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To cite this article: Haocan Sun & Jinghong Xu (2024) Gender Stereotypes and Composition in the Chinese Film Industry: A Study of the Top 15 Grossing Films, Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 68:1, 125-144, DOI: [10.1080/08838151.2023.2298276](https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2023.2298276)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2023.2298276>



Published online: 26 Dec 2023.



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Gender Stereotypes and Composition in the Chinese Film Industry: A Study of the Top 15 Grossing Films

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ABSTRACT

This study employed qualitative textual analysis to explore gender representation in the 15 highest-grossing films in China. Applying the doing gender framework, the study revealed that there are limited efforts toward gender equality, pervasive stereotypes, and patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies across different genres. Women are portrayed through family-oriented lenses, and an *Iron Lady* image has emerged, perpetuating shallow perceptions of femininity and maintaining male power. Furthermore, female actors composed only one-fifth of all actors, and there were no female cinematographers or editors. This study underscores the pressing need for the Chinese film industry to promote gender equality.

In films, women often present negative and pervasive stereotypes (UN Women, 2014). They are frequently underrepresented as protagonists in film narratives and are often relegated to secondary roles, such as nonprofessionals, homemakers, or wives, primarily to establish male characters (Collins, 2011). This issue is not limited to specific countries but is prevalent worldwide (Smith et al., 2014). Despite some positive trends in recent years regarding the representation of women in the media, sexual objectification and subordination still exist (Collins, 2011; Ward & Grower, 2020).

By reproducing gender stereotypes in everyday life through social interaction, movies can lead to condoning and disregarding misinterpreted images of women. This influence gives rise to phenomena such as sexual double standards (Endendijk et al., 2020; Kreager et al., 2016), slut shaming (Goblet & Glowacz, 2021), and workplace discrimination (Leskinen et al., 2015). Compared with social media and television programs, which have

attracted comparatively more attention, film, as a more ceremonial medium, has rarely been investigated. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the gender stereotypes presented in Chinese films and provide empirical evidence of the distortion of female screen images given the lack of evaluations of the representation of women in Chinese cinema.

As a cultural product with vital cultural attributes, film has improved box office performance within the same cultural context (Craig et al., 2005). Moreover, personal values promote selective exposure to media (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). This study aimed to explore the values and social norms of the Chinese public reflected by movie box offices as a result of people's choices (Bleakley et al., 2012). Moreover, films inevitably convey scriptwriters' perspectives, directors' visions, actors' interpretations, and artistic treatment by casts and crews. Therefore, this study examines how the gender composition of the behind-the-scenes workforce contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypical content in films.

Stereotypes and Film

Gender stereotypes prescribe fixed cognitive representations based on specific gender characteristics, dictating what is and how it should be (Ward & Grower, 2020). Studies show that women, as disadvantaged groups in patriarchal societies, are disproportionately subjected to stereotypes in the workplace (Balachandra et al., 2017; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Therefore, the study of stereotypes in films employs two main approaches: examining gender norms in plots, characters, and contexts on the film screen and exploring the representation of female filmmakers in the film industry (Jones & Pringle, 2015).

Researchers have engaged in multiangle discussions on the differences in the images of men and women on the screen. Men often dominate the screen, while women are consistently shaped as characters that are objectified and subordinated (Collins, 2011; Ward & Grower, 2020). Smith et al. (2010) analyzed 101 top-grossing G-rated films released in the United States and Canada from 1990 to early 2005. With respect to the sample of more than 3000 characters, the male-to-female ratio was 2.57:1, and female images were depicted more traditionally. Regarding TV programming, Sink and Mastro (2017) examined 89 primetime television programs in the U.S. over one week, highlighting that the low percentage of female appearances and images of "young, submissive, and sexually provocative" females deserve more attention.

