Post-Feminism and Idealization of Female Heroines in Contemporary Chinese Cinema—Deng Chanyu in *Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force*

Leyi Shao [*]

Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

* Corresponding Author Email: lsha3921@uni.sydney.edu.au

Abstract. With the development of feminist discourse and the modernization of society, the portrayal of female images in Chinese cinema has undergone significant transformations. These characters are becoming increasingly diverse, embodying distinct forms of "female power." In recent years, as the global expansion of post-feminism through neoliberalism has gained widespread dissemination, the idealized female images constructed within it have assumed an increasingly prominent position in media. A notable example is the portrayal of Deng Chanyu, a strong and independent female heroine in *Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force* (2025), whose depiction has sparked extensive attention and discussion among audiences since the film's release. This study takes Deng Chanyu as a case study, employing an interdisciplinary approach and film textual analysis to deconstruct the idealized female heroines in the film. It argues that the contradictions and complexities of post-feminism in China's social development, as depicted in the film, highlight the challenges currently faced by gender discourse in Chinese society. Furthermore, assessing the successes and shortcomings of idealized female images characterization provides significant implications for the rational construction of female representation in cinema.

Keywords: *Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force*, post-feminism, female images, heroines.

1. Introduction

The recent movie *Creation of the Gods* series pioneer a new mythological epic genre, elevating the industrialization and aesthetic of Chinese cinema [1], attracting substantial attention both within China and internationally. Among the characters in *Creation of the Gods II* (2025), Deng Chanyu stands out as one of the most remarkable female images. Since the film's release, her portrayal has sparked extensive discussions in mainstream media and among audiences. This image is widely discussed based on the feminist film criticism theory, which began to develop gradually since the 1970s. Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the "male gaze," arguing that women in film are often positioned as passive objects of visual consumption rather than possessing authentic subjectivity [2]. Because of the widespread dissemination of this theory, there has been increasing attention and critical discourse regarding whether the portrayal of female in visual media, particularly in mainstream commercial works, embodies their subjectivity.

Based on existing research and discussions, the author observes that most studies have supported the female empowerment constructed in this film with a mainly positive attitude. Many scholars discussed *Creation of the Gods* series as a significant departure from the traditional representation of female characters in original novels and previous film or television adaptations, introducing a more progressive and modernized vision of femininity [3]. Deng Chanyu challenges the stereotypes of female roles in mythology, history, and war films. Her characterization as independent, resolute, and fearless enriches the film's narrative depth and fills a historical void in the representation of women as "warrior goddesses" [4]. However, the representation theory of Stuart Hall proposes that the image presented by the media to the audience is a reconstruction of the real world rather than a copy of the actual situation [5]. Furthermore, Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" posits that gender identity is a performative and socially constructed process rather than a fixed or inherent trait [6]. Thus, based on theories of cultural representation and gender performativity, it can be argued that the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of gender issues and in constructing gender

identities [7]. Even if audiences have widely embraced Deng Chanyu's progressive representation, it raises critical questions about the new ideological underpinnings of such idealized female heroines in contemporary Chinese cinema. These idealized female images in Chinese cinema are shaped by a distinctive set of political, economic, and cultural conditions in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Since the PRC's economic reforms, the rise of consumer capitalism has led to the commodification of gender [8]. In recent years, with the rise of the "She Economy" (an economic phenomenon driven by female consumption), women's significant role and influence in the consumer market have been further emphasized, contributing to a greater degree of gender commodification. Concurrently, policies such as the One-Child Policy and the expansion of compulsory education in the PRC have enhanced female access to education, reinforcing the legitimacy of the discourse of "self-empowerment" through personal agency. Furthermore, at the turn of the millennium, western post-feminism has been widely disseminated in China through the rapid expansion of the internet. In response, film and television have increasingly adopted post-feminist tropes and pay more attention to the needs of female audiences, constructing idealized female images such as the "career woman" and the "independent, stylish professional" [9].

