From Patriarchal Discipline to Rebellious Narrative:

Classification and Cultural Context of Female Images in

East Asian Crime Films
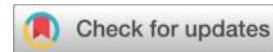
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Abstract: This study uses East Asian crime movies as the overall context, selects China and South Korea as representative samples, and explores the narrative position and agency of women under patriarchal discipline. This study constructs a "female initiative spectrum" framework, dividing female images into "The mute", "restricted agents", and "rebels" to reveal the different ways in which agency unfolds in narratives. The study found that Korean crime movies more frequently show women's dramatic transition from passivity to rebellion. Most women in Chinese films are stuck in the middle of the spectrum, and their actions are constrained by law, ethics, and realist narratives. This difference reflects the diversity of cultural structures and gender power configurations within East Asia. This study hopes to provide an effective analytical path for understanding female agency in regional films.

Keywords: East Asian crime movies; Female initiative; Patriarchal discipline; Role spectrum; Cultural context

Introcudtion

In the post-#MeToo context, gender politics in the global film and television field continues to be reconstructed, and the image of women, sexual harassment, and structural oppression in the industry continue to enter public discussions. East Asian films, especially Chinese and Korean crime genre films, absorb feminist discourse, and simultaneously are deeply restricted by the Confucian patriarchal structure, national censorship mechanisms, and local emotional structures, causing women to form a tense swing between "increased visibility" and "restricted initiative" [1-2]. Existing results often summarize female characters with archetypes such as "maternal wife", "victimized daughter", and "vengeful viper", etc., which still remain at the level of static types. It is difficult to reveal their action gradient and structural position in the narrative, and it is even more difficult to explain the systematic differences between China and South Korea [3-4]. Based on this, the article revolves around three questions: First, how patriarchal disciplines set a structural starting point for women in East Asian crime narratives, limiting them to a narrow range of behaviors from the beginning. Second, how to build a continuous classification system with more explanatory power than traditional role types through the "female initiative spectrum" to describe the gradient of women's actions from aphasia, restriction to rebellion. Third, why do Chinese and Korean female images show different trends on the path of "from discipline to rebellion", and what kind of institutional constraints and cultural psychology are related to these differences. This study combines textual reading, agency modeling, and cross-national comparison, selects representative Chinese and Korean crime and noir films after 2000, and takes into account the latest development of female revenge films and female-led genre films to examine the initiative distribution of East Asian female images from three levels: institutional, cultural and narrative.

1. Patriarchal Discipline in East Asian Crime Films: Structural Roots of Female Imagery
1.1 Patriarchal structure and the position of women in criminal narratives in East Asia

East Asian crime movies are rooted in the patriarchal structure with Confucian ethics as the core, where family-family order, gender division of labor, and national governance logic are interconnected [5]. First of all, in terms of gender power allocation, the paradigm of "differentiation between inside and outside" and "men dominate outside and women dominate inside" has existed for a long time, placing women in a subordinate position at the social and symbolic level. Their body, emotions, and fertility are regarded as important resources for maintaining the patriarchal order. When researchers examine Chinese, Japanese, and Korean crime films, they often summarize female characters into archetypes such as "maternal wife", "victimized daughter", and "vengeful viper". This naming reflects precisely the way in which women are embedded in patriarchal narratives, carrying moral and emotional loads. In this way, crime movies not only reproduce criminal events but also constantly reiterate the legitimacy of the gender order in the cycle of "destruction-restoration of order".

Secondly, regarding image form and narrative, East Asian films continue the "male gaze" of classic narrative films. Women are placed in the position of objects to be watched and judged, and their identities are often tied to issues such as physical violence, sexual victimization, and family ethics crises. Relevant studies have pointed out that "Oriental women" are often constructed as a complex of desire and fear, serving as both a carrier of exotic sentiments and a projection plane for male anxiety [6-7]. In crime genre films, this gaze is further combined with practices such as crime scenes, corpse displays, and police investigations, making women largely a narrative resource that promotes the growth of male characters and the rationalization of state violence. On the one hand, the works of directors such as Park Chan-wook continue the tradition of female othering. On the other hand, through extreme violence and revenge plots, the suppressed female subjectivity returns to the screen in an "excessive" way.

