

# The Construction of Female Identity in Chinese Biographical Film *Anita* Through the Lens of Male Gaze

Tingting Cui<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Correspondence: Tingting Cui, Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China.

Received: August 5, 2022

Accepted: August 28, 2022

Online Published: August 29, 2022

doi:10.20849/ajsss.v7i8.1269

URL: <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v7i8.1269>

## 1. Introduction and Rationale: What Makes *Anita* a Special Chinese Biopic?

*Anita* 《梅艳芳》 is a biopic newly released in 2021, chronicling her journey from a child performer to one of most recognized music idols in China and Southeast Asia. Mui began her singing career as a little girl, giving shows at an amusement park. Known as “Asian Madonna”, she kicked off her career by winning a singing contest in Hong Kong in 1982. Meanwhile, Mui also gained fame as an actress. She starred in more than 40 movies over 20 years, winning *Taiwan’s Golden Horse* award for best actress in 1987 for her role as a tormented ghost in the movie “*Rouge*.” She was also known for her charity work, setting up the Anita Mui Charity Foundation in 1990s.

Biopics generally focus on a non-fictional or historical person, reflecting the characteristics of the social context by retelling his or her life story in a comprehensive way. Thus, the protagonist Mui and the context she lived in make *Anita* a special Chinese biopic. Anita Mui lived in Hong Kong from 1963 to 2003, and she is known as “The Daughter of Hong Kong” for the spirits and culture reflected by her life story. Different from most Chinese biopics, the protagonist in this film is a female, not a male like *Ip Man*, *Wong Fei Hung* or *Mei Lang Fang* in most Chinese biopic. Besides, Mui is a modern singer, not a patriotic heroine such as Qiu Jin and Liu Hu Lan, or a feudal empress such as imperial concubine Yang (杨贵妃) and Empress Wu.

In a survey of biography up to 1960, George Custen finds that female biopic subjects in the thirties were often queens

The image of Mui as a modern female is complex and multi-dimensional. She is traditional in some way, shouldering heavy family burden, expressing her wish for marriage, while her works broke the common impressions toward female at that time. For example, songs like “Bad Girl” caused a ruckus in 1985 with its brazen lyrics about female sexual desire. She openly revealed her wish for romantic relationship and marriage life by saying “My idol is Momie Yamaguchi, who resolutely decide to retire at the height of her career for the one she love”, while at the same time, she presented herself as an independent singer, actress and a philanthropist, revealing her feeling that “I will concentrate on my career development in these years and I don’t need to settle down yet”. To sum up, Mui’s life story reflects the multi-dimensional values and dilemmas of Chinese career woman, which makes *Anita* a special biopic in China.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Male Gaze and Visual Pleasure: A Feminist Approach to Film Criticism

The term “male gaze” is first coined by Laura Mulvey (1975), a filmmaker as well as a feminist theorist. The theory posits that because men control the creation of media, the narration of a story is dominated by a male point of view: “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female.” The object of gaze, i.e., the female character, are expected to take a more “passive” role to meet their male gazers’ desire. Due to the endured pressures of power of the gazers, the gazed are increasingly internalizing the gazers’ value and betraying their own will, which eventually lead to their self-objectification. Classical Hollywood cinema, as revealed by Mulvey’s polemic essay, reflects a patriarchal language: woman is represented as ‘other’, as an object rather than a subject, materializing man’s unconscious. In this way, the gender stereo-type is reinforced.

Although Mulvey’s approach has been relevantly criticized for having embraced the heterosexual matrix and not

having seriously considered the widely diverse modalities of spectatorship (Creed, 1993; Mirzoeff, 1999), her work remains important. Mulvey's work has decisively contributed to orientate film studies towards psychoanalysis, opening that intersection with feminist thought that has proved crucial for visual studies (Chaudhuri, 2006; Rose, 2007).

As a commercial film primarily target to entertain the audience and making profits, *Anita* reflects how the director/producer Longman Liang interpret the mainstream ideology in Chinese market toward the life-story of an unmarried "but" successful female star (most entertainment news use this as titles to report the romantic relationship of Mui). In other words, the depiction of Mui serves primarily to move the plot along, which in turns serve the will of the director rather than the character herself, to some extent. As a result, what kinds of life stories of Anita Mui are selected to stitch together to explain her fate and how they are integrated reflect the director's prediction toward audiences' preferences. For example, in the biopic, the pity in Mui's romantic relationship is highlighted heavier than her eagerness to pursuit career success.

In short, the theory of "male gaze" is adopted to evaluate the construction of Mui's life-story in this biopic for the following reasons: 1) it has been proven as an effective tool in film criticism; 2) it is suitable to use a feminist approach to investigate a biopic whose protagonist is a female; 3) evaluating the construction of Mui's life-story from the perspective of "visual pleasure" and "male gaze" will be helpful to identify the common impression and unconscious expectation toward a career lady of the filmmakers and the audiences.

