

The Myth of Women's Fates under Patriarchal Crisis Control: A Case Study on Heroine's Characterization in Mid-Covid 19 Chinese TV Series

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Abstract. 2018 witnessed some unprecedentedly strict regulations on national media content production and distribution by the Chinese National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). On its annual recommended lists of excellent national TV series, there is a noticeable increase in historical series in line with core socialist values. Since late 2019, there has been a strict home-quarantine policy amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Accompanied by the newly introduced three-child birth policy in the context of the country's low fertility rate and significant ageing, a re-emphasis on traditional Confucian ideologies incited by the Chinese authorities emerged: the primary identity of women being an understanding wife and loving mother. Furthermore, thus, a manifestation of such enforced patriarchal ideologies and cultural values is visible in the country's strictly regulated media content. This study sets off from a corpus of national recommended TV lists to investigate the myth of women's fates in amid-pandemic Chinese TV series that are appraised and supported by authorities to explore how their identities are constructed and potentially abused under patriarchal media production.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Gender Roles under Traditional Confucianism Ideology

The roles of Chinese females are largely shaped and defined by Confucianism, the longstanding official state ideology since the Han Dynasty, which particularly emphasizes the idea of family structure. According to Zheng (2016), Confucianism regards the family as a social institution which does not recognize individuality but highlights only the roles of family members established and solidified by the principles of marriage and consanguinity [1]. It should point out that the fixation on the female role, as wife and mother, was the shackle that bound women in ancient China. As subordinates or 'people behind the scenes', they were always taught to obey their husbands, fathers or sons domestically, depriving them of the ability and awareness to resist oppression in society from a patriarchal society.

The Confucian philosophy dresses male and female roles in a theological veneer. By introducing the yin-yang philosophy (dark-light), the theory distinguishes the family structure into *nei-wai* (inside-outside), two mutually exclusive but inseparable parts. And that women should be *neiren* (insiders) who only deal with private affairs in the

family, while men handle the outside or public part [2]. Besides being the wife, Chinese females take another responsibility, carrying the family lineage [1]. Just as Mengzi (a major Confucian figure) puts that "there are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them", he states that it is a duty for women to pass on husbands' family names and being unfruitful is a shame. In general, ensuring women's obedience to their fathers, husbands and sons and their fertility for the family actually guaranteed the perpetuation of the patriarchal dictatorship throughout ancient China, complying with the *Jiaguo Yiti* (Intergradation Of Family And Nation), a system that believes the family structure is a miniature country. Confucianism, stifling women from pursuing self-actualization, manipulated and indoctrinated Chinese females for more than 2000 years, until the 1980s.

1.2 Women's Identity under Neo-liberalism

The launch of China's comprehensive reforms under Deng in 1978 drove women 'out of domestic zones' in a real sense. With China's increasingly connected to the market, economic changes have brought them changes in lifestyle and ideology, leading to a profound impact on gender perceptions and the division of gender roles [4]. The consumerism of the market economy system promoted private consumption, and to have women become real consumers,

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Deng further encouraged women to work and preached self-investment. Besides, the “one-child policy” issued in 1982 provides more educational opportunities for women and enhances their educational levels objectively [5]. More importantly, scholars such as Gillies (2008; as cited in Zhao and Bouvier, 2022), Smyth and Craig (2017; as cited in Zhao and Bouvier, 2022) insist that the ideas of individualism and hedonism propagated in neoliberalism were also spread throughout China and accepted by the emerging Chinese middle class, which is called a “mental conversion” [6, 4]. The Forth Fourth United Nations World Conference of Women in Beijing was a substantiation that Chinese women have begun to seek liberation in the mental stage, recognizing the significance of self-agency and challenging the state-imposed gender roles [7]. However, the disruption of the traditional family structure and gender roles has triggered a series of ‘social problems’ impeding national development according to the Chinese government, albeit in the author’s view, these are only social phenomena within the social process.

