

# The image changes of female migrant workers in Chinese films in the past 40 years of reform and opening up

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**【Abstract】** This paper focuses on the changes of the image of female migrant workers in Chinese films in the past 40 years of reform and opening up. By combing through a number of films with relevant themes, this paper studies the image of female migrant workers in films and the value presented in a shallow level. The image changes of female migrant workers in movies are mainly divided into three stages. At the initial stage, the image of female migrant workers is mainly manifested as the single role and shallow level of contradiction. The film focuses on depicting the new phenomenon of female migrant workers responding to the call of The Times to enter the city. In the prosperous stage, the film's creators are deeply concerned about the multiple oppression faced by female migrant workers as marginalized groups, and gradually diversified the image presented. The film presented the sad fate of female migrant workers to the audience by documentary method. In the gentle stage, film creators tend to show successful characters and describe inspirational stories, so as to show the positive impact of social progress on migrant workers. The film shows the development and change of social mainstream consciousness through the image changes of female migrant workers, and calls on the society to pay attention to the plight of female migrant workers.

**【Key words】** Female migrant workers image; Chinese Films about migrant workers; Reform and opening up

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Migrant workers are a special group in China's social transformation period. They have provided strong labor force support for China's industrialization and urbanization development. After the reform and opening up, the number of migrant workers continues to rise. According to the monitoring report on migrant workers released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of migrant workers in China reached 280 million in 2020, of which about 40% are women. As a specific social role, female migrant workers are in the dual disadvantaged position of female and rural origin. In the process of living space transformation, they are confronted with numerous tests such as region, class and gender, and bear more pain of integration. The film creator pays attention to the dual suffering of female migrant workers in the process of integrating into the city, and creates a rich image of female migrant workers in various forms at different times.

Since the reform and opening up in the past 40 years, there have been more than 100 films about migrant workers in China, among which the films about female migrant workers can be roughly divided into three stages: initial, prosperity and gentle. In order to reflect the stable creation characteristics and the progress and development of film creation in different periods, this paper classifies the images of female migrant workers in the film into three stages for image change analysis.

## I. The initial stage

### 1.1 The simplification of roles

From 1978 to 1998, the reform and opening up officially started and achieved initial results, which had a significant impact on China's rural and urban areas. Film creators are concerned about the new phenomenon of migrant workers leaving the countryside to work in the cities, and began to create films with migrant workers as the main characters. In 1982, the film "Huansheng Chen Entering the City" directed by Wang Xinyu, was released, which was the first Chinese film about the life of migrant workers. Since then, films such as "The Girl from Huangshan" and "The Beach" (1984) and "Add Sugar to Your Coffee" (1987) have focused on the lives of female migrant workers. Compared with men, female migrant workers are at a gender disadvantage with low educational level and cannot engage in high-intensity and high-cultural jobs. Therefore, female migrant workers in the film have a relatively simple occupation and are often limited to simple labor work such as nannies and factory employees. Most of them ignore their own image and dress simply, with the simplicity and purity of rural people.

The creators express their support for women's entry into cities through the film, believing that farmers going to work in cities is a symbol of the industrialization and modernization of the society and reflects the progress of The Times. Therefore, in terms of role setting, the image of female migrant workers is mostly positive, and they gain career and love through their own efforts.

### 1.2 Shallow level of contradiction

Although the films about female migrant workers in this period showed positive mainstream consciousness as a whole, as the initial stage of the films about migrant workers, the films only reflected shallow social contradictions. The self-consciousness of female characters was roughly the same as that of migrant workers, creating a single moral benchmark image. The contradictions in the film mainly include two aspects: urban and rural collision and secular oppression.

#### 1.2.1 Urban and rural collision

In the films about migrant workers during this period, the conflict between urban and rural areas appeared. Because of the urban-rural dual system formed by the household registration system, the society thinks that the city represents the modern civilization and the countryside means the backward tradition, so the city people have a natural superiority to the rural people.<sup>[1]</sup>

The living habits of the nannies from the countryside do not conform to the civilized behavior of the city, which bring troubles to the city people and then cause conflicts, but most of them end peacefully. The four nannies in the movie "The Apartment" come from the same village and work in the same apartment building. They go shopping together every day and often cut in line to save time, which finally causes the protest of city residents, have an argument. In the "Girl from Huangshan", Gong Lingling is a rural girl from Anhui Province who comes to Beijing to work as a nanny in order to pay off her family's debts. The employer was extremely distrustful of Ling Ling, and had a vitriolic attitude, accusing the heroine of stealing. Gong Lingling could not bear the humiliation and finally chose to leave.

