

Survival Landscape and Multiple Destinies: A Feminist Textual Analysis of Female Images in The Story of Minglan

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Abstract: This paper presents a feminist textual analysis of the female character system in the Chinese historical TV drama *The Story of Minglan*. Drawing on feminist film theory and character typology coding, this paper proposes a four-dimensional analytical framework-institution, space, relation, and value-to systematically examine how the patriarchal clan system constructs the survival landscape of elite Song Dynasty women. Through character coding analysis, five female archetypes are identified: the strategically awakening, the traditionally dependent, the speculatively competitive, the spiritually guiding, and the tragically marginal. This paper further proposes the concept of bounded awakening to describe a mode of consciousness in which the female protagonist achieves cognitive independence while limiting its practical expression to actions compatible with patriarchal institutions. The findings suggest that the drama functions as a displaced cultural narrative in which the Song rule-based society mirrors contemporary competition anxiety and the inner residence serves as a metaphor for involution.

Keywords: *The Story of Minglan*; Feminist Textual Analysis; Survival Landscape; Character Typology; Bounded Awakening

1. Introduction

The Story of Minglan, which premiered in December 2018, became one of the most influential Chinese historical costume dramas of the past decade. It accumulated over 40 billion domestic views and generated more than 20 billion readings of related topics on social media platforms. Set in the Northern Song Dynasty, the narrative follows the life of Sheng Minglan, the illegitimate daughter of an official's family, as she navigates the constraints imposed by the patriarchal clan system.

The extraordinary popularity of this drama raises a compelling question: why does a story about women confined within a Song Dynasty household resonate so deeply with contemporary Chinese audiences? Discussions surrounding Minglan's strategy of "cang zhuo" (hiding one's capabilities), the moral condemnation of characters who transgress norms, and the collective empathy for various female fates suggest that the drama functions as more than historical recreation. It appears to process and project contemporary anxieties, gender expectations, and survival concerns onto a historical canvas.

Existing scholarship on the drama has primarily focused on single-character analysis, ritual and aesthetic representation, or narrative adaptation studies. Few studies have systematically examined the integrated female character system, and fewer still have extended the analysis to the cultural logic underlying the drama's contemporary reception. This study addresses these gaps through three objectives: reconstructing the survival landscape that defines women's existence in the drama, developing a comprehensive typology of female characters, and interpreting the drama as a cultural symptom of contemporary China.

2. Literature Review

Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze established that mainstream visual culture constructs women as objects of a masculine spectatorial position [1]. This insight remains relevant for analyzing how *The Story of Minglan* positions female characters within a patriarchal visual regime. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity reconceptualizes gender as a process of iterative norm citation [2], which is particularly productive for examining how characters in historical dramas perform highly ritualized femininity within explicitly codified gender systems.

In Chinese scholarship, Xie Qiu analyzed *The*

Story of Minglan as negotiating between "big female lead" genre conventions and historical realism, arguing that Minglan achieves a balance between feminist aspiration and historical plausibility [3]. Yao Ting examined Minglan's life philosophy, highlighting principles such as "relying on oneself rather than others" as expressions of proto-feminist consciousness [4]. Shi Tianyi traced Minglan's developmental trajectory through a personal growth narrative [5]. However, these studies exhibit notable limitations: they overwhelmingly focus on the protagonist as a single case, lack systematic integration of feminist theoretical frameworks with Song Dynasty historical specificity, and do not adequately theorize the cultural reasons for the drama's intense contemporary resonance.

The field of cultural communication offers useful frameworks. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model emphasizes that media texts are sites of negotiation where preferred meanings are encoded and audiences actively decode through their own cultural frameworks [6]. This study integrates these theoretical resources to analyze *The Story of Minglan* as operating simultaneously as a representation of historical women's experience and as a displaced narrative of contemporary survival anxieties.

3. Method

This study employs qualitative textual analysis supplemented by systematic character typology coding. The complete 73-episode television drama serves as the primary analytical corpus.

