

Analysis of the Retrogression of Feminism in Female Gaze among Female-Oriented Contents

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Abstract: The researcher observes a trend in China where Danmei content and Female-oriented TV series are gaining popularity. The former has been restricted by policy and its popularity has come to an abrupt end, but the Female-oriented TV Series is continuing to grow in popularity. Both types of film and television content can be categorised as female-oriented content. The concept of the "female gaze", which serves the visual desires of women and enables them to achieve visual satisfaction, has emerged. This study was conducted to analyse the influence of the "female gaze" in visual female-oriented film and television content on the development of feminism. The research methodology of this article combines three methods: documentary analysis, textual analysis, and comparative study approach to analyse the characteristics of female-oriented content, and the representation of the male gaze. The purpose is to demonstrate that female-oriented content, while purportedly catering to a female audience, is actually a retrograde form of feminism. Firstly, the development and characteristics of the two types of female-oriented content selected for this article are sorted out. It shows that the representation of female-oriented content still reflects the relationship between one strong and one weak, and the implicit adherence to patriarchy, the cult of the powerful. Then, by sorting through the three developments of the feminist movement, it is concluded that the purpose of the feminist movement was to eliminate gender inequality and essentially to pursue equal rights. Next, the male gaze is therefore expressed as a separate section since it serves as a symbol of feminist theory in the sphere of film and television. Essentially, it is an illustration of gender inequality, expressing the subjectivity of the male and the subordination of the female. Finally, the characteristics of female-oriented film and television content are compared with those of feminism and male gaze. Results of the study showed that the textual characteristics of female-oriented content are different from the core claims of feminism and, therefore, are not a progression of feminism. Besides, the feminine gaze embodied in feminist content is essentially a repetition and reinforcement of the male gaze. This proves that the female-oriented content is not only not a progression of feminism, but rather a regression. Based on the findings of the study, it was proposed that if feminism is to truly develop and progress, the spirit of the feminist quest for equality and independence should be exhibited in the visualised texts. The particularity and importance of this article is that it is one of the lesser ones to argue that female-oriented content has a negative effect on the development of feminism. The popularity of female-oriented content in film and television has not lasted long in China, and the number of articles analysing this content is limited. It is hoped that the ideas in this article will provide some insight for subsequent researchers.

Keywords: Danmei, Feminism, Female-oriented Contents, Female Gaze, Male Gaze

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1. Introduction

Feminine issues have been an everlasting topic. Since 1975, when Laura Mulvey published *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*[1], feminist experts have combined the development of feminism with visual content, especially movies and TV series, and used video content as a new medium to further the development of feminism. Since the concept of male gaze in vision was proposed, many feminist scholars and filmmakers have made a lot of efforts to break the shackles of male gaze. In this article, the researcher will discuss and analyse Danmei films and TV series and Female-oriented TV Series of China since 2010 as a cultural phenomenon, which is another exploration of feminism in visual content. In this article, these two kinds of visual contents can be named as Female-oriented contents (女性向内容). Since it was only recently found and widely distributed, there haven't been many analyses or articles on this type of thought, not even in the Chinese literature. This is also the research gap in this article. As there is not enough literature to sort through, a textual analysis of the corresponding visualised female-oriented content as a text will be undertaken in this article.

The word “Danmei”(耽美) comes from Japan, whose Chinese meaning is “indulging in beauty”, namely the pursuit of beauty. Later, it gradually evolved into a synonym for love between men, and then came to refer to works of gay men. In the early days, Danmei culture was mainly based on comics and novels[2]. Around 2014, it was transformed into visual works and broadcasted in mainland China. Since then, China's Danmei culture has entered the field of visualization. It is important to emphasise that Danmei content that has been released and distributed in mainland China is discussed in this article. Between 2016 and 2021, Danmei films and TV works have become a phenomenal trend from a niche culture and have been paid attention to and produced by many fans and film companies. Danmei films and TV series have effectively demonstrated their commercial value, despite the fact that their development has not been without bumps in the road. The turning point came in 2021, when the National Radio and Television Administration published policies to put an end to the popularity of Danmei TV works.

