

## *Original Paper*

# From the Soil to the Screen: Women Representation in Contemporary Rural China

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### ***Abstract***

*This research delves into the representation of female characters in contemporary Chinese cinema, focusing on films set in rural and underdeveloped areas between 2010 and 2022. Under the guidance of Professor Luis Duno Gottberg at Rice University, the study scrutinizes the complex interplay between traditional socio-cultural norms and evolving gender perceptions within these cinematic narratives. Central to our inquiry is the exploration of how a distinctly Chinese interpretation of the Male Gaze and entrenched Confucian patriarchal values shape the portrayal of women, signaling a negotiation between historical and cultural influences and modern identities. Employing a qualitative research methodology, this study integrates a comprehensive literature review, focusing on feminist film theory and its application within the Chinese context. Content analysis of selected films is conducted to uncover recurring visual and narrative themes, character development, and gender dynamics.*

### ***Keywords***

*Male Gaze, Chinese Cinema, Rural China, Women*

### **1. Introduction**

This research contends that the representation of female characters in contemporary Chinese cinema set in rural and underdeveloped areas serves as a critical lens through which the interplay of entrenched socio-cultural dynamics and emerging gender perceptions can be examined. By delving into the nuanced roles assigned to these characters, we probe how their portrayals are shaped by a distinctly Chinese interpretation of the Male Gaze, which both reinforces and challenges traditional Confucian patriarchal norms. This study seeks to illuminate the complex fabric of modern Chinese society, where cinema becomes a battleground for negotiating women's evolving status amidst the persistence of historical cultural influences.

At the heart of China, its culture, and the intricate study of its societal interactions, lies the unassuming yet profound rural backdrop. This rustic part of China, often overshadowed by the dazzling pace of urban development, holds the key to understanding the nation's cultural psyche. In our journey to decode the portrayal of women, a much more discussed and much less studied role, in contemporary Chinese cinema, This research draw inspiration from the rustic roots of rural China, as deeply explored in Fei Xiaotong's (Rural China). Fei's observations on the male and female roles in the fundamental, often unvarnished, rural settings of China provide a pivotal backdrop for our study. Understanding rural Chinese cinema is not just an exploration of a subset of the nation's film industry; it is an excavation into the bedrock of Chinese culture itself. These rural landscapes, with their enduring customs and values, serve as the foundation upon which the modern, rapidly evolving, and increasingly globalized China is built and continues to thrive. By delving into the cinematic portrayal of these areas, we aim to unravel not just the essence of gender representation but the core of Chinese cultural identity as reflected in its cinematic narratives. Moreover, in this exploration of contemporary Chinese cinema's portrayal of women, particularly in rural and under-developed settings between 2010 and 2022, we stand at a crossroads of cultural transformation and cinematic expression. Rooted in the theoretical groundwork laid by John Berger in "Ways of Seeing", our study navigates the intricate landscape of the gaze—how it perceives, portrays, and often limits the depiction of women on the silver screen. This period, pivotal in China's cinematic and societal evolution, offers a compelling canvas to examine the interplay of gender, culture, and identity.

We commit to critically navigating beyond mainstream narratives, challenging prevailing perspectives within the film industry. Our approach is not merely observational; it is a conscious effort to uncover deeper, often nuanced, manifestations of the "Male Gaze" in contemporary Chinese cinema. In examining selected works, we seek not just to identify but to intricately dissect these subtle yet prevailing issues. Our analysis aims to go further than existing critiques, delving into the layers of representation and industry norms to unearth the subtleties that might otherwise remain unexamined. Through this critical lens, we aspire to contribute a unique and thought-provoking perspective to the discourse on gender portrayal in film.

## 2. Literature Review

The review of literature will mainly discuss sources, both visual (films) and secondary. The secondary sources will either provide the research with its needed theoretical bases, from the theory of Male Gaze, the relationship between film production and a general social view, and the feministic review of films, or, it will provide the context, socio-cultural and political of the Chinese cinema and rural areas of China. Some of the secondary sources will be similar papers from the past that will help us explain what we will build on upon the previously established opinions and research. The films and TV series are selected to fit into our determined period to study for Chinese rural cinema, these films range from

commercial blockbusters/TV Series, to “festival films”, and to low-budget suspense films. While they discuss and narrate very different themes and stories, one thing is common to all, they are all set in rural and underdeveloped parts of China.

