

Breaking Stereotypes: A Multi-case Study of The Gender Construction of Female Characters in Chinese Crime Dramas

Lulu Zhang

Anhui University, Hefei 230039, China

Abstract

Traditionally, the discourse of criminal investigation drama texts is often centered on men. New types of criminal investigation dramas advocate breaking stereotypes and promoting the gender construction of multiple female roles, while taking into account the moral sense and ethical values of female roles, so that the inherent character advantages of women can be seen. This study uses the case study method to analyze different types of criminal investigation dramas. Focusing on the basic issue of "gender construction of female roles", it conducts case analysis and cross-case analysis of character characteristics and case characteristics, and uses research to further understand the female roles in criminal investigation dramas. This article believes that the female image in criminal investigation dramas has gradually gotten rid of the single perspective of the male gaze, using self-personality to strengthen female subjectivity, and showing the gender temperament of women in the new era through multiple female roles.

Keywords

Gender stereotypes; China; criminal investigation drama; female roles; gender construction.

1. Introduction

The construction of screen images of female police officers, forensic doctors, judges, and lawyers has profoundly influenced the public's imagination and understanding of female gender temperament. Influenced by the high professionalism of public security, procuratorial and judicial work, the professional, specialized and stereotyped elite female gender temperament portrayed by these female characters in film and television dramas has reshaped the media image display of professional women in the new era - that is, bid farewell to the single, weak and vassal female gender stereotypes.^[1] In fact, as a highly professional genre drama, criminal investigation dramas take the shaping of female characters' professionalism as the core of film and television narratives, such as the understanding of typical characters in the early Chinese TV series "Ren Changxia". In recent years, various criminal investigation web dramas shot in China have also focused on the construction of female characters' professionalism and gender temperament, such as "Yu Zui", "Ice Breaking Operation", and "White Night Chase" etc. These works have changed the society's cognition of professions such as female police officers, female forensic doctors, female judges, and female lawyers to a certain extent.^[2]

In the development of Chinese feminist theory, the "invisibility" of women is on two levels: one is explicit, that is, the complete aphasia of female characters, completely reduced to the vassal of male characters; the other is implicit, women degenerate into a single imitation of men, that is, "iron lady" or "female man", completely denying the value of female gender temperament and making it invisible.^[3] The construction of female gender temperament in criminal investigation dramas is relatively special. How to balance morality and law has always been a

difficult problem in the practice of public security, procuratorial, and judicial law. The design and addition of female characters have a good balance of this. In the role design of female police, female forensic doctors, female judges, and female lawyers, criminal investigation dramas will focus on strengthening the role's sense of morality and ethics, leaving a deep impression on the audience.

Based on this, the key questions that this study attempts to answer are: RQ1: What kind of gender image and gender temperament do female characters show in Chinese criminal investigation dramas? RQ2: How does the construction of female characters in criminal investigation dramas break gender stereotypes and participate in the reproduction of new female images? RQ3: With the help of multiple case studies, what effect has been achieved in the gender construction of female characters in Chinese crime dramas?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Stereotype

As a gender stereotype, the social view that women are in a single and stereotyped position has been impacted by reality. For example, as women's education level improves, their social status and role changes have been stimulated, and the "gender role view" popular in Chinese society has transformed.^[4] The connotation of "gender role view" in contemporary China is gender equality, and its contemporary characteristics are mainly constructed based on the division of household labor and gender equality in employment.^[5] In essence, gender stereotypes are a type of social attitude towards gender, and the process of their concept change sometimes shows a lagging characteristic. This phenomenon can be explained by the "Cultural Lag Hypothesis".^[6] In terms of the composition of gender stereotypes, the discussion on positive and negative stereotypes of women is relatively sufficient. Among them, positive stereotypes of women are mainly manifested in nurturing and gentle personality traits, but they can also stimulate some negative effects. For example, praise for women's romance and gentleness may help perpetuate gender inequality.^[7]

2.2. Female roles in criminal investigation dramas

After female roles are stereotyped in film and television dramas, whether the real female power has "lost its power and possibility to confirm, express, or question its gender" has become a new problem, especially after women's liberation. The invisibility of real women has become a new problem.^[3] For a long time, the image of women in criminal investigation film and television dramas has shown certain stereotyped characteristics, but as far as the production of online dramas is concerned, it has innovated character design in the three links of "archetype observation", "multiple personalities" and "tragic crime".^[8] For example, dramas such as "Cold Case" and "Iron Detective" basically deny the dependence of women and absorb the characteristics of popular "female protagonist" dramas; "Iron Detective" focuses on constructing the image of female leaders and shaping the female power of female police officers in character construction.

