

Female Stars' Erotic Acting and Visual Politics in 1980s Taiwan Cinema

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Abstract

In the 1980s, Taiwan entered a period of “soft authoritarianism” in which the economy prospered, politics became more democratic, and mass culture became more diverse. Film censorship was more flexible and sexual scenes were increasingly shown on screen. Female stars' bodies were eroticized and commercialized through sexual and nude scenes and, by challenging conservative film censorship and social taboos, became the focus of mass media. This article will explore how discourses in mass media constructed the erotic images of female stars and, conversely, impacted film censorship, filmmakers and film actresses in 1980s' Taiwan.

I will regard the eroticized female film stars' acting as a “field” of internal interaction and continuous reproduction, where the ideology of male dominance and voices of female film stars conflict with each other. Based on textual analysis of female stars' sexual acting and the debate in mass media, I argue that the eroticized female bodies were gazed upon on and off screen. I will explore the social and cultural debate brought about by the erotic performance. Specifically, my questions are as follows: (1) Based on what position and logic, the literati of the newspapers and magazines discussed the female stars' sexual performance? (2) How did they view the relations between actress's acting skills and erotic performance? (3) How did the discussion in mass media react to the film censorship authorities (such as the Government Information Office), the film producers, and even the actresses, forming a cyclical relationship of multi-layered interaction? (4) How did the actresses do self-defense and express their female subjectivity through mass media platforms?

In 1981, following the release of the movies *On the Society File of Shanghai* (上海社會檔案) and *Queen Bee* (女王蜂), the “social realistic” crime films allowed the female to be the protagonists instead of the male, and subgenre of so-called “female revenge” films emerged. In the female revenge films, female characters were positioned as the central figures. The media marketing techniques of female bodies implied the tendency that the young male audience pursued a strong desire for alternative sexual stimulation. At that time, the young audience (mainly male) was no longer satisfied with the traditional housewives in “healthy realism” films, or the pretty young girls in Qiongyao romantic movies. What could stimulate their desire is an image of the violent female as follows: on the one hand, in terms of the visual representation, the female can have sexual allure to the male; but on the other hand, in terms of the narrative, the female has a retaliatory, threatening, subversive, and destructive power against the hegemonic and authoritarian male.

After 1983, the female revenge films gradually declined, but a so-called “New Cinema Movement” that changed the entire ecology of Taiwan's film industry begun. Similar with the female revenge film, the female body (especially the naked female body) was still positioned as one of the important selling points of commercial marketing for “new cinema”. The ideas and motivations of production companies and filmmakers of Taiwan New Cinema were contradictory from the beginning. The film producers, based entirely on

economic considerations, were willing to show female naked and sexy bodies for the erotized marketing.

In the 1980s Taiwan, female stars' nude and sexual scenes were often widely reported in the media. Among the articles in newspapers, the news reports about female stars' sexual scenes can be roughly divided into two categories. One is the news report about how the female stars performed in sexual scenes. The other category is about how Taiwan's film censorship agency - Government Information Office (GIO) reviewed and censored the sexual scenes in the movies. In addition, more articles about sexual scenes are cultural reviews written by newspaper editors and intellectuals (including writers, film critics and cultural researchers). The reviews include the following four topics: 1) the aesthetic value of the erotic performance; 2) female stars' professionalism in the sexual scenes; 3) the dilemma of female stars' acting in the sexual scenes; 4) The influence of erotic performances on social atmosphere.

In the discourses of mass media, the artistry of female stars' erotic acting was not only ignored, devalued and delegitimized, these stars were also labelled as "undressed star" or "nude star" and construed as victims of the film industry. Some reports even contained moral admonition, expecting female stars to act in the "healthier" movies. These reports counteracted female stars' choice of roles. However, the female stars were able to speak through mass media platforms, emphasizing their efforts in erotic acting and highlighting modern female subjectivity. In addition, acting in Taiwan New Cinema, the female stars also won the Golden Horse Awards for Best Actress Award which gave them the state's praise.