1.3 Re-assert Traditional Female Gender Role

Having awareness of the importance of self-achievement, women are increasingly rejecting being hooked as caregivers and sacrificers in marriage and household and a stable couple relationship seems no longer what young Chinese females aspire to achieve as a priority [8]. Statistics reveal that the marriage rate goes on the decline while the divorce rate rises dramatically, and the single adult population has reached 240 million [9], with 17.52 million more men than women of childbearing age, particularly pronounced for men in rural areas [10], who themselves are less competitive in the marriage market.

Nevertheless, what is most often discussed remains the threat of ageing of the population, as China has more than 260 million people over 60, yet the number of newborns is only 10.62 million in 2021 [11]. While the one-child policy and high costs of raising children are certainly important factors in the attribution, there is a greater propensity to assign blame to women’s reluctance to have children, accusing them of being not filial yet neglecting the social and workplace stress women face greater after pregnancy. Furthermore, there is also worry that more women entering the workplace will increase male unemployment, notably during the post-pandemic period, when the economic downturn is deepening.

Facing the social phenomena, chairman Xi applies a “Confucian-style morality” political policy, integrating Confucian traditional family values with the Marxist theory that equates family stability with society and nation construction [12]. By reverting to traditional female roles as an imperative in cultural autonomy and establishing national progress, the CCP, through propaganda and media representations, pressures women to renounce their individual pursuits and submit to national interests [3].

Start with the didactic brainwashing. For example, some newspapers report how highly educated women can contribute to social progress by doing child care, and household chores and the government also highlights the significance of homemakers’ participation in the Gross

Domestic Product [4]. President Xi surprisingly declared that “women’s civic duty is to promote family virtue and personal integrity” and linked “good” to “family” in a speech delivered to the 2018 All China Women’s Federation [13]. The combination of traditional patriarchal discipline with state governance from ancient times was reactivated. Xi depicts China first as a family led by his undisputed patriarch [12], then explains the obligation of its ‘children’ are culturally, morally and politically to obey parents by referring to traditional Confucian filial piety notions and persuades citizens to sacrifice for the gender roles, for achieving social harmony [3].

The coronavirus outbreak in early 2020 and the strict home isolation policy the CCP implemented served as a perfect time to reshape a state-desired steady family structure. A series of policies designed to turn women into “wives” and “mothers” were launched, such as the “Divorce Cooling-off Period”, issued at the beginning of 2021, which claims that divorce will only be permitted if no one withdraws the application within 30 days and the policy announced in May 2021 that allows and encourages couples to have three children, also called the “third-child policy”. Nevertheless, the ideology of maintaining women’s sacrifice for the family would also occur in an invisible form.

2 Chinese female characteristics portrayed on TV dramas

TV drama as a media form displays a rich fusion of popular aesthetics, current stories, stardom images, and other artistic elements. Yet TV drama also lies in a spectrum of the communication process, carrying societal implications that are both generally embedded by the sender (in this case, TV drama producers) and interpreted by the receiver, i.e., the audience. What media is capable of concerning societal dynamics is one of the oldest debates in media studies, with a distinctive focus on exploring how media are purposively mediated with embedded social power and institutional interests and the mechanisms they inflict socio-behavioural and psychological changes in audiences. This study invokes the concept of naturalization, recognizing TV drama as driven forms being actively shaped by a variety of power dimensions to naturalize cultural norms that are “what should be” in a contextualized society, therefore reinforcing, even gradually internalising the power-prompted values within the audience. Media form’s certain space of freedom is thus squeezed into “a terrain of durable inequality” [14].

Chinese TV drama draws a debating landscape of rich traditional-Confucian, neoliberalism, and Chinese characteristic core socialist values. 2018 witnessed NRTA’s several unprecedentedly strict regulations on national media content production and distribution, and there is a promotion of history-revolutionary TV dramas [14] accompanied by a suppression of youth idol dramas and “pan-entertaining” costume dramas. It is pointed out that the authority’s attempt to emphasize the norm masculinity is toxic in a society moving towards gender equality, healthy labour distribution, and avoidance of fixated heteronorma-