These idealized female images fulfill both the aspirations and consumption needs of contemporary Chinese women, particularly among the vast middle-class female population. By applying Christian Metz's theory of "the Imaginary Signifier," female audiences project their inner desires onto the screen, seeking to identify with these idealized characters as a way to compensate for perceived shortcomings in their own lives [10]. Within this context, *Creation of the Gods II* integrates post-feminist attributes—such as resilience, independence, and career ambition—into the depiction of Deng Chanyu, thereby shaping a female image that conforms to contemporary Chinese ideological discourses and achieving broad cultural circulation.

This paper examines Deng Chanyu's portrayal in *Creation of the Gods II* as a case study to explore the role of post-feminism in the construction of female images in contemporary Chinese films. It traces how post-feminism navigates the balance between "empowerment" and "discipline" by constructing an ideal female figure that aligns with the sociocultural context of modern PRC. This process ultimately shapes a new ideological framework.

2. The Inception and Development of Post-feminism

Post-feminism is an intellectual trend that emerged in the West during the 1980s. Influenced by various factors, it is a cultural phenomenon that both dialogues with and challenges mainstream feminism. Post-feminism emerged following the partial victories achieved by the second-wave feminist movement (1960s–1980s). The second wave of feminism primarily advocated for gender equality, bodily autonomy, workplace equity, and opposition to gender discrimination. However, it also faced criticism for its excessive politicization and the binary framing of gender relations. In this context, influenced by consumerism, cultural studies, and identity politics, post-feminism began emphasizing individual freedom of choice, diversity, and the re-embrace of traditional femininity. Post-feminism has consequently established a new system of sexual signification, which is apolitical in nature and grounded in women's consent, equality, participation, and pleasure [11]. It strongly emphasizes the power of modern women to make autonomous choices, affirming that the feminist movement's primary goals have already been achieved. It believes that contemporary women can attain self-empowerment through consumption, career advancement, and lifestyle choices rather than relying on collective or revolutionary feminist movements.

With the rise of neoliberal economic ideologies in the 2000s, feminist discourse was reshaped by market principles that valorized individual agency and self-efforts. With the growth of consumer capitalism, women became a vital market demographic. Post-feminism promotes a commodified form of empowerment, urging women to express agency through consumer choices, particularly in the beauty and fashion sectors [12]. Post-feminism has become increasingly intertwined with popular culture, including films, television, advertising, and other media forms. Digital media, in particular,

highlights the idea that women can enjoy independent careers while simultaneously pursuing romantic relationships and consumer freedom, thereby reinforcing and expanding post-feminism discourse's influence.

When post-feminism arrived in China, it underwent a process of cultural localization shaped by preexisting social structures and ideological imperatives. Due to the Neo-Confucian values upheld by mainstream Chinese society, post-feminism in China integrates female independence with national and familial responsibilities. The Neo-Confucianism discussed here refers to the PRC's utilization of the positive aspects of Confucian thought, such as social harmony, obedience to superiors, loyalty to the state, and the protection of the family, to stabilize a collectivist society and regulate its people [13]. Therefore, this framework inevitably accentuates the expectation advocating women's self-sacrifice and devotion to the collective, reinforcing the notion that heterosexual marriage is a necessary measure for maintaining social stability. The archetype of the "successful woman" in China is one who is career-oriented and independent, as emphasized by post-feminism. However, she is also expected to embody self-sacrificial virtues that align with collective values. This definition of female independence within a collective moral framework creates an ideal where women are seen as "gentle and firm." This reflects a high moral expectation that, despite achieving personal fulfillment in society, women are still expected to retreat to domestic roles or adhere to traditional heterosexual norms, dedicating their self-worth to the greater good of the community.

3.   The Construction of Deng Chanyu's Image from a Post-feminist Perspective

3.1. Female Autonomy of Individualism through Character's Personality

Post-feminism emphasizes female independence, attributing success to individual choice and effort rather than collective action or structural support. From the character's disposition perspective, Deng Chanyu, the female general of the Shang dynasty army, is granted independent decision-making authority. The director stated, "we aimed to reshape the image of a female warrior who dominates the battlefield, one who determines her fate and beliefs." A key scene establishes this disposition is when Wen Zhong intends to return the military seal and refuses King Zhou's command to attack Xiqi, Deng Chanyu steps forward voluntarily, offering to lead the troops herself. This moment firmly establishes her as a bold and responsible leader through autonomous decision-making. Her autonomy is further emphasized when she independently pursues and attacks Ji Fa in the battle, engaging in a combat sequence that highlights her self-reliant nature rather than waiting for the army's reinforcements.