3. Research Method: Multiple Case Analysis

As a qualitative research method widely used in social sciences, the case study method is suitable for in-depth and comprehensive investigation of a complex and specific problem in reality. In practice, the case study method often relies on the study of typical cases to try to construct new theories, collect qualitative data, and use empirical research methods to interpret the essence of existing cases, so that it is called a "repeated quasi-experiment" of different cases.^[9] In the process of this study, while applying the case study method, this article pays special attention to the representativeness of the case, that is, it can use different types of

criminal investigation dramas to analyze the characteristics and changes of female role construction. As for the steps of a case study, this paper mainly applies the steps of case selection, establishment of female roles, case analysis, cross-case analysis, and paper writing to standardize the research steps in order to deepen the understanding of the construction of female roles in criminal investigation dramas.

Table 1. Criminal investigation dramas to be studied

| Title | Showtime | Story Theme | Important female characters |
|--------------------------|----------|------------------|-----------------------------|
| <Draw the Line> | 2022.09 | Law construction | YeXin, SongYufei |
| <In the Name of People> | 2017.03 | Anti-corruption | LuYike, GaoXiaoqin |
| <In the Name of Justice> | 2025.06 | Eliminate crime | Zheng Yaping |
| <Ren Changxia> | 2005.04 | Law Biography | Ren Changxia |

The multi-case study method to be used in this study adopts participatory observation and can be used to build a knowledge structure framework. Its main characteristics are that it has two analysis stages. The first is the case analysis, that is, the case is regarded as an independent whole, and the second is the cross-case analysis, that is, unified abstraction and generalization.^[10] In recent years, case studies have advocated the practice of "rooted" paradigms, emphasizing "no presupposition" in the research hypothesis link, and believe that field investigations should be adopted to complete the research.^[11]

4. Research Findings

This study intends to analyze the four criminal investigation dramas "The Bottom Line", "In the Name of the People", "Ren Changxia", and "In the Name of the Law". Through a detailed study of the design of female characters, this study found that the breaking of gender stereotypes mainly depends on the diversified presentation of female characters. At the same time, the mixed use of round characters and flat characters highlights the artistry of the design of female characters in criminal investigation dramas.

4.1. Breaking gender stereotypes: Diversified presentation of female characters

What is a gender stereotype? The social gender concept of "male lead and female secondary" is its main connotation. This paper adopts the case analysis method, starting from the construction of female characters in criminal investigation dramas such as "The Bottom Line", to interpret how the gender stereotype of "male lead and female secondary" is broken. From observation, the female character Ye Xin in "The Bottom Line", as a representative of young women who have just entered the workplace, vividly interprets the state of women who have just entered the workplace facing work. Ye Xin, with her idealistic enthusiasm, handles one piece of work after another with her serious personality characteristics. She actively fights for the rights and interests of victims, but she always encounters embarrassing dilemmas due to her lack of social experience. Ye Xin is the epitome of an outstanding young woman in modern times. Women are often picky, nagging, and passionate. These traits are criticized in modern times. Women's pickiness is even considered aggressive. These negative stereotypes will bring negative evaluations to women, but there is no praise or criticism for the pickiness. Under certain conditions, this feature will play a huge advantage, just like some law students insisted on appealing because of the expensive catering in Disneyland, which led to the affordable prices in the park. Observing the female character Ye Xin, her pickiness has always been fighting for

the legitimate rights and interests of the parties in the case. She insists on fair trials. Even when Judge Song Yufei made an inappropriate trial, she spoke out boldly, put fair trials at the center, and put the legitimate rights and interests of the parties first.

The case analysis of the case "Bottom Line" shows that the image construction of feminism in criminal investigation dramas is three-dimensional and full. The innate characteristics of women are powerful and have great advantages. Through the projection of this film and television drama in reality, it is not difficult to observe that women in today's society have more subjective consciousness. They are no longer tragic and need to be pitied, but fair, strict, and reasonable. The construction of female images in film and television dramas is constantly breaking the stereotypes of women in traditional film and television dramas, and giving feedback on the impression of new female images in today's society. The social phenomenon of "everyone participates in the process of image construction in the simulated environment" is brought about by the development of online media, and film and television dramas also participate in this socialization process.^[12]

In the TV series "Ren Changxia", the protagonist Ren Changxia's real and friendly appearance makes the image of the public security chief in reality vivid on the screen. The image of Ren Changxia is constructed through the substitution of actors and the ups and downs of the plot of the TV series to construct a vivid character image. The audience will find that Ren Changxia's image is very kind, not a solidified image under her heroic deeds, but a female image very close to us. Her feminine characteristics, kindness, compassion, and majestic mother characteristics are transformed into her professional characteristics of protecting the people. Female traits have always been precious and should not be hidden or invisible. Those stereotyped labels and criticisms of some characteristics are actually projections of some human emotions. Some shortcomings can be advantages in some situations, but the conditions, environment, and background have changed, or at a certain stage, they seem insufficient to achieve the development of things. Through the observation and analysis of "Ren Changxia", the film and television drama contains female traits in the bits and pieces of Ren Changxia's work and life, and constructs a female image of fair law enforcement and benevolent love.

