

# *Research on Changes in the Female Image in Chinese Crime Films from 2013 to 2023*

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**Abstract:** Crime film is an indispensable branch and an important part of the film genre. In the past decade, the female image in Chinese crime films has changed and achieved obvious breakthroughs. The single portrayal of female characters in crime movies has changed, and strong, independent, and even vicious female characters are created while the stereotype of "weak" is discarded. In addition, as an essential existence, these female characters assume the role of driving the plot forward and reversing its direction. This paper analyzes the portrayal of female images in Chinese crime films shot or released in 2013 to 2023, and on the basis of analysis, explores and discovers the mode of transformation of female's roles, shortcomings and future direction. Adopting the case studies and theoretical analysis, this paper analyzes different female characters in the movie, and discusses the type of contemporary female roles and the social meanings and connotations they imply. Moreover, it uses the comparative argumentation and historical analysis to compare female roles at home and abroad and different years, so as to achieve a revelation of the future female characterization in film.

**Keywords:** Female image, crime film, feminism, diversity

## 1. Introduction

Crime films display the state and ideology of human society as their main content of expression, such as conflict and balance between extreme opposites, evil and justice, disorder and order. In Chinese crime films before the 21st century, compared with the male image, who was always used as the protagonist or key clue of the film, the female image mostly appeared as the marginal figures in the case. In crime films, all the men (police, murderer, judge, and victims), and the number of female images are small. There are only a handful of movie texts that revolve around women or start from a female perspective.

Since the 20th century, the implementation of the policy of reform and opening up and the material development brought about by the market economy have also broadened people's horizons with the influx of foreign feminist cultures. Accelerated globalization and modernization have provided an independent space for women in a real sense. Based on the support of policies and the positive social reality [1], the appearance of female images and the number of female roles in Chinese crime films after 2013 have increased, making the functions of female characters endowed with more dimensional and vivid character rather than imbalanced extremes of goodness or evil.

In recent years, a series of high-quality films such as *the Silent Witness*, *The Black Coal, Thin Ice*, *Wrath of Silence*, *The Shadow Play*, *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, *The Looming Storm*, and *Lost In the Stars*, etc. have achieved both box office and word-of-mouth success. They have also provided a steady power for domestic crime films to explore new narrative modes and creativity.

In recent years, the portrayal of female images in Chinese crime films has developed towards a multi-dimensional development. Not only has the number of characters increased, but the length and importance of films have also risen. The female has begun to move from the edge of the stage to the center position, becoming an indispensable element in the film. In addition, the reversal of female image identity and the unexpected behavior of female characters gradually broke the public's "stereotype image" of women in the plot design. Because of the existence of the diversified female characters, the film seems more vivid and realistic on the basis of its original foundation, and the structure also has more clever echoes, so the plot can be more complete. Through increasing the proportion of female roles in time and space, the trend of women's development moving from one-sided to three-dimensional in Chinese crime films has attracted different creators to continue their innovative creations.

Therefore, the paper focuses on the changes of female images in crime films. Through the text analysis and comparative demonstration of 21 crime films released from 2013 and 2023, the paper analyzes the presentation types of female images in films, and puts forward the future direction for their shortcomings.

## **2. The multi-level types of female images presented in crime films**

Bordwell believes that the core plot of a "crime thriller" is crime, usually involving three types of characters: the perpetrator, the law enforcer, and the innocent victim or bystander [2].

### **2.1. Victim: the victim of the harm**

In most crime films, female victims appear as a backdrop and a "tool", and are at the absolute bottom compared to female characters in other types of films. In the narrative of the film, there are usually two ways for female victims to end up after an atrocity. First, they are rescued by male characters aiming to demonstrate the hero's valor through heroic rescue. Secondly, women are persecuted and eventually die as complete victims. The death of the female victim intensifies the plot conflict, promotes the development of the plot, and arouses the audience's sympathy through the weak being bullied and damaged [3]. According to the type of injuries of female victims, the victims can be divided into three categories: domestic violence by male characters, mutilation or death by male offenders, and persecution by society and the environment.

