WHY WOMEN'S POSITIVE SPATIAL EXPRESSION IS MISSING IN CHINESE FEMALE FILMS BASED ON SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Amid the progression of Chinese cinema, female films have embraced an undeniable position, yet the challenge in the development of such films persists over the century-long history of Chinese cinema. Whether in terms of female film creators or films embodying a female perspective, both find themselves in a collective state of "absence." The proliferation of films with female themes has been notable, with select male directors now embracing a female perspective in their craft, delving into themes that resonate with the challenges confronted by women. Conversely, female directors are dedicated to conveying a distinctive female experience and illuminating feminine consciousness through their cinematic endeavors. Such films are transitioning from their initial niche status to becoming integral components of the mainstream cinematic landscape. Albeit with various positive initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality in Chinese society, female films continue to bear the imprint of patriarchy in their conception. Customarily, they merely exploit the veneer of feminine consciousness without genuinely affording women a substantial discursive space. This study circumstantiates this phenomenon by shedding light on spatial representation and expression issues in Chinese female films spanning the past decade. This research centers on the analysis of three films — *Love Education* (directed by Sylvia Chang, 2017), *Send Me to the Clouds* (directed by Teng Congcong, 2019), and *Lost in the Stars* (directed by Cui Rui and Liu Xiang, 2023) — serving as case studies to elucidate the paradox of space prevalent in Chinese female films. Comprehending and rectifying these issues are pivotal for the future creation and advancement of films within this genre. This study is firmly anchored in theoretical frameworks such as Michel Foucault's Discipline Theory, Laura's gaze theory, Kaplan's feminist film theory, and Judith's gender performativity theory. Capitalizing on these theoretical lenses, the analysis probes into the social space inhabited by women, the interplay of "gaze" and "anti-gaze" within spatial contexts, psychological spaces, and the realm of gender performativity evident in the three specifically chosen Chinese female films. The scrutiny of spatial dimensions in the examined trio of films reveals a paradox in the representation and expression of space within Chinese female films. Despite purportedly adopting a "female perspective," a predominant trend is observed wherein these works tend to attribute negative spatial connotations to women. Such representations include themes of oppression, susceptibility to the gaze, encounters with death, fear, and confinement. These films often fall short of liberating themselves from male influence, failing to provide affirmative spatial portrayals for women or aligning closely with the contemporary socio-cultural realities faced by women. As such, they miss the mark in presenting the most authentic facets of the female experience. This study bears significance for future formulation, advancement, and breakthroughs in Chinese female films.
Keywords: Films; Female theme; Female space; Paradox of space

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid societal transformations and evolving gender perspectives have positioned film as a pivotal medium for articulating female subjectivity, social relationships, and gender-related issues. In the 2010s, films dominated by female characters, such as *Caught in the Web* (2012), *Feng Shui* (2012), *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (2016), and *Soulmate* (2016), have emerged. Nevertheless, the market share of most of these films remains relatively limited. In 2017, the film *Angels Wear White* (2017), helmed by female filmmaker Vivian Qu, made a significant impact by earning a nomination for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. It garnered widespread acclaim both domestically and internationally, with its thematic choices and narrative perspective aligning more closely with female consciousness. Also in the same year, the film *Love Education* (2017), directed by female filmmaker Sylvia Chang, was released, portraying the pursuits and understandings of love and family across different generations of women. In 2018, a batch of low-budget films with female themes sprang up in China, exemplified by *Lost, Found* (2018). Since 2019, films within the realm of art cinema, centering on female themes, have exhibited a more diverse trajectory. Noteworthy examples encompass *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), *Spring Tide* (2019), *Balloon* (2019), and *The Crossing* (2019), all delving into multifaceted aspects of women's issues. Particularly remarkable is *Send Me to the Clouds*, starring Yao Chen, which directly confronts female desire and pleasure, deviating from the conventional portrayal of women enduring hardships and marking a significant advancement for mainland Chinese cinema in this genre. In 2021, during the Chinese Spring Festival holidays, *Hi, Mom* (2021) stood out in the Mandarin-language film market, historically dominated by male-centric productions. This accomplishment signals a new era for female films in the industry. Subsequently, the film *Sister* (2021) emerged as another blockbuster. In June 2023, the film *Lost in the Stars* was

released. Despite encountering various logical issues in the narrative, accentuated by numerous plot twists, the cumulative box office in mainland China raked in 3 billion yuan within 18 days of its release, securing a position in the top ten global box office rankings for 2023. Marketed with slogans such as "female perspective and female theme" and "girls help girls," the film successfully caught the eyes of a sizable female audience. However, when scrutinizing Chinese female films as a collective entity, a homogeneous phenomenon persists, and they have yet to authentically capture the nuanced survival and mental states of women from a genuinely female perspective.

Drawing upon the preceding reflections, this paper revolves around three films, namely — *Love Education* (2017), *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), and *Lost in the Stars* (2023) — as its primary research subjects. Concentrating on the spatial representations within these three female-themed films, it conducts a thorough analysis of the film texts, scrutinizing the portrayal of space and dissecting pivotal scenes. To commence with, this paper defines females and female-oriented films through a feminist theoretical perspective. Subsequently, it employs Foucault's discipline theory to analyze the social spaces occupied by women in these films [1]. Further, it capitalizes on Laura's gaze theory to scrutinize the dynamics of "gaze" and "anti-gaze" within the spatial context of the films [2]. Additionally, it applies Judith's gender performativity theory to dissect the gender performativity of the characters within the spatial realm [3].

This study plunges into the exploration of social space, the dynamics of "gaze" and "anti-gaze," psychological space, and the gender performativity space of characters in three films. Its objective is to tackle several questions: how do contemporary Chinese female films address the issue of female space? What are the similarities and differences in the process of spatial expression and representation in female films? Through this investigation, a noteworthy finding emerges—the deficiency or absence of expression concerning female space within this genre of films. The overarching goal of female films is to construct a meaningful structure for female discourse, endeavoring to break free from the discourse predominantly shaped by male perspectives and create a genuine space for female existence. The central question revolves around whether Chinese female films are custom-made to provide a liberated space for female discourse or if they serve as a "hollow signifier" within the patriarchal order. The term "hollow signifier" emanates from Dai's analysis of revolutionary and agrarian-themed films in the first seventeen years after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Dai pointed out that "on the discursive level, 'women' are portrayed as an invisible and suppressed identity, simultaneously representing a pivotal yet conspicuous 'hollow signifier.' [4]" Through this research, it was revealed that Chinese female films present female space as lacking. This paradoxical finding prompts an exploration of how to positively articulate female space, rendering it openness, inclusiveness, and diversity. This process involves fully opening up and embracing one's true self in the gaze of the "other." This endeavor would epitomize a crucial step for innovation and breakthroughs in Chinese female films, signifying a key to gaining new significance in the contemporary era.