tivity [15, 16]. The flip side of the coin is a speeded proximation towards the traditional “virtuous” role of the female, a re-emphasis on women’s societal obligation of getting married and childbearing, thus contributing to family stability and social security. Such cultural values are fully in line with the formerly introduced national policies on tackling the ultimate problem of the ageing Chinese society, the subtle, seemingly unnoticed cultural norm reinforcement has been gradually brought to light by sporadic public debates and constant social problems induced by gender inequality. Chinese TV drama is, among others, an important field to explore how the favored cultural orientation is mediated through artistic forms, manifesting oneself in the way of entertainment yet powerful enough to shake or solidify one’s opinions and social behaviours. Previous studies on Chinese TV dramas shed light on a feminist perspective from many aspects. For example, Hou (2022) takes a focal point on the identity struggle in Chinese urban middle-class women characters in two TV programs from 2020 and 2021 [17], respectively; Zhao (2016 & 2021) reviews the Chinese TV dramas’ representation of non-normative masculinity and femineity in relation to post-2010 societal context [14, 16]; Song (2016) accentuates the dynamic system between manhood and nationhood depicted in the national TV dramas [15]... Scholars are concerned with the relationship between characterization, identity construction, and cultural values. This study first seeks to take on this contribution and focuses on the “myth” of women’s fates in Chinese TV dramas’ portrayals, how female character negotiates their identity through a multifaceted lens of career opportunity, traditional virtuous role, neoliberal values, to name but a few, and ultimately their designated destination in pitched storylines.

Since late 2019, there has been a strict physical ban on social distance between citizens under intensive crisis control in China amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The ban isolates individuals from basic sociability, rather ‘stuck’ with intimate relationships with family members, partners, parents, children, etc. Yet, according to Kay (2020), there is a gloss-over on understanding family as a safe shelter from the cruel world: family is the basic reproduction unit for capitalist societies, in which the free labour of bearing children, caring for the old, maintaining family and so forth is mostly done by women [18]. Vice versa, capitalism produces, institutionalizes, and naturalizes family as it “cannot survive” without it [19]. Empirically investigated,

the pandemic quarantine induces certain psychological confusion in individuals, distinct in indifference towards social activities and distorted perception of intimate relationships [20, 21]. In addition to the implemented policies on childbearing, divorce, and the overall “Confucian-style morality”, restraining females inside a family unit seems even less effortless in a time when individuals are psychologically troubled, physically restricted, and sociably distanced. No research to our knowledge enlarges its lens on the pandemic time Chinese TV dramas and how it might be related to current national policies and cultural tendencies. This study takes an interest in the subtle interaction between the pandemic physical ban and the Chinese authorities’ efforts in reshaping gender roles, specifically, how, through the TV media form, certain ideologies are filtered and favoured, financially incited to be constantly reproduced in the national entertainment market. The researchers raise the below questions:

- RQ1 What kinds of major female characters are portrayed in the selected TV shows?
- RQ2 To what extent the preference complies with the pandemic-time political and cultural values?
- RQ3 What do the findings indicate on the myth of Chinese women’s fates intertwined with traditional Confucian ideologies?

3 Sampling

Since 2009, the Chinese National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) has had a tradition of selecting the previous year’s TV series at the beginning of each year to list the “Annual Selections of Chinese TV Dramas”. This study is based on the understanding that to make in NRTA’s annual list indicates, if not equal, a TV drama displays key features complied with the national interest, cultural norms, and the Chinese characteristic core socialist values. Yet it is important to notice that the standard is hardly evidence-based insofar as with reception considerations and thus does not fully comply with audience interests.

The Covid-19 pandemic has burst and spread around the humankind world since December 2019, the study chooses the “Annual Selections of Chinese TV Dramas” lists across three years: 2019 (No. 21), 2020 (No. 22), and 2021 (No. 22). In total, 65 series are chosen.