Unlike the nearly synchronous accessibility of social media (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2019; Rettie, 2009) and the living and accompanying role of television programs, movies tend to take place in fixed locations (i.e., theaters) during a specific period, where people view the plot together at the same

time. Thus, films are often considered ritualistic media (Pušnik, 2015). Additionally, since the duration of a film exceeds that of TV programs, music videos, and social media, the choice to view a film more closely resembles an autonomous decision, serving as an expression of personal interests and values. Thus, movies grossing high box office also reflect social norms and values to some extent (Bleakley et al., 2012). Therefore, because of the specificity of films, gender stereotypes in cinema should be a concern.

Research on stereotypes in movies shows that sexism is present in almost all film genres, including that related to intellectual ability (Gálvez et al., 2019), regardless of the specific plot context. Female representation also perpetuates the confirmation of the patriarchy (Marx, 2016) but to a lesser extent in science fiction movies (Brewington et al., 2022). Romantic films emphasizing relationship plots often conclude with women returning to family tasks (Rakovski, 2022). In animated films, while Disney films have been shown to have few gender stereotypes (Shawcroft et al., 2022), another study of 152 popular American children's animated movie posters revealed that males were more often depicted as the main character and held more gender power (Aley & Hahn, 2020). A content analysis of biographical films by Matei et al. (2021) summarizes the current status quo. Although female participation is increasing, gender inequality remains widespread and is constantly reproduced. Research on Chinese films reveals traditional stereotypes of women under the logic of a heterosexual patriarchy. Through a content analysis of 332 main characters in China's top-grossing feature films from 2002 to 2011, Liebler et al. (2015) found that women were portrayed as young and sexualized and conformed to ideal cultural images influenced by the beauty economy. Therefore, we propose the following research question:

RQ1: What stereotypes are expressed in the portrayal of women in Chinese films, and what values and social norms do such stereotypes represent?

Women's Representation in the Film Industry

The limited progress made in gender diversity within the film and television industry has been widely criticized, as female representation both on-screen with actors and off-screen with filmmakers is found to be limited (Jones & Pringle, 2015; Lauzen, 2023b, 2023c; Liddy, 2022a, 2022b; Newsinger & Eikhof, 2020). Katherine et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study of films, analyzing a sample of 1,500 films from 2007 to 2021 (100 films per year). The overall proportion of female actors was 30%.

Women often find themselves in peripheral or restricted positions, even among filmmakers. Regarding film genres, female filmmakers mainly concentrate on genres such as comedy, drama, romance, and music rather than higher-budget genres such as action and science fiction (Erigha, 2014). This perspective is supported by a report from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2019), which showed that comedies had the highest representation of women, followed by animation and then action-adventure. In 2019, 27.9% of the filmmakers of action-adventure films were women, which is lower than the percentage of women found in animation (33.3%) and comedy (38.7%) genres. A similar trend was also observed in 2007 and 2013.

In terms of position, women are rarely found in the core role of directors but are more prevalent as writers and producers. In 2015, 13% of the directors, 20% of the writers, and 27% of the producers were women in 203 films produced in the UK (Cobb & Wreyford, 2019b). Similar occupational disparities have also been found in films produced in the U.S. (Cobb & Wreyford, 2019a).

Furthermore, of the 203 films studied, 36% of the female directors and 37% of the female screenwriters worked on films with budgets less than £500,000, which is comparable to the proportion of such films among the total sample (35%, $n = 72$). However, 42% of female producers in low-budget films were represented, while they were underrepresented in high-budget films (Cobb & Wreyford, 2019c). Of the 172 Hollywood films produced in the UK in 2011, 25.6% included female lead actors, while only 4.1% of the total ($n = 171$) were directed by females, and 14.1% ($n = 170$) had female screenwriters (Hunt et al., 2014). In 2010, among the top 200 highest-grossing fictional films, only 9 out of 112 directors were female (8%) (Smith & Choueiti, 2011). This trend of underrepresentation is further highlighted by the findings of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2019), which revealed that in the top 100 films of 2019, those with female directors accounted for only 10.7%, female writers for 19.4%, and female producers for 24.3%. A longitudinal study of 1300 films from 2007 to 2019 revealed that only 4.8% of the films had female directors. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in the film industry extends to the realm of award-winning films. Studies have shown that in Oscar-winning movies, female lead actors account for less than 20% of the total, and men direct more than 90% of Oscar-winning films. Similarly, the Emmy Awards also reflect this trend of underrepresentation (Hunt et al., 2014). These data demonstrate the persistent and significant underrepresentation of women in critical roles within the film industry, particularly in high-profile, award-winning productions.