This research endeavors to offer insights and references for the development of Chinese female films, aspiring to explore novel dimensions within this genre. The objective is to catalyze the creation of works that authentically capture female consciousness and depict the genuine lived experiences of women. Furthermore, this research strives to contribute fresh perspectives and approaches to the examination of spaces in Chinese female films.

2   FEMALES, SPACE, AND FILM REPRESENTATION

2.1 Female Film

The term "Woman's Film" was coined in the 1970s by American feminist film critic Haskell 5]. In her work *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, Haskell observed [5]: In the thirties and forties (1930s and 1940s), the heyday of the "woman's film" was as regular an item in studio production as the crime melodramas or Westerns. Like any routine genre, it was subject to its highs and lows, and ranged from films that adhered safely to the formulae of escapist fantasy, films that were subversive only "between the lines" and in retrospect, and the rare few that used the conventions to undermine them. At the lowest level, as soap opera, the "woman's film" fills a masturbatory need; it is soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife. Haskell contended that a term like "woman's film" was summarily used to dismiss certain films [5], with no further need on the part of the critic to make distinctions and explore the genre, suggesting some of the reasons for this misery. In the woman's film, the woman—a woman—is at the center of the universe. Judith Mayne [3], a feminist film scholar at Ohio State University, delineated two categories of women's films. The first type is tailored for female audiences, primarily catering to women's emotional needs. This category, notably prevalent in Hollywood during the 1930s to 1950s, includes popular melodramas or "Weepies" designed to satisfy women's emotional outlets. Interestingly, these films were largely directed by men. The second type is classified based on the creators, specifically films directed by women. Within this category, Mayne identifies four subtypes: women-centric films that dominate the system, films expressing a female mode, women-centric documentaries, and experimental films that blend avant-garde forms with feminist political perspectives.

In his work, *The Chronology of Women's Films*, Chinese scholar Ying emphasizes that the term "women's film" extends beyond movies directed by women or featuring women as main characters [6]. Rather, its accurate definition should encompass films, videos, DV productions, and multimedia experimental works directed by women, characterized by a distinct female perspective and explicit awareness of women's issues. Cultural critic Dai [7], in *Invisible Women: Women and Women's Films in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, posits that "women's films" are creations by women, primarily portraying women and expressing the film's connotations from a feminist viewpoint. An ongoing debate within Chinese theoretical circles ensues around the definition of women's films. Scholar Wei contends that in the West

[8], "women's films" are closely tied to the feminist movement, intending to shape idealized female images by portraying women's lives and rejecting the objectification of women. On the other hand, Wan argues that women's films ought to be directed by women [9], revolve around women's lives, and approach filmmaking from a female perspective. Scholars Li and Xiu contend that women's films should exclusively focus on the concept of women's consciousness [10], which includes advocating for gender equality, liberating female images from the male gaze, and narrating women's own destinies, values, and psychological characteristics. However, researcher Jin contends that [11], despite ongoing definitional debates, a noticeable consensus has emerged—namely, the portrayal of women's consciousness from a distinctly female perspective. The 1980s film *Army Nurse* (1985) marked significant progress by gradually portraying the struggles of women when their desires clashed with the responsibilities they carried. Hence, it is apparent that female desires have become a crucial aspect of portraying women's consciousness in women's films since the 1980s.

This study defines "female films" as works primarily centered around women, delving into their lives and destinies. These films contribute to a broadened understanding of the world from a distinctly female perspective and present novel images of women. The research is confined to the past decade, with a specific focus on films featuring female protagonists and themes revolving around women. The selected samples for this study encompass *Love Education* (2017), *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), and *Lost in the Stars* (2023).

2.2 Space and Film

The space theory emerged in the Western world during the mid to late 20th century. According to Henry Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, space and society are closely related. Every society will produce its own space, which, in turn, implies the accommodation and cover-up of social relations. The discussion of space and gender is the basic content of feminist geography, representing the high consistency of the space theory and feminism. Massey, a British scholar, contended that "a gendered socio-spatial structure is male-dominated." [12].

Film is a comprehensive art that integrates time and space, wherein space plays a vital role. Marcel [12], a film theorist, argued: "We can discuss the film space, which refers solely to the spatial dimensions within the film, also known as the space of plot-expansion and the space of the drama world." In his view, "film space" is "space in the film," and "space in the film" is "space in the drama world". In fact, they correspond to three different levels of spatial concepts and cannot be equated. However, the three concepts can respectively correspond to the conceptual meanings of "film space," "film narrative space," and "story space" mentioned in this paper or can be seen as the combination of each shot space (the space recorded by the shot) in the film. It is not difficult to find that most researchers analyze the film space from the perspective of audio-visual language. Furthermore, Foucault analyzed the unique social space of prison in *Discipline And Punish* [1]. He argued that imprisonment has had two functions since the beginning of the 19th century: deprivation of personal freedom and technical transformation of individuals. Prison is a typical closed space. The French philosopher Henri especially emphasized the proposition of "space. [13]" His thinking on space is based on three dimensions of space: spatial perception, spatial imagination, and spatial experience. After absorbing the essence of Marxist philosophy, he put forward the concept of "the production of space." The "space" in "the production of space" includes three levels, namely, spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Lefebvre defined space from different levels, such as material, social, and spiritual, rather than deconstructing it from the single lens of film art.

2.3 Space in Chinese Female Films

Influenced by literature, the study of female space in film and television arts gradually embarked on the right track. The emergence of "female films" can be considered as an image in the mirror of females' existential dilemma in reality, which transitioned the focus of film development from females' consciousness to their self-identity, gender diversity, and subjective needs. In the film, *Peacock*, released in 2005, Director Gu Changwei depicts the survival activities of females in a specific era through the construction of geographical, domestic, and spiritual spaces. The elder sister, Gao Weihong, is a prominent female symbol in the film. At the beginning of the film, a young woman (Gao Weihong) is seen attentively playing the accordion in a narrow and crowded corridor. Next to her, the water in the kettle on the stove has boiled for a long time, yet she only gives a sidelong glance and continues playing the accordion. The beautiful melody of the accordion is in sharp contrast with the mundanity of the surroundings. This attests to the fact that Gao is a woman who is a romantic down deep but cannot break free from the shackles of reality. The narrow and crowded corridor is transformed into a tiny kitchen, which is regarded as the living space of females. It not only reflects the triviality of family life itself but also indicates the subordinate status of females in the family. She is eager to break through the restraints but is suppressed by patriarchy. The claustrophobic space in the frame reveals the tremendous physical and mental oppression of females.

