

Beyond Empowerment Narratives: A Feminist Analysis of Three Representative Chinese Women-Centered Films

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Abstract

In recent years, women-centered films have become increasingly visible in China amid wider public discussion of gender equality. Taking YOLO, Herstory, and Like a Rolling Stone as case studies, this paper uses three gender-evaluation tools, the Bechdel Test, the Sexy Lamp Test, and the Mako Mori Test, together with feminist film theory, to examine how mainstream Chinese cinema constructs female subjectivity. The analysis shows that these films have made clear progress in resisting the objectification of women and in presenting female desire, labor, anger, and self-recognition. They also make patriarchal oppression visible through domestic labor, spatial arrangement, and intergenerational conflict. However, their feminist critique remains limited because structural problems are often translated into narratives of personal growth, individual choice, and emotional healing. This strategy allows feminist themes to enter the commercial mainstream, but it also makes feminism more compatible with market consumption and weakens its critique of class, region, and institutional power. Future women-centered films should therefore move beyond the image of the successful independent woman and engage more seriously with intersectional experiences, especially those of working-class, rural, elderly, and less privileged women.

Keywords

feminism, film studies, women-centered films, Chinese cinema, female subjectivity

1. Introduction

Patriarchal structures have long shaped mainstream cinema. Many film narratives center male experience, while female characters are confined to family, romance, emotional support, or visual display. Early feminist film criticism therefore focused on how women were placed within the “male gaze” and deprived of subjectivity. Female filmmakers were also marginalized within the industry, which partly explains why women’s cinema developed later and often in opposition to dominant film culture [1]. With the global spread of feminist movements and the MeToo movement, contemporary cinema has produced more works featuring female protagonists who appear powerful, independent, and resistant to traditional femininity. Yet this progress has also produced a new problem: female empowerment can be turned into a marketable narrative, where feminism becomes a profitable cultural style rather than a structural critique [2, 3].

This problem is especially important in the study of women-centered films. These films are usually driven by female perspectives and openly use themes such as women's growth, independence, and self-realization. However, the female power they present is often simplified. Instead of challenging patriarchy as a social system, they may package empowerment as confidence, career success, bodily transformation, or the courage to leave an unhappy relationship. The key question is therefore whether the powerful female protagonist truly challenges patriarchal order, or whether she is a feminist fantasy repackaged for consumption.

Most major feminist film theories were developed in a Western context, while contemporary China has its own cultural and industrial conditions. In recent years, Chinese films such as *Hi, Mom*, *Sister*, and *Lost in the Stars* have shown the commercial appeal of women-centered narratives. These works reflect growing public attention to gender issues, but academic discussion has not yet fully addressed how mainstream Chinese women-centered films negotiate feminism, market logic, and social acceptability. This paper therefore focuses on three representative films released in 2024: *YOLO*, *Herstory*, and *Like a Rolling Stone*. It asks three questions: Have these films broken through traditional gender stereotypes? What kind of "strong woman" do they construct? Which feminist ideas do they respond to, and how are those ideas reshaped in the Chinese context?

2. Background and Theoretical Framework

Women's cinema emerged as a critique of the patriarchal narrative and visual paradigms of classical Hollywood cinema. Early critics such as Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell argued that women were often belittled, misrepresented, or reduced to carriers of male fantasy. Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure further explained how mainstream film organizes looking relations through identification, voyeurism, and fetishism. In her analysis, men control the gaze and narrative movement, while women become objects of visual pleasure [4]. Later feminist film theory complicated this view by emphasizing that women are not only objects on screen but also viewers, interpreters, and creators of meaning. This shift from object theory to subject theory is crucial for understanding the rise of women-centered narratives.