### **The Rural China and Women**

The Chinese society comes from the rural areas (Fei, n.d., p. 37). Fei Xiaotong was a pioneering Chinese sociologist and anthropologist renowned for his in-depth studies of China’s rural communities, as exemplified in his influential work “From The Soil” . His contributions laid the foundation for understanding Chinese rural society and its complex structures, significantly shaping the field of Chinese sociology and ethnology. Doctor Fei Xiaotong, in his collection of essays “From the Soil”, agreed on that. He explained in the very first chapter that although, as of today and in the foreseeable future, Chinese society is having more “variations” to the rurality than before, the fundamentals of the Chinese society, Fei pointed out, is “fundamentally rural”. Thus, studying rural China would be a great lens to study the multi-faceted Chinese society. Fei suggested this many aspects of Chinese society all originate from one mode of association which he called the “ChaXuGeJu” (the differential modes of association). This differential mode of association contends that the associations that eventually formed a rural society in rural China are fundamentally the interaction of different pairs of relationships performed and participated by an individual. One might be the father to his son; the son to his mother; the employee to his employer; the master to his apprentice; and the husband to his wife. Relationship expands in not as a group, but as a group of paired relationships. The “selfness” of an individual makes this mode of association like “ripples in the water” (Fei, n.d., p. 70).

One essay— Between Man and Women There Are Only Differences”—in particular, discussed the role of men and women, in rural China. Traditionally, man and woman have their own “socially agreed” roles, and marriage is more like a contract signed by both sides doing and only doing their own socially agreed business according to their roles. It also stressed that the subtleness and conservativeness of the concept of sex and sex behavior between men and women are essential parts of rural tradition and culture. This would make our research look at women’s representation differently than from a Western point of view, as Doctor Fei would probably agree with the difference between the rural Chinese tradition and Western traditions. In his writings, Doctor Fei emphasized the difference multiple times. The Chinese Communist Party, in their Congress Report, specifically dating from 2013 to 2023 when Xi Jinping took power, emphasized the “modernization of Chinese Communism rural areas” (Xi) and the achievement of eliminating poverty.

### **Chinese Rural Cinema and Women Representations in Modern Chinese Cinemas**

Modern Chinese cinema favors revolving around this relationship between soil and people. In Heiyaoshi’s essay “In Response to A Comment on Return to Dust”, the author discussed the return of depiction of countrymen, farmers, and people of rural areas in contemporary Chinese cinemas. He sees a boost in the number of works discussing or “utilizing” these characters as a tool of the story while a

plummet in the quality of the story in realistically reflecting the true essence of this particular group of people and this particular and vital part of China. One of the fundamental things that Heiyaoshi pointed out in his essay is the lack of thoughtful exploration of what a (countryman, farmer, or people from rural areas in general). Modern Chinese cinema sees a profit in “mocking” rural society yet oftentimes fails to discuss them in the most authentic and respectful ways. The representations of women in Chinese cinema can also be twisted.

In another essay, “Let’s Talk About Sex”, the author Cha discussed the lack of straightforward sexual content either due to censorship or due to the culture that favors a more subtle and tender way of expression. However, the author argues that this avoidance of direct sexual content was transformed into a trend that favors vulgar jokes, which oftentimes either directly undermine and discriminate against women or are represented through the female characters in an awkward way. Resulted in a stigmatization of female characters and the representation of sex between the two sexes.

### **The Male Gaze**

Our theoretical framework is enriched by the insights of John Berger and Corinn Columpar, whose works explore the intricate dynamics of the gaze in visual culture. Berger, in “Ways of Seeing”, revolutionized the understanding of how societal norms shape the perception of art and imagery, particularly the depiction of women. His critical analysis in art history and media studies lays the groundwork for examining the gaze’s influence. Meanwhile, Columpar’s “The Gaze As Theoretical Touchstone” delves into the complexities of the gaze within cinema, building upon Laura Mulvey’s “Male Gaze” theory. Columpar expands this concept to encompass intersectional elements of race and class, offering a multifaceted analytical framework. This comprehensive understanding of the gaze is crucial in our research, allowing us to dissect the representation of women in rural Chinese cinema beyond gender, considering the intersections of race, class, and identity. Drawing on these theories, we explore how cinematic narratives, often constructed from a male perspective, contribute to a dual gaze that objectifies or marginalizes less privileged groups, including women in rural settings.

