

# Performance Style under the Traditional Realist Director Concept of Chinese Films in the 1980s

## -- Gender Performance under Political Discourse

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### Abstract

Gender performance in political reflection is an important representation of realist performance culture under the concept of traditional realist directors in Chinese films since the new era, and this representation is prominently displayed in the film works of director Xie Jin. In Xie Jin's political reflection films in the new era, the actors' gender performances are clearly shown as the female characters' comfort to the male characters. The female expression of Feng Qinglan's moral ethics in *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* is reflected in her gender role: firstly, she is Luo Qun's wife, and secondly, she can be abstracted into a moral goddess. The uniqueness of Li Xiuzhi's gender performance that breaks away from traditional ethics in *The Herdsman* is reflected in the fact that she breaks away from the "standard image of old-fashioned women" to a greater extent, showing that she is no longer a "deformed product of patriarchal culture". Hu Yuyin's gender performance in *Hibiscus Town* is reflected in the collapse of the patriarchal order. She faces conflicts in politics, society, and life, and survives tenaciously in difficult situations, revealing the face of a special era.

### Keywords

Chinese Film, Gender Performance, Hibiscus Town, Legend of Tianyun Mountain, Political Discourse, The Herdsman.

## 1. Introduction

Being attached to political consciousness was the characteristic of Chinese film performance culture from 1979 to 1987, and the reflective effect of performance culture gradually deepened. The concept of film director determines the concept of performance to a greater extent. The return of traditional realist director concepts in 1979 determined the turn to realist aesthetics in performance. From 1979 to 1987, the performance concept of Chinese film directors went through a process from focusing on the reality of characters to focusing on the reality of life to devotedly reconstructing reality. Under the contemporary aesthetic trend of "seeking truth", in order to get rid of the shackles of passionate performance aesthetics, the concept of realist performance relies on the convenience of dramatic performance methods in character creation to complete the "reduction of human beings."

The cultural implications of the concept of realist performance are mainly reflected in the dimensions of time, politics, gender, and other dimensions. Among them, the gender dimension of realist performance culture is typically reflected in the gender performances of actors in Xie Jin's films. Feng Qinglan's gender performance in *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) embodies the female expression of moral ethics; Li Xiuzhi's gender performance in *The Herdsman* (1981) embodies the escape from traditional ethics; Hu Yuyin's gender performance in *Hibiscus Town* (1986) reflects the collapse of the patriarchal order.

## 2. Feng Qinglan's Gender Performance in Legend of Tianyun Mountain: Female Expression of Moral Ethics

Feng Qinglan in *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) has two gender roles. First, she is Luo Qun's wife, and second, she can be abstracted as a moral goddess.

### 2.1. Feng Qinglan as a Wife

As an ordinary intellectual, Feng Qinglan left the expedition team precisely for Luo Qun and returned to the countryside to become a primary school teacher. As a female character on the screen, Feng Qinglan has been endowed with traditional Chinese moral and ethical values that are highly contagious, and she shines brightly in the map of female characters in Chinese movies. As a wife, Feng Qinglan believed in and supported Luo Qun when he was in the most difficult time. As soon as she appeared on the screen, she was already suffering from illness and was haggard physically and mentally. Under the narrative structure of the film's characters' memories, the image of an ordinary, ordinary female intellectual in her youth appeared on the screen. As Luo Qun's companion in his tragic life, Feng Qinglan accompanied him out of the trough of life and ushered in a new life, but she sacrificed her youth and even her life. Director Xie Jin expressed his praise for Feng Qinglan's noble character and beautiful sentiments through the important scene of "The Song of the Wagon" in the film. "Because of her close friendship with Luo Qun, her spirit of providing help in times of need is very valuable, especially today when our social atmosphere has been seriously damaged." [1] Feng Qinglan is the wife of Luo Qun, an intellectual who was persecuted in the "anti-rightist struggle" movement. The character's identity in a political context undoubtedly has political implications. This political connotation is reflected through the actor's female gender performance in the moral life experience. Just as in order to "show the unique artistic conception of intellectuals living in rural areas", Xie Jin directed Shi Jianlan and said, "as an actor, why don't you experience it?" [2]

