

Recreating the “Oriental Woman”: A Comparative Analysis of Generative AI’s Portrayal and Imagination of Contemporary Chinese Female Images Based on DeepSeek, ChatGPT-4.0, and DouBao AI Painting

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Abstract: With the rapid development of generative AI technology, significant potential and cultural biases have emerged in its portrayal of contemporary Chinese female images. This study focuses on three generative AI systems — DeepSeek, ChatGPT-4.0, and DouBao AI Painting — to compare how Chinese and Western AI “recreate” Oriental female imagery. Through interpretative analysis, we reveal cultural and technological limitations underlying these portrayals. Findings indicate stark differences in cultural interpretations: Chinese AI obscures “midlife crises,” exoticizes bodies through male gaze, and commodifies visuals, reflecting tensions between traditional “virtuous wife/mother” roles and “modern women”. In contrast, Western AI distorts Chinese female images via “partial” worldviews, atmospheric distortion, and aesthetic hegemony, reproducing cultural power imbalances. The constructed images by Chinese AI mirror postfeminist complexities, while Western AI perpetuates Orientalist tropes, revealing lingering power dynamics in global cultural representation.

Keywords: generative AI, contemporary Chinese female images, comparative analysis; cultural bias, algorithmic limitations

1. Introduction

The advent of ChatGPT in November 2022 catalyzed advancements in generative AI, positioning it as a transformative infrastructure for human-machine interaction. Generative AI, powered by transformer models and large-scale pretraining datasets, aims to replicate human-like text generation and natural language understanding. However, its societal risks—particularly algorithmic bias and discrimination—have garnered increasing scrutiny. Existing research highlights biases in race, culture, and occupation, yet gender bias studies remain scarce. Notably, Luhang Sun et al. (2023) demonstrated gender disparities in AI-generated professional imagery, with women underrepresented in male-dominated fields. This study addresses gaps by examining cross-cultural AI-generated imagery of Chinese women, exploring how technological systems reproduce and amplify macro-level gender biases rooted in cultural structures.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1 Media Representation and Female Imagery

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal values. In China, media portrayals have evolved from the “modern virtuous wife/mother” ideal (Yu, 2002) to diverse representations in television, emphasizing physical allure and outspokenness (Li, 2011). Western depictions of Chinese women often rely on orientalist tropes, such as portraying Empress Dowager Cixi as a “witch-like” figure in French satirical press (Peng, 2023). This study investigates how generative AI replicates or reinterprets these narratives, particularly regarding occupational identities, family roles, and aesthetic standards.

2.2 Postfeminism

Coined by Susan Bolotin in 1928, “postfeminism” critiques traditional feminism while embracing individualism and consumer culture (Whelehan, 2010). It manifests in media through self-surveillance and aspirational content, masking anxieties about gender roles (McRobbie, 2004). This framework guides our exploration of AI-generated imagery as both a reflection and perpetuator of contemporary gender dynamics.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample Selection

Using thematic analysis, we conducted image generation experiments with three AI models (DeepSeek, ChatGPT-4.0, DouBao AI Painting). A hermeneutic approach ensured nuanced qualitative analysis, addressing limitations of machine coding in detecting implicit biases.

3.2 Material Processing

To address the research questions, this study systematically examined how Chinese and Western generative AI software conceptualizes Chinese female imagery by extracting a set of keywords: (1) Chinese female identity, social status of Chinese women, professional roles of Chinese women, family roles of Chinese women; (2) New Era women. To explore how Chinese and Western AI reconstructs these representations, each keyword category was further divided into two groups: tagged with “China” and untagged with “China”, resulting in five keywords for image generation experiments. The experimental prompts followed the structure: “Generate an image of a/an/the [Chinese/untagged] + [keyword]”, such as “Generate an image of women in China”. This methodological approach builds on similar text-to-image generation experiments (Gorska & Jemielniak, 2023).

All experiments were conducted using a single dedicated computer, ensuring consistency through uniform English prompts across all trials. Generated images underwent no post-processing. From March 9 to 14, 2025, multi-round image generation experiments were performed for each keyword group, producing 210 images in total. Qualitative analysis was employed until data saturation was achieved, following established protocols in computational social science research.

4. Chinese AI-Generated Representations of Chinese Women

4.1 The “Disappearing Midlife Crisis”: Obscuring the Age-Related Challenges of Middle-aged Women

Ageism, sexism, and ableism in the global visual economy are neither new nor surprising (Rosalind Gill, 2008). The bodies of older women exist in a dialectical relationship between invisibility and hyper-visibility. In the dataset, Chinese generative AI systems—primarily DeepSeek and DouBao AI Painting—tend to depict Chinese women with a blend of traditional gentleness and modern independence. These images predominantly feature young women with soft facial contours, large eyes, fair skin, and diverse hairstyles and clothing. For instance, DeepSeek-generated images often portray Chinese women with willow-leaf eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, small noses, cherry-like lips, fair complexion, slender legs, and petite waists.

The “white, young, and slim” aesthetic standard functions as an invisible shackle, trapping many women in anxiety and insecurity. It drives them to relentlessly pursue an unattainable ideal of “perfection.” This irrational obsession with youthfulness not only objectifies women but also denies their intrinsic value.

