narrative shackles of suffering and the complex of elegy, and have yet

to break free from the "rule of the game" centered on male supremacy in China's mainstream market [7].

"Good Stuff" employs wry humor to lighten its narrative while weaving in contemporary issues like generational divides and urban-rural values. For instance, Wang Tiemei objects to colleagues sensationalizing single mothers' struggles for reader appeal, arguing that such stereotypes are unjustified-as a divorced single mother herself, she proves capable, resilient, and far from tragic. This narrative shift moves beyond traditional victimhood, offering new paradigms for representing women.

The film also exposes the emptiness and narcissism of masculinity, wielding the female gaze as a tool to deconstruct patriarchal myths and claim narrative space for women. Key scenes with Wang Tiemei's ex-husband and Dr. Hu reveal masculine performance and fragility, particularly through focus on physical traits like "Xiao Ma's pectoral muscles" and the "ex-husband's fair skin."

This ironic approach subverts traditional gender stereotypes, creating a "counter-gaze." [2] Wang Tiemei's ex-husband resembles a decorative "trophy husband," whose professional competence and independence fall short of hers. This exaggerated comedic portrayal challenges the male gaze, provoking reflection on gender, identity, and power structures.

Another widely discussed film, Yin Lichuan's "Decision to Leave," adapts the true story of blogger "Auntie Su Min's Self-Driving Tour at 50." It follows protagonist Li Hong, who after a lifetime of suppression breaks free from the roles of "daughter," "mother," and "grandmother" imposed by her family to pursue her dream of traveling. [3] Though physically present in these roles, Li Hong experienced "spiritual absence," trapped by structural constraints on women. The film sparked broad debate, realistically portraying the lack of agency faced by homemakers while moving beyond the tragic framework of the "Nora leaves" narrative to redefine female resistance for a new era. Literary and cinematic traditions often reduce women's "departure" to symbolic rebellion, neglecting the complex process of self-discovery. This film, however, details the external obstacles Li Hong must overcome to claim her life. She bears the burdens of housework and grandchild care alone, while her husband not only fails to contribute but mocks her efforts. After repeated compromises, she perseveres, eventually discarding her phone SIM card on the road to escape domestic demands and embark on her journey. Li Hong's path to independence is fraught with conflict-she repeatedly postpones her plans for her daughter's family. Her daughter Sun Xiaoxue initially supports her mother's ambitions, but once preoccupied with her career, she shifts all household duties to Li Hong, resentfully opposing her mother's choices.[4] Throughout their upbringing, patriarchal norms profoundly shape the children. These norms quietly reinforce gender differences, celebrating male innovation and dominance while confining women to cultural constraints that limit control over their destinies. In a male-dominated society, culture operates as a subtle yet powerful force marginalizing women.

Growing up, Sun Xiaoxue witnessed her mother's suffering under her father's oppression-she once urged them to divorce and resented his domestic unfairness. Yet once accustomed to her mother's sacrifices, she resists Li Hong's pursuit of autonomy, unwilling to become "Li Hong" herself yet compelling her mother to remain the self-sacrificing "Li Hong." This reflects how the "men earn, women nurture" model is internalized from childhood; despite rebellious instincts, practical pressures lead Sun Xiaoxue to transfer burdens onto her mother, ignoring that fathers and husbands share domestic responsibilities. This reveals the ongoing challenges married women face in achieving independence, even in the 21st century. As Simone de Beauvoir noted, "Women are doomed to perpetuate the species and manage the household-which means, they can only remain in immanence."[5]

Chinese films like "Good Stuff" and "Decision to Leave" distinguish themselves through realistic focus and internalized resistance. They highlight everyday pressures, where women's struggles appear not as dramatic revolt but as "everyday resistance"-persisting through compromise, subverting through self-mockery, and finding small breakthroughs in daily life. These recent feminist films emphasize female subjectivity and agency, exploring women's inner strength and external barriers.

3. Tragedy and the Quest: Social Critique and Self-Realization in Japanese Feminist Films

Initially, Matsuko conforms to the male ideal of the "devoted wife and mother"-gentle, loving,

submissive, sacrificing her dignity for lovers yet repeatedly betrayed. Ironically, she finds relative freedom only in her final years as an androgynous, unkempt vagrant. This stark imagery breaks from the male gaze, using visual exaggeration to create profound impact. Kawashima Matsuko in "Memories of Matsuko" lacks selfhood, seeking security in others through desperate compromises. Before her death, she scrawls "I'm sorry" repeatedly on her wall-a heartbreaking testament to her self-blame and externalized hope. Her tragedy stems not only from personal vulnerability but from family dynamics and broader social currents. Her traditional patriarchal family-with a biased father and passive mother-denied her emotional security.[1] Set in post-war Japan, the film depicts a society scarred by militarism, where yakuza culture flourished, the sex industry boomed, and spiritual emptiness fueled material excess. Relationships grew shallow, and equal education lagged. In this male-dominated context, women held low status even in formal employment, with limited career paths. In Japanese society, patriarchal ideology holds significant sway, and women face severe inequalities in treatment. Within heterosexual relationships, women have long been trapped in a passive position. During her childhood, Matsuko was dependent on her father; in adulthood, although she gained the ability to achieve economic independence in her later years, she still pursued and remained psychologically dependent on a specific male figure.[8]