After the release of the female-themed film *Sister* in April 2021, several sensitive topics have leaped to the headlines, such as "bias for daughters," "the eldest sister acting as a mother," "the family of origin," and "the brother-supporting demon," hitting a great number of females' pain points. The film attempts to explore females' current living conditions, seeking the possibility of expanding their living space. However, females' realistic dilemma still returns to its original contradictory state in the end. An Ran, the sister in the film, is forbidden by her father to wear skirts as a child. Instead of choosing her favorite major, clinical medicine, she is compelled to study nursing. Her family changes her life against

her will, only because she is a girl. The appearance design of the sister, An Ran, in the film also embodies her boyishness. With short hair and simple striped or plain short-sleeved tops, often paired with pants, a neutral and handsome "tomboy" image is presented in front of the audience. The image the sister portrays is full of masculine qualities. On the one hand, her neutral dressing style reflects her tougher and rebellious personality; on the other hand, it also implies her inability to fully display her female identity due to the influence of social and family environments. Only through the camouflage of external image can she gain recognition from the outside world. The film dissolves the subjectivity of the elder sister from the very beginning, evidenced by its title, "Sister." While the identity of "sister" constitutes the narrative subject and narrative mode of the film, both focus on the functionality of this identity within the family. The patriarchal society constantly squeezes the living space that An Ran strives for through self-awakening, and her independence as an individual person has never been truly recognized. Moreover, the aunt in the film stands in opposition to An Ran, creating a space of "gaze" and "anti-gaze" between the two females. The aunt's character represents three major identities: mother, wife, and elder sister. Behind these identities, one can glimpse all her responsibilities as a traditional Chinese female. Unlike An Ran, she devotes all her personal feelings to her family, enduring hardships without complaint. In An Ran, she sees her own shadow—a woman who wants to go to Russia but cannot fulfill her aspirations due to family obligations. Accordingly, her attitude transforms from resignedly persuading An Ran "You are the elder sister," into "You must stand on your own feet in the future," and "Nesting dolls don't have to fit into the same set..." She no longer uses her own experiences and traditional moral standards to regulate her niece. However, it seems that An Ran's final compromise still falls into the old ways of her aunt, albeit with a sense of rebellion and independence. Yin Ruoxin and You Xiaoying, the female director and screenwriter of the film, aim to shift the story's focus to critique the notions of "male superiority" and "bias for daughters" in Chinese traditional culture. They emphasize that females have the right to pursue independence and realize self-worth. However, despite their efforts to convey concepts of "fairness" and "support" for women, their expression appears hesitant and filled with ambiguity in creation, failing to provide females space, especially real independent space. At the end of the film, An Ran ultimately succumbs to the recognition of patriarchy. She refuses to sign the adoption agreement for her younger brother and leaves the adoption family with him.

From the analysis of these two films, it is apparent that Chinese female films often fail to provide a correct identity to modern females, let alone foster a deep reflection on gender culture and consciousness. The majority of female-themed films still focus narrowly on discussing how patriarchy squeezes females' space.

2.4 Inadequacies of Existing Research

2.4.1 Limited research on the intersection of females and space in films

Through the above-mentioned literature, it is evident that Chinese scholars' research on female films can be roughly divided into the following three veins: Firstly, they study the development of female consciousness in female films and investigate the deeper underlying social problems. Secondly, they scrutinize female directors, aiming to showcase different female living conditions by taking a female perspective. Thirdly, they conducted research on the transformation of female figures so as to manifest the standing of females. Presently, academic researchers on female films mostly focus on the first two veins, with few studies on the space in female films and even fewer on the combination of females and space. Moreover, most of the research on film space studies camera language rather than the diversified presentation format of space, such as characters' social and psychological space.

2.4.2 Homogeneity in the creation and research of "female films"

The creation and research of "female films" are excessively homogeneous, less diversified, and even fixated. For instance, females in Chinese films are primarily portrayed in four main archetypes: Firstly, the "Cinderella" archetype, where females are often discovered and rescued by males; Secondly, the Mulan archetype, which is often attached with a note of heroism; Thirdly, the "Pandora" archetype, portraying women as seductive and dangerous; and Lastly, the "Gaia" archetype, which often cast modern females as good mothers and devoted wives. In addition, most literature studies lay emphasis on the unflattering impressions of females being subjugated, with words like "hysteria" appearing in many descriptions of females. Besides, the non-mainstream and marginalized groups are overlooked. The existing literature tends to focus on mainstream female characters and film works while ignoring the experiences and expressions of non-mainstream and marginalized groups. This can result in insufficient research on highly skilled females from all walks of life, ethnic minority females, migrant females, sex workers, and disabled females. Future research needs to put various female figures in the crosshairs for a more comprehensive perspective.

2.4.3 Incompatibility between the theoretical research on female films and the status quo of film creation

Females have participated in film production since the birth of films, but they have been gradually excluded from the ranks of directors due to the strong male-dominated system. The emergence of feminism in the 1960s not only provided a theoretical impetus for rewriting the history of female films, but also shattered the ceiling that prevented females from participating in the film industry. Nowadays, an increasing number of female filmmakers have entered the mainstream and moved into the public view. "Taking the screening history of the ONE International Women's Film Festival as an example, in the new production section, the proportion of female directors' works has shown an upward trend, peaking at 78.95% compared to the initial 55.56%. Among all the films shown in the past four sessions, the total number of works produced by female directors and male directors is 52.63% and 47.37%, respectively, basically striking a balance. In the case of new films focusing on female subjects, their proportion in the screening history is also on the rise, from 42.8% and 45.7% in the first and second sessions to 50% in the fourth session." While in the international literature,

research on Chinese female films pays more attention to the political and class nature from the perspective of traditional Chinese society and the suppressed female figures under the patriarchal system, which is mismatched with the increasing number of female filmmakers and diverse female themes.

2.4.4 Inadequate interdisciplinary cooperation

The study of females, space, and film space requires cooperation across film studies, gender studies, architecture, sociology, and cultural studies, among other disciplines. However, the current interdisciplinary cooperation is insufficient, restricting the in-depth understanding of the relationship among females, space, and film space.

2.4.5 Weak connection with viewer experience

A bunch of challenges remain to be solved through further study. These include how to build a connection between film space and viewer perception and experience, as well as how to analyze the latent space in film and the inner experiences of female subjects. Although some studies acknowledge the role of females in film production and creation, research conducted from the perspective of female viewers is underreported. Therefore, gaining insight into how female viewers perceive and interpret film space is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between females and film space.

2.4.6 Shortage of latest theories combined with latest works

The existing literature research relies primarily on the theoretical framework of Western feminism. As time passes, the development of other theoretical perspectives and methods also plays an essential part in studying the relationship among females, space, and film space. Nonetheless, existing studies that combine the latest theory with the latest female films are exceedingly rare, resulting in a severe imbalance and mismatch between the development of female films and the application of theories.