1.2 Law, censorship, and social sentiment: Institutional differences in female initiative in China and South Korea

Compared with the shared Confucian patriarchal culture, the differences in female initiatives in Chinese and Korean crime films are more directly subject to the different legal systems, censorship mechanisms and social emotional structures of the two countries. First, at the institutional level, contemporary Chinese film production is still under highly centralized censorship and administrative control, with clear "expression boundaries" for violent expressions, gender politics, and institutional criticism. Current censorship creates a "safe narrative zone" through deletions, bans and pre-censorship. Crime films especially need to return to the value framework of "victory of the rule of law" and "restoration of order" at the end. Under this premise, even if a female character has a certain ability to act, her violent resistance and institutional confrontation are difficult to be presented as a legitimate or even successful path, so they are often compressed into the "controllable middle initiative" range.

In contrast, South Korea has gradually relaxed its pre-censorship of film content in the process of democratization. Genre films have become more market-oriented, and political violence, sexual violence and gender oppression can be presented on the screen in a more direct and even extreme way. The culture of "hate" (Han), the strong tradition of social criticism, and the public sentiment inspired by the #MeToo movement have made sexual harassment, workplace inequality, and domestic violence prominent issues, and the gender agenda is more likely to be

linked to crime and revenge narratives. Recent research on "Korean video feminism" points out that this is a strategy that puts women's experience of violence, revenge and trauma at the center of the narrative, and legitimizes women's fierce resistance to the patriarchal system through the presentation of extreme situations. This allows Korean crime films to better shape "rebels" who stand on the right side of the spectrum and give their actions ethical comprehensibility.

2. Initiative Spectrum of Female Figures: A Classification System from Mute to Rebel

2.1 Construction of initiative spectrum: analysis dimensions and classification criteria

Although female characters in East Asian crime films have different identities, behavioral styles, and narrative functions, their action logic and power positions can be systematically identified on a continuum. This study proposes the "female initiative spectrum" as a theoretical tool to describe the subtle distribution and dynamic changes of female roles from completely passive to highly active. Its structure is shown in Figure 1.


The Mute	Restricted Agents	The Rebel
Minimal narrative agency	Constrained agency	High autonomy
No narrative drive	Limited capacity for action	High degree of autonomy and structural challenges
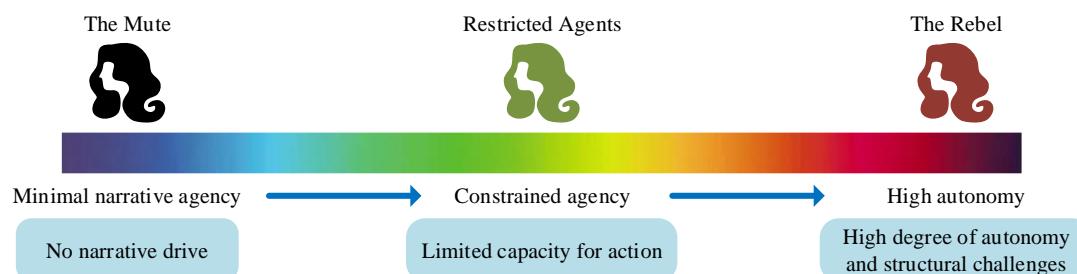
Figure 1 Spectral model of female initiative

Firstly, the spectrum framework relies on three core dimensions: First, narrative driving force, focusing on whether the character can trigger events, manipulate the narrative rhythm, or reshape the logic of the case. The second, purpose and action ability, evaluates whether the character has independent goals and can change his or her situation in a sustainable way. The third is structural challenge, which measures the extent to which the character's actions break through patriarchal ethics, legal systems or social norms. These three dimensions are interrelated and together determine where the character falls on the spectrum.

According to this, female images can be roughly classified into three nodes: "Mute" at the left end lacks the right to move and speak, and its existence is mostly functionally embedded in criminal narratives. The "restricted agents" in the middle have certain decision-making abilities and strategic actions, but their initiatives are often restricted due to patriarchal, legal or ethical disciplines. The "rebels" on the right end show a high degree of initiative, and their actions directly challenge the existing structure and gain maximum space for action within the narrative. The spectrum is fluid: a character may move from low initiative to high initiative as the narrative progresses, or may fall back to a lower range due to institutional or emotional constraints.