As film is part of a cultural production industry, it cannot be separated from its creators' identities and societal values (Grindstaff, 2008). Understanding filmmakers' demographic characteristics and employment

conditions can provide insight into the cultural system of the film industry and the formation of stereotypes (Caldwell, 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013). Research has shown that in cross-cultural films, the background of the filmmaker is essential for influencing cross-cultural representation (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2013). Therefore, research from this perspective also considers the gender composition of filmmakers to be a crucial factor influencing gender representation and gender categorization in films. By having more women, as an underrepresented group, participate in the production of films, stereotypes can be challenged, and the representation of women in cultural products can further change through meaningful systems (Collins, 2002; Erigha, 2015). Several studies have provided evidence for this viewpoint. Smith and Choueiti (2011) found that films with women in behind-the-scenes roles as producers and directors tended to have more prominent female characters and diverse female characteristics. Women tend to support each other, and most films directed by women also involve female screenwriters and at least one female producer. Female producers have brought significantly more female cinematographers and editors (Cobb & Wreyford, 2019b). Therefore, we pose the following research questions:

RQ2: What is the representation of women in on-screen roles in the top 15 box office films in China?

RQ3: What is the gender composition in the workforce within the top 15 box office films in China's film industry?

Doing, Redoing, and Undoing Gender: As an Analytic Strategy

To interpret the film plot, we integrate the doing gender, undoing gender (also known as degendering), and redoing gender theories (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). Doing gender, a landmark theory in gender research (Jurik & Siensen, 2009), argues that gender is produced in social interactions and is a routine accomplishment. Because doing gender is often used to demonstrate how gender relations are maintained, especially how traditional hegemonic masculinity regulates femininity, some scholars have called for a reversal of the gender binary (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009).

Through undoing gender theory, Deutsch (2007) calls attention to how social interactions become less gendered rather than just presenting gendered patterns of social interaction under conditions in which social interactions can be gender neutral. In addition, West and Zimmerman (2009) proposed redoing gender to reach a broader scope of gender

images by expanding the accountability structures of gender rather than eradicating gender systems.

In China, because gender inequality and stereotypes are pervasive, more attention should be given to gender interaction and deconstructing the process in conjunction with the theories of doing, redoing, and undoing gender. Wang (2020) calls attention to the expansion of gender norms as well as the possibility of pushing them down as they are being shaped, emphasizing that binary models of gender cannot provide a complete and realistic reflection of gender reality. Therefore, this study treated film promotion, screening, and discussion processes as social interactions, which imply the reproduction of the gender category and the expansion of accountability structures. Film, as a cultural product for public broadcasts, not only reflects social norms and values but also participates in shaping social norms through interactions involving gender. In addition, the stories in film are different from real life and can be used to achieve more radical undoing of gender images, presenting people's ideas about the category of undoing gender on the screen and thus influencing the public. Therefore, changing the image of women in films is expected to provide a practical start for undoing gender through interactions between films and people's perceptions, eliminating gender stereotypes while redoing gender and placing characters' behavior outside the gender category. As Deutsch (2007) stated, undoing gender is the ultimate goal of gender equality. Doing gender and redoing gender are the necessary stages before reaching undoing gender; thus, we propose the following research question:

RQ4: How are the stereotypes of women maintained by a film achieved through the interaction of the characters in a film?

Research Design and Method

Study 1

To address RQ1, 2, and 4, this study synthesized mainland China's top 15 box office results to reflect the public's preference for films (Table 1) before 2023 by combining evidence from Maoyan, Douban, and Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Maoyan is China's largest and most prominent movie ticketing platform, providing precise box office statistics. Douban hosts China's largest professional film forum, where movie ratings and expert reviews are often considered indicators of a film's word-of-mouth reputation during promotion. IMDb, one of the most authoritative online film databases, offers supplementary evidence from overseas

Table 1. The top 15 grossing movies in China.