Combining film theory, space theory, feminist theory, discourse theory, etc., this study deeply explores the space expression in Chinese female films, which involves not only the space of camera language but also the mental space of the spiritual world and the social space presented by the material world. This paper takes the space in female films as the research object and adopts the films *Love Education*, *Send Me to the Clouds*, and *Lost in the Stars* as samples to reveal the paradox existing in the creation of Chinese female films, as well as the shortage of creation regarding female space.

3   CASE STUDIES OF INFLUENTIAL FEMALE FILMS IN THE LAST DECADE

3.1 Female's Social Space

In the film *Love Education*, Zeng, the grandmother who lives in the countryside, is the original match of Yue Huiying's father, Yue Zifu. She marries him at the age of 17. After half a year, the man goes out to make a living and never comes back home again. Zeng serves her in-laws at home and remains single for decades with the so-called "chastity arch." Finally, she ends up with the body of her lover and reconciliation with herself. Zeng and Yue do not have a legal marriage contract but rather a "marriage agreement" under the traditional Chinese social system. However, because of this so-called marriage agreement, she spends her whole life secluded in the courtyard of a rural village, clinging to existence alongside the graveside in the fields. She points to her name in the family genealogy in the ancestral hall, identifying herself as a member of the Yue family for her entire life. She completes her own restraint and discipline, as well as her so-called self-mission. Traditional women are restricted by social norms, showing their obedience by sacrificing their power. Thornham [14], a professor of Media and Film Studies at the University of Sussex, UK, said in her book *Spaces of Women's Cinema* that "as critics have already retired us, these safe intervening spaces have traditionally been spaces of female imprisonment." Zeng has spent her entire life in the countryside, guarding the home she shared with Yue. For her, this is the safest and most belonging place. Ironically, it is also the space where she is imprisoned. Foucault mentioned in *Discipline and Punish* that the space inhabited by bodies under the discipline system is usually a compartmentalized unit [1]. Under the discipline of the micro-power, females' soul space is subjected to "torture," which is mainly manifested in two aspects: the lack of females' discourse power and the loss of their subject identity. The historical context of discipline is that a technology that manipulated the human body emerged at that time, which was not targeted at increasing the skills of the human body or strengthening domination over the body, but aimed at establishing a relationship. Through the mechanism, the body became more useful and obedient or more useful through increased obedience. A policy of coercing the body was formed, which was a careful manipulation of various factors, postures, and behaviors of the human body. As early as the 1990s, contemporary British social scientist and geographer Massey pointed out [15], "The attempt to confine women in the domestic sphere could be seen as both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social." Zeng follows the discipline she perceives in this self-enclosed place in the countryside, where both the body and soul are oppressed. In the film, the "chastity arch" appears multiple times as a "symbol" in different scenes and events. It seems to remind Zeng of the self-discipline and self-control over her body, implying her determination and obsession to spend her entire life waiting for a man. The invisible feudal system seems to act as a form of discipline, monitoring or controlling her behaviors. Suter et al. make an interview with Laura Mulvey [16], to use Laura's term, this technique produces an ambiguous effect in terms of the space within the house and, by extension, the garden as well . There is a kind of prison-nest effect. In a sense, the house is a prison since the women are limited to this space, bound by the confines of house and garden, if they are not to be in the position of object (controlled), as they must be in the male external realm. On the other hand, the space of the house assumes the security, intimacy, warmth, and safety of the nest; it belongs to the women and to their ways of being; they have control

over this space, as far as possible; it is a space of refuge, possibly even of "cure." This is precisely depicted in the movie *Love Education*. Zeng's old house resembles a prison, where she is confined. However, she also views it as the safest space, providing deep spiritual nourishment through memories shared with her husband, Yue.

The opening scenes of the movie *Send Me to the Clouds* are filled with an oppressive social atmosphere for females. Sheng Nan, the heroine, is seen riding an elevator while eating breakfast. Behind her, a couple is reading news from the phone. Sheng hears a conversation behind her: "Twenty-seven years old is the threshold for defining leftover women." "Twenty-seven years old?" "Yes, whether you are beautiful or not, rich or not, as long as you are over twenty-seven years old and unmarried, you are all categorized as 'leftover women.'" "But for men, they are golden bachelors..." The opening dialogue of the film seems to be directed at Sheng Nan, hinting at her reaching the awkward age defined by society, which is unfriendly towards females. One time, Sheng unexpectedly discovers she has ovarian cancer. As female reproductive organs, ovaries are a symbol of female identity. The expectation of society towards females is to bear children, Canadian author Margaret writes in her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* [17]: "We are for breeding purposes. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices." Society redefines a new identity for Sheng, and her own social space is constantly being compressed. Invisible social systems and concepts discipline and define females.

The Queen's Gambit, directed by Scott Frank. Adapted from Walter Tevis's novel, it infused the story with strong feminist themes. In the late 1950s, young Beth Harmon was abandoned and entrusted to an orphanage in Kentucky. She has an amazing talent for chess but is addicted to sedatives provided by the government for children. Haunted by the demons of her mind, combined with the dual role of obsession, Beth becomes an impressive, highly skilled, and charismatic outcast and is determined to break the traditional boundaries established by the world of chess dominated by males. Finally, relying on her talent, she dominates the chess world and gradually grows into an international chess grandmaster. The drama depicts the protagonist's psychological growth through each chess game, endowing females with independent and self-focused psychological space. However, in China, it is rare to see TV dramas or films that truly provide females with psychological or positive space.

3.2 The Space of "Gaze" and "Anti-Gaze"

The "gaze" theory is an important concept in Western literary theory and cultural studies in the late 20th century, referring to a kind of scrutiny or gaze with power and desire imposed by the subject on the object. Jacques proposed in his mirror stage theory that the gaze is the condition for constructing the subject [18], and individuals establish subjectivity under the gaze of others. Sartre believed that identity comes out of the gaze [19], and humans confirm their identity attributes under each other's gaze. He pointed out that this gaze is mutual; as we gaze at others, we are also being gazed at by others. And Foucault incorporated power mechanisms into the "gaze" theory [1], considering the gaze as an acknowledgment of a certain power system and constitutes a picture of social power. Laura examined the theory of the gaze from a feminist perspective [2]. In her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* published in *Screen* in 1975, she contended that the scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations and mechanisms, which this cinema has played on the image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film. The argument turns again to the psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat.