Table 1. “Annual Selections of Chinese TV Dramas” from 2019 to 2021

Year	Name	
2019	Beloved China	Airborne Blade
	Diplomatic Situation	The Thunder
	Communist Liu Shaoji	A Little Reunion
	Weida De Zhuanzhe	All Is Well
	Jiqing de Suiyue	When We Are Together
	Xiwang De Dadi	The Legendary Tavern
	On The Road	Memories of Peking
	We Are Family	Word Of Honor

	Te She 1959	He Shan
	The Galloped Era	The Story of Ming Lan
	The King of Land Battle	
2020	With You	Wanqu Ernv
	Unbending Will	Chuangye Niandai
	Jiyi De Liliang Kangmei Yuanchao	Go Ahead
	Taihangzhiji	Shicha Hai
	Juejing Zhujian	Xingfuli de Gushi
	Stage Builder	Hunting
	I Will Find You A Better Home	San Cha Ji
	Perfect Village	Fearless Whispers
	Like A Flowing River 2	Qin Dynasty Epic
	Nothing But Thirty	Serenade of Peaceful Joy
2021	Minning Town	The Awakening Age
	Refinement of Faith	Jingshen De Liliang
	Decisive Victory	Zhongliu Jishui
	Our New Era	Ark Peace
	Rememberance of Things Past	Crime Crackdown
	Medal of The Republic	Faith Makes Great
	Guangrong Yu Mengxiang	Crossing The Yalu River
	Ebbing Tide	Juemi Shiming
	A Land So Rich in Beauty	Roving Inspection Team
	The Ideal City	The Bond

Note: The table was made by researchers based on the “Annual Selections of Chinese TV Dramas” lists

4 Research method

This study follows the guidelines of feminist critical discourse analysis. It views TV drama first and foremost as a discursive script that consists of all surrounding elements in a generated discourse, either verbal, visual, or multi-modal [22]. We take a deeper aim in unveiling the nuances in female representation under hierarchal-generated gender inequality from entertaining TV dramas. Meanwhile, the researchers take an understanding of the intersectional problem of gender inequality: the operation of gender ideologies and manipulation of fixated cultural norms is at a nexus of social power, differentiated from one another, yet beyond gender [23]. Thus, we review TV series as primarily constructed narratives in which major female characters are designated with a complexity of identity individually and societally and are oriented with such qualities towards their fates in the narrative. The analyzing codes refer to Li’s research in 2021, including personality, social role, and occupational role on the individual level, which are articulated in both narrative settings, for example, a turn in the plot might induce a change in the character’s social role (giving birth to a kid means a mother’s role

added upon a character in marriage), and with the type of TV, dramas analyzed, such as identifying a formulaic female role in a certain kind of TV series. In deconstructing the codes, we wish to identify frameworks portraying women’s fates in the authority-recommended TV series and how women’s identity is entangled with a full dimension of political and social values during the pandemic.

5 Results and analysis

5.1 Urban Drama

Urban Dramas are used to set in modern city life, focusing on middle-class citizens’ progression. Centring on various aspects, Urban Dramas could be subdivided into Urban Affective Dramas, Urban Office Dramas and Urban Household Dramas. Due to its affinity of the context and characters design to the current generation, such a category could reveal the original social conditions and echo the public the most.

5.1.1. *Intelligent and competent women who stand behind family and husband amenably*

We found that women in a relationship or marriage with high qualifications and capacity tend to hold their lover and the steady of the household as their life goals, especially when facing the dilemma between intimacy and career. Taking Gu Jia, one of the heroines in the female-perspective drama *Nothing but Thirty* (三十而已) (2020) as an example, she becomes a housewife after cooperating with his husband in starting their own firework factory business. Gu fixes her husband's mistress and company troubles independently but "admits" her fault in marriage when they finally get divorced. Named by two Chinese characters homophonous to family-oriented, she is doomed to be an adherent to traditional family structure, prioritizing family solidity over personal pursuits. Also proved by Yao Kun, the heroine in *Chuangye Niandai* (创业年代) (2020), who deserts the promotion to marry the hero and parts her shares to guarantee him of being the chairman.

5.1.2. *Outwardly independent and determined but stealthily marriage-holic "pseudo superwomen"*

There always stands a promising but single career woman who longs for marriage and family clandestinely, implying that a female's bright business is inferior to a happy marriage. Typified by Yang Feiyan in *Xingfuli De Gushi* (幸福里的故事) (2020), the managing director of a foreign trade company, who often complains about her loneliness privately to the hero Li Qiang, and indicates Li's devotion to family drives her employing him. Ji Jianan in *Remembrance of Things Past* (我在他乡挺好的) (2021) shares the common as well. Ji is portrayed as a self-reliant modern woman who refuses to get married owing to cervical cancer while finally accepting Ou Yang's proposal after his short but crazy courtship.