Contemporary feminist film analysis must also consider globalization, digital media, and intersectionality. Global media circulation has allowed non-Western works to move beyond the Hollywood center [5]. At the same time, feminist theory increasingly emphasizes that women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by class, race, sexuality, generation, region, and other social factors [6]. In China, rapid urbanization, changing family structures, and the expansion of social media have provided new platforms for gender discourse. Strong female-led films and television series, from *Empresses in the Palace* to *Thirty Something*, have gained popularity and generated public debate. However, as Dai Jinhua's work suggests, female images in Chinese cinema are often caught between liberation and representation: they may symbolize modernity or enlightenment, but they are also absorbed into national, familial, or market narratives [7].

This study combines feminist film theory with three practical gender-evaluation tools. The Bechdel Test asks whether a film includes at least two named women who talk to each other about something other than men; this paper also adds the requirement that they have their own storylines [9]. The Sexy Lamp Test asks whether a female character could be replaced by a decorative object without changing the plot; if so, she lacks narrative function [10]. The Mako Mori Test asks whether a female character has an independent narrative arc that is not merely attached to a male character's story [11]. These tests cannot fully measure feminist value, but they offer a useful starting point for examining existence, function, and subjectivity.

The paper also draws on theories of gendered labor. Becker's family economic model describes the traditional logic of specialization, in which men perform paid public work while women perform unpaid domestic labor [8]. Feminist criticism challenges the claim that this division is natural. It argues that domestic labor is socially constructed, culturally normalized, and institutionally reinforced. Radical feminism views the family as a site of patriarchal power, while socialist and materialist feminism emphasize how unpaid care work supports both the family and the broader economy [12-14]. These perspectives are especially useful for analyzing how the selected films depict kitchens, living rooms, houses, workplaces, and roads as gendered spaces.

3. Method

This study uses textual analysis and feminist critical theory. The selected films are mainstream Chinese commercial films released in 2024 that were widely promoted or discussed as women-centered, feminist, or concerned with women's growth. *YOLO* follows Du Leying, a socially withdrawn woman who rebuilds confidence through boxing and bodily transformation. *Herstory* centers on Wang Tiemei, a single mother in Shanghai, and explores motherhood, female friendship, sexual desire, and everyday feminist consciousness. *Like a Rolling Stone* tells the story of Li Hong, a middle-aged woman who leaves a long oppressive marriage and begins a solo journey of self-discovery.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, the three films are examined through the Bechdel Test, the Sexy Lamp Test, and the Mako Mori Test in order to identify whether female characters have independent presence, function, and narrative arcs. Second, the films are analyzed through close reading. Key plot elements, dialogue, camera perspective, spatial arrangement, character relationships, and visual symbols are treated as textual evidence. Because the purpose of this paper is not to evaluate audience reception or box-office performance in detail, the analysis treats commercial success mainly as a sign of mainstream visibility. The central concern is how feminist meaning is organized inside the films themselves. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: female subjectivity, the visibility of gendered power in domestic and social spaces, and the limitation created when structural inequality is translated into personal growth.

4. Findings

4.1 Female Subjectivity and Narrative Agency

All three films pass the Bechdel Test, the Sexy Lamp Test, and the Mako Mori Test. This does not mean that they are fully feminist, but it does show that female characters are no longer merely decorative or secondary figures. They have names, relationships, conflicts, desires, and storylines that are not completely organized around men. This marks an important shift in mainstream Chinese cinema: women's lives are increasingly treated as narratively valuable.

In *YOLO*, Du Leying drives the story. Her conflicts with her cousin and sister are not framed as competition for male attention, but as conflicts over dignity, resources, and family obligations. Her romantic relationship is not the center of the film; rather, it becomes one element in her movement toward self-recognition. In *Herstory*, Wang Tiemei's life is structured through conversations and relationships among women. The film does not rely on a dramatic male-centered plot but focuses on the exchange of ideas between women, including motherhood, sexuality, work, and everyday gender politics. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, Li Hong's relationship with her daughter is not simply a mother-daughter bond within the family order. It becomes a relationship of recognition between women from different generations who both experience gendered pressure. Her former peer also functions as a warning image: if Li Hong stays, she may be permanently absorbed into unpaid caregiving.