2.2 Mute: "No initiative" in structural victimization

"Mute" is at the starting point of the initiative spectrum. Its ability to act is almost completely deprived, and its characters mostly enter the narrative system in the form of "victimization" or "absence". Such characters often appear as corpses, missing people, or long-term oppressed figures, with little ability to influence the course of events. The image of the ex-wife in "Fireworks of the Day" was broken down into clues to the case shortly after her appearance, and she only exists as a target of police investigation. Many anonymous women in "The Party at Southern Station" are invisible victims in the chain of violence on the margins of society, and their lack of initiative constitutes the tone of the film's underlying survival dilemma. In Korean movies, "Mute"

also occupies a key position. In "The Beginning and End of the Jin Funan Murder Incident", Jin Funan was in a repressive environment for a long time in the first half of the film. Although she has consciousness and feelings, she lacks effective ways of action. His "unspeakable" puts her in a typical structural victimization position. The images of the victims in "Princess Aurora" mostly appear in the form of absence, and their lives are reduced to triggers of the case. A common feature of "Mute" is that the scope of action is compressed to zero, existing primarily as evidence of the violence of social structures rather than as narrative subjects. They represent the victimization and silence at the bottom of the patriarchal structure, providing a contrast to the initial changes in roles in the middle and right end of the spectrum, and also revealing the structural starting point from which women's initial initiative is systematically deprived.

2.3 Restricted agents: The middle ground between discipline and resistance

"Restricted agents" located in the middle of the spectrum have a certain degree of strategy, autonomy, and narrative drive, but their action space is subject to multiple constraints from social structure, legal ethics, and gender disciplines. They are the most common female image in East Asian crime movies. Wu Zhizhen in "Fireworks in the Day" is able to deal with multiple male gazes, influencing the police judgment and the direction of the case through selection and concealment, but she has never been able to get rid of structural dependence and find it difficult to break through the boundaries of the system. Although Sangqi in "The Mystery of the Floating City" has will and motivation, she is in trouble due to lack of structural support. Her initiative is more like "desire for action" than "power for action." The girl who was violated in "Carnival" showed the ability to protect herself and judge, but due to the absence of the system and social indifference, she could only constantly adjust her coping strategies, but was unable to truly change the direction of the incident. In Korean narratives, "restricted agents" are often set up as potential precursors of "rebels." In "Dear Jin Zi", Jin Zi still needs to continue to reconcile between legal procedures and self-will in the early stage of revenge, and his actions are temporarily locked in the middle range. The common characteristics of this type of role are: awareness but lack of power, strategy but lack of structural support. Their initiatives are constantly expanding, but they are always within the range where they are easily subsumed by the system. Therefore, the middle initiative has become the most complex and tense area for the female images in both countries.

2.4 Rebels: The release of extreme initiatives and boundary-breaking

"Rebels" on the right end of the spectrum have a clear purpose, a strong will to act, and breakthrough strategic capabilities. The core of their actions points to direct challenges to patriarchal structures, violent systems, or institutional deficiencies. This type of image is particularly prominent in Korean crime movies. In "The Beginning of the Jin Funan Murder Incident", Jin Funan responded to structural violence in an extreme way after a long period of silence and repression. Her actions not only changed her own destiny, but also destroyed the patriarchal network that maintained the system-governed island society. In "Dear Jin Zi", Jin Zi's revenge plan is highly dominant within the narrative and is endowed with ethical comprehensibility. In "Princess Aurora", the heroine pursues justice through a series of actions, forming a unique "female rebellious ethics" in Korean narratives. In comparison, there are very few female characters on the right end of the spectrum in Chinese crime films, both because narrative censorship requires "order to be restored" and because the realist tradition strengthens "female tragedy" and "dilemma narratives." The reason why rebels are at the end of the spectrum is because their initiatives are structurally destructive and ethically reshaping. They challenge the

cultural expectation that "women should be restrained, meek, and forbearing" and reconstruct power relations through extreme means. Because of this, such images have both narrative impact and prominent cultural and political symbolism.

3. Discipline to Rebellion: A Comparison of Cultural Contexts of East Asian Women's Initiative Differences

3.1 South Korea: Trauma culture and initiative legitimation of stylized violence narratives

The leap of female initiative in Korean crime films is rooted in the multiple intersections of trauma culture, emotional structure, and film and television systems. First of all, at the cultural and psychological level, "Hate" (Han), as a collective emotional form, deposits suppressed anger, shame and powerlessness in social memory for a long time. Image here is not only a representation tool, but also a field for trauma narration and emotional regulation [8]. As the bearers of multiple oppressions, women are seen as concentrated carriers of weakness and violation. When they take extreme actions in crime narratives, they are often understood as concentrated outbursts of long-term accumulation of injustice, thus gaining emotional sympathy and recognition from the audience, and providing a cultural legitimacy basis for the highly-initiative "rebel" image.