The Female-oriented TV Series(大女主剧) refers to the TV works which take the fate of a female protagonist as the core of the story, and her growth and love as the main narrative line[3]. From 2000 to 2010, there had been this kind of TV series, most of which were about historical figures. Now, when Danmei was restricted, it almost replaced the original popular Danmei works.

The significance of this article is that, as an integral part of the contemporary medium of cultural communication, the study of the cultural content contained and expressed in the film and TV series is of epochal significance. Feminism is still a trendy issue in contemporary times. Moreover, most of the audiences of Danmei and Female-oriented TV series are female fans and viewers[4]. As a result, the researcher uses the cultural phenomenon in the area—in this example, the popularity of Danmei and female-oriented TV series—as a case study and a text to examine the development of feminism, identify its root reasons, and anticipate its direction in the near future.

After paying attention to this cultural phenomenon, the researcher raises two questions. First, does the emergence and spread of the popularity of Danmei films and TV series and female-oriented TV series equal the development of feminism? Second, does the emergence of “female gaze” indicate the progress of feminism in films and TV series?

This article will focus on responding to these two questions.

In line with this, the study was conducted to examine how the "female gaze" depicted in female-oriented film and television content impacts the advancement of feminism.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

The research questions in this article focus on the following: Can the emergence and popularity of Danmei films, TV series targeted at women, and the concept of a "female gaze" be considered indicators of the progress of feminism in the entertainment industry?

2.2 Research Design

In order to answer the above questions, this article uses a combination of documentary analysis, textual analysis and comparative analysis as research methods. Firstly, this article extracted literature by searching for papers related to female-oriented content, and for the purpose of literature analysis, using academic databases (mainly Springer and Taylor Francis libraries for English and CNKI which means China National Knowledge Infrastructure for Chinese), with keywords such as Danmei and Feminism as the core of the extracted literature. The analysis was carried out with the extracted literature as the centrepiece. The main focus was on the analysis of the development process of the feminist movement first. Secondly, the development of the two main types of works in feminist-oriented content in China, sorted out in chronological order. Thirdly, one of the key concepts in feminist visualisation is the concept of "male gaze", which is highlighted in this article. By consolidating the relevant literature collected by the above methods, the characteristics of the three are summarised by means of a documentary analysis.

Regarding the sample size, it is important to note here that even in Chinese literature, there are few papers on female-oriented film and television. Therefore, this article uses textual analysis to analyse and interpret the content of representative female-oriented works.

Through a comparative analysis, the requirements and characteristics of feminism are compared with those of female-oriented works. If the characteristics are relatively consistent, then the feminist content is a positive development for feminism, and if not, then the feminist content is a regression for feminism.

3. Female-oriented Contents

A female-oriented film or TV series is defined as a film or TV series produced and distributed to please women and to satisfy their visual needs, the most obvious and prominent of which would be Danmei films and TV series[5]. Here, both Danmei visual works and The Female-oriented TV Series are considered Female-oriented contents. They have been developed to satisfy the visual desires of the majority of female viewers and are supported by these female viewers with the ability to consume.

3.1 Danmei Contents

Firstly, it should be made clear here that the Danmei film and television content mentioned in this article is also known as Dan'gai (耽改). This Chinese word means that it is adapted from Danmei. Hence, Danmei film and television content is a type of film and television drama that is rescripted and filmed after a film and television company buys the copyright to an original Danmei novel (mostly male gay romance novels)[6]. After 2016, China's censorship of Danmei films and TV dramas has been intensified, some visual contents which is straightforward expressions of love between two men being taken down. After that, Danmei productions could only modify the original plot so that the relationship between the two males transformed from the original love to other types of emotional relationships, such as teacher-student, classmate and brotherhood, but retaining and giving the possibility of a Danmei interpretation of these feelings[7]. However, both pre-2016 content that shows straightforward male

romance and later content that can only show two male brotherhoods. If they have been released and broadcast in mainland China, they can be included in the “Danmei content” in this article.