5.1.3. *Irritable "study mamas" with invisible fathers*

Despite the image of the wife, the mother image is also popularized in women's roles. *A Little Reunion* (小欢喜) (2019) depicts a group of mother characters and blames their distorted relationship with husbands and children on their strictness and control. By comparing three various mothers, Tong Wenjie, Song Qian and Liu Jing, the teleplay condemns Tong and Song's stifling, which may have been caused by their job as finance controller and Physics teacher, while praising Liu with soft feminine features. On the other side, fathers are allowed to be absent and alienated. Qiao Weidong, Song's ex-husband, introduced as a "good father", shows generosity and consideration to his daughter while neglecting her daily life care.

5.2 Costume Drama

As a kind of TV series setting the background into ancient times, costume dramas usually imitate the habits of the ancients while also including those with alternative-history.

However, with the injunction against fictional historical dramas in 2019, Costume Dramas recommended by NRTA are often adapted from authentic ancient figures and events, which could hardly escape from the traditional patriarchal structure.

5.2.1. *The victim persecuted by traditional moral and patriarchal clan system*

There are merely three Costume Dramas on the list from 2019 to 2021, having two biographies unfolding from the man's perspective and narrating their empire-establishing stories. Zhao Ji, the mother of emperor Qin Shihuang in *Qin Dynasty Epic* (大秦赋) (2020), is manipulated and defrauded of her unique identity while finally immured by her son when caught having an affair. In *Serenade of Peaceful Joy* (清平乐) (2020), the destinies of Cao Danshu and Zhao Huirou are also fully controlled by the male in the family. As emperor Song Renzong's only official wife, Cao, getting married to him for political reasons, is never appreciated by her husband and dies lonely. Likewise, Song's biggest daughter Zhao, whom he loves most, is sent by Song to get married unwillingly and dies for it. Generally, women in the ancient context could hardly be disobedient to orders from the males in the family but fill their roles as submissive daughters, mothers, or wives.

5.3 Revolutionary Historical Drama

This type of TV drama is required to unfold with real historical figures. The story it tells shall base on a righteous view of historical events, especially those related to the contemporary Chinese revolution history. A majority of revolutionary historical dramas were selected on NRTA's lists, underlining a national preference for promoting educational media content to present history and spread socialist values from a historical root.

5.3.1. *The subordinate female identity of being a hero's wife*

Despite the considerable number of revolutionary historical dramas on the lists, there is a dearth of female characters in them. The women depicted in these series are usually the partner of the central character - the great wives of the prestigious male reformers in Chinese revolutionary history. In the series *The Communist Liu Shaoqi* (共产党人刘少奇) (2019), the main female character Xie Qiongxian who is married to Liu once read an article Liu writes about the qualities of a justified communist and feels deeply ashamed for her insufficient devotion to the party. Hence, she applies to superiors that Liu deserved a woman who could better care for him before leaving for grassroots service. A similar motif is found in the popular show *The Awakening Age* (觉醒年代) (2021), in which the famous reformer Chen Duxiu's second wife, Gao Junman supports her husband's reforming career and takes care of his daily life. Gao is depicted in another show *Ebbing Tide* (大浪淘沙) (2021), her job at the Chinese Women's Federation is displayed, but her main plots are

to bring together another revolutionary couple before she gets divorced from Chen.

The fates of the past reformers make meaning only within a broad framework of patriotic representation instead of being genuine human beings. Female characters are formulaic as being good wives, traditional or forward-thinking, and often subordinate to males with little exception. Some great female reformers like Song Qingling and Yang Kaihui are diminished as pioneers but as wives and the lubricants of a male-led revolutionary career. The imagination of female figures in history is a choice for media producers and state values, yet from the 2019-2021 NRTA lists, the insufficiency is obvious.