This narrative aligns with post-feminist "choice discourse," which constructs women's success as the result of personal effort rather than systemic change [12]. Deng's intelligence and strength in the film appear entirely individual efforts, seemingly unaffected by social structural repression. However, the "female's success equals personal effort" ideology often obscures systemic barriers such as patriarchy and class oppression. Deng's resolute and valiant characteristics are primarily shaped by her years of military experience alongside her father. Through effort and rigorous training, she acquires exceptional combat skills and strategic cleverness, embodying the traits of masculine attributes, which is closely linked to her extended immersion in a rigidly patriarchal military system.

"Masculinity" has been viewed as the crucial point to constructing male identity, and its central concept is power [14]. Then, a woman's simulation of masculine traits can be interpreted as a strategy to attain power. Consequently, through self-efforts, Deng strives to discard conventional notions of femininity and embrace masculinity to transcend societal constraints and achieve female subjectivity and success. This perspective suggests that women must try to emulate and adopt masculine traits to achieve equality. As a result, the socially recognized character traits of masculinity as strong and able are idealized in the process of female characters' affirmative performance of stereotypical masculinity; the hegemonic construction of femininity as a weakness is not being challenged or changed [15].

3.2. Sexual Empowerment in Character Visual Design

Sexual empowerment, a key feature of post-feminism, mentions women's affirmation of autonomy and power through control over their bodies and expressions of sexuality. In *Creation of the Gods II*, Deng Chanyu represents a post-feminist discourse of sexual liberation and empowerment, which is consistently reflected in her visual portrayal throughout the film. Compared to the original novel, the film's adaptation embraces a more modernized representation of female warriors. Unlike traditional depictions of female beauty in Chinese culture—marked by delicate facial features and ornate styling—Deng's appearance in the film abstains from conventional femininity. Instead, she embraces a minimalist aesthetic. With minimal makeup, her striking cheekbones and phoenix-like eyes highlight her strong and determined presence. Deng Chanyu's portrayal also resists the commercialized sexualization found in many Western female superheroes (such as Wonder Woman and Black Widow).

In contrast, Deng Chanyu's costume and physicality establish an androgynous presence, allowing her to claim autonomy as a form of sexual empowerment. A pivotal scene in the film exemplifies this dynamic. Before leading her troops into battle, King Zhou bestows upon Deng a suit of armor, symbolizing her elevated status as a distinguished warrior. When she first appears clad in this armor, riding assertively across a bridge, a spy from Xiqi recognizes her as a female general and mocks her "*you nü huai chun*" (The maiden longs for love) with a provocative song. It is a Chinese idiom that describes a young woman's affection or admiration for a member of the opposite sex. Deng Chanyu, however, refuses to be insulted. Instead, she raises her head high, declaring, "Let them sing louder," and rides forward with a confident look. This moment captures her reflection of power over her body, transforming what could have been an act of objectification into a statement of authority. Her sexuality is no longer passive or objectified; instead, it becomes evidence of her empowerment.

As Angela McRobbie further argues, post-feminism employs "sexual empowerment" to make women believe they have complete control over their bodies and desires. However, this empowerment often remains aligned with patriarchal standards [16]. In the film, after removing King Zhou's royal armor bestowed upon her, her appearance gradually shifts towards a more traditional feminine visual representation. The feminine and gentle features of her appearance come through. Witnessing the male protagonist's actions and the merciless slaughter of innocent civilians by the Shang, she develops a sense of empathy and ultimately defects to the Xiqi people. From this narrative strategy, her independence is carefully contained so as not to threaten any male characters. This suggests that her sexual empowerment is still subsumed within the patriarchal system, where the power she gains through this empowerment does not truly disarrange patriarchal structures but rather exists as fighting back against the male gaze.