The first release of a film or television production in the genre of Danmei in mainland China was in 2014. But at this stage, it still belongs to a niche culture that fans of Danmei culture themselves know and spread. Until 2016, that the first peak of Danmei reform came with the launch of 18 Danmei film and television adaptations[6]. This brought the concept of Danmei into the public horizon for the first time. Lots of fans started joining and became Danmei fans in this period. Besides, during this period, the National Radio and Television Administration of China was also concerned that, and for the first time, it had also taken down some film and television content that was directly about love between men. Although there was no explicit policy requirement, Danmei content that had not had the chance to be released and broadcast was tweaking its original plot to transform the love between two men into other relationships to avoid censorship. It was only in 2018 that Danmei content returned to the public horizon in a more unstoppable manner. In 2021, a policy was published and will be implemented in 2022. The main element of this policy is a total ban on Danmei content[8]. This policy is a definite blow to Danmei content.

Danmei film and television work in general can be divided into two styles in terms of narrative structure. One is the relationship between two strong men, in which both males have the temperament of men in traditional society. The other is a relationship between two men, one strong and one weak, in which the weaker man takes on characteristics that are different from those of traditional, such as clean and delicate skin, elegant behaviour, which is closer to feminine characteristics[9].

There is no doubt that Danmei content was introduced to begin with as a kind of work that serves the visual experience of women. Whether the fan base comes to watch with a rebellious spirit or a sense of wonder[4][5], two beautiful men with pretty faces and toned bodies will capture the viewer's vision. It is should be clear that the emergence of Danmei content did, to a certain extent, promote feminism. It makes women become the subject of the look, and leaves men as the object to be looked at. It is an act of anti-male gazing. There is a certain progressive significance to the development of feminism. However, the text of most of Danmei's stories still has its drawbacks. Either one strong and one weak or either of the two strong relationships, it is impossible to transcend the extremely powerful sense of power that lies behind the masculine overtones of the story. The narratives trace the social reality that has existed since time immemorial, that whoever has the power has everything. Danmei film and television content is thus inherently flawed in terms of its narrative dynamics.

3.2 Female-oriented TV Series

The replacement of Danmei by Female-oriented TV Series did not just start in the year Danmei was banned. In 2017, when Danmei was still quiet, Female-oriented TV Series were already making their mark. Unlike before, most of the early content in this genre was set in ancient China. Some strong women in the workplace, set in the present day, began to emerge now. And the number of dramas in this genre has proliferated in recent years, portraying women in professional suits and high heels who can organise their work in a rapid-fire manner to their sidekick. They don't indulge in love affairs and have a more grandiose career focus. Besides, a stark variation on the romance angle is the "sister-brother" relationship. Most of them choose a good-looking, stable young brother to fall in love with or even marry, and this, together with the strong, successful female figure, creates a scenario in which the woman is the head of the family, which almost completely overturns the previous stereotypical image of the gender division of labour in the family.

But whether the stories are set in ancient or contemporary contexts, the female protagonists cannot grow up without male patronage and support. In addition, there are few dramas that present women in any realistic detail to construct their self-identity and shape their self-worth. Moreover, the dramas

imagine the successful Chinese woman as no more than how she overcomes the abandonment of her family of origin and goes through trials and tribulations to reconcile with her parents and with herself. In addition, everyone recognises that these females in dramas are great at their jobs. Hence, almost all the conflicts that the heroine must deal with in Female-oriented TV Series nowadays are caused by members of her family. Realistic problems are cleverly transformed into problems with the characters' personalities[10].

It is because of the characteristics above, that it also allows many female audiences to bring themselves in and imagine they are invincible at work and can reap the benefits of a young boyfriend who fits the romantic imagination. Moreover, although these males are younger, can help her when it matters. It is this visual desire and visual need that has certainly made this the best alternative to Danmei in recent years when Danmei has been banned.

4. Feminism Movements

4.1 Late 19ths to Early 20th Century

The first wave of feminism emerged at the end of the 18th century, with the demand for women's political equality and the fight for women's suffrage as the core content. Based on the Enlightenment thought promoting individualism, emancipation of individuality, freedom and equality, the basic human rights issues of women's suffrage, education and employment were raised[11], which caused massive social response. Issues about Chinese women and revolution are quite different from those in the West, but only their influence by the first wave of the women's movement is mentioned here.