Box Office Ranking	English Name	Gross (billion)	Year/Gross (billion)	The Proportion of the Annual Gross (%)
1	<i>The Battle at Lake Changjin</i>	5.78	2021 (39.92)	14.48%
2	<i>Wolf Warrior 2</i>	5.69	2017 (30.10)	18.90%
3	<i>Hi, Mom</i>	5.41	2021 (39.92)	13.55%
4	<i>Ne Zha</i>	5.04	2019 (41.18)	12.24%
5	<i>The Wandering Earth</i>	4.69	2019 (41.18)	11.39%
6	<i>Detective Chinatown 3</i>	4.52	2021 (39.92)	11.32%
7	<i>The Battle at Lake Changjin 2</i>	4.07	2022 (25.51)	15.95%
8	<i>Operation Red Sea</i>	3.65	2018 (37.90)	9.63%
9	<i>Detective Chinatown 2</i>	3.40	2018 (37.90)	8.97%
10	<i>The Mermaid</i>	3.39	2016 (28.75)	11.79%
11	<i>My People, My Country</i>	3.17	2019 (41.18)	7.70%
12	<i>The Eight Hundred</i>	3.11	2020 (17.09)	18.19%
13	<i>Moon Man</i>	3.10	2022 (25.51)	12.15%
14	<i>Dying to Survive</i>	3.10	2018 (37.90)	8.18%
15	<i>The Captain</i>	2.91	2019 (41.18)	7.07%

sources to validate the data from Maoyan and Douban. These 15 films, spanning from 2016 to 2022, represented a sample of high-revenue movies, comprising 7.70% to 18.90% of their respective year's box office earnings (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023), indicating their representativeness.

The data on the professional versions of the Maoyan and Douban ranking lists are updated daily and are identical. We excluded foreign film, *Avengers: Endgame* (ranked seventh), and shifted the ranking to the top 16. IMDb's film critics provide box office data for Chinese films up to March 2021. The film *Moon Man* released on July 29, 2022, is not included in the data. However, based on the data from Maoyan and Douban, with a box office gross of 3.1 billion, *Moon Man* was found to ultimately surpass *Captain* and *Dying to Survive* at the box office.

This study used qualitative textual analysis, a method that involves the systematic examination and interpretation of the meanings of texts to understand the underlying thoughts, opinions, and attitudes that represent cultural norms and communicative practices (Fürsich, 2009). This method is commonly employed to analyze data derived from various sources, including words, images, symbols, and other elements of discourse, to enhance our comprehension of a discourse structure (Van Dijk, 2015). The film can convey cultural values, beliefs, and practices through the representation of characters, storylines, and settings. Therefore, it can serve as a helpful tool for exploring the social norms and cultural values of a particular society or group. By analyzing the visual text presented in a film, researchers can gain insights into how culture is constructed and communicated and how it shapes the behaviors and experiences of individuals within a society.

Study 2

To address RQ2 and RQ3, we adopted the analytical approach used in previous studies (Lauzen, 2023a, 2023b) for the gender diversity of film industry personnel and conducted a statistical analysis of the gender composition in the top 15 films. Gender determination is based on the information in the film credits, as well as their prior work histories. A total of 690 people were counted, including producers and directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, and editors. Additionally, this study innovatively included film presenters as a part of the analysis, as they serve as the film project's investors and may impact the proportion of female staff.

Due to the complexity of the titles and duties of film industry personnel in the Chinese film industry, personnel involved in various films may assume distinct roles. Producers in some films may be divided into executive producers, producers, line producers, and coproducers. Compared to the duties of the line producer and producer, the duties of a coproducer are more multifaceted and often serve an auxiliary function. Additionally, the title of the coproducer can be bestowed upon any key player, and they may not have direct involvement in the production of the project but may have played a significant role in its financing through the provision of equipment. The line producer's primary responsibilities include ensuring the logistical aspects of the production, handling contracts, and scouting for shooting locations. The line producer reports directly to the producer. Therefore, the present study classified executive producers and producers as producers and conducted separate analyses for line producers. The assistant directors include line directors, costume directors, casting directors, first assistant directors, and B-group directors.