### 2.2. Feng Qinglan as the Goddess of Morality

The moral goddess is another important gender performance by Feng Qinglan in Xie Jin's film *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980). This is different from Feng Qinglan's concrete role as Luo Qun's wife. She is an abstract moral signifier and elevates the life context of moral discourse in the film to the sociological context of moral commentary. Xie Jin embodied the ideals of morality and humanity into the female character Feng Qinglan, who comforted all men who suffered hardship and persecution in a certain era. "Our future films should tell people what truth, goodness, and beauty are. Literary and artistic works should exert their artistic power so that they can improve the ideological, cultural, and moral standards of the entire country; They play a role in improving everyone's ideological level." [3] The purpose of *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) is to convey beauty and hope to the world while shaping the image of women represented by Feng Qinglan who are rich in traditional Chinese virtues. "Xie Jin's performance aesthetics is in line with Chinese performance cultural codes and Chinese people's performance appreciation habits." [4] In the film, Feng Qinglan seems to have transcended the concrete image of Luo Qun's wife, and has been endowed with the meaning of a moral goddess of spiritual comfort and humanistic care. The combination of Feng Qinglan and Luo Qun embodies the spirit of sacrifice of women, thereby "reversing the inverted moral standards" [5]. As the image of a moral goddess, the creation of Feng Qinglan's female character requires actors to "go from life to art" [6], experience the soul appeal of morality in life, and embody this spiritual power with the appeal of gender performance. It can be seen that Feng Qinglan's gender role is the incarnation of a moral goddess. "Feng Qinglan's spirit of 'giving help in times of need' is the most valuable virtue of our nation" [7].

### 3. Li Xiuzhi's Gender Performance in *The Herdsman*: a Break from Traditional Ethics

#### 3.1. The Independent Character of Female Performances

The uniqueness of Li Xiuzhi's gender performance in *The Herdsman* (1981) lies in the fact that she breaks away from the "standard image of old-fashioned women" to a greater extent, showing that she is no longer a "deformed product of patriarchal culture". [8] She creates life with her hard work and intelligence, and enjoys life with her optimism and determination, which is also reflected in the independent character of a female performance. In the film, Li Xiuzhi contains huge creativity, which is not only reflected in her active creation in material life after marrying Xu Lingjun, but also in her warm comfort to Xu Lingjun's spiritual world. In the scene in *The Herdsman* (1981) in which Li Xiuzhi removes adobe, actress Cong Shan's series of life-like actions of shoveling mud, mixing mud, and removing adobe embodies the character's urgency and enthusiasm to create a new life. The diligence, optimism, and extroversion of Li Xiuzhi's character are vividly expressed. The charm of gender performance lies not only in creating the character of an individual character, but also in abstractly creating the character of a group. Li Xiuzhi's hard-working, free and easy working temperament was highlighted and became even more shining under the circumstances prescribed by the "Cultural Revolution" and the political identity of her "rightist" husband. In the film, Li Xiuzhi's inner emotions and temperament are fully exposed, exuding the strong creativity of working women. At the same time, in this process, her longing for and creation of a better life deeply infected Xu Lingjun. Xu Lingjun's emotional tone also changed from dark to bright, and his heart changed from sorrow to happiness. The praise of Li Xiuzhi's life creativity reflects the director's praise of the vitality of women during the "Cultural Revolution", and it also reflects the praise of China's working women.

#### 3.2. Women Who Create and Enjoy Life

Li Xiuzhi's gender performance in *The Herdsman* (1981) is further reflected in her enjoying the life she created with an innocent, simple and positive attitude. She is not afraid of a hard life and believes that labor can change life. In a scene on the first night when Li Xiuzhi and Xu Lingjun met, Xu Lingjun gave up his only pair of chopsticks to Li Xiuzhi, turned around and pulled out two broom tassels to use as chopsticks. At this time, Li Xiuzhi couldn't help but smile and said, "You are really capable of making do with things." Li Xiuzhi's cheerful character of finding joy in suffering and taking pleasure in suffering began to infect Xu Lingjun from this moment on, and slowly gave Xu Lingjun, who was exhausted both physically and mentally, spiritual comfort and hope for the future. "Bread will be there, everything will be there..." is her unchanging belief, and she creates and changes her life with her hard work. Underneath her indifferent material life, she hides a deep and profound love for her husband. In a scene on the eve of leaving home, Li Xiuzhi's simple and profound words contained her reluctance to leave Xu Lingjun. Xu Lingjun threw herself affectionately into Li Xiuzhi's arms, implying his sincere attachment to her. This is the care of one heart for another heart, and it is also a dialogue between two hearts. Cong Shan and Zhu Shimao's performances were sincere, revealing the truest emotions in human nature and highlighting the beauty of human nature. Based on the emotional expression of the character's personality, the film gets rid of the conceptual color of the passionate performance aesthetics of the "Cultural Revolution" and makes the character more vital and life-like. This is also due to the aesthetic requirements of gender performance. Li Xiuzhi uses the image of an ordinary woman and a creative spirit to protect and support Xu Lingjun who is in political dilemma. Her gender performance is not only reflected in the physical and verbal movements of two people meeting, getting to know each other, and staying together, but also in the emotional movements between them. In short, the gender performance in *The*

*Herdsmen* (1981) is significantly reflected in the optimistic spirit of contentment behind Li Xiuzhi's heroic self-sufficiency in labor, and the mutual sympathy between her and Xu Lingjun in the collision of hearts.