4.2 1960s to 21st Century

The second wave of feminism, beginning in the 1960s, led directly to the birth of contemporary feminist theory. The keynote of the second wave was the need to eliminate gender differences, to demand the full opening of the public sector to women, and to change the subordinate status of women. The second wave was quite large-scale, involving developed countries in Europe and America, and was closely related to the struggle for civil rights, the anti-racist movement, and the massive anti-war movement in the United States, as well as the student and social movements that were taking place in Europe[12].

After the 1980s, the women's movement moved toward a pluralistic theoretical landscape as it became broader and deeper, while more voices representing different groups emerged from within, and corresponding theoretical differences arose[13].

If the first wave of feminism was based on the "natural rights" of the Enlightenment, and sought equal rights with men, the second wave noticed the differences between women and men. The first wave focused on women's collective political and social rights, while the second wave focused on women's individual physical and psychological experiences.

After the founding of New China, slogans such as "women can hold up half the sky" and "men and women are the same" emerged. Since the 1990s, especially after the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, the whole feminist trend has been circulating in Chinese academia and society. In the Internet era, more women netizens began to express their anger through their keyboards, and many variations of "feminism" were created.

4.3 21st Century to Present

Since the beginning of the 21st century, feminism has entered into a more detailed debate. On the one

hand, with the development of the Internet, gender issues are still being brought to the attention of more people as topics that still have value for discussion. On the other hand, gender inequality still exists, and equality is still being pursued. Moreover, in the view of the new generation of feminists, the political demand of "gender equality" has obvious flaws, as it puts women on the same position as men but does not help to change the deep psychological structure and symbolic order of society, so they focus more on the ideological and cultural causes and modes of gender discrimination[14].

It should be mentioned here that the popularity of the internet is not the whole advantage. As educational resources are still uneven, the one-sided and irrational statements made by many people before their worldviews and values are formed also add to the negative impact of feminist discussions. There are even some people who unkindly provoke gender confrontation on the Internet, and the irrational netizens are influenced and passively join the discussion.

Feminism's development to date allows for the hand, and the existence of gender inequalities and their causes, on the other. However, there is still room to mitigate inequality. Feminists are seeking true equality and the elimination of gender inequality, not the pursuit of female privilege.

5. Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey was the first researcher to combine the psychoanalysis with feminism. Since she introduced the concept of the "male gaze" by drawing on Lacan's theory of the gaze[1], feminism has continued to argue that there is a distinct gender consciousness behind the act of seeing, which undoubtedly reveals the "male gaze" that has been in place for a long time in history. In the academic context of feminism, vision is naturally gender-conscious, women are objects of male desire and sources of visual pleasure. men are look, women are being look at; men are peering, women are peered at; men have desire, women are desirable objects. The male gaze is a cultural practice that feminism naturally resists.

Obviously, this series of dichotomous narratives reveals profoundly that mainstream commercial films, especially Hollywood films, showing the "reproduction of patriarchal culture"[15]. The male gaze is still essentially a continuation of the persistent idea of the male subject in the traditional cultural society, or the visualization of "Phallogentrism". Thus, in the visualized works, the female figure remains passive, in the position of an object, a being to be viewed. The female protagonists are set up to follow the male aesthetic, to satisfy their visual desires and bring visual pleasure to the audience, especially the male audience. The relationship of being seen here is not unique, as the female character is gazed at by the male character on the one hand, and by the gaze of the audience on the other. But no matter where the gaze comes from, it is ultimately the bearer of desire. From a feminist point of view, this phenomenon shows exactly the subordinate position of women. This coincided with women's demands in the 1980s to eliminate gender disparities and change the subordinate status of women.

6. Results and Discussion

By the history of the feminist movement in Chapter 4, the quest for equality of power between the sexes is easy to spot. So, the embodiment of feminist progress in the content of film and television should be a manifestation of the quest for equality. Both men and women should have a sense of affirmative action. Here is a table listing the characteristics of female-oriented content, the characteristics of feminism and the characteristics of the male gaze in a comprehensive manner, so that their differences can be seen more clearly. See in [Table 1] for more details. In this chapter will be devoted to a specific analysis of some of the texts with female-oriented content.