3.1 Four-Dimensional Analytical Framework

Table 1. Character Typology Coding Framework

Type	Structural Position	Survival Strategy	Representative
Strategically Awakening	Illegitimate daughter to principal wife	Strategic concealment; delayed revelation	Sheng Minglan
Traditionally Dependent	Legitimate daughter or principal wife	Norm compliance; status reliance	Wang Ruofu, Sheng Rulan
Speculatively Competitive	Concubine or illegitimate daughter	Resource exploitation; norm transgression	Lin Qinshuang, Sheng Molan
Spiritually Guiding	Elder generation; widow	Wisdom transmission; moral authority	Old Madam Sheng
Tragically Marginal	Low-status concubine	Minimal agency; passive endurance	Wei Xiaoniang

3.3 Rationale for Textual Analysis

Textual analysis was chosen over narrative analysis, discourse analysis, or audience research because this study aims to reconstruct a systematic character landscape across 73 episodes. Narrative analysis would overemphasize plot sequencing; discourse

To analyze the survival conditions depicted in the drama, a four-dimensional framework was developed, encompassing: (1) institutional oppression: the legitimate/illegitimate birth hierarchy, the transactional marriage system, and dual patriarchal-clan authority; (2) spatial discipline: gendered spaces including the boudoir, the inner household management sphere, the ancestral hall, and the inner residence as sites of regulation and limited agency; (3) relational constraint: dependency networks of blood, marriage, and female mutual aid, including their possibilities and limits; (4) value discipline: ethical discourses such as "xian liang shu de" (virtuousness, gentleness, propriety, and chastity), knowledge control doctrines, and bodily discourses of chastity.

This framework was applied through repeated viewing and systematic documentation of scenes, dialogues, and narrative events that instantiate each dimension.

3.2 Character Typology Coding

For character typology coding, all named female characters with significant narrative presence were coded along three axes: structural position (birth status, marital role, class background), survival strategy (concealment, competition, compliance, withdrawal, mutual support), and narrative outcome (marital result, status attainment, ultimate resolution). Through iterative analysis, five distinct types emerged: the Strategically Awakening, the Traditionally Dependent, the Speculatively Competitive, the Spiritually Guiding, and the Tragically Marginal. Table 1 presents the coding framework.

analysis requires a smaller corpus; audience research captures reception but not textual encoding. Textual analysis best reveals how institutional, spatial, relational, and value mechanisms consistently construct female subjectivity within the drama.

4. Findings

4.1 The Survival Landscape: Four Mechanisms of Containment

The drama constructs a comprehensive survival landscape through four interlocking mechanisms.

Institutional oppression operates primarily through the legitimate/illegitimate birth distinction, which determines initial life chances. Minglan's position as an illegitimate daughter compels her to adopt protective strategies that her legitimate half-sister Rulan never requires. The marriage system transforms women into objects of inter-familial exchange, with all four Sheng daughters' marriages arranged to serve family interests. The dual authority of the father and the clan, supplemented by the moral authority of elder women, creates a system of total regulation.

Spatial discipline encodes physical spaces with gendered meanings. The boudoir functions as a site of enclosure and surveillance. The inner household management sphere paradoxically serves as both confinement and the only legitimate arena for female authority, generating intense competition between principal wife and favored concubine. The ancestral hall re-sanctifies patriarchal authority with women in fixed subordinate positions. The inner residence emerges as a micro-political arena of zero-sum competition for limited resources.

Relational constraint embeds women in dependency networks. Blood relationships provide protection that is simultaneously controlling. Marital relationships are depicted with striking realism, eschewing romantic idealization for portrayal of polygynous competition where husbandly favor can be arbitrarily withdrawn. Moments of female solidarity exist, particularly in Old Madam Sheng's mentorship of Minglan, but these bonds operate within structural hierarchies.

Value discipline permeates all aspects of self-presentation. Minglan's brilliance lies in her mastery of the "xian liang shu de" discourse: she performs compliance so effectively that her occasional assertions appear as exceptions granted by authority rather than exercises of autonomous will. Knowledge is permitted but channeled toward domestic utility. Bodily discourses render female physicality a site of constant moral scrutiny.

4.2 Character Typology and Divergent

Destinies

The Strategically Awakening type, represented by Sheng Minglan, is defined by "cang zhuo"-calculated self-presentation of harmlessness enabling survival where conspicuous female competence invites suppression. Her childhood trauma of witnessing her mother's death and recognizing the system's indifference to low-status women's lives forms the psychological foundation. In adulthood, her strategy evolves from pure concealment to timely revelation. Her marriage represents the culmination of an indirect approach: cultivating personal value through self-improvement to position herself for selection by a man capable of offering relative respect within the institution of marriage.