Discussion

Study 1: Females Stocked by Patriarchy

Doing Gender: Family Metaphor, Male Dominance, and Shallow Femininity

The top 15 box office films commonly depict a stereotypical image of women being shaped by family attributes, presenting a return to women's charm and praise for traditional female images. Women are often confined to familial roles, engaged in unpaid labor, and frequently portrayed through family-related metaphors in films. Meanwhile, men, who are positioned as crucial decision makers, become heroes at the last moment. This appeal to heroism aligns with the traditional Chinese stereotype, depicting men as dominant figures and women as submissive. For example, in the comedy *Hi, Mom*, the female lead believes that her family will be happy if she has a father with a higher socioeconomic status. The sci-fi film *The Wandering Earth* features

a predominantly male cast, with the female lead portrayed as the protagonist's vulnerable and in-need-of-protection sister. The male protagonist, Liuqi, is characterized by solid masculine qualities, including arrogance, grit, and an expectation of invincibility, constituting a traditional gender narrative. In *The Captain*, which is a biographical film, women are given solid and dedicated characteristics, but the personal and professional labels in the film are highly gendered. The protagonist, Captain Liu, is male, and the stewardess is relegated to a secondary character, enhancing the hero image of Liu. This plot not only reinforces the stereotypes related to occupation and gender but also suggests the metaphor that, while women may make excellent decisions, men are depicted as pivotal in determining the outcome.

This gender discrimination can be traced back to traditional Chinese culture. Confucian gender ethics dictate that women follow the “three obedience” principle, mandating that unmarried women obey their fathers, married women obey their husbands, and widows obey their sons (Cheung, 1997). They were often denied education and employment opportunities designed to restrict their movements and make them more dependent on men. The ideal image of a woman was limited to the “virtuous wife and mother,” defined in relation to men. The belief that “a woman without talent is virtuous” (Song & Hird, 2013) further perpetuates male power and gender inequality. As Confucian ideas were frequently used as the official governing philosophy in various historical periods, women were consistently portrayed as subservient.

In war films such as *The Battle at Lake Changjin* and *The Eight Hundred*, there are no female characters in the main roles, and women are mainly supporting characters used to promote the plot. The portrayal of women in military environments follows highly stereotypical patterns, where they often assume planning roles and adopt a uniform appearance, featuring short hair and no makeup. Moreover, women in war films are always wives and mothers who perform their work at home. Their responsibilities involve primarily caring for children and the elderly and managing household chores. The role of the soldier's mother is depicted as a typical older woman who entrusts her three children to the state after enduring hardships under the call of the country.

Comedy, as a reflection of humor, is strongly tied to local social norms and cultural practices. In the *Detective Chinatown* series, the portrayal of women varies. One female character is portrayed as a geek with distinctive hair colors, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets. Despite her peculiar personality, this geek possesses strong abilities but tends to downplay emotions, especially regarding romantic aspects. In contrast, the female protagonist in *The Mermaid* is portrayed as a naive and unskilled young girl. Another negative characteristic is that a female boss with high sexual capital is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goals. These portrayals contribute to

the perception of women as objects to be protected and consumed, echoing prevalent stereotypes. Furthermore, dialogs between dominant male figures in several films, such as “Do not act like a woman,” also emphasize the inadequacy of women to establish male hegemony.