Considering both beneficial to a more comprehensive analysis, this research adopts a comprehensive theoretical framework in viewing (This text can be utilized in the research for its insights into) how visual culture, including film, shapes and is shaped by gendered perspectives. The two sources as a whole have also touched on the theories of viewer identification, whereas in our case: The male gaze suggests that film narratives are often constructed from a male perspective with the assumption that the viewer is male, leading to a cinematic experience that invites the male viewer to identify with the male protagonist. A dual gaze is shown in the film often, which is the gaze from a male or a superior sex or race towards the less superior ones and the gaze from a superior class or social level, to a less superior one, stigmatizing them.

### 3. Methodology

Our research utilizes a comprehensive qualitative methodology, deeply informed by the theoretical frameworks established in our literature review. Each method is tailored to explore different aspects of female representation in contemporary rural Chinese cinema:

**Content Analysis:** We will systematically analyze a selection of films, focusing on how female characters are visually portrayed and their roles within the narrative. For example, in films like “Return to Dust”, we will examine character development, narrative importance, and visual representation, noting recurring themes and motifs.

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Discourse analysis is widely used in film studies to analyze and rationalize the film techniques, story plots, and directorship, it focuses on the analysis of the content of the film and its relationship to the orientation of the film in a larger socio-cultural context. This method will allow us to delve into the films’ dialogues and narratives. We will scrutinize how conversations and storylines construct and reflect gender and class ideologies. In “The Long Season”, for instance, we will analyze how dialogue and narrative choices contribute to the portrayal of female characters in the context of a fallen industrial city.

**Reception Studies:** We will review critical and audience responses to these films, such as reviews and comments on platforms like Bilibili or YouTube. This will help us understand how different audiences perceive and interpret the portrayal of women, providing a broader cultural impact context. Reception studies will also involve analyzing audience and critic reactions to the films, including comments on social media and professional reviews. This will help us gauge public perception and the cultural impact of these portrayals.

In our methodology, we will also integrate secondary sources to deepen our understanding of the context and themes within the films. Scholarly critiques and historical analyses, such as those by Fei Xiaotong and John Berger, will provide a backdrop against which we can contrast and compare our findings.

The film and TV series will be our major visual sources, providing not only visual clues but also relevant ideas, themes, and reactions around and beyond the stories themselves. Here is the list of the selected films, and in the remaining of the Literature review, we will be addressing the films using the sequence number instead of their original title:

- 1) *Return to Dust* (2021) Li Ruiqun
- 2) *The Longest Season* (2022) Xin Shuang
- 3) *Kaili Blue* (2021) Bi Gan
- 4) *Journey To The West* (2021) Kong Dashan
- 5) *Laughing to Die* (2015) Zhang Tao

While the films are made by different directors with distinctive styles and narratives; they all feature stories of rural China trying to explore but one question with their audiences—“What is (Farmer, villagers, and rural people in general) and what is the rurality of them”. This shared feature of all of the movies in which they made a unique if not perfect journey through answering these questions qualifies them as suitable sources for our studies. The women’s representations vary in the forms and their roles in the story yet have many similarities that were subtly shared through all.

Films 1, 2, 3 will be our major primary sources. They are both broadly discussed, highly artistic, and the industry’s leading-level works.

Film 1 is a melodrama featuring a marriage story of two outsiders in a village in the northwestern part of China, one of the most under-developed rural areas. Guiying Cao, a woman without fertility and mobile disability, and Youtie Ma, a man living in extreme poverty with impaired oral abilities, were both considered “useless” and excluded by their villages. Thus, they were put into this arranged marriage. Lao Si (the husband), although with his disability in communicating and expressing himself to others, tried his best in the coming years to take care of his arranged wife. The wife, similarly, did the same for the husband, persisting the family and doing the “wife’s” role. The balance and serenity were sabotaged by their family, who wanted their house to be sold and were eventually destroyed by the sudden death of the wife through an accident. The film ended with a nuanced yet sensational questioning of the rural traditions, the ignorance of the people, and the CCP’s propaganda on eliminating poverty. Having gained considerable success at the box office and social effect, the film was eventually nationally banned in 2022, 6 months after its public screening.

2 is a TV Series featuring a suspense story in Dongbei, one of the underdeveloped areas of China that relies on heavy industry. This series narrates a story from the point of view of a family living in a small industry town.

Film 3, *Kaili Blue*, is another melodrama film directed by Bi Gan. The film features the story of a middle-aged young man Sheng Chen coming out of jail, finding his wife dead, decided to take on a journey to find his nephew in another town, Zhenyuan. In the middle of his journey, he stopped at Dangmai where time seemed to have been stopped or at least not floating in a linear motion, he felt as if he had experienced the past, now, and the future. The film ended with the man arriving at Zhenyuan but did not meet with the nephew and walked away.

