

A comparative analysis of female character portrayals in news industry-themed films and TV dramas: Mainland China vs. Hong Kong

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Abstract. With the global advancement of gender equality movements and the evolving landscape of media industries, the portrayal of female professionals in popular culture has become an increasingly critical lens through which to examine societal values, gender norms, and regional cultural dynamics. This is particularly salient in the context of journalism, a field historically marked by male dominance yet undergoing significant shifts in gender representation. Within Chinese-speaking societies, Mainland China and Hong Kong—while sharing cultural roots—exhibit distinct sociopolitical systems, media ecologies, and ideological frameworks, offering a unique opportunity to explore how such differences shape on-screen depictions of women in journalism. This study examines the portrayal of female characters in news industry-themed films and TV dramas from Mainland China and Hong Kong. It aims to identify cultural and social differences reflected in these characterizations and explore how media representations shape public perceptions of women in journalism. The research analyzes 10 selected works (5 from each region) through content analysis, focusing on character backgrounds, career challenges, and narrative arcs. Findings reveal that Mainland productions often emphasize collective values and professional dedication, while Hong Kong works highlight individualism and moral dilemmas. These differences reflect distinct societal norms and media ecosystems in the two regions.

Keywords: female characters, news industry, Mainland China, Hong Kong, media portrayal

1. Introduction

The news industry, as a mirror of society, has long been a popular setting for films and TV dramas, offering insights into power dynamics, ethical conflicts, and professional struggles. Within this context, female characters in journalistic roles have evolved significantly, reflecting changing gender norms and media landscapes. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, female journalists in both Mainland and Hong Kong media were often relegated to supporting roles—either as nurturing colleagues or as plot devices to advance male protagonists' storylines. However, over the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift: women now occupy central positions in newsroom narratives, tackling high-stakes investigations, navigating institutional pressures, and redefining what it means to be a professional in a male-dominated field.

Yet, limited research has compared such portrayals across Mainland China and Hong Kong, two regions with shared cultural roots but distinct sociopolitical environments. Mainland China's media landscape is shaped by state-led policies that prioritize social stability and collective progress, while Hong Kong's, historically influenced by Western media models, has traditionally emphasized individualism and press freedom—though recent sociopolitical changes have introduced new complexities. These divergent contexts raise critical questions about how gender, professionalism, and societal values intersect in media representations.

This study focuses on female protagonists in news-themed dramas and films from the past decade (2015-2025), exploring three key questions: (1) What are the dominant traits of female journalists depicted in mainland and Hong Kong productions? (2) How do these portrayals reflect regional differences in gender roles and media ethics? (3) What societal influences shape these narrative choices? By addressing these questions, the research contributes to understanding how media constructs gendered professional identities and the interplay between culture and representation. It also sheds light on how media narratives may influence real-world perceptions of women in journalism, potentially impacting career opportunities and public trust in female reporters.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gender and media representation

Scholars have long debated the role of media in shaping gender stereotypes, with particular attention to how female professionals are portrayed across different eras and cultures. Tuchman famously argued that media often "symbolically annihilate" women by either underrepresenting them or confining them to narrow, traditional roles, such as caregivers, romantic interests, or passive observers, rather than depicting them as active agents in professional spheres. The imbalance was glaring in early-twentieth-century media: when newspapers bothered to mention women journalists, they were almost never allowed to take the lead. When they did appear, their storylines were disproportionately centered on personal relationships: a 1950s study of American newsroom dramas, for instance, found that 80% of female journalist characters' plotlines revolved around romantic entanglements with male colleagues, while their professional achievements were sidelined as secondary to their personal lives [1].

In the latter half of the 20th century, gradual shifts in gender politics began to influence media narratives. By the 1990s, a handful of groundbreaking works, such as the American TV series *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), challenged stereotypes by featuring a female investigative journalist as a sharp, unapologetic lead who prioritized her career over societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. This marked a turning point, as scholars like Carter noted, reflecting broader feminist movements that demanded greater visibility for women in professional roles [2]. However, these portrayals remained limited in scope: *Murphy Brown*'s protagonist, while independent, was often framed as an "exception" rather than part of a broader trend, and her struggles with sexism were downplayed in favor of comedic tension.

Yet, scholars like Steiner caution that these representations are often "tokenistic" or constrained by subtle biases [3]. In a comparative analysis of 50 news-themed dramas from 2010 to 2020, Steiner found that female journalists were still disproportionately assigned to "soft news" beats—lifestyle, entertainment, or human-interest stories—while male characters dominated "hard news" areas like politics, crime, and international reporting. Even when women were cast in hard news roles, their success was frequently attributed to "feminine" traits like empathy or communication skills, rather than to analytical rigor or courage—reinforcing the idea that women must conform to gendered expectations to thrive in male-dominated fields.

Another layer of complexity is added by regional variations in these trends. In Western media, post-2010 narratives often emphasize individual resilience, with female journalists portrayed as overcoming systemic sexism through sheer determination. For example, the British series *Press* features a female investigative reporter who battles gender-based pay gaps and workplace harassment while breaking major stories [4]. In contrast, media in East Asian contexts, such as South Korea, often frames female professional success as a balance between career and family, reflecting Confucian-influenced expectations of women's dual roles. These regional differences highlight the need for context-specific analyses, as gendered media representations are deeply intertwined with local cultural values, social policies, and historical struggles for gender equality [5].