Redoing Gender: Iron Girls

The depiction of women in films adheres more to heteronormative patriarchal norms, presenting an idealized male-centric image of women and reinforcing the notion that women should possess qualities similar to those of men and embody stereotypical “iron girl” characteristics. In the past, Chinese women were often portrayed as asexual, confident, strong “iron girls” who were deeply committed to socialist causes. Expressing one’s femininity is no longer encouraged or condemned (Bray, 2022; Zhang & Liu, 2015). Although the portrayal of iron girls tries to eliminate gender disparities, in movies, gender roles still exist, with men occupying managerial and decision-making positions while women remain in subordinate positions (Leung, 2003; Yihong et al., 2006). Only one of the seven short films of *My People, My Country*, features a female protagonist, while the other films depict women as being secondary to men. The short film tells the story of a female pilot who serves on the 70th anniversary of the NDP. The female character has a short hair and presents a solid professional ability and a passion for work with competent and robust characterization. A masculinized portrayal of a character’s formation, personality, and behavior reflects a contemptuous attitude toward female identity. Nevertheless, the character continues to face unjust treatment from her male superiors. The same issue arises in the *Operation Red Sea*, where the only female soldier in the unit is a deputy machine gunner. While attempting to show that women can perform as well as men, she is still a supporting role and takes orders from male leaders.

Pini (2005) noted that the social norms in movies further emphasize the differentiation between males and females and cause women to be alienated as a third gender. This is a form of redoing gender that expands the definition of gender, but progress is limited, as it remains confined within the framework of heteropatriarchy. To be independent and free, women must denaturalize themselves and attain skills and identities that match those of men by assuming a masculine role. Since the founding of the PRC, women’s participation in the workforce has been crucial for the economic development of China, and it has also been a critical factor and prerequisite in the advancement of women’s status. Therefore, women had to demonstrate that they were capable of doing the same work as men were, and this often meant that they needed to possess qualities traditionally seen as masculine. This social tendency, in the collective perception of the time, created a general cultural iconography of women, who usually wear unisex, monochromatic work

clothes and display the same strength and temperament as their male counterparts and ignore the autonomous and individuated female consciousness (Leung, 2003). This process of transforming the ideal image of a woman has partially liberated women from the feudal network of relationships (subordination to father, husband, and son) and limited them to collectivist labor efficiency.

Furthermore, women's independence and strength are often conditional. The first condition is the existence of men as more robust than that of women. The second is the woman's unfortunate life experience and strong motivation, such as revenge stemming from the loss of a spouse or a desire to prove oneself. Such state-imposed liberation of women has led to dual constraints for women in both public and private realms rather than completely dismantling traditional gender hierarchies (Bray, 2022; Leung, 2003; Zhang & Liu, 2015). In *Operation Red Sea*, the female character is a war journalist motivated by the loss of her husband and daughter as a terror attack. Other female characters seem to be burdened with negative memories and tragic experiences, which appear to be necessary conditions for them to display strength and courage. In the drama film *Dying to Survive*, two female characters had different misfortunes yet exhibited similar strengths. One of them is willing to compromise her integrity and engage in sexual consumption to earn money to support her sick daughter and maintain her family. The other character, the male lead's wife, works tirelessly to find ways to cure her husband.

Even if a feminized woman holds a high position, she is still limited by marriage and family in the movie. A woman's ability to work and sacrifice her career is viewed as proof of her being a good wife, perpetuating the notion of her being a perpetual accessory to men (Heather et al., 2005). When a male protagonist expresses feelings toward a female protagonist in a movie, he or she inevitably develops an intimate relationship, irrespective of his or her status or difference in social experience. This is not a promotion of class confrontation or discrimination based on money but rather a reflection of the illogical experience of women in movies who conform to male ideals. Despite her abilities, a woman is perceived as flawed and unable to escape her status as an accessory to men.

In *Wolf Warrior*, the female character is portrayed as the ideal woman in a male-centric imagination. She is a young and beautiful female doctor with a strong will, rich professional knowledge, and gentle, caring personality traits. However, she admires the heroics of the male lead and supports him during critical moments, conveying a submissive image of a woman who is impressed by the male lead's masculinity.

