



Gender Ethics in Women's Films of Contemporary China

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Abstract: A great number of outstanding women's films have been produced in today's China in which gender ethics is one of the most important themes, such as *Lost in Beijing*, a representative work of Yu Li, *Lost, Found* directed by Yue Lü, *The Bold, the Corrupt, and the Beautiful*, directed by Ya-che Yang and the Best Feature Film at the 54th Tapei Golden Horse Film Festival, and *Send Me to the Clouds* directed by Congcong Teng. Among them, *Send Me to the Clouds* released in 2019, which focuses on a "leftover woman" suffering from cancer, expresses the director's profound thoughts on gender ethics with its picturesque scenes like Chinese ink paintings.

Keywords: *Send Me to the Clouds*; Gender ethics; Women's films

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Women's films are not just films with female directors or protagonists. A more accurate definition is that they are films which focus on feminist issues and have a clear feminist consciousness^[1]. Throughout the history, they can better reflect women's culture and living conditions compared with other movies. Starting from *Woman-Demon-Human*, a representative women's film of the Chinese mainland, it is not difficult to spot discussions about gender ethics in such films. Besides, they have been continuously promoting the development of ethics in China. *Send Me to the Clouds* is such a film that explores gender ethics under freedom and bondage.

Gender ethics refers to relationships between men and women. The most prominent part of gender relations is love and marital relationships. *Send Me to the Clouds* mainly tells about different views of two

women on love and marriage. While urban young women like Nan Sheng hold liberal views about marriage, views of middle-aged women represented by her mother are more traditional. Thoughts on gender ethics are expressed exactly through different views of the two generations.

In the film, Nan Sheng is not only highly educated, but a photographer with independent thoughts and personality. Faced with Director Li's ridicule, she bravely fights back to defend her dignity even when earning lifesaving money. She also shows contempt for passers-by's remarks on "leftover women." Sheng actually represents the marriage view held by many young women nowadays who, both highly educated and economically independent, pay more attention to pursuing their own values, and do not approve the traditional view that men are the breadwinners while women are only responsible for housework. On the other hand, Sheng's mother, Meizhi Liang, stands for the marriage view of middle-aged and elderly women who are more conventional and center around their husbands and children, and who lose their support of life once a marriage crisis occurs. Liang, for instance, chooses to seek her true self together with her daughter after such a crisis. Focusing on two disparate women, the film explores different views on love and marriage of modern women. The driving force behind changing views is inseparable from China's economic development and invasion of foreign cultures. While Liang represents women who conform to traditional Chinese family ethics, attach great importance to blood ties and revolve around their husbands and children all the time, Sheng is a representative of women who are influenced by modern family ethics. Living in today's information society and market economy, and enjoying a highly developed and prosperous life, they are not only independent, but

take an open attitude towards marriage and have the courage to revolt against the patriarchal society.

The economic development and foreign culture invasion have influenced marriage views in China in multiple ways. On one hand, more and more women, whose status has indeed improved, are gradually getting rid of the traditional Confucian idea that men are superior to women, and have realized economic independence and personality freedom just like Sheng. However, with the rise of postmodernism and invasion of consumer culture, money has become an important cornerstone of Chinese marriages. In the film, for instance, Guangming Liu, who has married into his wife's family for money and suffered mockery from her and her father ever since, has become a clown that amuses others by reciting the circumference rate. On the other hand, virtually no country in the world can avoid the impact of the sexual liberation movement that began in Europe and the U.S. in the 1960s. China, with all its fine moral traditions, is no exception. One outstanding manifestation of this sexual revolution is extramarital affairs^[2]. In the movie, Sheng's father has an affair with her classmate. When his company is stuck in financial difficulties, he would rather buy handbags for his mistress than give the money to his wife and daughter. Disappointed at her husband's betrayal, Sheng's mother embarks on the path of self-pursuit. In addition to illness, Sheng's tragedy is the result of her parents' unfortunate marriage in a large degree. *Send Me to the Clouds* not only shows the freedom and independence of Sheng as a contemporary female intellectual; the ethical problems reflected in it, such as extramarital affairs and loveless marriage, are also worthy of our attention.