Film 4 is a mock documentary drama by Kong Dashan. It not only mocked the current sci-fi industry but also dived deep into the question of what happens to a village when colliding with possible or possibly imaginative alien encounters.

Film 5 is an independent “festival film” that will provide an alternative perspective and form of film that would give a rare case scenario of women’s representation in the film. This will also be an interesting case to see what will happen if the targeted audience changes with the reaction study.

Viewer identification studies will be used to understand how audiences relate to the characters, especially in terms of gender representation. We'll analyze how viewers of different backgrounds perceive and interpret the roles and narratives of female characters, considering factors like empathy and relatability.

Through this multi-layered approach, incorporating both primary film analysis and secondary source reviews, our study will offer a comprehensive understanding of the representation of women in contemporary rural Chinese cinema.

#### 4. Research Findings

In our research, encompassing a detailed discourse study of selected films, reception analysis, and a reflection on secondary sources, we uncovered a prevalent trait in the portrayal of women characters in contemporary rural Chinese cinema. These characters often exhibit a nuanced deviation from traditional social norms and stereotypes. However, our findings indicate that they ultimately conform to a recurring portrayal consistent with the roles described in Fei Xiaotong's "From the Soil", where women are often depicted through a maternal lens within a patriarchal framework. This portrayal reflects an underlying persistence of traditional gender roles, despite initial deviations, suggesting a complex interplay between evolving and enduring cultural norms. This trend highlights a significant aspect of the representation of women in these films, pointing to the deeper cultural and societal influences at play in contemporary rural Chinese cinema.

The Superior and Detached Point of View:

In our analysis of contemporary Chinese cinema set in rural areas, we discovered a discernible trend in the portrayal of rural life, which suggests a superior and detached, and potentially discriminated point of view.

This detachment is primarily evident in the stereotypical depiction of rural settings, often characterized as rustic, old, and untidy. This consistent visual narrative, while aiding in audience immersion and storytelling, risks reinforcing a one-dimensional view of rural life. For instance, films like "Kaili Blues" and "Journey to the West" employ a *mise-en-scène* that accentuates the aged and underdeveloped nature of rural settings, further emphasized by a cold, desaturated color grading. In *Kaili Blues* this opening scene depicts an untidy, outdated and broken village clinic with a simple, rustic layout and blocking. The characters are also introduced as traditional villagers with heavy accents. The color grading showed a depressing and bittersweet tone and mood. Similarly, in the scene from *Journey to the West* where the team of explorers first reached the house of a native resident in the rural area, the house is also depicted in a similar sense, broken, old, and poor.

This depiction aligns with Heiyaoshi's critique of the mocking stereotypes of rural representation in Chinese film, catering to audience expectations but potentially perpetuating a narrow view of rural life, and stigmatizing the rural people and rural areas in the films.

The use of poetry or poetic elements in these films adds another layer to this narrative detachment. The juxtaposition of the sophisticated and artistic form of poetry against the backdrop of rural settings, as seen in films like “The Long Season” and “Return to the Dust”, creates a stark contrast with the realities of rural life. This stylistic choice, while enhancing the films’ aesthetic appeal, contributes to a viewpoint that is somewhat removed from the socio-cultural reality of these settings. Such a portrayal risks elevating the narrative above the actual socio-cultural level of rural life, potentially leading to a discriminated perspective.



**Figure 1. The House Depicted in *Kaili Blues* by Bi**

This narrative detachment, as evidenced in our study, is significant in understanding the portrayal of rural settings in contemporary Chinese cinema. It suggests a viewpoint that is removed from the inherent socio-cultural context of rural life, potentially leading to a perspective that lacks a deeper, more nuanced understanding of these communities. As outlined in “The Gaze As Theoretical Touchstone”, such a detached and potentially discriminated viewpoint in the film raises critical questions about the representation of rural life and its socio-cultural implications in contemporary Chinese cinema. This study highlights the need for a more balanced and nuanced portrayal of rural settings that truly reflects the complexities and realities of rural life in China. In the following sections, we will elicit why this is also a result of the audience’s expectation and its relationship to the directorship.





Figure 2. A Scene in *Journey To The West* by Kong

### Women Representation in the Plot

From a discriminated point of view, the plots of the selected films are nonetheless written under such points of view. The women characters share a common identity in that they are either flat characters or protagonists with an incomplete character arc. Zooming in, the women characters are represented, although at times we feel like the story is about women characters, in a way that serves to better the character arc or the completion of the growth of a male protagonist.

