

A Study on the Construction of the Mother Figure in the Chinese Comedy Film “Hi, Mom”

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Abstract. After entering the 21st century, the scale and technology of China’s film industry have developed rapidly. In the meantime, Chinese comedy films as an important part of China’s film industry have also received more and more attention. The Chinese comedy film “Hi, Mom” released in 2021 has won numerous awards and reputations for its humorous style and tribute to maternal love. This study takes “Hi, Mom” as a typical case to deeply investigate how the film constructs the image of the mother from multiple dimensions. In addition, under the guidance of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) theory, this study focuses on five main aspects: plot design, facial expressions, background music, iconic symbols and clothing style of the mother in the film for in-depth analysis and discussion. The main findings of this study provided several new perspectives and findings for other case studies on “Hi, Mom”, and further provided more references for other studies on the theme of “mother image”. The discussion of this study shows the multi-dimensional construction of specific character images by different elements in this film, which settled an important platform for the filming of related theme films in the future.

1 Introduction

After the “Reform and Opening up”, China’s film industry has achieved great development in both scale and influence, especially the comedy films that obtained the public’s wide interest and love. In the 21st century, Chinese comedy films as an important component of the film genres have further shown a trend of diversification and differentiation.

“Hi, Mom” is a Chinese comedy film that was released on February 12, 2021. It is starred and directed by Jia Ling and is adapted from her sketch of the same name created in the comedy competition program “Comedy Mobilization” on Zhejiang Satellite TV in China. After the release of this work which took three years to prepare, it immediately attracted the love and discussion of the public, and the ticket office situation is very objective. On the 57th day of its release, the cumulative tickets office exceeded 5.4 billion yuan. Jia Ling became the highest-grossing female director in the world, and the ticket office of the film ranked second in the ticket office history of Chinese films [1]. It has also won many film festival awards, including the “Outstanding Film Award” at the 36th Popular Film Hundred Flowers Award and the “Outstanding Feature Film Award” at the 19th Popular Film Hundred Flowers

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Award [2]. After the film was released worldwide on March 14, 2021, it also received positive international reviews. The famous director, James Cameron believes that the film “Hi, Mom” shows the most essential emotions between mothers and children. This emotion comes from everyone's daily life, so it can greatly trigger people’s inner emotional resonance”.

“Hi, Mom” as the English name of this film also has double deep meanings. In different countries and regions around the world, the pronunciation of “Mom” is very similar. The name of the film is “Hi, Mom”, which is not only easy for audiences in various regions of the world to understand, but also successfully touches audiences of different ages through delicate narrative and profound emotional portrayal. At the same time, from a deeper level, it not only refers to Jia Ling’s mother but also refers to all mothers in the world. As China News Network commented, “This movie is truly dedicated to all mothers in the world, and every mother hopes that her children can grow up healthy and happy”.

In the film “Hi, Mom”, the image of Mother is portrayed as ordinary but at the same time very great. The film shows the living environment and social personality of the figure of Mother when she was young through the subjective perspective of the protagonist Jia Xiaoling. In this film, the “mother” is not only a vibrant and optimistic young woman but also a selfless and caring mother. Her image is not limited to the stereotype of mothers in traditional Chinese society but through various details in the movie (such as iconic symbols, background music, facial expressions etc) to construct an ordinary but three-dimensional image of a mother.

2 Literature review

As “Hi, Mom” has attracted widespread attention both domestically and internationally, many scholars and researchers have taken “Hi, Mom” as a typical case to conduct in-depth research. According to Yu jia’s study, she employed “Hi, Mom” as the research entry point to emphasize that the film is not only a recollection of time, but also a tribute to family affection, highlighting the greatness and selflessness of maternal love, and finally allowing the audience to resonate and think in the moving [3]. Another researcher named Xiao Yuan believes that “Hi, Mom” not only shows the director’s feelings for his mother but also highlights the deep friendship between the two leading actors Jia Ling and Zhang Xiaofei, which also played an important role in the filming process of the film, not only about the friendship and mother-daughter relationship behind the movie, but also about the path of emotional communication in comedy movies [4]. Based on another research, took “Hi, Mom” as a typical example to deeply analyze how the film conveys profound emotional content through comedy elements [5].

Although there is a relatively small body of studies that is concerned with the emotional connotation of “Hi, Mom”, there are many studies on the main figures of this film. A researcher named Peng Zhuyan focused on the personality characteristics and internal motivations of the main characters in the film by analyzing the dialogue based on the principle of cooperation [6]. However, her research still has some limitations, since her research only analyzes the growth trajectory of the main characters by analyzing the dialogue between the characters but ignores the role of other elements in the film in shaping the specific character image. This is very important because according to the Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) theory proposed by Kress and Van in 2001, the shaping of the character image in the film depends not only on the dialogue, but also on other elements such as music, iconic symbols, costumes, and lens language [7].