The Traditionally Dependent type, including Wang Ruofu and Sheng Rulan, internalizes patriarchal norms and relies on status legitimacy for security. Their relative stability is the system's reward for compliance, but it comes at the cost of undeveloped self-awareness. Rulan performs a script written by others without questioning its authorship.

The Speculatively Competitive type, represented by Lin Qinshuang and her daughter Sheng Molan, uses non-normative means-allure, intrigue, manipulation-to compete for resources. Lin's temporary dominance is achieved through depletable capital: beauty fades, schemes are exposed, favor is transferable. Her destruction is structurally determined; the system tolerates temporary disturbance but will not permit a rootless concubine to permanently rewrite hierarchy. Molan's repetition of this trajectory with diminished returns illustrates the closing of what limited tolerance previously existed.

The Spiritually Guiding type, embodied by Old Madam Sheng, derives informal authority from generational status and accumulated moral capital, enabling transmission of survival knowledge across generations. Her educational philosophy emphasizing self-reliance represents the most progressive discourse available, yet remains bounded: she teaches navigation, not transformation.

The Tragically Marginal type, represented by Wei Xiaoniang, possesses no birth family backing, no husbandly protection, and no manipulative skills. She is exposed to structural violence without defensive resources. Her death-ambiguous in cause, unmourned by almost everyone-reveals the system's ultimate truth: for

those at the bottom, life has negligible value and can be extinguished without consequence.

4.3 Bounded Awakening

This paper proposes the concept of bounded awakening to characterize Minglan's mode of consciousness: genuine cognitive independence deliberately limited in practical expression to actions compatible with patriarchal institutions. Minglan articulates principles of female self-reliance that resonate with modern feminist values, yet channels this awareness into personal optimization rather than collective challenge. Her goal is not to dismantle patriarchal marriage but to secure the best possible position within it. This boundedness is depicted as realistic rather than as failure, which naturalizes the patriarchal framework even as it celebrates female intelligence.

5. Discussion

The Song Dynasty setting functions as a rule-based society mirror for contemporary experience. The Song was characterized by sophisticated bureaucratic systems and limited meritocratic mobility—a landscape where mastery of norms determined success. This parallels the experience of China's contemporary urban middle class, who navigate intricate explicit and implicit rules in education and employment. Minglan's strategy of hiding capability resonates because it mirrors survival wisdom required in environments where conspicuous talent attracts suppression.

The inner residence serves as a metaphor for involution-intensifying competition within a closed system where increased input yields diminishing returns. This precisely describes the zero-sum dynamics of the inner residence, mirroring contemporary experiences in education, career advancement, and family life.

The drama's narrative strategy involves suturing modern feminist values into a framework that ultimately validates traditional institutions. Minglan is endowed with contemporary virtues of rationality and self-reliance, yet her story leads toward optimal positioning within patriarchal structures rather than independence from them. This satisfies two potentially contradictory audience desires: for representations of female strength reflecting contemporary ideals, and for the security promised by traditional family structures.

6. Conclusion

This study has presented a systematic feminist textual analysis of female images in *The Story of Minglan*. The findings demonstrate that the drama constructs a comprehensive survival landscape through four mechanisms that define the boundaries of elite women's existence. Within this shared landscape, female characters diverge into five types based on structural positions and strategic choices. The concept of bounded awakening captures a distinctive mode of consciousness: cognitive independence deliberately limited to actions compatible with patriarchal institutions.

The drama's cultural significance extends to its function as a displaced narrative of contemporary survival anxieties. The Song setting provides a rule-based society mirror, the inner residence serves as an involution metaphor, and the suturing of modern values into traditional frameworks responds to complex demands of contemporary Chinese gender discourse.

The study's primary limitation is its reliance on textual interpretation without empirical audience reception data. Future research could employ audience interviews or focus groups to investigate how different viewer segments decode the drama's gender messages. Cross-cultural comparative analysis would further illuminate dynamics of cultural proximity and distance in the global circulation of Chinese historical dramas.

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