In “The Long Season”, the narrative prominently features a father’s grief and the decline of Northeast China’s industrial sector. The female protagonist, pivotal to the crime story, remains underdeveloped; her motivations are largely unexplored. Attempts to flesh out her character are repeatedly overshadowed by male-centric storylines and the overarching crime narrative. Her name, Shen Mo, echoing “silence” in Chinese, symbolizes this narrative neglect. Other women in the series predominantly support the male characters’ stories, like the father’s wife, depicted solely in relation to her son and husband, her personal tragedy merely augmenting the father’s narrative arc.

*Kaili Blue* also depicts women in rural areas as a background of the story, rather than a character that grows in the story. The old doctor gives the protagonist some gifts that she would like him to give to her old-time lover, and is never introduced again in the story; the barber lady who resembles the protagonist’s passed wife is there only to let the protagonist tell his past stories; the tailor who serves as a muse figure for the men in the town of Dangmai merely explains the reason why the protagonist is taken a detour at the town of Dangmai. The diverse women characters in this film, reveal no more charm and distinct personalities but introduce the male protagonist in different ways.

In *Return to Dust*, Director Li Ruin takes a similar path in his depiction of the women character. Guiying's introduction in the film was iconic. She was introduced by the villagers as "unable to reproduce" and "unable to be married". This is the sole purpose of women in this film, set in the rural west of China. Then, as much as she is unable to conduct the purpose of women set in this film, she is introduced, or, rather, forced to marry Lao Si, the outsider of the village, only to reinforce the fact that Lao Si is not welcomed and considered the last option for any women in the village to marry him. The eventual death that pushes the plot to its climax is also a way that shows Guiying is a "guest" to the plot, not the protagonist. Her death was more like a objectification of Lao Si's toils and hardships he experienced over the years as an outsider, making him a true outsider of the society as he becomes a husband who lost his wife. In the real world, we often hear the saying of the cost of living. Those who survived are those who take the most. But in the film, it is easier to make someone die, because those who are dead, no longer need a completed character arc, their purpose is completed right away, and makes it easier for the emotions of the living ones to be expressed. The women character in *Return to Dust* is under such a characterization.

In *Journey To the West*, things are somewhat different as women characters are not in an important position. However, their significance to our research lies in how the story ended with the protagonists' pursuit of a woman, and how the power of love leads to the final discovery in the film. As much as it is a farce comedy, we can still see how cheaters of women are represented as a supportive character which in this case, rationalizes the romance.

### **Viewer's perception of the films**

The generalization of women characters in these films can be attributed to audience preferences for a detached portrayal of rural areas, favoring an artistic contrast with reality. This inclination is reflected in the high ratings on Douban, a prominent Chinese film rating website, where these films have garnered an average rating of 8.425, with significant viewer engagement. Comments often highlight a "sense of contrast", underlining the appeal of a narrative that places viewers above the social level of the depicted rural settings. This approach tends to sideline the depth and development of female characters, positioning them as supportive elements rather than as central, fully-realized figures in their own narratives.

In these films, a notable characteristic is the subtle treatment of sex and sexual violence, mirroring societal norms in rural areas as discussed in Fei Xiaotong's works. This is evident in the implicit representation of these themes, often conveyed through character interactions rather than explicit scenes. For instance, Shen Mo's backstory of abuse is suggested but not graphically depicted, reflecting a cultural reticence to openly address such topics. This approach not only aligns with the societal norms described by Fei but also impacts the development and portrayal of female characters in these narratives, often leaving their motivations and arcs understated.

### The Further Detached—Women under The Camera and Film Languages

The scene from *The Long Season* is one of the most iconic representations of how women are being viewed through a stigmatized and unequal lens, the family is having a lunch, the son would like to have a porridge. While the mother is about to grant her son the porridge, the father says no because he feels that having porridge for lunch is not good for his health. In the entire scene where the three is having a conversation, and while a triple shot is being utilized, the mother is always put on the edge of the frame, suggesting less importance to her character and a lower power dynamic. A similar sense of putting female characters in a weaker power dynamic is shown in the scene from *Kaili Blues* where Chen is trying to give the barber lady a gift. Although the shot was taken in a rather higher position, showing a difference in power dynamic between the characters. Another way that the film language stigmatizes women is through the mise-en-scene. The shot from *Journey to The West* elicits this properly. The only female character in this scene was blocked again out of the core area of the shot. What's more is the props and costumes she has, a lot of baggages—we can see she is the only one with a suitcase and she also has two cushions, one on the suitcase the other on her backpack, suggesting that woman characters tend to carry more personal belongings, and would be a burden to an exploring team like this as we learned that they stopped only because she wanted to rest.