Among the top 15 box office films, only *Moon Man* places women in high positions, but it includes crude humor and female consumption. The female lead exhibits a masculine appearance and a decisive personality and is well

educated, holding a high position. However, her romantic relationship is absurd, as she falls in love with the male lead after watching his survival video, ignoring her initial dislike of him. This storytelling approach ignores female agency and constructs a solid but submissive iron girl image through a patriarchal perspective.

Undoing Gender: The Expansion and Dissolution of the Ideal Woman

Ridgeway and Correll (2004) argued that the emphasis on gender in our understanding depends on the environment. Therefore, the way gender is constructed within films is restricted by genre. For example, historical themes in nationalistic films can only reflect past historical backgrounds, limiting the portrayal of independent and progressive female characters in films about military life. In comedy films, different stereotypical impressions are often combined to create characters with contrasting characteristics, and gender stereotypes are an inevitable part of this automatic process (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Based on this, Deutsch (2007) suggested that genderless interactions are possible in specific contexts. However, in our sample of 15 films, no interactions were degendered; instead, interactions were merely transformed between different gender categories. In contemporary mainstream Chinese cinema, discussing gender interactions and reinforcing or changing gender structures is challenging. Just as storytelling cannot transcend meaning, films reflect reality, and symbolic meanings are established on that basis.

It is possible to depict female images that are nonheterosexual and patriarchal, especially in science fiction and animation films. If the characters driving the plot have ambiguous genders or are even degendered, it is also possible to express relationships such as love, friendship, courage, and strength. Undoing gender in film should not be limited to only the signifier that carries the meaning but should also transcend the patriarchal framework underlying gender. In other words, using the patriarchal system and stereotypes to please the existing cognition of the audience should not be the only way to understand films. Instead, by employing more feminist expressions of undoing gender, filmmakers can elucidate the potential directions and outcomes of women's equality to the audience, fostering alignment between advanced consumption levels and cognitive understanding in developing countries.

Study 2: Unrepresented Women: Gender Composition of the Chinese Film Industry

Consistent with the trends in other countries (Lauzen, 2023a, 2023b), Table 2 shows the gender composition of the top 15 movie makers in China to prove that the proportion of women in the movie industry is far lower than that of men.

Table 2. Gender composition of the top 15 grossing movie makers in China.

Staff Number	The Battle at Lake Changjin									
	The Battle at Lake	Wolf Warrior 2	Hi, Mom	Ne Zha	The Wandering Earth	Detective Chinatown 3	The Battle at Lake Changjin 2	Operation Red Sea	Detective Chinatown 2	The Mermaid
Female: Male										
Lead actor	0:8	1:6	2:2	2:5	1:4	0:2	0:7	1:3	0:3	2:2
Top ten actors	0:10	2:8	5:5	2:8	2:8	3:7	0:10	2:8	2:8	2:8
Director	0:3	0:1	1:0	0:1	0:1	0:1	0:1	0:1	0:1	0:1
Assistant director	0:3	0:5	0:4	1:0	1:6	0:1	0:2	0:5	-	0:6
Presenter	0:2	0:5	0:7	1:3	0:4	0:3	0:6	1:3	0:2	3:6
Line producer	1:0	1:0	0:1	2:1	-	0:1	2:0	-	1:1	0:2
Producer	3:2	5:14	2:2	1:1	0:6	0:3	3:2	2:4	7:13	2:8
Writer	0:2	0:5	2:4	1:2	2:6	0:1	0:2	1:3	0:1	0:3
Cinematography	0:7	0:3	0:3	0:1	0:2	0:1	0:6	0:3	0:1	0:2
Editing	1:2	0:2	0:3	1:0	0:2	0:2	-	0:2	0:1	0:3

Staff Number	Number of employees					
	Female	Male	Total	Female ratio	Male ratio	
Female: Male						
Lead actor	7:18	5:19	1:1	3:3	26	88
Top ten actors	2:8	1:9	2:8	5:5	32	118
Director	1:6	0:1	0:1	0:1	2	21
Assistant director	2:5	1:4	-	0:2	5	46
Presenter	0:2	1:1	0:1	0:4	7	55
Line producer	-	1:0	-	0:3	9	10
Producer	5:14	4:4	1:1	2:4	39	94
Writer	2:11	1:6	2:2	1:0	13	50
Cinematography	0:8	0:2	0:1	0:1	0	44
Editing	4:2	0:2	0:1	0:1	8	23

Only staff members listed in the cast and crew will be shown, “-” indicates that the position is not present in the film.