[Table 1] the characteristics of female-oriented content, feminist movements and male gaze

Genre	Characteristics
Female-oriented contents	1.Danmei: The two males, one strong and one weak, still respect the traditional cult of power, a reproduction of patriarchy. 2.Female-oriented Film and TV series: Young and romantic boyfriend, can help or even save the heroine if necessary
Feminist movements	Eliminating gender inequalities, equal rights
Male gaze	Male look, female been look at / Male subject position, female subordinate position

Firstly, Danmei content is characterised in chapter 3 by an implicit admiration and desire for power. Even in the case of the relationship between two men, the status of the two is determined by the level of power, not by the pursuit of equality. In the *Addicted & Heroin*[16], for instance, there is a clear relationship of strength and weakness in the background of the two main characters. One is the son of an army officer, the family is well-off and relatively wealthy, as shown in Fig. 1 which illustrates their daily standard of consumption and the image of their father as [Fig. 1]. The male lead actor is second from the left in [Fig. 1] Can easily take his friends to high-spending places.



[Fig. 1] Stills of the TV Series *Addicted & Heroin*[17][18]

While the other is set up as a man from a poor family as [Fig. 2]. Their family environment and father figure are shown in Fig 2. This disparity from the social background easily brings in a clear contrast between the strong and the weak. So, in essence, Danmei content does not strive for equality.



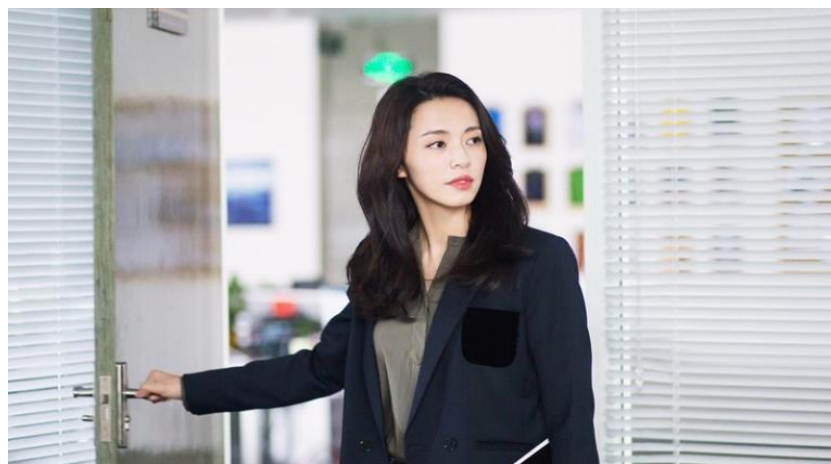
[Fig. 2] Stills of Another Character Family Background in TV Series *Addicted & Heroin*[19]

Secondly, in the visual realm, big female dramas show the simple inversion of male and female more clearly. For instance, in the 2019, the TV series *ALL IS WELL*[20]. The heroine's boyfriend is a chef. He is a clean, handsome, and gentle young brother. [Fig. 3]. And the heroine is a typical heroine who has all the conditions described in Chapter 3 - excellent work skills and problems in her family of origin. [Fig. 4]. And a recurring scene in *ALL IS WELL* is that of the man cooking while the woman rests on

the side. The significance of the kitchen space is a recurring theme in feminist literature. From a patriarchal vantage point, the kitchen is typically viewed as a female domain, and feminist discourse has exposed how this societal expectation has led many women to experience a sense of emotional and psychological turmoil in this setting.



[Fig. 3] The Man in the TV Series "ALL IS WELL Works in the Kitchen [21]



[Fig. 4] The Heroine as a Strong Female Figure in the TV Series "ALL IS WELL" [22]

On opposite, in *ALL IS WELL*, the man is put into the kitchen and the woman is placed outside of it. On the surface it seems like feminist progress that women are finally not oppressed, but it needs to be clear that if the kitchen is oppressive for women who don't like to cook, it is also for men. Just because the chef in this series likes to cook does not mean that all men like to cook. Therefore, it is a form of oppression for both men and women who do not like to enter the kitchen to cook and end up in the kitchen for different personal or social circumstances. In this drama, because of the occupational set-up, men are then inescapably placed in the kitchen, just as women who are placed directly in the kitchen from a patriarchal perspective. Everything seems natural, but on closer reflection, this is simply a reversal of gender. One of the immediate changes to the previous relationship of male oppression of women through the kitchen is also the oppression of men. Since it is a mutual oppression between the two genders, the meaning and values he reveals it is also inconsistent with the feminist quest for affirmative action.