### 2.2 The Features of Female Biopics

In a survey of biography up to 1960, George Custen (1992) identified several features of Hollywood's female biopics. First of all, the films avoid issues of female's ambition even though their protagonists are royal women (such as queens) who have power. Instead, the conflicts of them between female's power and their "emotional, romantic, and dependent nature" are highlighted. Second, in contrast to "celebrate the achievements of male subjects", female biopics show great interest in finding conflicts and tragedies in a woman's success. A victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and a non-traumatic personal life, and early deaths were preferable to long lives.

The Chinese female biopics demonstrate similar characteristics while differences exist. From 1949 to 1966, Chinese female biopic was concentrated on revolutionary heroine who is patriotic, highlighted the propaganda value of biopic films. After the ten-years Cultural Revolution, the female revolutionaries or heroines in the former female biopics walked down from the altar to daily life when their inner feelings are paid more attention. Another popular subject in Chinese female biopics is feudal empress, who usually have no ambition to gain power until they are hurt by other concubines and fail to gain the love and protection from the emperor.

The trajectory of victimization and suffering seems to dominate Chinese women's biography. Will there be any difference when the protagonist in *Anita* is a successful singer, actress and a philanthropist? What kinds of life stories are picked out from Anita Mui's experience to construct her identity and how these fragmentary events are integrated? Adopting the perspective of male gaze will be helpful to identify answers to these questions and to provide reasonable interpretation.

## 3. The Portrayal of Anita Mui Under the Male Gaze

Anita Mui is the queen of Hong Kong's pop-music industry. After she won a singing contest in 1982, her life in the limelight began, and she started her acting career at about the same time. Both her singing and acting careers reached brilliant success, and she made great contribution to the society by charity, thanks to which she was respected as "the daughter of Hong Kong". However, in the biopic, Mui is depicted as a protectee instead of a protector and a girl longing for marriage rather than an artist striving for success.

### 3.1 Anita Mui: A Protector or a Protectee?

Anita Mui's acting career was actually a breakthrough in Hong Kong's films at that time, which is not mentioned in the biopic. Distinct from other famous actresses with oriental feminine, Mui's innate charisma and tough personality contributed to the emerge of some rare plots in Hong Kong's films. Through her performance, female can act as protector and savior of male characters in movies such as *A Better Tomorrow*, *Justice My Foot*, *My Father is a Hero* and etc.

It cannot be said that Mui's charisma is so powerful that she single-handedly changes HK film industry but it is a truth that Mui visualize the brave heroines exist in directors' mind. However, she is carefully depicted as a passive protectee of male characters in the biopic. Each time Mui encountered setbacks and frustrations, a male character will come out and serve as an instructor or protector to guide her out of the mist.

**Scene 1:** When Anita Mui was depicted as a girl distressed about whether to pursue her love or to concentrate on her career development, her costume designer Mr. Liu gave her an epiphany with the following sentence: “The most important thing of a female artist is to keep sexy, and a girl daring to express her love and hate straightly is most attractive”. Mui decided to pursue her love bravely because of the support of her male friends.

**Scene 2:** Similarly, Mui ended her romantic relationship due to her boyfriend’s “protection”, who worried that their relationship will impact their career development since they are both young stars. A noticeable plot is that, when their dating was discovered by her boyfriend’s boss, Mui was pushed into a closet in a hurry, hearing her boyfriend talking to his boss that: “Please forgive me. I can’t ask her to come out. I am a man, and that is not a thing a man should do to the one he loved”. However, the real story is that, instead of protecting her, Mui’s Japanese boyfriend hurt her feelings severely by having close relationship with other female. Under this kind of narrative mode, Mui was portrayed as a passive role who made important decision based on a male’s suggestion instead of her own will.

**Scene 3:** Another representative plot of protraits that, after Mui was slapped by a gangster, her boyfriend managed to protect her by accompanying her to Thailand. The boy run around for her restlessly to straighten the thing out while Mui is portrayed as a dispirited girl crying in front of a mirror, confusing about the whole accident and being worried about her future. In Mui’s real life story, Anita asked her female friend Chen Lan (陈岚) rather than a male for help the moment she got bullied. Thanks to Chen Lan’s assistance, she leaves the place, unscathed. It cannot be denied that Chen has a powerful husband, but Chen herself also help her husband a lot by assisting him to build up their company. In other words, Chen herself is powerful and the power her husband hold is also part of her resource.

**Scene 4:** Mui’s sister serves as a contradictory role who sometimes exert negative influences on her. One typical line of Mui’s sister is that “a woman bears either a baby or a cancer in her womb”, which sounds like a curse to Anita Mui who are unmarried. In the film, Mui feels upset or even jealousy toward her sister’s wedding and reasons behind her negative feelings are not presented. How would the audience feel when they are watching this scene? Will they feel confused? Or, will they unconsciously accept the setting that a female will easily feel jealousy toward other females when they gain happier marriage life?