The cultural industry thrives on both the pathological portrayal of silver-haired individuals and the commercialization of idealized aging (Wang Yun & Ming Wenjing, 2025). Modern media landscapes not only construct and reinforce public discourses about specific generations but also dictate how people of certain ages perceive themselves. By continuously shaping cultural experiences, these discourses cultivate age-related perceptions. Age becomes embedded in the cultural industry’s processes of redesign and production, intensifying the phenomenon of “culturally induced aging.”

4.2 The Male Gaze: The Alienation of Body Aesthetics under Patriarchal Culture

The concept of the “male gaze” was first introduced by art critic Laura Mulvey, which constructs female images as visual objects for male spectators. This serves to stimulate and satisfy the primal desires of male subjects, reflecting the dominant position of men in patriarchal societies who hold the majority of discursive power and construct subjectivity. The portrayal of young female characters through specific physical features and performances in mediated environments reaffirms the resurgence of heterosexual patriarchy in postfeminist culture (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2019).

In generating Chinese female images, DouBao AI Painting promotes specific facial standards, such as large eyes, high nose bridges, and pointed chins. These women are depicted with slender and petite figures, characterized by so-called “A4 waists” and “chopstick legs.” In terms of facial expressions, they present reserved smiles with gentle gazes, exuding approachability and friendliness. They are often dressed in sharp professional attire, featuring tailored blazers paired with knee-length skirts, and accessorized with delicate high heels. Such representations reflect an alienated “aesthetic” shaped by the male gaze. Within this distorted aesthetic framework, women’s bodies are monitored and evaluated by spectators. The male gaze influences spectators’ imaginations of appropriate appearances, physiques, and movements for women. Consequently, women unconsciously adopt the idealized images defined by male standards as references, developing unrealistic expectations and anxieties about their own bodies and appearances. Some may even alter themselves to conform to this so-called “beauty,” ultimately losing touch with their unique values and charms.

5. Western AI's Representation of Chinese Women

5.1 AI-Constructed "One-Sided" World: Simplification of Chinese Women's Social Identities

Studies reveal that modern societies still exhibit a skewed focus on women, reinforcing stereotypes through oversimplified portrayals (Zhao Zhi, 2009). Western generative AI systems disproportionately emphasize traditional artistic and cultural professions for Chinese women while neglecting their achievements in technology, business, and politics. For instance, ChatGPT-4.0 predominantly generates images of professional women in corporate settings: tailored blazers paired with straight-leg trousers, presenting investment strategies in boardrooms with confidence and precision. These portrayals highlight technical and managerial expertise, reflecting Western-centric ideals of female empowerment.

The root causes lie in biased training data and algorithmic design. Western AI systems are trained on internet datasets rife with stereotypes, shaped by Eurocentric values. Developers often unconsciously embed assumptions — such as perceiving Eastern women as “submissive, delicate, and traditional” — into algorithmic logic. This not only perpetuates monolithic representations but also stifles the diversity and modernity of Chinese women's roles.

5.2 Atmospheric Distortion: Western Filters Reconstructing Chinese Women

Cultural contexts shape divergent portrayals of Chinese women. In Western high-society settings, women often wear form-fitting attire that accentuates physical beauty without reservation. Consequently, Western AI systems impose Western aesthetics onto Chinese women, replacing distinct East Asian features with Eurocentric ideals—large eyes, high nose bridges, and sharp chins.

For example, ChatGPT-4.0's depictions resemble European aristocratic elegance: Chinese women in opulent court dresses adorned with embroidery, jewels, and fur trim, in vibrant colors like red, purple, and gold. The designs emphasize curves, with plunging necklines and cinched waists to highlight slender physiques. This “Western lens” distorts the dissemination of authentic Chinese female identities and cultural heritage, damaging China's international cultural image.

Although such abstraction seeks to subvert conventional beauty norms, it risks transforming women into abstract visual commodities. The complexity and diversity of female subjectivity are diminished, positioning them anew within cultural power hierarchies. Ultimately, this process does not liberate women's representations but ensnares them in another form of technological and aesthetic hegemony.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Chinese female imagery reflects national identity and aids cross-cultural communication. Both Chinese and Western generative AI face issues like socio-cultural biases and cultural hegemony. Generated imagery often oversimplifies women into fixed roles, influenced by Orientalism. Western AI's Chinese female imagery stays in Orientalist stereotypes, fueling civilizational clash narratives and reinforcing Western cultural hegemony.

Bryan S. Turner (2003) contends that Orientalism is ultimately an epistemological issue. Its theories on power, rationality, social change, and gender are fundamentally Western problems, inescapably rooted in Western perspectives. In disseminating other civilizations, many nations position themselves as the global benchmark and center, adopting a “civilizational superiority” stance to label heterogeneous cultures as “the Other.” They wield ideology as a weapon to criticize and attack others. This disregard for global diversity and the imposition of so-called “universal values” increasingly becomes a root cause of global conflicts. Thus, we must remain vigilant against the postfeminist and Orientalist undercurrents in Chinese and Western generative AI's portrayals of Chinese women.

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