Regarding the marketing strategy of the film, many researchers have also expressed their views from different angles. One study believes that in the process of publicity and promotion, the film uses a variety of means, such as the use of social media, word-of-mouth marketing,

celebrity effect, and emotional resonance strategy to jointly promote the film's market promotion [8]. He Rui believes that through precise market positioning and audience interaction, "Hi, Mom" attracted many audiences in a short period, forming a wide range of social attention and discussion [9]. Another researcher named He Long reflected on cultural communication and social value through the film's market performance [10].

There is also a considerable amount of literature on the mother figures in films which is mainly about different types of mother figures, the mother figures in different areas and employ specific films as the typical case to study the mother figures. A researcher named Fan Linna believes that single mothers are a special social group, and the images they portray in this film could reflect the social issues of a certain period [11]. Besides, many attempts have been made to study the mother figures in different areas, Xie Lifang studied the transformation of the image of mothers from traditional to modern in Chinese mainland films, and she believed that this transformation could reflect social changes [12]. Another researcher named Yu Cong focused on the films directed by Hirokazu, "Still Walking", "Deeper than the Sea" and "Shoplifters", analyzing the characteristics and development of the image of mothers in these films, and explored how Hirokazu explored family, social and emotional issues through these images [13].

Research on mothers or female characters in films also has a long tradition around the world. In terms of the movies in the 1990s, American culture is saturated with images of white, middle-class mothers. In *Motherhood and Representation*, E. Ann Kaplan considers images of mothers in three related realms: history, psychoanalysis, and cultural representation [14]. There also has been a study that revealed the lack of mother characters in Disney film production, this study found that the image of mothers in Disney movies was influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the Electra complex and the Oedipus complex [15]. In addition to the discussion about the image of the mother in American culture, another research deeply explores the evolution of stereotypical images regarding African women in films and advertisements, the researcher found that the "drug mother" is not only a symbol of racial discrimination but also strongly connected to a wide range of social issues [16].

The above-mentioned past research and existing theories help us understand some background information in advance. However, there are still some research gaps. Although there are many studies on plot analysis, narrative strategy, and marketing, there are few studies on the comprehensive study of the shaping of specific character images in "Hi, Mom" through the six dimensions of plot design, facial expression, background music, iconic symbols, silent moments and makeup.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to further gain a deeper understanding of how movies as a medium of cultural communication and obtain the audience's sense of identity through cultural symbols by studying whether the details and effects of six various dimensions on the shaping of the mother role in this movie. To achieve the intended purpose of this study and put the significance of this study into practice, this study takes the Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) theory as the theoretical guide and employs qualitative content analysis as the data analysis method.

3 Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis as the data collection method and data analysis method, aiming to understand better how the mother's role image is shaped in "Hi, Mom". Qualitative content analysis can systematically identify the text and image content related to the construction of the mother's role image in the film, making the collected data comprehensive and objective, further ensuring the representativeness and effectiveness of the analysis results.

The theoretical framework of this study employs the Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) theory because MDA theory is particularly suitable for analyzing how the linguistic and non-linguistic elements in multimodal data work together and how these components contribute to the construction of specific discourse objects [7]. The target sample of this study is the “Hi, Mom”. To ensure the comprehensiveness of each part in the overall process of data analysis, this study focuses on the following six specific aspects of careful observation and recording of “Hi, Mom”.

From the perspective of “plot design”, this research focused on recording the appearance and interaction of the mother role in key plots and climax plots, and analyzed the appearance, interaction, and relationship of the mother role in each plot in the film, paying special attention to whether there is a corresponding relationship between the previous and subsequent plots related to the mother role, and then deeply analyzed and summarized the role of the connection between the plots in shaping the image of the mother; In terms of “facial expressions”, the facial expressions, eyes, micro-expressions and body language of the mother role were carefully recorded, and the specific ways of conveying the mother’s emotions and expressions were deeply analyzed; For the analysis of “silent moments”, the researcher focused on whether the mother role had a short or long silence, and described the silence. The reaction of the mother role and other roles in the specific environment; From the aspect of “background music”, the style, rhythm, and emotional degree of the background music were carefully observed and recorded within this study, and then further summarized how certain music set off the image of the mother role on this basis; In terms of “iconic symbols”, the iconic symbols (such as objects, scene settings, etc.) that frequently appeared in the film will be observed and recorded, and further analyzed whether these symbols represent the specific identity and values of the mother role; For the dimension of “costumes design”, the mother role’s clothing, makeup, and appearance design were regarded as key aspects of observation, and further analyzed how these elements convey the mother role’s social status, personality characteristics, and cultural background.