Films about migrant workers keep up with The Times and grasp the theme of "change" of The Times, focusing on the conflict and integration of new and old ideas at the time of alternation, showing the renewal of migrant workers' ideas and the transformation of their life and production mode. In this period, the conflict between urban and rural areas has already appeared, but it is not obvious.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### 1.2.2 The manifestation of secular oppression

Many female migrant workers have shown their excellent qualities in the urban self-search and have been recognized. However, due to the secular oppression of rural identity in the city, it is difficult to be recognized.

In the film "Add Sugar to Your Coffee", Lin Xia comes to Guangzhou to escape her arranged marriage in the countryside. She attracts Gangzai, a young man from Guangzhou who loves photography. They gradually develop a relationship. The letter from her hometown urged her to return to her hometown to complete her marriage, and Lin Xia gave in. There was an insurable gap between her and Gang Zai. In that era, the city could not completely save the rural figures.

In "The storm of female model", Chun Xing works as a mannequin for an art student to take care of her husband who suffers from leg problems. Chun Xing's husband knows after wants to divorce her. Yu Dalong falls in love with Chun Xing and decides to marry her, but is strongly opposed by his family. Chun Xing is also asked by her family to return to the countryside to marry, and she is forced to commit suicide. Although she is saved and has a perfect love, the portrayal of the role of a rural woman who has been divorced and used to be a human body model in the film shows the audience that the secular oppression makes her suffer many hardships in the process of pursuing love and career.

## II. Prosperity stage

### 2.1 Diversification of image

From 1999 to 2008, the social reform gradually deepened, and a large number of enterprises in the eastern coastal areas developed rapidly, attracting a large number of rural labor force to leave their hometown and go to work in big cities. Some migrant workers have been integrated into the cities through their own efforts, but more female migrant workers have encountered various problems in the cities, which greatly affected the creation of Chinese film. The film creation of this period exudes a strong sense of the bottom, focusing on the depiction of the individual reality of migrant workers and the criticism of the group value, further demonstrating the diverse spiritual characteristics of female migrant workers.

Compared with the previous stage, the female migrant workers in the films of this period had more professions and began to appear a large number of female roles that were not recognized by the mainstream, such as construction site migrant workers, massage girls and mistresses. The difficulties of urban survival make female migrant workers even violate ethics and sell their bodies in order to settle down in the city. The creator focuses on this phenomenon and shoots many works with similar themes. For example, Ruan Hong in "Pole Girl" is a singing girl, and Xiao Hong in "Anyang Baby" is a nightclub prostitute and so on. If migrant workers are the fringe of the city, then female migrant workers are the fringe of the fringe.

At the same time, the external image of the characters in the film has also changed significantly. The first is the change of the character's dress, from the initial simple, to the city after the women try to integrate into the city, have begun to make up, wearing fashionable; Secondly, dialect is used in the film. In many films, they are labeled as migrant workers as soon as they open their mouths. In the movie "My Beautiful Homesickness", a rural girl named Ximei's Hunan dialect causes her a lot of inconvenience. During the interview, she can't understand the questions thrown at her. When she worked in a restaurant, she also faced difficulties because of her language problem.

In addition, the image of female migrant workers in the movies during this period gradually changed from group image construction to individual image construction, from the previous generalized images of female workers such as backward and ignorance to various individual identity creation, some struggle, some solve hardships with great love, and some lose themselves in moral degradation. The difference of different images in the film makes the identity construction of female migrant workers more three-dimensional and full, making this kind of films more diversified.

## 2.2 Pay attention to the multiple oppression of marginalized groups

The backwardness of rural areas makes female migrant workers yearn for the city, but behind the prosperity of the city is an invisible wall. Cities are not ready to respect and accept migrant workers. Female migrant workers live in the gray zone between urban and rural areas and stray in the edge of the city. They need to rebuild themselves in the city, but this will inevitably require them to pay a huge price. In the city life, they struggled to find themselves, but frequently faced with oppression, mainly manifested in three aspects: survival suffering and spiritual distress, emotional and moral degradation, and oppression of patriarchy.