#### **2.1.1. Domestic violence**

In recent years, under the attention and reports of the media, domestic violence has gradually moved from the private sector to the public domain and has become a hot topic. However, the issue of domestic violence still presents a certain degree of "gender imbalance" (traditionally refers to the imbalance of the relationship between the sexes), which profoundly reveals the unequal power structure of the gender [4]. There are many Chinese crime films showing domestic violence, such as *the Woman in the Storm*.

In the film, Xu Min decides to change her career in order to provide a better life for her family and to realize her self-worth, but this becomes the trigger for her husband's dissatisfaction with her. Her husband even complains that Xu Min leaves early and returned late, treating him as a purely marriage accessory. As a female victim and a domestic violence victim, Xu Min repeatedly endured

humiliation and beatings from her husband to maintain the integrity of her family, despite the fact that she is physically and psychologically traumatized.

The path of these women, who appear as sufferers, is mostly limited to the family, while the value and significance of their lives are pinned on their children and families. Spiritual dependence has repeatedly diminished the awakening consciousness of independence and resistance.

### 2.1.2. Destruction or death

In the crime film, there is no shortage of evil criminals who regard the lives of female victims as ants and abuse them, injure them, and even die. In this case, most female characters can only passively bear the violence and killing of men. As for the victimized individuals, the misfortune suffered by the victimized individuals often happens in a real-life moment and is unpredictable [5].

Wan Xiaoning in *Back to the Wharf* is a simple-minded young girl who is innocently drawn into a conspiracy that ultimately takes her life because she wants to track down the truth about her father's death. The sudden death of the young girl, like a moment of fireworks, became a victim of counsel and fame. The dazzling headlights before her death are like Wan Xiaoning, the only bright color in the dark clouds and dark tide of the film, but in the end, it can only be snuffed out.

In *"Guilty of Mind"*, Chen Xi served as the Fang Mu's pillar and hope, giving him a lot of care and companionship. However, she is killed by murderer in a very cruel way just to force Fang Mu to face the murderer, and eventually became a victim in the game of good and evil. The pure beauty of the girl collides strongly with the evil that has no moral bottom line.

### 2.1.3. Social environment

Along with the pace of China's social transformation, social problems are on the rise. and the social system and the dark reality will force countless people to despair. The ensuring pressure, despair, hopelessness, regret, and threat are squeezing the survival and breathing space of modern people.

The film *Port Call* revolves around the death of a woman, Wang Jiamei, and shows the cruel and real social reality of Hong Kong. Through the information revealed by the murderer, Ding Zicong, during the police investigation, it hits the core of the film, that is, what is more cruel than the murder itself is the exploitation and influence of the social environment on people. Wang Jiamei was born in Hunan and immigrated to Hong Kong. After her family broke up, she fell to the bottom of society with poverty and loneliness. In this realistic environment, she works hard and lives positively, such as by modeling and distributing leaflets. But unfortunately, all these efforts end in failure. Eventually, she chose the pornographic industry. After meeting Ding Zicong, she asks Ding, who also has no courage to live, to end her life. The persecution caused by this institutionalization tacitly accepted by society is far more indifferent and cruel than the murderer's atrocities.

## 2.2. Law enforcers: The pioneer of breaking stereotypes

Law enforcers are usually the staff who implement the law and maintain its operation, among which the police, judges, and lawyers are all typical representatives. The enforcer is a hero who defends the dignity of life and the law of the country, and a hero with a noble personality who fights against the dark and evil. In past crime movies, law enforcers were often portrayed as the spokesmen of justice, bravely fighting against criminals. In recent years, female law enforcers have frequently appeared in crime films as special police officers, undercover agents, and prosecutors, which greatly enriches the diversified image of women on the big screen.

### 2.2.1. Case 1 - *A Guilty Conscience*

The female character in *A Guilty Conscience*, Fang Jiajun, is an excellent lawyer who has rational, logic, steadiness, sang-froid, and knows how to protect herself. The other male character lawyer, Lin Liangshui, is an ability idealistic without fighting spirit and morality character, which is used to reflect and highlight the rationality of female characters. The character traits of this character complement each other perfectly. In the plot, Fang Jiajun's behavior of looking for Lin Liangshui's cooperation also reflects Fang Jiajun's character trait of knowing right from wrong. In addition, Fang is well aware of her professional strengths and weaknesses, and after careful consideration, she chooses to invite Lin to work together to solve the lawsuit, which reflects Fang's strategy as a lawyer and his determination and strength to win the lawsuit.