Sexual morality has always played a major part in gender ethics. Likewise, sexual liberation is also a goal of the feminist movement which aims to realize freedom and gender equality for women. A classical line in the hit TV drama, *Why Women Kill*, runs as follows: "Sex is how women gain power over men. And there is nothing humiliating about that." Chinese women, however, are forbidden to talk about sex by traditional Confucianism. Many of them suffer sexual inhibition to a certain extent^[3]. In *Send Me to the Clouds*, Sheng, who remains single, has not had sex for a long time. That is why she becomes so shocked after a tumor is found in her ovaries. When learning her sexual experience will be affected after the

operation, she starts to face her sexual needs squarely. "I want to make love to you," says she bravely to Guangming Liu. This line is not only a courageous move of Sheng who lays down all her scruples and speaks out her inner desire in front of the man she loves, but represents progress of China's women's films in facing up to the normal physiological needs of women. In addition to women's bold expression of their sexual drive, the film goes deeper and explores female orgasm. In a Web survey focused on cognitive-affective factors and sexual health, 250 women reported orgasm difficulties among a total of 500 women aged 18 to 72 years^[4]. In the second half of the film, Sheng replaces Cui Mao's suit with a pink one and makes him a laughing stock at the funeral of Mr. Li, Director Li's father. Mao revenges himself by forcing her to have sex with him. Later, when talking to her, he finds Sheng masturbating, apparently not satisfied with the sexual experience. By courageously displaying female desires on the screen, the film not only faces squarely the sexual desire of women, which is a normal physiological need, but reflects on the importance of high-quality sexual life to Chinese women.

Taking Nan Sheng's emotional development and expression of individual desires as the main plotline, *Send Me to the Clouds* also faces up to the sexual needs of old people represented by Mr. Li in its subplot. In China, sex has always been an obscure topic not to be talked about openly, especially for the elderly. It is the Chinese stereotype that all old people should be amiable with few desires. Once people realize they also need sexual activity, the respectable image of the elderly will collapse. According to a survey conducted by the University of Michigan, 40% of those aged 65 to 80 years are still sexually active, 60% admit their interest in sex whether they are sexually active or not, and over 50% think sex is of vital importance for the quality of life^[5-6]. It should be old people's right to satisfy their sexual needs in gender ethics. In the film, Mr. Li makes no secret of his sexual needs as an artist. He bravely pursues Meizhi Liang and says jokingly when professing his admiration for her, "Some time ago I had a stroke. This hand can no longer serve certain functions." As an old man, he alludes to his desire for sexual life with such humorous words. In the end of the movie, he asks Sheng to conclude his autobiography with the following remarks: "Life and death are ruled by

love and desire. I'm returning to where I came from." Boldly exploring people's sexual needs, the film is not simply about women's right to sex; its more important value lies in reflections over the quality of women's sexual life and attention to old people's sexual desires.

Gender ethics, which has always been an important part of ethics, is closely related to family ethics. While marriage is the premise of family, the first stop of human life, the premise of marriage is the development of gender relations. In *Send Me to the Clouds*, freedom and bondage are undoubtedly the crux of gender relations. For one thing, the film contrasts liberal attitudes towards marriage of young women represented by Sheng with traditional attitudes of women who are bound by male chauvinism just like Liang. For another, it shows Sheng's and Mr. Li's bold expression of sexual needs and their failure to satisfy such needs due to health problems. This kind of freedom and bondage does not only exist in the film. Such images also mirror real life. Although women's status is constantly improving with social progress, the sexual needs of women and old people have not been faced squarely, and little attention has been paid to victims of unequal marriages such as Liang and Liu. All this should be laid stress on in the

development of China's gender ethics. With social development and the improvement of women's status, women's films in China have made great progress in recent years. The gender ethics in such films has not only enriched film texts, but reflects the change of gender relations in modern China.

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