Under the guidance of the MDA theory, this study could further reveal the construction process and expression of the image of the mother in the film from multiple perspectives such as plot design, language expression, expression, silence, background music, iconic symbols, and decoration through in-depth analysis of the above six aspects of data. During the process of data analysis, this study pays special attention to understanding how each aspect interacts with each other to jointly shape the overall image of the mother figure and the deeper meanings.

4 Results

After the careful review of “Hi, Mom”, key findings emerge that focus on five different perspectives, including plot design, facial expressions, background music, iconic symbols, and clothing style. To analyze different perspectives more completely, the perspective of background music and iconic symbols were analyzed together because the iconic symbol came from the background music.

From the perspective of plot design, three types of key plots have been found that have a great influence on the construction of the mother’s image, and all the key plots could be classified into echoing plots, turning plots and climax plots. These three types of plots together create various dimensions of the mother’s image. The echoing plots at the beginning and the end reflect the delicate interaction and deep emotions between mother and daughter. As an illustration, from the beginning when the mother mends the tattered pants to the end when Jia Xiaoling finds small animals sewn on the pants, it shows the image of a mother who cares for her children meticulously; The turning plot also highlights the complexity of the mother’s image. For instance, from the joy of the mother when she holds a celebration

banquet for Jia Xiaoling to the loss after discovering the forged admission letter, it reflects the mother's ardent expectations and disappointment for her daughter; The climax plot deepens the mother's image through extreme emotional expression. To cite three striking examples, when Jia Xiaoling was performing on stage, her mother was paying close attention to her daughter's performance, with a variety of emotions in her tears; when Jia Xiaoling fell from a height, her mother rushed over to hug her daughter, shouting "my baby"; before the sudden car accident, the mother and daughter have full expectation for the bright future, but this traffic accident happened and the mother died accidentally. Therefore, this study considered that these three different types of plots are intertwined to jointly construct a three-dimensional image of a mother.

Through the dimension of facial expression, the mother's facial expressions and body language show rich emotional levels in different situations, vividly shaping her mother's image. The overall changes in the mother's facial expressions are extremely delicate. When she sees her daughter trying hard to perform to make herself happy, her eyes reveal joy and tears of emotion; and when she is misunderstood by her daughter, her eyes are full of heartache and helplessness; What impressed the researcher the most was that when she realized she had travelled back to 1981 and looked at her younger self in the mirror, her eyes sparkled with tears of excitement and longing for her youth. This facial expression indirectly portrays the mother's cherished of her youth, but she could give up what she cherished for her children, which embodied the greatness of maternal love. Especially in terms of micro-expressions, the mother's subtle changes in expression fully reflect the rich psychological activities of the mother's role; When she carried the drunk Jia Xiaoling home, the determination and fatigue on her face were intertwined, and the slightly trembling corners of her mouth and tightly pursed lips showed the image of a determined mother.

In terms of background music and iconic symbols, the choice of background music in this film accurately creates an emotionally rich and contradictory atmosphere, especially the main theme "Daylily Flower". This song with its gentle melody and affectionate lyrics, introduces the audience to the complex emotions of the mother's inner world. In the first place, the main style of "Daylily Flower" itself is soft and warm. Through flexible guitar and beautiful singing, it injects a sense of warmth and intimacy into the image of the mother in the film. This choice not only makes people feel the mother's deep love for her children but also conveys expectations and hopes for the future, which is closely related to her expectations for Jia Xiaoling's growth. Secondly, "Daylily" is not just a piece of background music, the "daylily flower" in this song has also become an important iconic symbol of the mother. As a plant with special significance, the "Daylily flower", accompanied by a moving melody, deepens the audience's understanding of the mother's inner world. "Daylily flower" further represents her simplicity and sentimentality, expressing her reluctance to the passage of time and the growth of her children. This emotional color echoes her deep love for her daughter and further enhances the audience's feelings of parting with the image of a mother. Therefore, the use of this song in the film and the use of "Daylily flower" as a symbol not only fills the gap in the musical background but also provides a profound musical interpretation of the emotional clues of the mother's role, making the whole story more touching and fascinating.