To sum up, in the four plots mentioned above, males are depicted as active protectors and instructors while females are portrayed as passive roles waiting to be rescued. Meanwhile, it is noticeable that almost all the important figures in Mui’s life are depicted to be males, while female, such as Mui’s sister was portrayed as a contradictory role who will exert negative influences on her.

### *3.2 Anita Mui: A Girl Longing for Marriage or an Artist Striving for Success*

The icon of HK entertainment industry is depicted as a tragic woman yearning for marriage and romance in vain, which echos with George Custen’s (1992) statement that Hollywood’s female biopics tend to “avoid issues of female’s ambition” and “show great interest in finding conflicts and tragedies in a woman’s success”.

It could not be denied that Mui wished to get into marriage, as she had mentioned in an interview: “My idol is Momie Yamaguchi, who resolutely to retire at the height of her career for the one she loves and to build her family.” However, it is also a truth that she reveals her feelings in an interview in 1985 that her boyfriend was unhappy because she was too occupied by work but “I will concentrate on my career development in these years and I don’t need to settle down yet”. In a word, the attitudes Mui hold for family and career is complicated and multi-dimensional.

However, the biopic spent a lot of time to depict her pity and sorrow when Mui broke up with her Japanese boyfriend. Meanwhile, the way it integrated these fragmentary events build a causal relationship between Anita’s devotion to work with the leave of her boyfriend: since she cannot find comfort from romantic relationship, she had no choice but to devote herself to work. Neither her eagerness to success nor her strong heart is revealed by the narration. In addition, Mui is portrayed to be a jealous sister who feel uncomfortable for her elder sister’s wedding and she deliberately upsets her sister by being late for 4 hours. The sorrow of being unmarried is finally reinforced by describing Mui’s wish to wear a wedding dress in her final farewell concert in great details. Instead of highlighting Mui’s strong will and her love for the stage, lots of shots are used to depict how lonely she was.

It is a truth that Mui wished to have a happy marriage. However, it could not be denied that she was also an artist striving for success, wishing to accomplish her dream in the stage. All these stories deserves equal narration to build up a comprehensive and complicated image of Anita Mui.

## **4. Conclusion**

Based on the analyses above, it seems that in the biopic *Anita*: 1) almost all the important figures in Mui’s life

are depicted to be males who serve as active protectors and instructors, while Mui are portrayed as a passive role waiting to be rescued; 2) Mui, the icon of HK entertainment industry, is depicted as a tragic woman yearning for marriage and romance in vain, neglecting her ambitions and inner power.

Why do *Anita* and other female biopic share these features? From the perspective of the male gaze theory, the narration of a story is dominated by a male point of view because men control the creation of media: “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female”. Which dimensions of protagonists’ personalities and life stories were picked up to construct their identity are decided by the film makers, while it is reasonable for directors to make their choices based on audiences’ preferences they assumed. Therefore, it can at least be inferred that, the director of *Anita* believe that audiences enjoy watching story in which conflicts and tragedies in a woman’s success are highlighted. The deeper psychological reasons for these preferences may be that men will feel threatened by women’s success in career because it “should” be males’ dominant area. This kind of threat can be greatly relieve if this woman shows no ambition to success and she feel sorrow if she fail to have a happy marriage with a man (in heterosexuality).

What would be the potential harmful outcomes of this kind of narration? The first issue is that, do the audiences, especially the female audiences, really enjoying the story? As the rapid development of Chinese economy, the transformation of Chinese society undergone rapid changes in all aspects. One of them is that the gender consciousness of the overall society has been changed to some extent. Whether female audiences with increasing awareness of gender equality and gender stereotypes will watch the biopic comfortably and make good comments toward this kind of narration deserves filmmakers’ concern. Moreover, it is still harmful even if the female audiences enjoy watching the story because “due to the endured pressures of power of the gazers, the gazed are increasingly internalizing the gazers’ value and betraying their own will, which eventually lead to their self-objectification”.

Last but not least, this article does not set out to blame or to require a commercial film to undertake the responsibility to break up gender stereotypes or to improve gender equality. Instead, it serves as a reminder, suggesting that filmmakers should raise their awareness toward the working mechanism of “the male gaze”, and there would do no harm to build up a complicated and comprehensive female image with power and ambitions, which can potentially attract more female audiences.

### References

- Bingham, D. (1999). “I Do Want to Live!”: Female Voices, Male Discourse, and Hollywood Biopics. *Cinema Journal*, 38(3), 3-26.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2006). *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. London: Routledge.
- Creed, B. (1993). *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- George, C. (1992). *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, pp. 102-7.
- Li, Z.-P. (2019). *Dream and the City*. Joint Publishing HK.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Rose, G. (2007). *Visual Methodologies* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).