3.3. Traditional Constraints on Strong Female via Character Arcs

Post-feminism frequently portrays the concept of a "strong woman," suggesting that she must pursue her career, often at the expense of her own well-being. From the character arc in this film, Deng Chanyu initially returns to the battlefield to honor her father's legacy. Later, King Zhou orders her to "fight for me in place of your deceased father" during the campaign against Xiqi. Then she meets Ji Fa, a young hero who shares a similar destiny, and the two form a bond of mutual admiration and growth. Under Ji Fa's influence, Deng Chanyu evolves from "fighting for the dead" to "fighting for the living," ultimately achieving her character growth through her self-sacrifice to save the people of Xiqi. This contrasts with the traditional film stereotype that female heroes must rely on men or follow the conventional path of redemption through love. Thus, she is no longer a rescued image or a supporting character, emerging as a subjective, self-sacrificing heroine.

However, Chinese female heroes are often described not only as warriors but also as family and moral values defenders. Their strength is often not for personal empowerment but to serve the family, the nation, or male characters [17]. The concept of "*jia guo tianxia*" (family-state under the heaven) is deeply ingrained in mainstream Chinese values, leading to narratives centered on family and the state dominating the PRC's media and reinforcing patriarchal family structures and traditional gender

norms in films. Deng initially displays unquestioning loyalty to her father's behavior and the king's commands, striving relentlessly to fulfill the duties assigned by her family and nation. Later, she encounters Ji Fa, who influences her, and during their interactions, she develops feelings and affection for him, ultimately sacrificing herself for his growth.

Therefore, despite being the most powerful female character in the film, Deng cannot escape the patriarchal ideologies ingrained in her, and her romantic involvement with a male character remains a significant aspect of her story. This reflects one characterization of the post-feminist film is that it simultaneously espouses conservative and liberal values about gender, family, sexuality, and romance [18]. Despite Deng Chanyu's strength, her sacrifice ultimately reinforces the male power structure, positioning her as a narrative tool that drives the actions of male characters and safeguards the country's peace. Such a character arc aligns closely with the moral expectations imposed on contemporary Chinese women by post-feminism, which is intertwined with Neo-Confucian ideals.

3.4. The Consumerist Potential of Idealized Females in Market Strategies

Post-feminism integrates female empowerment with consumerism, making the "independent woman" a marketable commodity. From this film's marketing perspective, Deng Chanyu has high commercial value and is a major promotional highlight. At the end of *Creation of The Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*, the director included brief teaser clips from the ending, where Deng's mere seconds of screen time immediately drew wide attention. In response, *Creation of the Gods II* marketing campaign actively leveraged Deng as a primary selling point. The director emphasized in pre-release promotions that the character was deliberately reimagined to break free from the patriarchal constraints of traditional Chinese mythology. Deng quickly gained audience and media attention following the film's release. Some audiences argued that her decisive leadership made her a more fitting ruler than the male protagonist.

Media narratives also framed her as "the resurgence of true female power in the cinema." Deng's character aligns with contemporary female consumer aesthetics—she is independent, powerful, and a capable heroine—while also fulfilling traditional male market expectations of female appeal, such as expressions of emotional devotion and self-sacrificial virtue. Her portrayal as a new-era female hero is successful from a commercial perspective. Her image as a female warrior resonates with both female and male audiences.

Nevertheless, this form of symbolic empowerment does not signify true gender equality but rather the commercial exploitation of the concept of female empowerment. Before the release of *Creation of the Gods II*, the actress portraying Deng Chanyu cooperated with multiple luxury and sports brands. These brands consistently shaped her as independent and confident, reinforcing a "heroine-like" image that visually resonated with her portrayal in the film—donning majestic black-and-gold armor, exuding confidence on horse, and demonstrating her combat skills as a general. From a consumerist perspective, the market has capitalized on Deng's image, extending her beyond the film narrative to become a purchasable, imitable, and reproducible commodity through costume design, character traits, and visual aesthetics.