Figure 3. A Scene in *Kaili Blues* by Bi



Figure 4. A Scene in *The Longest Season* by Xin



Figure 5. A Scene in *Journey To The West* by Kong

### Exceptions or Not Exactly

In our selection of films, there is one that, in a way does not resemble the others—*Laughing to Die* a festival film that was not commercially or even publicly screened. This film, not produced to accommodate a mainstream appetite of the audiences, features a family drama of an old lady from an unspecified Chinese rural area. The major character is a female and the interactions, the development of stories, and the development of character arcs all seemed to be revolving around her. However, what the film does not achieve is the escape from narrating from a detached point of view, oftentimes stigmatized view of rural areas and their stigmatized view of the women. We are still seeing a rather underdeveloped Chinese rural area and how stigmas in this area were shown. The grandma in the film is criticized by her family for letting the granddaughter go out to make a living herself because they

believe that women should not be making a living on their own but should rely on the family.

A dual gaze is the main cause of this generalized portrayal of female characteristics under a much stigmatized background of these films—the rural areas. Although there are times that certain films do not accommodating the general audience's appetite and endeavors to move away from the portrayal, they did not move away from the essence that film and film industry in the Chinese environment is producing works, especially works featuring rural areas with a lens superior and detached to that of rural society and rural people. Women, as a stigmatized group in that lens, are further portrayed in a more detached and stereotypical way—an object to the imagination of the film producers.

## 5. Discussion and Limitations

In addressing the potential limitations of our research, it's important to acknowledge the constraints and subjectivities inherent in our methodology and scope. First, our selection of films, though carefully chosen to represent contemporary rural Chinese cinema, is ultimately a limited sample. This limitation raises questions about the generalizability of our findings, as the films chosen may not fully capture the diversity and breadth of perspectives found in the wider body of rural Chinese cinema.

Secondly, our reliance on secondary sources predominantly from Western perspectives could introduce a certain bias in our analysis. While these sources provide valuable insights and theoretical frameworks, they might not fully encompass the unique cultural and societal nuances specific to the Chinese context. This Western-centric lens may inadvertently overlook or misinterpret elements significant to Chinese viewers and filmmakers, thus affecting the depth and accuracy of our cultural analysis.

Furthermore, our methodology, which leans heavily on discourse analysis, is intrinsically subjective. Our interpretations of the films' narratives, themes, and characters are shaped by our perspectives and theoretical biases. While discourse analysis is a powerful tool for unpacking the subtleties of film language and representation, it is also prone to the subjective interpretations of the researchers. This subjectivity, though inevitable in qualitative research, necessitates a cautious approach to drawing broader conclusions from our analysis.

Lastly, the dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape of Chinese cinema, especially in rural settings, presents a challenge in capturing the current and future trends accurately. The films analyzed, though contemporary, may not fully reflect ongoing changes in societal attitudes and cinematic styles.

In summary, while our study aims to provide meaningful insights into the portrayal of women in rural Chinese cinema, these insights must be contextualized within the limitations of our film selection, source material, and analytical approach.

## 6. Conclusion

In concluding our research, which scrutinized the representation of women in rural Chinese cinema through a qualitative methodology, we observed a persistent dual gaze. This gaze, influenced by the theoretical insights of John Berger and Corinn Columpar, reflects a superior and detached perspective, leading to a stereotypical portrayal of women characters. Our analysis, drawing upon works such as “Ways of Seeing” and “The Gaze As Theoretical Touchstone”, revealed that even when films attempted to deviate from these norms, they largely remained within an industry framework that views rural society and its people through a lens of detachment and superiority.

Women, in this cinematic context, often appear as mere objects of the filmmakers’ imagination rather than as complex individuals. This portrayal not only reinforces existing stereotypes but also overlooks the diverse realities of rural life. Our study, while insightful, acknowledges its limitations, including the selected film range and potential biases due to a focus on Western theoretical frameworks. The subjective nature of our discourse analysis also underscores the need for cautious interpretation. Despite these limitations, our findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender representation in Chinese cinema, highlighting the necessity for more nuanced and equitable portrayals that genuinely reflect the intricacies of rural Chinese society and the dynamic roles of women within it.

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