Despite Matsuko's optimism and kindness, she meets a tragic end, beaten by delinquents-a poignant critique of systemic failures rooted in gendered inequality and family structures.

Satoshi Kon's "Millennium Actress" follows actress Fujiwara Chiyoko's lifelong search for a painter she loved in youth. The film interweaves roles from her career, all defined by relentless pursuit. On her deathbed, she reflects: "It doesn't matter if I never found him. I love the version of myself who never stopped chasing." Though she briefly conforms to tradition-marrying a persistent director after losing the painter's key (their token)-she resumes her quest upon rediscovering it, defying conventional expectations.

In that turbulent, less-connected era, Chiyoko's lifelong search for a phantom love seemed irrational, even transgressive. Yet her true pursuit was always her own aspirational self. By the film's conclusion, Chiyoko, amid a hallucination, returns to the final film production of her lifetime. Inside the spacecraft poised for launch, she appears on the verge of embarking on an even more thrilling adventure. In her early years, driven by the instinct for survival, she was drawn to the painter-an individual embodying the spirit of rebellion and initiative. Throughout the course of her life, such a spirit gradually became ingrained in Chiyoko's own character. Having portrayed numerous roles of significant artistic merit, she ultimately established herself as a true artist: she resisted the disciplinary constraints of society, persisted in forging a life defined by her own choices, and in the final phase of her existence, made the deliberate decision to embrace self-love [6].

Notably, the film avoids objectifying gaze; Chiyoko remains defined by her agency, while the painter's face stays obscured-a symbol of her self-actualization. Director Kon resists reducing her to an accessory in a male narrative, instead crafting an autonomous, resilient heroine who challenges Japan's "weak woman, strong man" trope.

Both Japanese films employ individual narratives to critique social apathy and pathology through tragic, allegorical tales. Chiyoko and Matsuko each confront pressures to prioritize family, yet respond differently-Matsuko's descent evokes pity and warning, while Chiyoko's quest transcends romance for self-realization. Their stories provoke reflection on female choice and independence, blending tragic aesthetics with philosophical inquiry into life's meaning and societal flaws.

4. Dramatic Resistance and Cross-Class Alliance: Systemic Critique and Collective Liberation in Korean Feminist Films

Park Chan-wook's "The Handmaiden" portrays the awakening and rebellion of two women-Hideko, a noblewoman forced to recite erotica for male patrons, and Sook-hee, a lower-class pawn in a male conspiracy. United as victims of patriarchy, they conspire to escape, sailing toward freedom. Through mutual trust, love, and cunning, they reclaim their agency, outsmarting the men who control them. Their story highlights solidarity between marginalized women in 1930s Korea, offering a powerful model of resistance relevant to modern

feminism.

The film's male characters embody patriarchal corruption-Count Fujiwara schemes for Hideko's wealth, while Uncle Kouzuki tyrannizes her and her aunt. Female liberation here demands strategic, collective action and physical flight. This direct, confrontational approach delivers a dramatic indictment of oppression, celebrating female alliance as a forceful breakthrough toward liberation.

5. Conclusion: Diverse Narratives and Aesthetics of Resistance Across Three Cultures

Considering film eras (e.g., Japanese postwar, Korean colonial), differences partly stem from history not pure culture."These films collectively reveal structural barriers facing East Asian women, challenging the "virtuous wife and mother" ideal while affirming women's desire to transcend roles and pursue self-worth. Notably, all three cinemas critique family as a core site of patriarchal control-whether depicting Chinese women torn between maternal duty and self-fulfillment ("Decision to Leave"), Japanese women traumatized by toxic families ("Memories of Matsuko"1), or Korean women treated as property ("The Handmaiden").

In summary, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean feminist films share East Asian roots yet blossom into distinct artistic expressions: Chinese cinema finds resilience in everyday reality; Japanese film plumbs tragic depths to question existence; Korean drama wields theatrical force against systemic barriers. This diversity enriches global feminist dialogue while illuminating East Asia's complex modernity. Appreciating this "harmony in difference" is vital for deeper cultural exchange.

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