

## Female Identity Crisis under the Perspective of Consumerism: Examples of “Female Spies” in Spy War Series

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### Abstract

Under the dual domination of economic interests and cultural mechanism, the commercial intent of the public cognition of female identity is increasingly evident. Under the dual impact of Chinese mainstream ideology and mass culture consumerism, the construction of female images in the uniquely political-characterized Chinese spy war series takes on identity confusion and “exfoliation”. The gradual diversification and personalization of female spy image have not only solidified women’s existence as a symbol of consumerism but also made it a carrier of “belief crisis”. What kind of identity crisis has happened to the female spies? And how should we view the “fall” of women identity and answer the question “who am I”?

**Key words:** Consumerism; Identity; Patriarchy

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### INTRODUCTION

Born out of the economic development, consumerism has promoted the formation of a new way of life, thinking and values and social and cultural ecology. At the same time, the traditional way of life and cultural value system tends to collapse and deconstruct. The late 1980s witnessed a national spread of consumerism across China. And its rapid expansion lies in the improvement of the mass media. The media images of women have

been incorporated into mechanism and the orbit of business system and market operation. Under the double control of economic interests and cultural mechanism, the commercial intent of public cognition of female identity and the self-awareness of women are increasingly apparent. As an important part of mass culture, movies and television shows are not any exception.

The construction of the female images in the film and television plays has also been affected by the concept of “consumption for consumption’s sake”, displaying confusion of identity and “exfoliation”. This is especially true for the spy war series, which dominates smokeless war plot and the loss of character identity. On the one hand, it meets the imagination of individual breaking through the current status—a peep of the female body. On the other hand, it also reveals subconscious identity crisis of women and the irreconcilable conflict between the individual and society. In spy war series, the features are mainly as follows: “female spies” on the surface have become increasingly important, and even become the key link. But in fact they do not escape the “shackled” reality such as Gu Xiaomeng in *The Message*, Li Ningyu and Hao Birou in the “*East Wind Rain*” etc. The “turn” of imagination actually highlights female identity crisis in the current era of consumerism. In what respects does this identity crisis is mainly manifested? How to treat this kind of identity crisis? And what kind of strategy should be taken to alleviate the crisis?

The uniquely political-characterized Chinese spy war series, has been included in the gender narrative of national political discourse in a posture of “being incorporated. Under the dual impact of Chinese mainstream ideology and mass culture consumerism, the narrative form of gender discourse has catered to the gender narration of the public-female body writing shackled by the “patriarchy” discourse system. This is more obvious in the role of “female spies” in “*Seventeen Years*”: Formatted dialogue, symbolic character

positioning, and patterned behavior, generally active on the screen as “non-gendered”—neutral image in political level. “Femininity” is on the surface present but absent in reality. In recent years, the dislocation development of “revolutionary” at the ideological level and “watch” in consumerism culture makes female spies a new sight in films and television plays: women tend to be more diversified and personalized, occupying the double identity of “female heroines” and “female spies” and also highlighting the existence of women, revealing women’s subject status and power. However behind “superficial prosperity” are women’s “aphasia” and the position of “being watched” or even the loss and fuzziness of gender. In other words, from the perspective of feminism, they are still in the shackles of male voice without achieving full independence of female consciousness. So, in what respects do this identity crisis is mainly manifested?

## 1. THE FEMALE SPY IMAGES ARE EXCESSIVELY OVER—CONSUMED AND SYMBOLIZED

“In the Sartre framework of signifier-subject and signified-object, not only women are wrongly represented, such errors also point out the shortages of this whole representation structure”. At present, “beauty agent”, “beauty spy” becomes the ones “being encoded” and “being narrated”, acting as a “foil” in the female narration without any substance. Female audience and actress themselves are attracted by “screen images”, having no sense of recognition of “alienation” under the male voice narration. In *Qiu Xi*, when Shuang Qing can’t bear the hardship of underground work, it means that she is no longer the “arranged one” or the “narrated one” in the male identity construction. So she disappeared on the screen. As a symbol of “simplicity”, *Qiu Xi* was the “the aphasia” and eventually became a memorial of heroes, inspiring the heroic spirit of Yan Haiqing at the expense of life. Another example is *The Message*. We are attracted by the intelligence, maturity and holistic consideration of Gu Xiaomeng and amazed by the self-sacrifice and her wrestling with the enemy. But the film only showed how she sent the message successfully. The inner feelings and mentality can only be imagined by the audience. The undermined female is a kind of coding symbols belonging to the gender awareness in social and cultural systems controlled by the public.