In Laura's view, the camera is a typical embodiment of the male gaze, and the film shots symbolize the viewpoint of the male gaze [2]. In a world featured by gender inequality, the pleasure of watching is divided into male (active) and female (passive), and the oppression of females in patriarchal society is displayed through the camera. With the passage of time, female directors have persistently emerged, and the film camera has been imbued with a female perspective. For example, in the film *Love Education*, the female director Sylvia Chang focuses the camera on women of different generations. In the film *Send Me to the Clouds*, the female director, Teng Congcong, focuses the camera on the modern independent woman, Shen Nan. However, even in films shot from a female perspective, they are still not spared patriarchy in terms of character portrayals and plot settings.

In *Send Me to the Clouds*, the protagonist, Shen Nan and her mother, Liang Meizhi, are two extreme female figures, forming a sharp contrast. Liang marries Shen's father at a young age and depends on him for her livelihood. Upon learning of her husband's affair, she is at a loss and seeks shelter with Shen, taking her as a last resort. However, Shen does not agree with her mother's way of life and scoffs at the "leftover women" theory. Her name, "Sheng Nan" is the most direct metaphor. In Chinese, "Sheng Nan" is a homophone for "prevailing over men," indicating that her father, who has no sons, raises her as if she were a son to balance his psychological loss of not having a son. Since he doesn't have a son, he hopes his daughter will be even more like a son than an actual son. There is a small detail in the film: When the father sees his daughter with injuries on her face, instead of showing concern for her, he asks, "Did you have a fight with someone? Did you win or lose?" When he hears she wins, he immediately says, "That's good." This conversation is more like one between a father and son rather than between a father and daughter. Sheng Nan's capable and independent temperament is inevitably associated with her family's expectations. Additionally, the "Sheng" in Sheng Nan's name also resonates with the "sheng" in "leftover women." In Internet slang, "leftover women" refers to women who have passed the generally accepted age for marriage but are still unmarried. According to the definition of

Language Situation in China, leftover women are those who are 27 years old or older, with high education and income yet still have not found an ideal marriage partner. Labeling elite women like Sheng Nan as "leftover women" is actually stigmatizing and derogatory toward women. The implied meaning behind the father's naming of his daughter reflects a paradox and dilemma in the family's expectations for Sheng Nan. On one hand, they hope she can "excel men" and be stronger than men. But on the other hand, they also believe that if she is stronger than men, no one will marry her. Sheng Nan appears in a neutral outfit. As a female journalist, she investigates the truth alone in the wilderness, carrying a camera on her back. She smokes, curses, and squats by the roadside to eat heartily. These images undoubtedly conceal her feminine traits, thus excluding her from the category of being gazed at by males. Instead, she begins to anti-gaze males around her. As an idealist, she detests her cheating father, looks down upon Li Ping, a nouveau riche, despises Si Mao, a colleague who embraces the money-first mindset, and unravels Liu Guangming's hypocrisy. Such characterization is a dispelling and resistance to the male gaze, preventing Sheng Nan from being the "object" of the male gaze. The fate of women being gazed at as the "object" has changed. Anti-gaze has thus become a way or means of identity writing in Chinese female films.

The male gaze theory posits that desire is always connected with gender. Influenced by traditional patriarchy, females are gazed at by the males, which transforms them into the weaker sex being stared at. Through the operation of power, societal gender roles are constructed, turning females into objectified parties. Under the pervasive gaze of patriarchal society, the construction of females' gender status is completed. The ubiquitous gaze becomes a confederate of discipline and power, placing females within a panopticon, impossible to conceal. Even females view themselves through the lens of males; anyone can become an enforcer of such a discipline. Sheng Nan's mother, Liang Meizhi, represents female figures shaped by the norms of the traditional patriarchal society. In her initial appearance in the film, she is driving a pink car, with fashionable curled hair, beautifully manicured hands, and pouty lips from lip surgery. She often wears white or pink clothes, maintaining her charm well into her fifties. She tells her daughter, "You're so capable; no wonder you can't find a boyfriend." As an adult female, Sheng's mother constantly views her daughter from a male perspective, representing the "male gaze." In the film, she and Sheng create a space of "gaze" and "anti-gaze." Despite sharing the same sex, Sheng's mother still views her daughter from a male perspective, which proves that a large number of females are disciplined and "taught" and do not have a genuine sense of subjectivity or independent space. Although the portrayal of Sheng Nan has broken the traditional pattern of females under the male gaze, her "anti-gaze" space can be seen as dancing with shackles. As a female, she can only engage in "anti-gaze" by covering up her femininity and adopting a neutral appearance. Thus, even though reputed as a female-themed film, *Send Me to the Clouds* still does not provide women with a completely independent space. The female subject still feels ashamed to display her feminine identity and lacks confidence in it. Only when females can examine themselves from a new perspective and engage in "anti-gaze" without the need for neutral dressing, can they truly fight against a monopolistic viewpoint.

The film *Lost in the Stars* is based on a true story. Compared to the character Li Muzi, who is killed at the beginning of the film, the prototype Wang Nuanuan seems to embody a more independent and clear-headed female cognition. On June 9, 2019, Wang Nuannuan, a Chinese woman who was in the first trimester of pregnancy at the time, fell from a cliff about 34 meters high while visiting the Pha Taem National Park in Ubon Ratchatani, Thailand. She was found by a lost tourist and taken to the hospital, where she miraculously survived after rescue efforts. The one who pushed her off the cliff was her husband, Yu Xiaodong. Yu carefully orchestrated the murder to inherit Wang's huge fortune and defraud the insurance money. In the real case, there was no so-called "girlfriend" or "girls help girls," but Wang herself engaged in a battle of wits with her ex-husband and initiated a self-rescue plan. Faced with no surveillance, no witnesses, and a language barrier, Wang had to comply with her ex-husband to protect herself. Later, when his guard was lowered, she informed the attending doctor of the truth and contacted a friend to visit her. The friend secretly recorded a conversation between Wang and her ex-husband, which became the only physical evidence of his crime. After being transferred to a general ward, she seized the opportunity provided by the hospital's visitation policy to call the police immediately. During her time in the hospital, Wang not only had to endure physical pain but also to maintain a high level of courage and wisdom. This is a stark contrast to the portrayal of the wife in the film. If the film *Lost in the Stars* had portrayed the character more closely resembling Wang, it might have been more convincing and could have better showcased female space, instead of leveraging the label of feminism and claiming to speak up for females. The film depicts a story where "a male seems to be manipulated by a female," but in reality, it still centers around males, objectifies females, and disregards the value of females' lives.