Among the top 15 movies, only 22.8% (26/114) of the lead actors were women, and only 2 of the 26 female characters served as the main storytellers. Among the top ten lead actors, 21.3% were women (32/150), 30% were women (Katherine et al., 2022), and 33% were U.S (Lauzen, 2023b). Notably, most of these lead female actors are not the main characters in movies. Only in *Hi, Mom* and *My People, My Country* are women the first perspective narrators. In the other movies, female lead actors still play complementary roles.

In the top 15 films, the proportions of female directors and assistant directors were 8.7% (2/23) and 9.8% (5/51), respectively. One film was directed by a female director alone, and one film comprising seven stories was codirected by one female and six male directors, in which the female was responsible for one story. Compared with the low proportion of directors and assistant directors, the proportion of women in screenwriting and production positions in the Chinese film industry is greater, reaching 20.6% (13/63) and 29.3% (39/133), respectively. This finding is consistent with the results of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2019), which showed that women rarely hold director positions with complete control or partial control (such as casting) but instead play supporting and coordinating roles. Among the 62 presenters in the 15 films, 7 were women.

Finally, we found that the presence of female presenters and producers did not correlate with more diverse themes or female staff. However, the sole female director of *Hi, Mom*, displayed a distinct preference for female representation in the allocation of lead actors and in the narrative perspectives, thus highlighting a more diverse portrayal of female characters in the content.

Conclusion

This study conducted a qualitative textual analysis of the top 15 box office films in China and found that as cultural products, films participate in the gender interaction process. The plots and character depictions reflect and shape stereotypical impressions. By analyzing the plots, themes, and character portrayals of the 15 highest-grossing films in China, this study addressed RQ1 and revealed the stereotypes of the family metaphor, shallow femininity and iron girls. Despite the disappointing portrayal of gender stereotypes in these films, this study highlights the significant potential that films hold in advancing gender equality in China.

The descriptive statistics on the gender composition of the staff in the top 15 films answered RQ2 and RQ3 that the representation of women in the Chinese film industry is inadequate, both on and off the screen. One-fifth of the actors were women, and there were no female cinematographers or editors in the 15 films. Women were more represented in roles such as producers and screenwriters, but this did not result in more female characters. The film industry is a reflection of stereotypes. In the future, China's film industry needs to not only

implement related policies and standards but also consider the root cause of patriarchal heterosexual dominance, such as film classification, and improve the sexual education of young people.

Finally, the study used the concepts of doing gender, redoing gender, and undoing gender to explore RQ4 by examining gender interaction in the context of China and providing evidence of the potential of films to challenge and subvert gender norms. Films offer a space that differs from the real world, where directors can shape the narrative freely without being limited by reality. As such, the challenge and subversion of gender norms in films can occur without directly engaging with gender categories, thereby blurring the audience's understanding of gender and loosening the dominance of heteronormative patriarchy.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, qualitative textual analysis provides depth to the research, allowing for subjective analysis. However, the limited sample size suggests the need for larger-scale content analysis in the future to derive more quantitatively generalizable conclusions. Second, the percentages in this exploratory study are not intended to indicate generalization to a larger population. Further research with broader generalizability would help validate or challenge the initial findings of this study. Finally, this article focuses on the progress of Chinese women in the film industry without connecting it to the broader global context, including the Asian film industry or other regions. With its long history of patriarchy, China currently holds the world's largest film market without a film rating system. Future research can compare China to Hollywood, India, or South Korea to explore the factors contributing to these differences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Work Capability Enhancement Program of Ideology and politics in Anhui Provincial Universities [sztshj-2022-6-19]; Anhui Province University under Grant Collaborative Innovation Project [GXXT-2022-091].

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