5.4 Reportage TV Drama

The reportage TV drama is a genre unique to Chinese television, introduced by NRTA at a conference on the creation of television dramas held in February 2020. It refers to TV drama works that are “created at a faster pace, based on real stories and featuring a documentary style”, similar to the TV drama version of reportage literature (Guangming Net, 2020). This type of TV drama is particularly interesting for its time of occurrence: amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Units direct the structure of the reportage TV dramas; one unit may contain several episodes designed to tell one complete story. All units fit the theme the reportage is trying to convey, and typical ones include the Covid-19 pandemic, poverty relief, national policy carried-out, and so forth.

5.4.1. *The price it takes to be a female intellectual: guilty on neglecting the family*

Medal of The Republic (功勋) (2021) is a reportage show made to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of CPC and is designed to tell the stories of 8 great figures in Chinese history. Tu Youyou, who has won the Nobel Prize for her extraordinary contribution to antimalarial medicines, is given a unit for her story. Noticeable is that the depicted struggles she faced when devoting herself to work is her family, which she has little time caring for it. Her daughters Jun and Min are distant for her constant absence in their life, while her husband plays a patient role in comforting her and well understands her hesitation between career and family. Another example is from an urban-context reportage TV drama Our New Era (我们的新时代) (2021), in a unit telling the story of young volunteers in Beijing perfecting themselves in primary administration work. Bai Jing, a successful urban woman joins in community work after having experienced a violent attack at work. She gets pregnant later during her exhausting work for the neighbourhood, but she chooses to keep up her work to make a role model for her baby. She is faced with substantial hostility later from her husband and family for valuing her work more than her pregnancy. From the two examples, we discern that a family sacrifice must accompany a female's great achievement. Fertility is imbued with a sense of mission, either devoting to the country or the pregnancy is the primarily expected image of a female character in reportage TV dramas.

5.4.2. *The ‘defendant’ of the patriarchal system: young rural women as a wife or a daughter*

Another prevalent theme is the carrying out of poverty relief initiatives by CPC members and grassroots workers. We identified a framework in which the major female characters are confined within the systematic inequalities in Chinese rural areas, like being trafficked for marriage and exchanging like products to bring money to their low-income families. Li Shuihua, a beautiful young girl in the show contextualized in a Chinese rural area, Minging Town (山海情) (2021), is sold by her father for a donkey, two sheep, and two cages of hens. She lives a hard life with her disabled husband but is still worried about her father's condition and even ran away a few times to check on him.

This type of female character is not offered an opportunity to challenge the fates of obeying the often evil illness of traditional customs, but to follow without rich personal characters. Such a paradigm would facilitate the naturalization of the problems and set the imagination of rural women's fates for audiences.

6 Further Discussion

There are some self-reliant and self-propelled female characters, rebuffing to be the sacrificer of the patriarchal system, nevertheless. The Ideal City (理想之城) (2021) is an Urban Office Drama depicting how cost engineer Su Xiao strives and elevates herself in the male-dominant field of construction. Although being benefited from Xia Ming, the hero, also her boyfriend, Su always applies her expertise to meet approval and breaks up with him when the relationship disturbs her dream career. Su's being rational and capable are akin to Sheng Minglan in the Costume Dramas named The Story of Ming Lan (知否知否应是绿肥红瘦) (2018). Being the concubine's daughter, she has been bullied and oppressed by her family of origin but learns to be self-sustaining. Recognizing the context, she would rather live on her own than compromise herself for a man and finally leads the army against the mutiny individually.

7 CONCLUSION

With pity and shame, we found that Chinese females, who are characterized as tools for social achievement with no self-agency, as stated by Leung (2003) and Huang (2018), have long been trapped in the cave constantly carved by men under their desire [24, 25]. Knowing that the compulsory policy would be the least ineffectual in repelling the global wave of women's self-liberation and propagating submissive and family-oriented female characteristics of traditional Confucianism, the intermedium of TV series with its capability of internalising the ideology to the audiences clandestinely, would be the optimal alternative. And as retrospected in the research, the female characters are largely portrayed as affiliated, which would normalize the patriarchal hierarchy of females being subordinate to men and further legitimize feminism under national interests, even provided as precedents. Therefore reluctantly,

confronted with social disciplines from various aspects, the road for Chinese women to cultivate critical consciousness of self-efficacy will be vague and bumpy.

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