Once again, the images of female spies meet the male audience’s imagination of “body writing”. The “visual violence” presented by scenes in which female spies are tortured meets the subconscious demands of current audience for thrill and desire. Unlike traditional spy films, female spies are mostly dressed in traditional Chinese cheongsam, with charming posture, which is often a reference to the male’s aesthetics values. Such as

the dancer in *Hui Honglian* in *Qiu Xi*, whose appearance was only to meet the desire of males represented by Xia Huimin? Like Huan Yan in *East Wind Rain*, although taking on important intelligence work, her identity was also a dancer; in “*Lust, Caution*”, to lure the puppet leader, Wang Jiazhi resorted to “seduction” means. Women with unique beauty, gaining successful intelligence, of course, should play an important role in the spy. But this does not indicate that the screen images of women gained the dominant position. Conversely, when female images become a narrative symbol or desire carrier, they once again become a “watched” individual under “patriarchal consciousness”. In a sense, the body is not only a symbol of desire, but also a symbol of political power discourse. Consumerism era, full of visual impact, power for the control, play and possession of the body is a metaphor for the political desire. Li Ningyu in “*The Message*”, was innocently involved in the brutal, closed interrogation. To break her mental defense, the Japanese officer stripped her clothes; *Hui Honglian* in *Qiu Xi* is Xia Huimin’s relief object as well as the object to vent anger of political defeat. And when she refused to follow him to Guangzhou, Xia shot her. So, the shape of female images in the spy war films caters to male’s imaginary consumer psychology of “body writing”.

Moreover, this kind of identity crisis is reflected in the material “fall” and the “marginalization” of viewpoint of the female images. The theme of a spy film is the special social activities undertaken by heroes. And the public conventional gender stereotypes of “hero” belong to men. Women, especially the “female spies”, become the foil or ornament of hero narrative. Female spies together with spying activities become symbols of male subject ideology and desire imagination in the form of “objectified” otherness. In other words, the present female spies who set wisdom, beauty and ability in one have solidified the affirmation of male subject value. As a woman who clearly embodies the needs of the heart of survivors, men want her to achieve self-realization while going through the process of striving for perfection. The “fall” also embodies in the change of the role of “emotional” from the role of “rational”. That a female spy, shouldering the vital task of national survival, rationally mixes with the enemy, but hesitates to and fro in love has become the conventional technique. For example, Wang Jiazhi in “*Lust, Caution*”, losing rationality in love, has ruined her life. The fact is that the return of “the female character” is the expectation and stereotype of women in the current male-centered discourse and mainstream discourse. It is this hidden attachment that makes us believe the diversification and personalization of women are improvement of their status in the creation stage and the audience-accepted stage. Yet this kind of “refinement” represents the “fall” of female identity—a foil and further consolidation of male dominance.

In a word, most of “women” in the spy war series are in a position of “being watched” and “being consumed”.

Women and the roles they play are the objects of male discourse and the mainstream ideology. “Female Spies” and “honey trap” still take gender political relations as a premise in the patriarchal society. The double perspectives of “body” in the story, and the double splitting and confusion of “sacrifice of body” and “dedication of emotion” are also the embodiment of the passive position of women. Why is there this kind of identity crisis? This is closely related to the consumerism social and cultural context and the gender stereotypes commonly agreed on the construction of female identity. The location of “female spy” in the male-centric narration field consolidates the “otherness” and “object” role of women, highlighting the identify crisis of women.

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## **2. TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY FROM A PRODUCTION-ORIENTED ONE TO A CONSUMPTION-ORIENTED ONE**

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First of all, in the transformation of society from a production-oriented one to a consumption-oriented one, the city culture, media culture and consumption culture become the focuses of people’s life, which naturally highlights the need for visual culture. The theoretical paradigm of consumer society emphasizes the satisfaction of desire and the prevalence of hedonism and the female body has become an element of visual consumption as a “sight”. The consumption culture is mainly the consumption of symbolic meaning itself with symbols also gradually becoming the main way of social circulation, and the images of “female spies” are no exception. Different from the ordinary female images, “female spies” are a concentration of courage, wisdom, beauty and other attractive elements, especially the “elite women” bearing the weight of national responsibility. In the spy narration with male being the hero, the control and conquer of this kind of woman solidify the position of “male-dominated discourse”. Under the social and cultural context of consumerism, this kind of symbol consumption is to satisfy a certain social status, fame and honor. Therefore, the more diversified, personalized and fuller the female images, the more prominent the male-centered narration. The greater the importance of the “female spies” means a stronger attachment to the male and a more symbolic value of women. Therefore, the realization of self-identity of women in this kind of symbolic value becomes the biggest constraint of the fundamental improvement of women’s status.