### 2.2.1 Living suffering and mental distress

Migrant workers in the city life faced with employment, accommodation environment, identity and other problems, the city's flashy appearance more highlights the serious survival of migrant workers. In the movie "Loach is a Fish" (2006), the female loach has a perfect personality, but she can't escape the tragic fate after all. Her marriage failed and she met a male loach who was a contractor on the truck to Beijing, In order to survive, they work together on construction sites, compete with other workers for food, and are tricked into selling their blood; Finally found a place to live, and was soon evicted because of demolition; She went to work as a nanny and did her best to care for the elderly without recognition. She worked hard, but she couldn't escape the bad luck life brought her. Male loach is a small contractor, two people gradually produce feelings in getting along. But the male loach is also a miserable person. The boss defaults on the wages of the workers, but the workers think he embezzled money, and he is in huge debt. He took erythromycin when he was sick, but he delayed his treatment and died. The female loach lost his only support and had to pay off countless debts for him.<sup>[3]</sup>

Migrant workers in the city life not only face hard working and living conditions, but also face spiritual pain. The life of female migrant workers is hard and monotonous. No one is aware of their spiritual distance from the city, and their joys and sorrows are hidden. In the film "The World", directed by Zhangke Jia, Xiao Tao, Tai Sheng and others work in the gorgeous World Park. Every day, they travel between the magnificent landscape of the world, wearing colorful dance costumes and performing delicate dances. However, after work, they have to return to the humble dormitory to face the mediocre life. "In Beijing, around the world" is just a slogan for them, but in reality, they are just the duckweed of the world, and it is difficult for them to really integrate into the bustling city. Small peach and too born after falling in love, the love as the life of the only good, but too born in order to seek the desire to meet and betray small peach, in front of the cold depressed reality, small peach chose to commit suicide. Female migrant workers and the city each other as passengers, only the body of labor and hunger of the mind.

### 2.2.2 Emotional and moral destruction

The plight of female migrant workers in urban survival prompts a small number of them to break through the traditional emotional and moral defense, and use their own flesh as a bargaining chip to satisfy their desire for urban life. The city is their playground, but also the sacrifice of self.

In "Woman on Construction Site", Yulan becomes the mistress of the contractor Kun Du, in order to open a grocery store on his construction site. Kun Du told Yulan, he has a such a "grocery store" on each site, he has no love for Yulan, only desire to vent, even he can give Yulan to others, just to fulfill a business. However Yulan fell in love with the construction site of the boy Xiaojun, two people have a care in the city, even if this love immoral, not accepted. In the film, Xiaojun gives Yulan a pot of morning glory kept in a helmet. Xiaojun tells her that morning glory is the strongest and can grow anywhere, but Yulan says: "If morning glory wants to grow, it must have something to support it." Survival and the pursuit of true love, become a dilemma.

At the beginning of the film "Get on the Bus and Go", Xiaobian likes Gaoming with her girl's innocence and pure love, sharing the joys and sorrows with her boyfriend. In the second half of the film, she becomes a laughing hostess, dressed up and standing under the city lights, which makes audience feel distressed. She is not

because of the hardships of life and the lure of the city? When their fellow redneck boyfriends fail to weave their urban dreams and provide them with superior material life, they choose to fall into the arms of city men, climb into their cars and drive away, and degenerate into the consumable goods who rely on their bodies in exchange for urban residence.

### 2.2.3 Oppression of patriarchy

According to the traditional gender concept, women are regarded as the incidental existence of men, and female migrant workers are faced with oppression from men both on and off the screen. Whether they are urban men who are higher than the migrant workers or male migrant workers of the same class, the plight of female migrant workers pushes them to become the object of desire step by step.

In the movie "Apple" directed by Li Yu, Apple Liu, a massage girl in the city of Foot washing, is repeatedly oppressed by patriarchy. The boss assaulted Apple while drunk and tried to pay her off with money. However, as the victim, Apple not only failed to get the care of her husband Kun An, but was regarded as dirty and abused and retaliated against, although she never deigned to become a sex worker. Her husband and boss even bet on the baby in her belly, and reached a deal with money. Apple become a fertility tool in the conflict between them, and lost the dominance of her body and mind. In the film, she does not resist or even speak. When she finally learns the truth, she hugs and cries with the wife of owner, because they are both women who lost themselves in the power of patriarchy, which is an unspoken accusation.