The film *Lost in the Stars* has been promoting itself with the slogan "Girls help girls." It portrays a sense of sisterhood, from which perspective it can be counted as a female-themed film. However, it seems that females are more objectified in this film. The wife, Li Muzi, who dies from the very beginning, is like a prop, devoid of any value in her existence. The male protagonist, He Fei, meets his wife, Li Muzi, because of diving. Li Muzi is keen on the "underwater starry sky" and stops in front of Van Gogh's paintings, unaware of the "appreciation" of He Fei from behind. Just as a Chinese proverb says, "The mantis that is praying on a cicada is not aware of the oriole behind." Li Muzi is treated as his "prey," objectified as a complete money-maker. The females portrayed in this film correspond to three stereotypes of females under the male gaze: the seductive and treacherous dragon lady—fake wife, the innocent and kind "blonde"—real wife Li Muzi, and the capable and smart career woman—lawyer Chen Mai (posed by Li's friend Shen Man). The real and fake Li Muzi represent the two extremes of the male imagination of females: the pure ethereal beauty and the seductive dragon lady. He Fei personally orchestrates the "mysterious disappearance of his wife," viewing his wife Li Muzi from the male gaze under the patriarchy. However, as someone from the lower class, He lacks the capital to "gaze" Li. Hence,

he conceives this "murder case" to compensate for the deficiency and leap into the upper class, little knowing that Li's friend Shen Man (namely, lawyer Chen Mai) is also planning a big play, an "anti-gaze" drama against him. The fake wife she plants beside him has a big wavy hairstyle, a red dress, and flaming red lips. In his work *Ways of Seeing* published in 1972, British art historian John proposed that visual media objectify females by presenting them in a way that serves the heterosexual male viewers' pleasure [20]. As Laura notes [2], the effect of this is that the beauty of the woman as object and screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of the guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look. As a female, Shen Man seems to be defining women from a male perspective as well, assuming that women dressed in this way are more attractive and aggressive. Likewise, from the perspective of the director or producer of *Lost in the Stars*, such an appearance satisfies the desires of male viewers. Consequently, the image of the fake wife is not only an objectification of women from a male perspective but also from a female perspective. When Shen Man engages in "anti-gaze" behavior towards He Fei, she is also defining and objectifying females from a male perspective. As time progresses, the image of females should not be solidified into such stereotypes as "heart-breaker," "blonde," or "butch;" they are diverse and intelligent. At the end of the film, Shen Man visits He Fei in prison, holding the sonogram of Li Muzi, and says, "You killed the person who loved you the most in this world," instead of "You killed my best friend." This statement diminishes Shen Man's subjectivity and portrays her "anti-gaze" behavior from the point of view of He Fei, representing an "anti-gaze" space within the patriarchal framework.

Whether it's Sheng Nan in *Send Me to the Clouds* or Shen Man in *Lost in the Stars*, they both engage in "anti-gaze" behaviors towards males in the films. However, the former is based on self-empowerment, erasing feminine qualities, while the latter is anchored on objectifying females. Neither of them completely escapes the male gaze, but represent a patriarchy hidden beneath the female perspective.

3.3 Psychological Space

The compression of female space in Chinese female films leaves little space for females, while the social space under the patriarchal system further constrains their psychological space. *Love Education*, a film depicting three female generations, introduces their love lives from an incident of "moving graves," showcasing the persistent pursuit and diverse understandings of love and family among Chinese females in different eras. As a female director, Sylvia Chang adeptly utilizes family estrangement to explore nuanced emotions in family relationships and portrays the psychological space of characters in plain storytelling, offering audiences a glimpse into an emotive realm. In the film, she also takes on the role of Yue Huiying, a retiring female teacher, whose husband, Yin Xiaoping, is a driving school instructor. While their relationship appears mundane and interdependent, they struggle with emotional communication issues. Although Mrs. Wang is their neighbor and Yin Xiaoping's driving student, Yue Huiying harbors suspicions about his husband because of his gentleness and patience in teaching Mrs. Wang to drive. The psychological space of middle-aged females, characterized by jealousy, fear, anxiety, and a sense of crisis, is vividly depicted in this moment. Regarding the portrayal of sexuality and the body, Director Chang employs a subtle metaphorical "spring dream." When Yue Huiying is knocked unconscious by a ball on the school playground, she drifts into a hazy reverie in the hospital, where she encounters a towering "chimney" and a vague young man extending his hand to her. As light filters through the "chimney," her countenance reveals a coy smile and a soft sigh. The director seems to use this "spring dream" to express a middle-aged female's deep-seated desires, but this obscure portrayal of female psychological desire space falls short of boldly unleashing female space.

Love Education features multiple scenes set within the "home." In this household of three, the audience can perceive the fragmentation of the home, in which the layout resembles a series of compartments. A closet divides the space into three sections, with the mother, Yue Huiying, occupying the left side, the father, Yin Xiaoping, on the right, and the daughter, Weiwei, positioned in the middle of the closet. The respective locations of the three individuals within the frame correspond to their attitudes and positions: the left symbolizes the mother's authority, the right reflects the father's powerlessness, and Weiwei is caught in the middle dilemma. This framing technique provides a clear visual representation of the conflicts and imbalances among the family members. Additionally, the father, mother, and daughter often appear in three distinct spaces within the same frame, such as the bedroom, kitchen, and living room. This juxtaposition of spaces within a single shot conveys the director's underlying metaphorical emotions, highlighting the conflicts between two female generations and the family imbalance. In *Love Education*, the three family members are physically separated in the home by a closet, symbolizing a psychological space of isolation and fragmentation. Weiwei's interactions with her mother in the city are often contentious, yet when she visits her grandmother (Yue Zengshi) in the countryside, she seems to open up, lying beside her grandmother on a bed and even introducing her boyfriend. Transitioning from the city to the countryside, Weiwei's psychological space evolves from estrangement and resistance with her mother to intimacy and initiative with her grandmother. The rural outdoor environment fosters a degree of openness for Weiwei, while the urban space seems to constrict, reflecting her closed-off inner world in the city. In *Camille*, "Nurtured by Armand's loving and protective attention, Marguerite blossoms in this realm, freed from all social obligations. The mise-en-scène represents liberation in the extreme long shots, showing the lovers surrounded by wide-open space in contrast to the crowded, claustrophobic city spaces. The mise-en-scène here represents the liberation of nature as constrained to the tight, claustrophobic city spaces. The extreme long shot shows the lovers surrounded by wide-open space, the unreality of the sets adding to the sense of a regression to the imaginary realm, outside of the symbolism that the public spaces represent. Armand gazes lovingly at Marguerite who now, virtuous, looks coyly down."