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## **3. THE PUBLIC’S CONSUMPTION PSYCHOLOGY IS MORE SUBJECT TO THE CONVENTIONAL GENDER STEREOTYPES**

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Since ancient times, the patriarchal tradition has been deeply rooted in the public. Despite of the influence of the women’s liberation movement, such concept exists

to some degree. Simone de Beauvoir holes the view that: “Today, although women are not slaves of men, but always rely on men, these two genders have never had an equal share of the world.” The so-called “women’s liberation” refers more to the enjoyment of the rights men have for thousands of years, and the “equality between men and women” refers to no more than “women can do what men can do”. In the spy films, “female spies”, intelligent and competent, engage in the spying mission should be shouldered by men and take on the heavy task of national survival. Women are gradually lost in the “discourse” illusion. The improvement of “subject status” is a pursuit and an imitation of the engagement and authority of men under the premise of recognition of female personality. This is the subconscious prejudice of female against identity. In addition, “female spies” often get intelligence by the way of “seduction”, such as Wang Jiazhi in “Lust, Caution”, Hongyan in “East Wind Rain”, and Gu Xiaomeng in “The Message”. Regardless of what superhuman skills they possess, female spies are always centering on male perspectives.

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## **4. MALE-CENTERED HEROIC NARRATION WITH THE MARGINALIZED IDENTITY OF WOMEN**

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the spy films are male-centered heroic narration with the marginalized identity of women being placed in a concealed location. Today’s spy films combine the mainstream political and ideological education with the audience’s entertainment consumption concept. Themed by the revolutionary war, the spy series must correspond to the personal aesthetic consumption in the great revolutionary collective narration. And this is mainly embodied in the “mystified” processing of “female spy”. For example, Gu Xiaomeng always emerged as a supporter of the communist party and is calm in the face of interrogation, torture and death. She could handle complex crisis independently and finally sent the intelligence successfully, whereas her psychological journey is a “white space” to the audience. The processing of refusing the audience into the inner world hides identity of women as “individual”, and includes them in the male collective sacrifice system showing “revolutionary spirit”. This kind of “mystified” has shaped women as “ideal” and “divine”, but the prototype can’t be found in real life. Instead, the real female spies in the history, for various reasons, are not seemed on the screen. It means that the “female spies” we see is fictional. In other words, the fictional “woman” is used as means and tools to satisfy individual consumption desire in addition to balancing mainstream political discourse, that is, putting the idealized sublime faith in the fictional “female spy” images. This shows the “entertained” nature of present spy films, and this kind of “deified” precisely describes

the self-identity crisis of female.

Famous sociologist Giddens argued that: "Identity is not given- a result of the continuity of individual action system, but something created and sustained in the process of the individual self-examination". On the surface, the nearly perfectly shaped "female images" in spy films give women more autonomy and discourse, and "female spies" are charming scenery equal to men in spy activities. In the text, however, "female spies" are fictional. The appearance of such images is a kind of embodiment catering to the public aesthetic consumption view itself, and an image rendering of desire for women "body". Besides, it also reveals the audience' subconsciousness of "abuse" which is externalized as all kinds of torture and crisis imposed upon the female spies. The combination of brutal violence and certain aesthetic feeling becomes a new paradigm of spy films-postmodernism aesthetic style. It is in this kind of violence that the audience vents their desire of "bloodthirsty" that cannot be met in reality. Therefore, the phenomenon of no "spy" without "torture" is also understandable.

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## CONCLUSION

The gradual diversification and personalization of female spy images have solidified women's existence as a symbol of consumerism. Women become the individual carrier of "belief crisis". And the architecture of idealized belief in "fictional" women itself is a kind of political

entertainment, thus women become the "controlled" and "watched" in the entertainment. The fall of this identity is reflected in "exfoliation" of womens self-identity , the free and the confused "sacrifice" of "emotion" and "body", and the doubt of "who am I", which is the "character" identity crisis. The "omnipotent" of females on the screen loses touch with reality, which meets the wonderful self-imagination of the woman but it ignores the fact that this satisfaction is completed by the "fictional" individual, just like "flowers in the mirror or moons in the water". From the two levels, the consumerism era gives women more platforms to show self -discourse and body, but the architecture of the platform itself is built on the basis of male discourse and their aesthetic view. Therefore, no matter how wonderful the performance is on the stage, this wonder is still in the "remote control" of the male audience.

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