Camera language reinforces this shift. In *YOLO*, the fight between Leying and her sister is shot through fast handheld movement and physical force. Unlike traditional "girl fight" scenes staged as spectacle, this scene presents women's anger as real and socially meaningful. In *Herstory*, the balcony scene between Tiemei and her daughter uses symmetrical composition and the recurring symbol of blueberries, associated with eyesight, to suggest the transmission of feminist observation from mother to daughter. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, shaky handheld shots and warm lighting during Li Hong's departure visualize both inner conflict and determination. These examples show that female subjectivity is constructed not only through dialogue and plot, but also through framing, movement, props, and spatial positioning. Following Mahmood's point that stories shape social consciousness, the significance of these films lies in who is allowed to tell the story and whose experience becomes culturally legitimate [16].

4.2 Domestic Labor and Spatial Politics

The three films also make gendered power visible through domestic labor and spatial arrangement. Abstract oppression becomes concrete when the films show who cooks, who rests, who occupies central spaces, and who is confined to service areas. This is where feminist theories of labor and family power become especially

relevant. The family is not presented as a naturally harmonious space; it is a space structured by unequal obligations and expectations.

In *YOLO*, the family house is divided symbolically. The downstairs store represents the family's public social presence, while the upstairs living area represents domestic responsibility. Leying's father often stays downstairs and occupies the visible public position of the family. The women are more often linked to the upstairs space and to domestic tasks. When Leying refuses to participate in the television show and leaves angrily, her father only asks whether they will have ribs for dinner. This small detail clearly reveals the gendered division of emotional and physical labor: men may avoid care work while still enjoying the benefits of being served.

Like *a Rolling Stone* presents this structure even more directly. Li Hong's husband occupies the living room and dining room, while Li Hong is repeatedly placed in the kitchen and utility balcony. The scene in which he knocks on the kitchen window and demands vinegar cuts between the spacious living room and the cramped kitchen. He plays ping-pong leisurely, while Li Hong completes chores and picks up the balls he leaves behind. When he calls her lazy, the insult exposes the core violence of domestic labor: women's unpaid work is necessary but treated as valueless. The film therefore turns the kitchen, balcony, and living room into a map of patriarchal power.

Herstory offers a softer but still important version of spatial politics. Tiemei's home is not shown as a place of direct male domination. Instead, it becomes a carefully managed urban space that allows female independence, conversation, and creativity. Yet this space also reveals class privilege. Tiemei can live as an independent single mother partly because she has cultural capital, flexibility, and access to an urban middle-class lifestyle. The film's domestic space is therefore empowering, but it is not equally available to all women. This tension prepares for the larger limitation of the three films: they recognize gender oppression but often avoid a deeper structural account of material inequality.

4.3 Personal Growth as Both Strategy and Limitation

Although the three films expand female subjectivity, they often transform structural contradictions into stories of personal growth. This strategy makes feminist themes emotionally accessible and commercially acceptable, but it also weakens systemic critique. The films suggest that women can change their lives through courage, discipline, self-knowledge, or departure. They are less willing to ask why women must rely on individual struggle to survive structures that remain unchanged.

YOLO is the clearest example. Boxing requires money, time, coaching, and physical resources, but the film largely avoids the question of how Leying supports herself. Instead, it turns her transformation into a victory of willpower. The training montage is emotionally powerful, but it hides the material conditions that make transformation possible. The film also closely connects weight loss with self-worth. Leying's bodily change is presented as part of her recovery of dignity, but this risks reinforcing the idea that a woman must reshape her body before she can be respected. What could have been a critique of body discipline and patriarchal beauty norms becomes a personalized inspirational story.

Herstory also relies on a romanticized model of independence. Tiemei writes, repairs things, raises her child, and lives with taste and self-possession. This image is empowering, but it also sets a high threshold for ideal womanhood: economic stability, cultural knowledge, urban resources, and emotional competence. The film includes feminist gestures, such as stopping men from urinating in public, but these moments mainly highlight Tiemei's decisive personality rather than examining the broader gendered occupation of public space. Female healing is presented through conversation and friendship, but the structural sources of trauma remain only partially explored.