### 2.2.2. Case 2 - *Detective vs. Sleuths*

In recent years, the policewoman in crime movies has gradually transformed from the original follower to the dominant one, playing a major role in the detection and promotion of the case. In terms of behavior, they break away from the weak, passive, dependent, and other rigid female image characteristics, and replace them with decisiveness, open-mindedness, bravery, and resourcefulness.

In the film *Detective vs. Sleuths*, although the whole film revolves around Li Jun's madness in the narrative, female police officer Chen Yi's extraordinary physical ability and bravery add a lot of highlights to the film. In the early part of the film, through Chen Yi's outstanding policewoman at work, she successfully shaped the image of an outstanding female police officer. The information that makes the character more dimensional is the fact that Chen Yi acts as a victim, and Cheng Yi's image transitions from the passive position of a victim to that of a criminal police officer. At the end of the film, the fact that Chen Yi's beloved husband is a criminal is revealed. As an excellent Interpol, Chen Yi decisively chooses to stand on the side of justice, not being swayed by subjective feelings, and calmly and objectively captures her husband, which demonstrates her inner justice and noble quality as an Interpol.

### 2.2.3. Case3 - *The Soul*

As independent individuals, the police also have personal emotions. In recent years, crime films have not only focused on the professional actions of women in the special professional category of police, but also on the conflict between personal emotions and professional ethics, magnifying their choices to highlight the dimensional and vivid images.

In *The Soul*, A Bang and her husband, Liang Wenchao, are the "dual-worker" families in the law enforcement community. Liang is searching for the truth through the normal thinking and procedures of handling cases. Whereas, A Bang is a police officer who believes in Buddhism and is more receptive to unnatural factors due to her faith, so she directly touched another truth through the phone recording. But A Bang's attention is on saving her husband Liang's life and does not probe deeper into the truth. In fact, her practice is incompatible to the law and professional ethics. As a guard of love and family, A Bang weakens her identity as a police officer in this moment and chooses to compromise with life. This plotting makes the police identity more dramatic as well as the characters more conflicted.

## 2.3. Criminals: a legal and moral rebel

The development of crime movies on the mainland China has experienced a process from "stating" crime to "interpreting" crime. The "interpretation" crime is to achieve insight into the effects of

complex human nature and society by presenting criminal behavior so that the audience feels empathy and has high artistic value, which is the enduring power of crime films. For crime films, it is extremely important to portray the image of the criminal in the movie, including the motivation, inner activities, and external environment. However, early Chinese crime films did not focus on the charm of female characters, nor did they plot around them. Therefore, female images are mostly biased toward male discourse power and divorced from practical concepts. However, in recent years, the portrayal of female criminals in crime films has inherited the image characteristics of traditional female criminals while reflecting the profound change in the portrayal of female criminals under the influence of social trends in the new era.

The portrayal of female criminals in the film also reflects the resolute defense of the national law by society as well as the critical attitude towards criminal behavior. In addition, it also represents the latent and ambiguous nature of the violent resistance against female criminals.

### 2.3.1. Victim offenders

Under the influence of traditional social culture, women are labeled as weak and dependent, and are in a weak position, so they are more vulnerable to violence. When women face injustice (abuse or abuse), they turn from victim to perpetrator.

Deng Yujiao in *A Touch of Sin* is a character who perfectly realizes the transition from victim to criminal. This story is based on a true case. In the film, Deng anxiously waits for her lover to choose between her and his wife, but what she gets in return is righteous and violent from her lover's wife. Faced with this situation, Deng can only hide in a "snake reincarnation into beauty" sightseeing car. The snake in the car's glass crawled slowly, but never climbed out, a metaphor for Deng's strong heart and deeply imprisoned fate. When she is humiliated by the two men who came to look for fun while sitting in the duty room, her accumulated helplessness, disappointment, and resentment instantly explode, transforming her from a victim to the initiator and perpetrator of a crime.