The last finding stems from the mother's clothing style. The mother's clothing style shows a simple and frugal mother's image. This study found that she wore simple clothes (such as traditional rural women's clothing and factory clothes when working) most of the time. This simple and clean dressing style and color (gray, white, and blue) delicately reflect her rural background and ordinary life. Although her clothing style will be slightly affected by social trends after travelling to the 1980s, it still maintains a simple and practical tone, which is consistent with her personal life values and the economic strength of that era. Furthermore, the researcher found that the mother's makeup style and hairstyle design are also simple and plain. She usually wears light makeup or even no makeup, which highlights

her natural and generous image in life. As for hairstyle, she usually chooses simple hairstyles, such as pigtails or simple buns, which are closely in line with her life status. This simple makeup and hairstyle design helps to enhance the realism of the mother. Equally, it is also consistent with the image of a mother in the 1980s in real life, triggering emotional resonance among the audience and making it easier for the audience to approach this character through personal memories regarding their own mother's image.

5 Discussion

Based on the above five research findings, this research then focused on three aspects of extended discussion, including iconic symbols, plot design, and clothing style.

Starting with the iconic "Hi, Mom" symbol, the "Daylily flower" not only praises the image of mothers in this film but also praises countless ordinary and great maternal loves throughout history. "Daylily flower" is the mother flower of China, also known as "forget-me-not grass". In ancient China, children who left their hometown would plant "Daylily flowers" in front of their mother's residence for their mother to enjoy, to express their deep concern for their mother. Therefore, "Daylily flowers" are praised as a symbol of maternal love in China's traditional culture. In every dynasty, many poems and songs about the "Daylily flower" have emerged, among which "Complete Tang Poems" alone includes 80 poems describing the "Daylily flower". Furthermore, "Daylily flower" as the main theme of this film not only portrays the image of the mother in the film more vividly, but also represents the image of countless mothers who have been looking forward to their children returning home as soon as possible from ancient times to the present, and the image of the mother in the film is the continuation and inheritance of countless ancient mothers. From a higher dimension, this film is not only dedicated to mothers in modern society but also to countless ordinary but great mothers from ancient times to the present.

Secondly, the flexible interweaving of turning plots and echoing plots could arouse emotional resonance among most viewers, especially in the last part of the film. Jia Xiaoling looked at the cute little animals sewn on the torn part of her pants, and she suddenly realized that her mother did not know how to sew clothes at this time, so there was only one possibility mother actually "travelled through". Moreover, the film was interspersed with the mother's perspective. In the beginning plot, she found that she had become young again through a small board. While she was still immersed in the surprise regarding the changing of her appearance, she suddenly heard another sound in her ears - her beloved daughter fell from the sky. She rushed over without hesitation and wanted to catch the child. This was undoubtedly the instinctive reaction of a mother to protect her child. This investigation looked at all the plots from her perspective and found that whether in the turning plot or the echoing plot, it was always the daughter - Jia Xiaoling who was happy, and her mother was happy too. Whether it was Jia Ling pretending to be blind to help her grab the TV, the mother and daughter cheered together; or Jia Ling insisted that her mother participate in the volleyball game to prevent her mother from feeling resentful. And during that art performance, the mother cried and laughed at the same time, because she knew that she didn't have much time to spend with her daughter. Finally, they said goodbye in the room, woke up in the room, and the dream ended. Through the inner activity of the mother, this study speculated that the emotion and thought she wanted to express to her daughter was "Mom has never regretted giving birth to you in this life, you will always be my baby. Mom just wants you to be healthy, happy and happy". Therefore, the great image of the mother was constructed by the flexible plot design.

However, the researcher assumed that there are more possibilities in the mother's clothing choices. This speculation is based on previous survey results which show her clothing style is relatively simple most of the time. The story in the film takes place in 1980 (during the

“reform and opening” took place), and many popular elements entered China in that era. The mom of that era was a young girl in her youth. The girl loves beauty by nature. If she could wear more bright and beautiful clothes (such as skirts with bright colors) in the design of clothing, the image of the character could be fuller. At the same time, a variety of clothing choices can also deepen the theme of the film, indicating that every woman is a little girl before becoming a mother, and they also have their precious youth. But they are willing to give up their youth and beauty for their children, reflecting the psychological growth of women after becoming mothers. Therefore, this research suggested that more shots of the mom wearing bright clothes can be appropriately added to the film to portray a richer and more complete image of the mother.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, “Hi, Mom” as a Chinese comedy film, shows the emotions between mother and child humorously, and deeply depicts the great and selfless multi-layered image of the mother. Through an in-depth analysis of the plot design, facial expressions, background music, iconic objects and clothing style of the mother in the film, this paper recognizes the detailed role of each aspect in the construction of the mother’s image. The flexible interweaving of three sets of key plots builds the background of the mother's life and personal lifestyle for the audience from a macro perspective. In addition, the subtle changes in the mother’s micro-expressions and the clothing design that fits the historical background make the mother's image constantly fit real life from a micro perspective. Meanwhile, the background music and iconic objects build a bridge of emotional communication between the audience and the film, deepening the theme of the film while creating more thinking space for the audience.

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