Like *a Rolling Stone* has the strongest structural consciousness. Li Hong's lost opportunity for education directly points to gender inequality across generations. Her daughter's struggle between work and family also shows that patriarchal pressure continues in new forms. However, the film ultimately returns to Li Hong's individual departure. The road becomes a symbol of freedom, but the system that made departure necessary remains largely intact. The film sees the wound clearly, yet its solution is still personal escape.

In the Chinese context, this limitation is also a practical strategy. Mainstream commercial films must negotiate market demand and censorship. Direct structural criticism may reduce a film's chance of wide release,

while personal-growth narratives are safer and more communicable. These films therefore develop a “gentle but visible” mode of feminism. They bring women’s issues into the mainstream, but they often soften their political sharpness. This double nature should not be dismissed. It is both a compromise and a condition of possibility for feminist expression in contemporary Chinese commercial cinema.

5. Discussion

The central dilemma of the three films is that they try to escape women’s objectification while still operating within capital logic and regulatory boundaries. Feminist experience is made visible, but it is also transformed into a consumable cultural product. *Herstory* is the sharpest example of this tension. It includes female desire, criticism of romantic obsession, women’s mutual support, and implicit resistance to patriarchal discipline. Yet even its sharper voice remains carefully controlled. Its feminism is recognizable and sometimes provocative, but still acceptable within a commercial and urban middle-class framework.

Consumerism can absorb feminist language by turning the “leading woman” into an idol of individual success [15]. In *YOLO*, empowerment becomes measurable through weight loss, physical discipline, and visible transformation. In *Herstory*, independence becomes tied to taste, cultural capital, and urban lifestyle. In *Like a Rolling Stone*, structural oppression is acknowledged, but the final emotional force still comes from the heroic act of leaving. In each case, the films produce inspiring female images, but they do not fully challenge the systems that make women’s lives difficult.

This is why intersectionality is essential. If gender equality is separated from class, region, age, and labor, it risks becoming a middle-class fantasy. Women-centered films should not only show educated, urban, self-reflective women who can eventually choose freedom. They should also take seriously rural women, elderly women, factory workers, service workers, unpaid caregivers, and women whose choices are constrained by poverty or institutional dependence. Without these perspectives, women-centered cinema may reproduce hierarchy even while claiming to resist patriarchy. This problem is not merely a matter of representation, but also a matter of audience imagination. If mainstream films repeatedly define the ideal feminist subject as urban, educated, emotionally articulate, and able to make individual choices, viewers may come to see these conditions as natural signs of empowerment rather than as resources distributed unequally across society. A broader feminist cinema would need to show not only women who successfully leave oppressive situations, but also women who cannot leave, women who negotiate survival inside family or work structures, and women whose resistance takes less spectacular forms.

At the same time, the value of these three films should not be denied. They have helped normalize female-centered narratives in mainstream Chinese cinema. They have shown women’s anger, desire, friendship, labor, and self-recognition as legitimate subjects of film. Their limitation is not that they fail completely, but that their feminism remains incomplete. They open a space for critique, but that space still needs to be expanded.

6. Conclusion

YOLO, *Herstory*, and *Like a Rolling Stone* demonstrate the progress and contradictions of contemporary Chinese women-centered cinema. They pass basic gender-evaluation tests, construct more active female protagonists, and use visual language to make female subjectivity and domestic oppression visible. However, they also tend to translate structural gender inequality into personal growth, emotional healing, or individual escape. This strategy allows feminist discourse to enter the mainstream, but it also makes feminism easier to consume and less capable of systemic critique. The next breakthrough for women-centered films should not simply be more successful female leads. It should be a broader, more intersectional cinema that represents women across class, region, generation, and labor conditions. Only then can women-centered film move beyond superficial empowerment and become a more genuinely critical cultural practice.

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