### 2.3.2. Revenge of the lower

The subversive power of the power subordinate is reflected in the fact that they reverse the existing power relationship with the superior through revenge, so that they are no longer suppressed, and some will even directly dismantle the existing relationship, thus completely subverting the existing power structure. However, there is also a "subverted" relationship in the film, in which a character has the identity of the victim and the perpetrator. The two are opposite and unified.

For example, the female character in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Wu Zhizhen, is a elegant, low-key, and diligent woman, but often incurs male malice will because of her outstanding appearance. This is what leads to sexual blackmail by a nightclub owner for a piece of fur cleaning. In defiance of the boss's insolent request, she accidentally killed him. After that, she was imprisoned under the surveillance of her husband, Liang Zhijun, who took the blame for her. Wu is not actively or deliberately trying to achieve the purpose of subverting authority, so how to achieve self-redemption is the focus of the film [6].

Furthermore, there are many ways in which vengeance is practiced by the inferior, including weapons, tools, killing, etc. But the purpose of revenge is unified: to return all the damage and reverse the existing power relations and order. In crime movies, there is a category of women who have not been physically attacked or harmed, but who feel the pain of their loved ones and have decided to flip the existing power relations. Under the premise of the failure of law and order, they choose to confront their enemies in a more extreme way. In recent years, most of these images in crime movies portray as a mother.



One of the samples is the mother of the *Last Suspect*, Chen Zhiqi is also a lawyer. Chen's daughter is kidnapped at school. In order to find her daughter, Chen accepted a request from the robber to defend Dan Wen and acquitted him. With Dan Wen's victory and the safe return of Chen's daughter, Chen finds that Dan Wen is actually the real murderer in the case, and the mother of the victim in this case, Lin, is the one who kidnapped Chen's daughter. Lin exhausted all her efforts to ensure that Dan Wen escaped justice only so that she could punish the murderer who killed her daughter by herself. The flame of hatred drives Lin to take revenge, and the extreme revenge behavior faces the possibility of losing its positive social significance.

### 2.3.3. Acting type of "crime"

In crime movies, there is another category of female characters whose superficial characteristics do not differ much from the stereotype of women, such as being weak, petite, ignorant, wife and mother, and dependent on men. But creators tend to focus on breakthroughs and reversals in this type of role, making them unrelenting in the face of evils, adept at disguising their crimes, and utilizing their femininity to achieve their goals faster and more efficiently. Like the drama actors on stage, they create the perfect persona for themselves and revel in it.

Maggie from *Who Killed Cock Robin* falls into this category. Maggie is a gorgeous, gentle, and intellectual woman with strong work abilities who is loved by superiors and colleagues. However, she is also a woman of deep secrets. In the process of tracing an incident that happened nine years ago with her colleagues, in order to cover up the fact that she is in the incident under investigation and to protect her own interests, she uses Qi's love for her to realize the purpose of concealing the truth. This type of character tends to be clear about her own pursuits, value her interests, and be unscrupulous.

## 3. Limitation of Chinese criminal creation

Films have the important function of reflecting reality. Early films distorted and symbolized the female images in order to serve the purpose of male discourse [7]. Therefore, how to break through the "gaze" and become the subject of the film narrative has become the main direction of thinking about developing female characters in films. Regardless of the identify of women, they are more or less subject to male oppression, control or violence, so most of the emotional or behavioral imbalance of women stems from the panic of male hegemony and women's vulnerability in gender relations.

Women's discourse and women's social and personal survival will always be "foggy scenery", and that what women write remains one spiritual adventure after another. But it will undoubtedly continue. There are breakthroughs and falls, but the attempt to break out again at the trap constructs and holds up a female cultural space [8]. The positioning of female characters in the film has evolved from the initial ambiguity to the creator's conscious attention to the awakening of female consciousness within the characters, and to the highlighting of women's individual rights and the display of their unique personalities. Men are often seen as constructing the reality of women rather than engaging in the same constructive and continuous process of interaction with them. In *Ash is Purest White*, directed by Jia Zhangke, men do not construct the reality of women, but rather women construct theirs [9]. Although the film is not directed by a female director, it can be seen that the preliminary female creative consciousness is also demonstrated in the creation of male directors.