In contrast, the two female characters in the film and television drama "In the Name of the Law", Zheng Yaping is the director of the First Procuratorate of the People's Procuratorate of Haidong Province, and Zhang Wenjing is the former legal director of Wanshi Group. From the interaction between Zhang Wenjing and Zheng Yaping, it can be seen that based on justice and truth, the help between women is tenacious and powerful, and the characteristics of women themselves are worth seeing. At the end of the story, when Zhang Wenjing, who regained her freedom, stood in the sun and looked at Zheng Yaping, the warmth that overflowed from her words was better than the most beautiful language. The two women in the play also fully demonstrated the soft and tenacious power of women, which is moving to uncover the truth and uphold justice. Through the various films and television dramas that have gradually appeared on the market, we can see that in the context of the increasing popularity of dramas with strong female protagonists in recent years, women have gradually picked up their own right to speak, built their own subjective consciousness, and uncovered the inherent female power.

4.2. Round characters and flat characters: Female character design in criminal investigation dramas

Round characters in literary and artistic theory research often refer to characters with rich and complex personalities. The "simplification" of round characters often used in artistic creation is more about subtraction in processing round characters; flat characters are the "opposite" of round characters, with more flat characteristics. The "refinement" of flat characters often used in work creation is addition.^[13] Compared with round characters, flat characters are mostly manufactured and produced based on simple ideas or certain characteristics, and have the

characteristics of a "single" personality.^[14] Through participatory observation and cross-case analysis, we can classify and summarize the image characteristics of women, the richness, hierarchy, and fullness of the construction of female characters, and the image characteristics of characters can be better summarized.

Through participatory observation of the drama "In the Name of People", it can be analyzed that the female image of Lu Yike conforms to the TV series' method of shaping flat characters. Lu Yike's character background is very clear. She is the director of the Anti-Corruption Bureau of the Handong Provincial Procuratorate. Lu Yike has a serious work attitude, focuses on anti-corruption work, adheres to principles, and sticks to her original intention. The shaping of Lu Yike's image conforms to the character image of flat characters in literary theory. Lu Yike is a positive image in film and television dramas, just and sincere, dedicated, and reliable. As a civil servant, she has not forgotten her original intention and has solved many problems in her work. She is also valued by her superiors and given a difficult mission. The character image of Gao Xiaoqin in the play tends to be a round image of literary images in literary theory. The character has a complex background and gradually shows multiple aspects of the character with the changes of time and events. The reasons for her economic crimes in the play are complex and diverse, including the temptation of money, the drive for survival, the oppression of power, and the helplessness of being a female subject. It is worth mentioning that she and Gao Xiaoqin's rivalry, two people with different backgrounds, finally reach an understanding of each other's fate through dialogue and empathy. When Lu Yike curiously asked Gao Xiaoqin, who was about the same age as him, why she was so involved in the world, Gao Xiaoqin's answer was deep and helpless. Although Gao Xiaoqin was involved in power and money transactions, the hardships and difficulties of her own tragic life experience were heartbreaking and helpless. Such a full character image deeply won the audience's empathy and understanding. The collision of this round character and the flat character has taken the conflict and richness of the drama to a higher level. This rivalry is also full of dramatic tension, which makes the audience talk about it with relish. On Douban, Baidu Tieba, Zhihu, and other online platforms, the audience has also been comparing and analyzing the characters and rivalry of Lu Yike and Gao Xiaoqin. There are also many comments on the interaction and emotions shown by the two characters with different backgrounds. Most of the audience expressed understanding and sympathy for Gao Xiaoqin, and had an emotional attitude of regret or sadness for her rough life experience, and recognized and sympathized with Gao Xiaoqin's characteristics of ability and courage despite her rough life.