#### **4. Hu Yuyin's Gender Performance in Hibiscus Town: the Collapse of the Patriarchal Order**

Compared with Feng Qinglan in the movie *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980) and Li Xiuzhi in *The Herdsmen* (1981), Hu Yuyin in *Hibiscus Town* (1986) has stepped out from behind the male protagonist and become the protagonist of the movie story. She faced conflicts in politics, society, and life, and survived tenaciously in difficult situations. This reveals the face of a special era.

##### **4.1. Using Gender Performance to Convey Historical Themes**

The use of gender performance to convey historical themes is embodied in *Hibiscus Town* (1986) by using Hu Yuyin's love tragedy to express the distortion and alienation of human nature caused by wrong and distorted political power. The story of the film begins in 1963 and spans the "Cultural Revolution" until it ends in 1979. The conflict between Hu Yuyin and Li Guoxiang is placed in the shallow layer of the film's narrative, but underneath the deeper narrative lies the sentimentality and historical reflection of the times. "We (the director team of *Hibiscus Town* (1986), author's note) must focus on revealing the tragic power of Hu Yuyin's love in the film." [9] There are three main men in Hu Yuyin's story, Qin Shutian, Li Mangeng, and Li Guigui. However, no matter which male character she is in the story with, Hu Yuyin is always the main body of the story. The rice tofu stall became popular because of her, and she was the main body of economic activities; the tragedy of her married life was also directly triggered by her conflict with the political ecology of the time, and she became the main body of political activities. Interpreting heavy historical tragic themes above female characters enhances the expressiveness of the tragic themes through contrast and contrast, and is conducive to the expression of the cultural implications of gender performance. The subjective expression of female characters is a new representation after the development of gender performances in Xie Jin's films. The gender performance interpretation of its historical theme is in line with the need to explore new ways of expression and the new ideological support and new cultural pillars behind it in the context of the gradual collapse of the patriarchal order after the "Cultural Revolution".

##### **4.2. Completing Female Performances as Ordinary People**

The feminist expression of Hu Yuyin's gender performance in *Hibiscus Town* (1986) was completed by giving the character the identity of an ordinary person. Except for Li Nan in "Ah! Cradle" who is a revolutionary soldier, the female characters who take on the main part of the narrative in Xie Jin's films are basically ordinary people. Hu Yuyin is an individual small business owner who runs the rice tofu business in Hibiscus Town. As an ordinary woman, she possesses the character traits of gentle, kind, hard-working, virtuous, and hard-working women in Chinese literary and artistic aesthetics. After being criticized during the "Cultural Revolution", she and Qin Shutian supported each other, comforted each other, endured humiliation, and "lived like animals". Combined with the context of the times, Hu Yuyin in the film is the embodiment of feminist aesthetics. She is the healer of the national psychological trauma after the collapse of the patriarchal order, and the corrector of the distortion of the national spirit. The cultural value of gender performances in Xie Jin's films lies in the fact that women play the main role in confronting revolutionary, political, class injustice and violent culture under patriarchal values. Therefore, female characters defend the general public, traditional morality, and justice ethics. The gender performances of actors in Xie Jin's films

continue and develop the tradition of female expression in Chinese film performance culture, and are an important aspect of realist performance culture under the concept of traditional realist directors. It reflects the social spirit of the times, satisfies the audience's aesthetic expectations, and is an important component of national culture.

## 5. Conclusion

Gender performance in political reflection is an important representation of realist performance culture under the concept of traditional realist directors in Chinese films since the new era, and this representation is prominently displayed in the film works of director Xie Jin. In Xie Jin's political reflection films in the new era, the actors' gender performances are clearly shown as the female characters' comfort to the male characters. Female characters, who are represented by Feng Qinglan played by Shi Jianlan in *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (1980), Li Xiuzhi played by Cong Shan in *The Herdsman* (1981), and Hu Yuyin played by Liu Xiaoqing in *Hibiscus Town* (1986), are different from the distinct political backgrounds, strong political consciousness, and firm political beliefs of the women in Xie Jin's previous films. They are a group of ordinary women on the political margins. However, they use the rich, delicate and warm emotions of female nature to protect men who are bruised and nearly collapsed due to political persecution. In the stories woven from moral and humanistic discourse in Xie Jin's films, they play the role of "lovers" to soothe the body and soul of the male protagonist. In this way, the actors in Xie Jin's films experience moral life in a political context through actions with obvious gender characteristics. It can be seen that the realist director's concept gives the character an ordinary identity. They use life-like words and bodies, as well as female expressions of gender performance, to highlight the humanistic core, scar temperament and reflective spirit of their performance culture.

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