### 3.1. To ignore the integrity of the story and the rationality of the logic

At present, although there are many kinds of female images in Chinese mainland crime films, they are relatively single and concentrated. The identity of female characters still revolves around the needs of men, and in terms of function, they still serve the male roles more. Therefore, in the field of crime films, the female image is a dramatic ornament created by men, rather than a realistic one. In addition, it is difficult for female images to show a distinct and advanced sense of femininity, and the purposes of women's behavior are easily misunderstood, which leads to the status quo of female characters being consumed and criticized in crime movies.

In the movie *Buer Detective*, policewoman Angela is smart, witty, and an absolute leader in the police station, meeting cases that can be finished efficiently and independently and voicing her own ideas on the case. However, only for the purpose of highlighting the image of the actor, Wang Buer, the director forced Angela to become flat, brainless, and dependent on the male character's image of women, and even forced the arrangement of the emotional line. This is no logic in such plot design and image construction. The creators did not consider that Angela, as the male lead's superior, should have a higher level of professional ability than the male lead. It has no role in promoting the case itself, which is seriously against the logic of characterization.

In contrast, the movie *The Silence of The Lambs* portrays Clarice as a hard-working, savvy, and well-trained policewoman. It is worth exploring that Clarice's outstanding beauty is the reason for entrusting her to face Hannibal, as well as part of the director's process of portraying stereotypical females. But in the subsequent plot advancement, Clarice accepted the task perfectly and demonstrate extraordinary talent, courage, and perseverance. Although she still faced physical disadvantage and psychological isolation, she always adhered to the professional ethics of the police as a police officer and successfully escaped by herself.

Angela and Clarice also belong to the identity of the police, but the latter is more dimensional than the former and more in line with the identity of the police. In crime movies, the police play an important role in maintaining social order and protecting the personal safety of citizens. It is clear that the responsibilities and characteristics of the police themselves are the basis for shaping a successful image. Instead of treating the female role as a male accessory, weakening its highlights infinitely, and belittling or even wiping the merits of female image.

### 3.2. Lack of solutions to the problems that women face themselves

Although some directors use a female perspective to show humanistic concern for female role, such as accusing women of the harm they have suffered and criticising distorted human nature, Chinese crime film have always lack of solution to the problems faced by women themselves, such as violence, discrimination, sexual harassment.

*Trending Topic* centers on an incident of bullying in a school, which is a narrative of online public opinion. The movie spends a large part of its time on the reversal of public opinion, including the real persecution of women and the accusation of the evil of those behind the scenes. However, the movie does not explore in depth the brutal truth and social hot issues of the female student's own victimization and her eventual suicide by jumping from a building. The problems encountered by women are only used as a gimmick to attract the audience and cause public outrage. In the end, the whole movie is reduced to an exposition of personal heroism that only highlights the heroine's personal and straightforward setting and fails to fill the gap by calling for solutions to the problems that women may face.

On the contrary, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, one of Park Chan-woo's "Revenge" trilogy, the helpless ordinary people can realize revenge after experiencing the injustice of fate. However, the second half of the film does not stay and amplify the thrill of revenge, but it explores social issues,

the characters' self-redemption, and the transformation of the relationship between mother and daughter. The director denounces social injustice with a sharp perspective. It will also make the audience think about society's unfair treatment of the young girl, and blinded by the truth, the law of powerlessness is infinitely magnified in this moment.

In general, Chinese crime films are influenced by traditional creative concepts, and focus on the implementation and criticism of the moral level, but to a large extent ignore the integrity of the story and the rationality of the logic, thus lacking the pursuit and search for solutions to social problems [10]. With the expansion of China's crime film market, the capital investment of crime films is bound to become more and more obvious. Therefore, we should avoid the single construction and the narrative only staying at the story level, and try to dig the heart and focus of the characters, which may have unexpected joy.

#### 4. Conclusion

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This paper focuses on the changes in the image of women in crime-themed films. The paper summarizes and analyzes the development of the image of women in cinema by comparing and contrasting the texts of 21 crime films released from 2013 to 2023. However, this paper lacks empirical data research and involves a small variety of literature. It can be further analyzed by comparing the female school colors in Chinese and foreign crime movies, so as to obtain a more suitable direction for the development of female characters in Chinese crime movies.

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