Secondly, in terms of industry and genre structure, the loosening of censorship and the marketization of the film industry in the process of democratization have enabled the rapid development of Korean crime, thriller and revenge genres. Genre films' preference for strong emotions, extreme violence, and narrative reversal reinforces each other with society's traumatic memories and critical traditions, forming a set of aesthetic mechanisms that encourage "transgressive narratives." In this mechanism, women are no longer just passive victims, but can be placed at the center of the action, assuming the narrative function of making potential anger explicit. Images such as female avengers and female killers have gradually become normalized within the genre system. They are no longer isolated "alien" but have become familiar character options for the audience.

Thirdly, in the context of gender politics, the #MeToo movement and the chain effects it triggered in the Korean cultural industry have made sexual harassment, sexual violence and gender inequality in the workplace a public issue, and feminist discourse has shifted from the margins to the explicit. Therefore, film and television works have the task of exposing system failure and gender violence, and women's radical actions on the screen are regarded as symbolic responses to real-world dilemmas [9]. Women's fierce confrontation with patriarchy and institutional structures in crime narratives is both a genre strategy and a metaphorical counterattack against reality. To sum up, women in Korean crime movies are more likely to complete the transition from discipline to rebellion on the initiative spectrum. This is the result of the linkage between trauma culture, genre tradition and gender politics. The image of the rebel therefore has a high degree of cultural recognition.

3.2 China: Institutional discipline and "restricted initiative" under the tradition of realism

Compared with South Korea, the image of women in Chinese crime movies remains more stable in the middle of the initiative spectrum. This pattern is closely related to institutional disciplines. The content censorship system sets clear red lines in terms of violence, gender politics, and institutional criticism, requiring criminal narratives to eventually return to the value track of "authority of the rule of law" and "restoration of order" [10]. If high-initiative female rebellion is seen as a challenge to the existing order, it is often difficult to obtain a positive space for

presentation within the mainstream production system. Therefore, even if women's actions in narratives have the urge to resist, they are usually limited within the scope that does not subvert the legitimacy of the system, forming a structural upper limit of "actions are allowed, but complete overturning is not allowed."

Secondly, the long-standing tradition of realism in Chinese films regards crime narratives as an important way to reveal the contradictions of social structure and the plight of individual survival. Female characters are often used to carry multiple issues such as poverty, migration, and power imbalance, and their victimization status is shaped as a microcosm of social problems. In this aesthetic and ethical framework, the more important function of women's pain and oppression is to "show" structural injustice, rather than to "rewrite" the structure itself through their actions. Even if there is a certain degree of counterattack or resistance, it is often incorporated into the narrative logic of tragedy and powerlessness to maintain realism's commitment to the reproduction of "heavy reality", thus weakening the possibility of women going to extreme initiatives.

Thirdly, in the mainstream discourse environment, gender issues often enter public discussions in relatively mild ways such as "family ethics", "intergenerational relations", and "marriage dilemmas". Radical feminist discourse and direct institutional criticism are easily seen as forces that disturb social stability. Therefore, film and television creations tend to use metaphors, symbols and emotional narratives to refractively express the plight of women, rather than directly presenting high-intensity challenges to patriarchy and institutional structures. The action space of female characters in crime narratives is more reflected in strategic adjustments in structural gaps rather than a frontal impact on the foundation of order. As a result, Chinese crime movies have formed a stable "restricted initiative" range: women will neither be completely silenced nor be molded into complete rebels, but will maintain a subtle posture between obedience and resistance amid layers of discipline.

4. Conclusion

This study starts from three paths: patriarchal discipline, institutional structure and video culture, and reveals the hierarchical differences in the presentation of female initiatives in East Asian crime films. Through the "female initiative spectrum" framework, it is found that women's position in the narrative is not fixed, but constantly moves between no initiative, restricted initiative and extreme initiative. Due to the combined effects of institutional censorship, realism tradition and ethical norms in Chinese films, women mostly stay in the middle range of agency. Korean movies, with the support of trauma culture and genre violence, provide stronger narrative substantiveness and cultural legitimacy for female rebellious behavior. The differences in images of women in the two countries not only reflect different social structures, but also demonstrate the multiple variations of gender power in East Asian culture.

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