In contrast, the two female characters in the TV series "In the Name of Law", Zheng Yaping is the director of the First Procuratorial Department of the People's Procuratorate of Haidong Province, and Zhang Wenjing is the former legal director of Wanshi Group. Both Zheng Yaping and Zhang Wenjing are flat characters, both are positive characters, and they have made sacrifices and contributions to the pursuit of justice and truth. The two female flat characters gradually show more refined character characteristics in the development of the plot and story, making the character creation more refined. From the interaction between Zhang Wenjing and Zheng Yaping, it can be seen that based on justice and truth, the help between women is tenacious and powerful, and the characteristics of women themselves are worth seeing. At the end of the story, when Zhang Wenjing, who regained her freedom, stood in the sun and looked at Zheng Yaping, the warmth that was beyond words was better than the most beautiful language. The two women in the play also fully demonstrated the soft and tenacious power of women, which is moving to uncover the truth and uphold justice. Through the various film and television dramas that have gradually appeared on the market, we can see that, with the popularity of dramas with strong female protagonists in recent years, women have gradually picked up their own voice, built their own subject consciousness, and opened up the inherent female power. Through case observation and cross-observation, we can find that the female

image in the same film and television drama highlights the femininity and personality characteristics of each female character through the creation of flat characters and round characters, which also reflects the new era of women's dedication to work.

5. Conclusion

The existing criminal investigation dramas show the image of the heroine. Women stand at the forefront of the times and show a dedicated and elite female image at work. The construction of women in criminal investigation dramas reflects the true power of women in upholding justice and pursuing the truth. This study believes that the positive stereotype of female gender temperament in criminal investigation dramas has caused the invisibility of female discourse, the deformity of female image construction, and the convergence of social aesthetics. In highly typified criminal investigation dramas, female police officers, female judges, and female cadres all show different skills and strengths from men in the process of law enforcement. They are the soft power of female characteristics, and film and television dramas have also played an important role in breaking the inherent gender stereotypes. Through multiple case studies and establishing the objects of case studies in chronological order, it can be concluded that the construction of women in criminal investigation dramas responds to the phenomenon of women regaining their subject consciousness in the current era, and the construction of female images in criminal investigation dramas also triggers the further awakening of female subjectivity.

The further thinking triggered by this article is that in the early stage of the legalization of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the complexity and particularity of grassroots work require law enforcement personnel to have more flexible law enforcement power, so as to overcome the difficulties, bottlenecks, and pain points of grassroots work. The flexibility and empathy of female characteristics are exactly the power lacking in law enforcement work in the current era. Softness can turn hardness into softness, and female characteristics can better interpret the humane law enforcement in the new era. For example, the rabbit police officer next to the West Lake in Hangzhou well interprets the important role of female power in the work of public security, procuratorial and judicial organs, and the female characters in criminal investigation dramas also timely spread and construct the professionalism and power of female law enforcers.

References

- [1] Wang Zhen, & Guan Jian. (2024). Changes and invariances of gender stereotypes? Evidence from content, methods, and effects. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 32(6), 939. in Chinese.
- [2] Zhang Zhihua, & Zhang Jing. (2021). Archetypal observation, multiple personalities, and tragic crimes: innovative paths for character images in criminal investigation web dramas. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*. In Chinese.
- [3] Dai Jinhua. (1994). Invisible women: women in contemporary Chinese films and women's films. *Contemporary Film*, (6), 37-45. in Chinese.
- [4] Wang, Z., & Guan, J. (2021). Do positive stereotypes have negative effects?. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 29(9), 1657-1668. in Chinese.
- [5] Liu, A.Y. (2022). Division of housework between husband and wife under the interactive influence of relative resources and gender role attitudes. *Journal of China Women's University*, 34(2), 27-35. In Chinese.
- [6] Diekmann, A. B., & Schmader, T. (2024). Gender as Embedded Social Cognition 17. *The Oxford handbook of social cognition*, 471.
- [7] Wang Zhen, & Guan Jian. (2024). Changes and invariances of gender stereotypes? Evidence from content, methods, and effects. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 32(06), 939-950.

- [8] George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). Case studies and theory development in the social sciences. MIT Press.
- [9] Tang, Q. (2017). Mixed case study method: the introduction of mixed research methods into the qualitative-empirical case study method. *Science and Technology Progress and Policy*, 34(12), 155-160. in Chinese.
- [10] Liu, A.Y. (2022). Division of housework between husband and wife under the interactive influence of relative resources and gender role attitudes. *Journal of China Women's University*, 34(2), 27-35. In Chinese.
- [11] Sun, H.F., & Zhu, Y.C. (2004). Theory and application of the case study method. *Journal of Scientific Management Research*, 22(1), 116-120. in Chinese.
- [12] Li Chao. (2018). Research on the social gender construction of current online criminal detective dramas in my country (Master's thesis, Ningxia University). In Chinese
- [13] Ouyang Ming. (2004). The simplification of round characters and the refinement of flat characters in TV dramas. *Yunnan Social Sciences*, (1), 123-126. In Chinese.
- [14] Zhang Youwen. (2003). Flat characters and round characters in police literature. *Journal of Suzhou Teachers College*, (03), 46-106. in Chinese.