Natural space expands the characters' psychological space. Director Andrea Arnold mentioned in *Red Road* (2006) that "their protagonists, he writes, 'are all metaphorically imprisoned in the "squalid" city, and long for the "freedom" and "open space" of the countryside.' Against the urban context of factories, terraced streets and alleyways, canals and dockyards which dominate the films, are set brief scenes of pleasure achieved through escape into 'a countryside invested with a sense of romance'." In "Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' Film (1984)", Higson explores the importance of "place" in British social realist cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s [21], and introduces the "country/city distinction" which permeates these films.The films are thus structured according to a set of oppositions—between urban and rural, imprisonment and escape, the everydayness and romance. But Higson suggests that this "system of differences" is also implicitly mapped onto another set of oppositions [22]: between a particular British cinematic realism characterized by location shooting and an emphasis on the contemporary and social issues, and its counterpart, the escapism of Hollywood. "

Send Me to the Clouds, directed by Teng Congcong, depicts the circumstances and challenges faced by independent females in modern society. It focuses on the physical and psychological health problems of modern females and narrates their efforts to bravely confront various dilemmas in life, death, emotions, family, and society. The heroine, Sheng Nan, is an independent, progressive, and aspiring single female journalist. When she is unexpectedly diagnosed with ovarian cancer and needs 300,000 yuan for surgery, she reluctantly sets aside her journalistic aspirations and takes on a task she dislikes, leading to her quest for love and self-discovery. Accompanied by her mother, Sheng Nan embarks on a journey to interview Mr. Li. On the way, they encounter an elderly woman crying over the loss of her coffin by the river, so they look directly in that direction. This moment marks the first appearance of the coffin, which recurs four times in the film. Through the characters' perspectives, the audience is compelled to confront the realities of life and death. The film was shot in Guizhou, a mountainous and scenic region in the hinterland of southwest China, featuring scenes such as Yelang Valley in Huaxi and thousands of Miao villages. Guizhou's unique karst topography creates a sense of layered space, which is suitable for depicting personal psychological space in the film. The misty slopes and Yelang Valley become mystical and literary under the gray lens, aligning well with the film title and the temperament of the heroine. Crafted by the renowned artist Song Peilun, Yelang Valley boasts stone architecture, sculptures, and pottery art, evoking a dreamy artistic ambiance that satisfies the modern imaginations of ancient Yelang. These scenes bring the audience into a mysterious realm, crafted by nature's uncanny handiwork. In the valley veiled by clouds, the atmosphere is solemn, mirroring Sheng Nan's internal struggle to release her emotions amidst the tension of life. In the late night, she shuttles among peculiar and exaggerated facial stone pillar sculptures, stretching out her arms and breathing quickly. With the camera shaking from above to shoot the ground, the entire space contains only her and the surrounding eerie sculptures, presenting a psychological space shrouded in an atmosphere of death. At this moment, the audience seems to resonate with Sheng Nan, participates in her inner world, and senses her fear of death and the unknown life, thus witnessing a helpless female facing a fearful space of death.

Lost in the Stars employs Hitchcock-style suspense filming techniques and utilizes multiple "zoom lenses" to immerse the audience in the characters' unease. The film skillfully manipulates suspense, reversal, and psychological space to control the audience's psychological orientation. Li Muzi died in the "starry sea" that she adores, isolated far from the mainland in an iron cage deep under the sea. As she removes her oxygen mask, a sense of despair envelops the audience, plunging them into a helpless, fearful, and desperate female psychological space. The film employs numerous blue, green, and yellow interplay to express the characters' inner mania and fear, which further stimulates the audience's sensory acceptance. Van Gogh's paintings symbolize the love between He Fei and Li Muzi throughout the film. The "starry sea" at the beginning of the film derives from Van Gogh's "Starry Night," which is not only their acquaintance basis but also the abyss of Li Muzi. Their marriage scene is dreamy and bright yellow in a rice field, where He Fei confesses the gambling facts to Li Muzi and swears to quit gambling. This scene comes from Van Gogh's "Wheatfield with a Reaper," symbolizing He Fei as Li Muzi's reaper. These scenic references evoke both beauty and dread, representing a psychological space of fear and death that the audience participates in.

Yue Huiying in *Love Education*, Sheng Nan in *Send Me to the Clouds*, and Li Muzi in *Lost in the Stars* are females of different ages, personalities, and social classes, but they all convey a psychological space of fear, uncertainty, and death to the audience. The directors, under the guise of female themes, fail to endow the characters with bold and positive psychological spaces.

3.4 Gender Performance Space

"Gender performativity," first introduced by Judith in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [15], opens a future for sex and gender with diverse possibilities. It entails the ambiguity of gender roles, where individuals may embody characters of the opposite sex. In *Send Me to Clouds*, Sheng Nan's appearance is presented to the audience in a neutral style with leather jackets, Martin boots, hefty backpacks, and hats, seemingly arming herself and isolating herself from the outside world. She engages in behaviors like smoking, cursing, disregarding posture, and casually squatting by the roadside, as the director deliberately obscures her feminine vulnerabilities. It is not until later in the film that Sheng Nan removes her hat, swaps her heavy leather shoes for ordinary sneakers, and begins to release her tough exterior, gradually embracing reality and reconciling with herself. Researcher Zhou states in *Performing China: Female Stars, Performing Culture, Visual Politics* [23]*,* "External dress not only specifies gender but also serves to subvert existing norms." Sheng Nan's neutral dress can defy the stereotype of "femininity" and break the traditional female norms. However, this portrayal lacks a sense of female subjectivity consciousness. Film researcher Wang said in

the classic Chinese film *Ghost Love* [24], the heroine's success is achieved at the expense of "her perpetual feminine lack,"leading to a paradox of "silence while expressing." "She becomes absent as a female image while presenting herself as a male image, but expressing herself as a female comes at the expense of the absence of a female discourse subject." In the film, Sheng Nan's dress in "Mulan complex" seems to center on women, yet it serves to remind them that the language and behavioral norms of our history and society are not inherently natural but rather steeped in patriarchal discourse and male-centric rules. Her neutral dress makes her performance characteristics more inclined to males in language and action, which is an external subversion for gender identification, aligning with Butler's theory of gender performativity. Judith posits that the subject is a performative construction [3], which is a "subject in the process" constructed through repeated behaviors.