## III. The gentle stage

After 2008, the reform and opening up resulted in the gradual and stable development of the society. In order to adapt to the social theme, film creators no longer narrated hardships, but turned their attention to the successful entrepreneurs and migrant workers who returned to the countryside to help rural construction. Meanwhile, the films were more market-oriented and commercialized, so such films developed slowly at this stage, with few breakthroughs.

### 3.1 Role success

At this stage, the phenomenon of migrant workers in cities is no longer novel. Policies and systems encourage migrant workers, the creator meets the mainstream trend of society, and tries to show the mutual integration of migrant workers and the city through struggle, and their dreams come true. The film encourages migrant workers to strive actively, and even sketches out a beautiful blueprint for the construction of a new countryside from entering the city to returning home.

In terms of the appearance of female migrant workers, they are no longer the stereotypical "migrant girls" image. In order to get rid of the rural label brought by the dialect, some of them practice Mandarin. Female migrant workers have escaped the miserable fate of the previous period and have been built as models of success by the creators. Some of them set up their own shops or even factories, some of them work hard to learn knowledge and enter the city's management, some of them become teachers and lawyers, etc. In short, their images reflect the vitality of The Times. The change of identity has prompted the reshaping of the image of female migrant workers. They wear bright and bright clothes, and many women who have returned to their hometowns successfully dress up simply and effectively. They are confident and proud, surrounded by their family and fellow villagers, returned to the embrace of the new countryside as a new farmer.

### 3.2 Describe inspirational stories

In the early film and television works, suffering is for the achievement of virtue, while in the new era, there are fewer scenes of suffering and survival, and more focus on the women workers in the city who are not afraid of difficulties in the hardships, to strengthen their morale to move forward. If the early films of "Woman in Town" are the narrative of suffering, then the recent films are the inspirational stories.

In "All Dreams Bloom", Fang Lin achieved career success through her own hard work. When she just entered the city, she took the manager Cai from Hong Kong as her goal of success. She learned humbly, treated work seriously and responsibly, created a set of new management methods for the factory, and promoted the development of the factory. After she made a mistake, she took responsibility voluntarily and returned to her old factory to become a trainer after setbacks. She loved her work, went to night school to learn languages, and wrote poetry in her spare time, the spiritual world is rich. She firmly buy a house of faith, to let father happiness; She also adopted a child and did her best to raise it. Her inspiring struggle story is also a successful example among many migrant women.

The film "Woman into the City" focuses on highlighting the "Hongyan" "Meihua" "Ma Ling" "Zhen Li" these four "socialist new rural women" fighting spirit, especially Hongyan the most prominent, she in the face of difficulties dare to bear, led the sisters to work hard, is to lay down a piece of heaven and earth, suffering for her is just a stepping stone. If "Working Girl in Special District" describes the suffering on the road to the city is full

of sadness, the "Woman into the City" suffering decorated with a very tragic. In the camera, Hongyan is always full of spirit and fighting spirit. She inspires her timid sisters and attracts a large number of people who did not trust her or even look down on her. Therefore, "Woman into the City" is a history of rural women going to town, but also a new rural women's struggle history.<sup>[4]</sup>

In the films of this period, although migrant women were still ordinary, they made efforts to reshape their self-identity. Under the push of The Times, they changed from farmers to urban people and finally re-identified with the identity of farmers, achieving a new identity and mission.

#### **IV. Realistic significance of image construction of female migrant workers in movies**

Migrant worker films have always been generous in their praise of good qualities. The thoughts of migrant women are constantly changing with the changes of urban life and times. As a marginalized group, the film creators have deeply explored the various hardships they encounter in the city, trying to present the shining brilliance of humanity and traditional virtues in the difficult situation. The purpose of the film is to appeal to women's courage to resist, promote the awakening of female consciousness, and promote the restoration of morality and the construction of good character. At the same time, the film arouses the attention of all sectors of society, calls for social fairness and justice, and improves the plight of female migrant workers.

##### **4.1 The awakening of female consciousness**

Female migrant workers in order to leave the countryside, get rid of the plight of survival, often have to pay a huge price. Some change their fates through their studies and career struggles, while more female migrant workers find it difficult to succeed easily and are tempted by money in order to survive. The female migrant worker film mainly expresses the value connotation of the film calling for the awakening of female consciousness through depicting the inspirational female typical and awakening the awakening of the lost female.

