



Image, social role and social weight of Chinese women on the cover of *Popular Cinema* from 1950 to 2012

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The purpose of this study is to examine the female image, social role and social weight (relative size and positioning) of women as portrayed on movie magazine covers during four different time periods of the Chinese People's Republic. Social action theory is the theoretical analysis framework for this study (Anderson & Meyer, 1988). Although Chinese women's social status has increased since 1949, some researchers suggest that the female image has changed in a "negative" direction in movies during the past 100 years (Wu & Guan, 2007). Four hypotheses were derived from previous research: H<sub>1</sub>: There are significant female image differences among depictions of women across different periods, H<sub>2a</sub>: There are significant social role differences between genders among depictions of women and men across different periods, H<sub>2b</sub>: There are significant female social role differences among depictions of women across different periods, and H<sub>3</sub>: There are significant differences in the visual portrayal of social weight between genders in different periods.

Method. The current study is an analysis of the entire population of front covers of *Popular Cinema* from 1950-2012 (except the cover of Issue 3, 1961, which was not available). Four periods were examined: 1950-1966, 1979-1990, 1991-2000, and 2001-2012 (the magazine was not published during 1967-1978). Two trained coders analyzed the covers with 0.90 inter-coder agreement.

Demographic variables recorded were: gender, ethnicity, and estimated age. Images were only coded for female figures with seven variables. Six of them were 3-point scales, including: masculine-feminine appearance, degree of sexiness, amount of body display, heaviness of make-up, naturalness of hair style, and simplicity of clothing style (see Table 1). The categorical variable was posture (forward, submissive, female touching). Social role and social weight were coded for both female and male figures. Social role was assessed by a person's job implied by their dress or surrounding context (e.g., soldier, farmer, student, etc). Social weight was measured by two categorical variables: relative size (female larger than male, male larger than female, equal) and centering (female in center, male in center, equal). *Chi*-square was used to test for differences across time periods using SPSS 17.

Results. All four hypotheses were statistically significant ( $p < .019$ ). The results showed that: (1) Demographic variables were significantly different across periods in that young Asian females were most commonly featured; (2) seven variables were all significant in cross-period comparisons (Table 1); (3) Female and male social roles were significantly different across time: in 1950-1966, women were more often displayed as farmers (40.5%) while men were more often soldiers (28.9%); in the other three periods, actors and actresses were the dominantly displayed job. However, actresses (62.8%, 96.5%, and 69.2%) were more often displayed than actors (23.5%, 75%, and 46.6%); (4) Female social roles were significantly different across periods. In 1950-1966, females were farmers, after that, they were actresses; (5) Social weight between genders was statistically significant in different periods. For the first three periods, female size equaled male size (50.6%, 50%, and 60%) and both were centered (52.4%, 50%, and 60%). During 2001-2012, men are larger than women (70.9%) and men are more often in the center of the cover (52.7%).

Discussion. These differences reflect the changing social roles of women in China. Women before the Cultural Revolution (before 1967) were more masculine, modest, natural, and simple in adornment and clothing. Increasing display of the body and stylish images have been depicted since 1979, while men were depicted as having more social weight. Hence, women depicted on covers of Chinese movie magazines have become more hedonic in appearance and more feminine in dress and body size and positioning, reflecting increasing consumerism in China and increasing Western standards for film actresses. Analysis of visual characteristics of media images allows insights into cultural role norms and ideals of the time.

Table 1: Results of H<sub>1</sub>

Variables	Coding scheme	1950-66	1979-90	1991-00	2001-12
M-F	Masculine=1, Feminine=3	1 & 2 (81%)	3 (71.3%)	3 (95.6%)	3 (83%)
Sexy	Not sexy=1, sexy=3	1 (83.3%)	1 (59.7%)	2 (34.5%)	2 (40.7%)
Body	Mostly covered=1, Partly naked=3	1 (76.2%)	1 (56.6%)	2 (46%)	3 (37.4%)
Clothing	Simple clothing=1, Luxurious =3	1 (63.7%)	2 (54.3%)	2 (70.8%)	3 (45.6%)
Hair	Natural =1, styled =3	1(70.2%)	1 (56.6%)	1 (77%)	3 (61%)
Make-up	No=1, Make up=3	1 (79.2%)	2 (42.6%)	3 (48.7%)	3 (82.4%)
Posture	Forward =1, Feminine touching=3	1 (53.6%)	3 (58.9%)	3 (85%)	3(60.4%)

Note: Neutral =2,  $p$  is always  $< .001$  for the above seven variables in cross-period comparisons

#### References

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