Thirdly, another thing common to both above film and television content is that all of these male characters, are well portrayed. Whether they are muscular, clean and lean, innocent and cute, or mature and intelligent. These different characteristics are all designed to serve the female audience and female fans. Therefore, the two types of film and television content can be collectively referred to as female-oriented content. The visual desire of female audience for this content becomes the "female gaze" that female audience cast on female-oriented content.

This Female Gaze is put the object of the gaze is directly transformed from the original female to the male character. Then the female audience can bring their own feelings into the identity of the protagonist more directly and feel the experience and desire of the male character in the object to the protagonist, to the subject, and also to "themselves". It is progressive in itself to meet the viewing experience of female viewers, or at least it is a brave exploration and attempt, but it will be found that the rest of the content has not changed except for the gender of the object being looking at has switched. Therefore, such a female gaze, which is only a change of gender, has its roots and mode of thinking in the male gaze itself, and is even a repetition of the male gaze. Then, this so-called female gaze is only a repetition and reinforcement of the male gaze, not only is it not a development of feminism, but this reinforcement of the male gaze is a retrogression of feminism.

As analysed in the two paragraphs above, neither Danmei's plot nor the setting can escape from the traditional strong and weak relationships and simply shift the gender of the characters. It does not conform to the feminist goal of equality. Secondly, the situation in the Female-oriented TV Series is a more nakedly direct shift in the traditional status and roles of men and women. The previous lifestyle of "men oriented the outside of world and women oriented the home" is considered as oppression of women. So, the straightforward switch to "women oriented the outside of world and men oriented the home" is also a kind of oppression of men. It also goes against the equal rights pursued by feminism.

Both types of content are superficially tweaked to please women, but the core of the story does not change. Even if there is some progressive significance, but it is the repetition of the male gaze in female-oriented content that is more central, more subliminal.

In the pursuit of feminist progress, it is important to look beyond the superficial and consider whether the creators are really thinking about how to improve the status of women in society rather than cloaked in a veneer of pleasing women while the actual core remains unchanged. The more such content appears, the more it deepens the notion of a patriarchal society and the male gaze within the viewer. Instead, it saps the feminist quest for independence, autonomy and equality.

7. Conclusion

This study was conducted to analyse the influence of the "female gaze" in visual female-oriented film and television content on the development of feminism.

By collating the feminist movement, this article proposes that the essence of the feminist movement lies in the elimination of gender inequality and the pursuit of equal rights. Through the development and specific examples of the two main types of female-oriented content in visualisation, it summarises the characteristics and drawbacks of each of them: the inability to escape the oppressive and unequal ideas of traditional patriarchal society. Thus, this article contends that the creation and development of female-oriented content in the visualised field has allowed feminism to be progressive to some level, but that it is mainly a replication and reinforcement of the male gaze. The masculine gaze, on the other hand, runs counter to the feminist ethos of equality. Hence, the 'female gaze' born of visualised female-oriented content not only does not allow feminism to develop further, but it also essentially leads to a regression of feminism.

The development of feminism cannot be solely focused on the fact that more people are watching or that it pleases female audiences. It requires a deep understanding of the spirit of feminism, and on this

basis, the creator must place the spirit of equality in the text. The essence of the spirit of equality and independence must be conveyed. Equality means more than the spiritual independence of everyone. Rather than making women stronger and more able to attract good men, they remain passive, waiting for men to rescue them or still aiming to please them. In female-oriented content, from the text of the story to the values of the characters, the goals that need to be achieved and realised need to be rethought.

Drawing from the study results, it was posited that the authentic advancement and evolution of feminism necessitates the explicit portrayal of its core tenets of equality and independence in visualized texts. The salience and significance of this article lies in its rarity among literature arguing against the proposition that female-oriented content has a deleterious impact on the development of feminism. In China, the trend of female-oriented content in film and television has had a relatively ephemeral existence, with only a limited number of studies conducted on this subject matter. It is anticipated that the notions propounded in this article will prove insightful for future scholars.

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