In the film "Working Girl in Special District", Xingzi fully embodies the modernity and subjectivity of female self-consciousness. She completed the transformation from traditional to modern with three times of "leaving". First of all, Xingzi in order to go to the city and his father break, get rid of the shackles of the family, to open and innovative big cities; The second step, Xingzi do not want to have been the female manager of verbal discrimination and unreasonable treatment, run away openly, find another job, and the confrontation with female manager is also the widespread existence of the unfair social phenomenon of the confrontation, for the development of self fair, free and constant struggle; The third step, Xingzi use spare time to go to night school, learning advanced scientific and cultural knowledge to reshape her image, in order to achieve self-value, in the construction of the country and society shine.

In the film Finding You, Sun Fang, a nanny, and Li Jie, a city woman, are compared to call for the awakening of female consciousness. Sun Fang suffered from domestic violence for a long time and sold her body and organs for her children. The children of Sun Fang and Li Jie were also sick, but they were in completely different situations due to the class gap. After Sun Fang's baby died, she woke up. She has lost her lover and children, and in the future she will find her true self in the city alone.

##### **4.2 The brilliance of human nature**

Migrant workers have made great contributions to urban construction, but there are still problems such as lack of urban household registration, unable to enjoy social security, female migrant workers as a vulnerable group of marginal people in the society in a state of aphasia. As the realistic work, female migrant worker films expose and express the plight of migrant workers from the perspective of female workers, creating a full suffering image. The creators are more in-depth observation of the complexity of human nature, focusing on various contradictions, recording the appearance of The Times with films, spreading humanistic care, and mining the real brilliance of human nature in the society.

The female loach in "Loach Is Also a Fish" touched the paralyzed old man with her sincere enthusiasm when taking care of the old man. When the old man recovered his mobility, he had physical desire for the female loach. Although the female loach was angry, she forgave him. It is also the first film to positively depict the sexual desires of lonely old people. Some films also promote excellent traditional morality. In the "Working Girl in Special District" a piece, Tingmei Li and Sixi Li with the common goal, two people mutual friendship, learn technology to fund entrepreneurship, technology back to the poor home. Tingmei Li did not blindly pursue the city life and love, she has a great spirit of dedication, trying to let the backward hometown people to achieve common prosperity.

##### **4.3 Call for fairness and justice**

The situation of female migrant workers in cities need not be repeated. Most of the films about female migrant workers use documentary techniques to make a strong contrast between their suffering and tenacious spirit, and appeal for social fairness and justice in reality with strong humanistic care. In the process of integrating into the city, migrant workers not only desire to be recognized in terms of material conditions, but also expect to be treated equally in spirit.<sup>[5]</sup>

In the film, the problems of labor rights protection encountered by female migrant workers have repeatedly appeared. In "Working Girl in Special District", the girls from the countryside work for more than 12 hours a day, far exceeding the working hours stipulated by law. In "Cotton", the female textile worker put forward suggestions to the manager because of the high temperature in the workshop. When she felt sick, she put down her work and went to see a doctor, because she believed that the body was more important than money. In "My Poems", the migrant workers asked for their salary in the way of poetry, "We are not afraid to kneel down and return our hard-earned money", the creator used the camera language to highlight and praise such behavior. Through documentary artistic means to interpret the meaning, it shows that the films about migrant workers support female migrant workers to seek self-worth and advocate dignified labor within the framework of artistic expression. In addition, in several films such as "Add Sugar to Your Coffee" and "The Storm of Female Models," the concept of freedom and equality in love and marriage is also expressed. The experience of female migrant workers in love and marriage is pitiful. The boundary between urban and rural areas should not be an obstacle to love. Female migrant workers can pursue emotions across classes and control their own destiny.

Films about migrant workers show the audience a variety of social problems that female migrant workers encounter in cities. In reality, the problem of their integration from the countryside to the city has not been solved. The society should face up to the plight and needs of female migrant workers in the city. Through the shaping and presentation of multiple images in the film, the deeper social contradictions can be conveyed, the humanity care of the society can be shown, and the solution of relevant problems can be finally helped. Films about migrant workers are an important part of Chinese films and should be paid attention to by film researchers and creators.

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