In *Lost in the Stars*, the fake wife is dressed in a red gown, with her hair styled in a charming wave and her lips painted a fiery red. She embodies a seductive female image, catering to the male gaze and representing the materialized feminine ideal dictated by patriarchal norms. In contrast, Li Muzi has long black hair and solid-colored dresses, especially in her back photo of the white dress at the seaside throughout the film. It seems that only this kind of dress can shape her wealthy fair female image with simplicity and kindness. Society's patriarchal discourse demands females according to male desires, placing undue emphasis on femininity and constraining them within its logic. As Alison (2009), an American socialist feminist philosopher, states, "A woman is estranged and alienated from herself." The fake wife's dress embodies the so-called sexy image with femininity under the male gaze. Judith believes that "sex" is an objective reality [25], while "gender" emerges from social and cultural constructions. She regards gender not as the inherent subject existence and "self" but as an acquired behavior result. As she said, "Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which variable acts proceed; rather, it is an identit*y* tenuously constituted in time–an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Feminist scholar Song states [26], the significance of Judith Butler's theory (1990) lies in: "By recognizing that we are performing, we can manipulate and reconstruct the power dynamics at play, and then write it into the script of this performance." The lawyer, played by the best friend Shen Man, dresses in a waistcoat suit and always appears on the scene with motorcycle and leather clothes. The waistcoat has long been a staple of male fashion, often associated with the suave and sophisticated gentlemen seen in foreign films. Shen Man's image-building seems to effectively convince He Fei, as she adapts her appearance to fit different roles and occasions.

The two distinct female films, *Send Me to the Clouds* and *Lost in the Stars*, seem to capture the female characters of "flaming red lips" under male desires. Throughout history, the notion persists that to captivate male attention, females must adhere to a sexualized dress. However, this stylized portrayal fails to truly empower females or highlight their subjectivity. The male gaze tendencies sever the complexity and three-dimensionality that females should possess as subject individuals, thus overlooking the excellence of female independence, freedom, and wisdom. Even in today's era of rapid economic development, female identities have yet to transition from concealment to full embrace, with the "Mulan complex" of independent females persisting and society still assigning specific dress to certain female types. In *Women & Films*, Kaplan (1983) discusses Motherhood in Von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus* (1932): "Eon Sternberg was one of the directors singled out by Claire Johnston as relegating women to absence. She argues that woman as a sexual and social being is actually repressed in Von Sternberg's films, so that the man can remain at the center of the world of the film, despite the fact that it ostensibly focuses on a woman: The woman as sign, then, becomes the pseudo-center of the filmic discourse. The real opposition posed by the sign is male/non-male, which Sternberg establishes by his use of masculine clothing enveloping the image of Dietrich. This masquerade indicates the absence of man, an absence which is simultaneously negated and recuperated by man. The image of women becomes merely the trace of the exclusion and repression of women." Thus, the paradox also aligns with the concept of "empty signifier" proposed by cultural critic Dai Jinhua [9]. By analyzing revolutionary films and proletarian art films in the 17 years since the founding of New China, he points out that "on the discourse level, 'female' is not only an invisible and suppressed identity but also an important and glaring 'empty signifier.'"

In *Send Me to the Clouds* and *Lost in the Stars*, females are often depicted as subdued and concealed, and their images are shaped in dialogue with patriarchal structures rather than reflecting their internal dialogue. To truly grant meaningful representation to female films, we should create more three-dimensional and positive female characters. When it comes to films with male protagonists, well-developed and three-dimensional characters are prevalent. For example, *Infernal Affairs*, adapted from *The Departed by Martin Scorsese* (Liu Weiqiang and Mai Zhaohui, 2002), is a tale about male machination struggles. With complex identities, Liu Jianming and Chen Yongren are undercover agents for the police and the underworld respectively, and they finally decide to rediscover themselves after an intense battle. Their struggle is devoid of female influence, highlighting their bravery and tenacity and portraying them as thoroughly developed and three-dimensional male characters. It contrasts sharply with the presented space depicted in male-centric films as a pseudo-female perspective. We need more films that positively depict female space, whether it is about self-growth, entrepreneurship, or value creation, to turn space into a tool of positive and powerful expression, rather than a feeble paradox.

4   CONCLUSIONS

In the evolution of the Chinese female film, from its inception to its current ascendant, it has become an independent and stable film type. Based on Foucault's discipline theory [1], Lara Mulvey's gaze theory [2], Kaplan's feminist film theory [27], and Judith's gender performativity theory [28], this paper analyzes the female social space, "gaze" and

"anti-gaze" space, psychological space, and gender performance space in three Chinese female films: *Love Education* (2017), *Send Me to the Clouds* (2019), and *Lost in the Stars* (2023). The analysis exposes certain problems and limitations of the Chinese female film in its advancement process. Most female films capitalize on "female" as the selling point and merely pay lip service to feminism without delving into female individual physical, life, and social experiences, which contradicts female subjective consciousness. Furthermore, compared with the creation of Western female films, Chinese female films lag both in theory and practice, still in the exploration stage of feminist filmmaking overall. Based on the accumulation of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese female films tend to implicitly and passively express female demands and embody a gentle "telling" with distinct local values, which differs from the "confrontation" and "subversion" of Western female films. The resistance to patriarchy in Chinese female films cannot be portrayed as intensely or even bloodily as depicted in Western female films, resulting in Chinese female films being perceived as less pure and thorough. The female image in these films often appears as a superficial symbol and a "tool" unable to escape the stereotype of females.

Female films combine feminist philosophy and interpret female issues from a female perspective. However, in many recognized female films, the filmmakers subconsciously harbor a sense of identification with females as the "second sex" and being "gazed" by males under the background of patriarchal cultural systems. While these films may possess elements of female subjective consciousness, they also harbor a hidden paradox of anti-feminism. The presentation and expression of female space often revolve around negative themes such as gaze, death, fear, depression, and concealment of self-identity in the patriarchal society, failing to truly showcase female subjectivity and initiative. Most female characters are endowed with certain identities, yet they fail to portray truly independent female characters reflective of contemporary social realities. Inadvertently, these works often fall into a self-perpetuating paradox: while seemingly addressing female themes in which female positive space should have been presented and expressed on various levels, these works ultimately fail to escape the deeply ingrained masculine perspective. Thus, the opportunity to present female spaces becomes a means of oppressing females, showcasing a lack of space rather than empowerment. Most films lack the creation of positive, active, and empowering spaces, resulting in a type of spatial paradox.

Overall, Chinese female films fall behind in both theory and practice and are still in the exploration stage. Many works neglect the real female living conditions while promoting female subjectivity and seeking liberation and independence of consciousness. Moreover, they often remain confined by traditional viewpoints, resulting in a paradox of breakthrough and discipline, coexistence and confrontation in image construction, rebellion, and body discourse. Despite advancements in the female image in Chinese female films over the past decade, accompanied by an increase in female subjective consciousness, they still find themselves in an awkward and ambiguous position. Therefore, the development of Chinese female films requires collaborative efforts from directors, screenwriters, actors, and audiences to enhance female subjective consciousness. This entails conducting comprehensive studies and reflections on both the production and theoretical aspects of female films, challenging the prevailing male-centric film culture, breaking down gender discrimination and disparities, and striving to create a harmonious and equitable atmosphere in film art and culture. This collective effort aims to cultivate a unique female consciousness in Chinese female films.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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