From this, it is evident that the independent female image of Deng is a commodified product shaped by the film industry and capital markets. As a result, narratives around female self-empowerment have been packaged as appealing selling points for Chinese women. While this trend has contributed to the spread of gender equality concepts, it has not truly empowered women and is essentially just a strategy of consumerism.

4. Conclusion

This study analyzes Deng Chanyu in *Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force* as a case study to deconstruct the idealized image of the female hero. It explores the construction representations of female images in the contemporary Chinese film industry under the influence of post-feminist discourse. This paper analyzes the impact of post-feminist discourse on the idealized portrayal of female characters in contemporary Chinese cinema from the perspectives of cultural representation and gender construction. By examining four aspects—character personality, character visual design, character arcs, and marketing strategies—the study clarifies how post-feminist discourse, while advocating for gender equality and female independence, simultaneously imposes new societal expectations on women.

Unlike many traditional heroines, female heroines like Deng Chanyu do not rely on men or familial ties to gain agency. However, their characterization remains deeply embedded within the ideological framework of contemporary China. To gain agency, female characters often adopt male roles and represent patriarchal values instead of directly challenging the existing patriarchal order. Although they exhibit a degree of progressive consciousness reflective of their era, demonstrating an awareness of self-worth and striving to validate their social achievements through their own efforts, they nevertheless remain subordinated within the framework of patriarchy. The images of females on screen are based on the requirements for women in the stage of social development. When female audiences identify with and emulate these idealized heroines, they simultaneously resist the predetermined roles traditionally imposed on women by society while reinforcing a new form of patriarchal culture.

In contemporary Chinese cinema, the idealized female heroes reflect the themes of post-feminist discourse. While these characters are promoted as symbols of empowerment, they primarily function as a narrative tool to capture the interest of female audiences and address societal concerns about gender inequality. Thus, the idealized female heroines in Chinese cinema embody a paradoxical feminist discourse: they advocate for gender equality and female independence yet confine women within a new moral framework that demands they conform to the idealized image prescribed by post-feminist discourse. Ultimately, rather than subverting patriarchal culture, this approach imposes an even stricter set of moral expectations.

References

[1] Chen, Xuguang. "*Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force*: Human-Centered Ethics and Its Tensions in a World of Gods, Immortals, and Demons." Film Art, February 8, 2024.

[2] Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Screen 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

[3] Zhou, Wenping. "*Creation of the Gods I*: The 'Restored' Chinese Ancient Mythological Epic from a Modern Perspective." China Film Journal, September 6, 2023.

[4] Ren, Shengsu, and Wang Xiaoshang. "*Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force*: Reflections on the Creation and Merits of Domestic Mythological Epic Films." Journal of North University of China (Social Science Edition), 2025.

[5] Hall, Stuart. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London: SAGE, 1997.

[6] Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990.

[7] Ali, Ghulam, and Lubna Akhlaq Khan. "Language and Construction of Gender: A Feminist Critique of SMS Discourse." British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences 4, no. 2 (2012): 68–79.

[8] Yanning, He. "Female Perspective and Gender Politics in Chinese Internet Buzzwords." Peking University Journalism and Communication Review 1 (2017): 19.

[9] Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra, eds. Interrogating Post-feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

[10] Metz, Christian. The imaginary signifier: Psychoanalysis and the cinema. Indiana University Press, 1981.

[11] McRobbie, Angela. "Post-feminism and popular culture." Feminist media studies 4, no. 3 (2004): 255-264.

[12] Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility." European journal of cultural studies 10, no. 2 (2007): 147-166.

[13] Song, Xianlin. "Reconstructing the Confucian ideal in 1980s China: the "culture craze" and new Confucianism." In New Confucianism: A critical examination. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003, 81-104.

[14] Connell, Robert William. Masculinities. New York: Routledge, 2020.

[15] Özkan, Derya, and Deborah Hardt. "The strong female lead: Postfeminist representation of women and femininity in Netflix shows." Female agencies and subjectivities in film and television (2020): 165-187.

[16] McRobbie, Angela. The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change. London: SAGE, 2008.

[17] Edwards, Louise. Women warriors and wartime spies of China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

[18] Schreiber, Michele. American postfeminist cinema: Women, romance and contemporary culture. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.