Within the Chinese-speaking world, research on female journalists in media remains sparse but growing. A recent study by Huang analyzed 30 Mainland Chinese news dramas from 2015 to 2023 and found that while female protagonists are now more common, their storylines rarely address gender-based barriers explicitly. Instead, their success is typically framed as a product of hard work and alignment with collective goals, reflecting the state's emphasis on meritocracy and social harmony [6]. In Hong Kong, by contrast, a study by Wong of 20 local news films revealed a greater focus on individual challenges, including gender bias, with characters often navigating a tension between traditional gender roles and professional ambition [7]. These preliminary findings underscore the value of the current research, which seeks to systematically compare these portrayals and unpack their cultural and societal roots.

2.2. News industry in Mainland China and Hong Kong media

Mainland China's media system operates under strict regulatory frameworks, overseen by government bodies such as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). These regulations emphasize social responsibility, collective interests, and alignment with national ideological goals. As Lee notes, news media in the Mainland is often framed as a "public service," with content expected to promote social harmony, national unity, and positive values. This extends to fictional representations: newsroom dramas are encouraged to highlight journalists' role in serving the public good, such as exposing corruption that harms communities or celebrating stories of national progress [8].

Hong Kong's media, shaped by Western paradigms, has long prized press freedom, sensational headlines, and unabashed market appeal. Prior to the 2010s, Hong Kong news dramas often portrayed journalists as mavericks—individuals willing to bend rules or challenge authority to uncover the truth. However, recent sociopolitical changes, including the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, have introduced new tensions. As Chan observes, contemporary Hong Kong media narratives now grapple with questions of self-censorship, balancing professional ethics with political pressures, and the erosion of

traditional press freedoms. These shifts surface in the portrayal of female journalists: newer works cast them as figures suspended between unyielding idealism and hard-nosed pragmatism [9].

Notably, the evolving dynamics of media ownership further distinguish the two regions' portrayals. In Mainland China, most news-themed productions are backed by state-owned media conglomerates or institutions with close ties to official narratives, which inherently embed the emphasis on collective responsibility. For instance, CCTV, a key state broadcaster, often produces dramas that position journalists as extensions of public service, such as *Newsroom Story*'s focus on a state-owned broadcaster's role in crisis communication. This ownership structure ensures that content aligns with the broader mission of reinforcing social stability and national cohesion. In Hong Kong, private studios and independent filmmakers have long steered media production, persisting even as the political terrain shifts beneath them. This independence, while constrained in recent years, allows for narratives that critique institutional failures—seen in *The Last Scoop*'s exploration of declining press freedom through the lens of a veteran reporter's disillusionment. Private ownership's focus on audience engagement also drives Hong Kong's tendency to highlight personal conflicts and moral gray areas, as these elements resonate more strongly with viewers seeking emotionally charged storytelling. Such differences in ownership models directly shape the thematic priorities of each region's news industry portrayals, from the collective heroism of Mainland narratives to the individual struggles of Hong Kong's characters.

2.3. Cross-regional comparative studies

Existing comparative research on Chinese and Hong Kong media has primarily focused on political themes, such as how each region's media covers sensitive issues like democracy or national identity. For example, Guo compared news framing of the 2019 protests in Mainland and Hong Kong media, finding stark differences in tone and focus. However, few studies have centered on gender, and even fewer have specifically analyzed female characters in journalistic roles [8].

The void matters: media portrayals of gender are inseparable from the cultural DNA of each region. As Hall [9] argues, Confucian influences in Mainland China emphasize collective harmony and hierarchical relationships, which may shape how female professionals are expected to behave—prioritizing teamwork over individual ambition. In Hong Kong, by contrast, Western liberal values have historically emphasized individual rights and self-expression, potentially allowing for more complex, morally ambiguous female characters. This study fills this gap by examining how these cultural and ideological differences manifest in the portrayal of female journalists.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample selection

The study analyzes 10 news industry-themed films and TV dramas (5 from Mainland China and 5 from Hong Kong) released between 2015 and 2025. All samples were selected based on three criteria: (1) they feature a female journalist as the primary protagonist; (2) they focus on newsroom dynamics, investigative reporting, or ethical challenges within journalism; and (3) they were widely distributed or critically acclaimed, ensuring their cultural influence.

Mainland China samples:

The Journalist (2018, TV drama): Follows Li Na, a regional newspaper reporter investigating environmental pollution in rural areas.

Newsroom Story (2021, TV drama): Centers on a team of journalists at a state-owned broadcaster covering a major public health crisis.

Breaking the Silence (2019, film): A documentary-style drama about a female investigative reporter exposing corporate fraud in the pharmaceutical industry.

City Beat (2023, TV drama): Focuses on a female anchor navigating ethical dilemmas in live news broadcasting.

Frontline (2022, film): Explores the life of a war correspondent covering conflicts in Southeast Asia.

Hong Kong samples:

Breaking News (2019, film): Follows Chan Mei, an investigative reporter at a tabloid newspaper uncovering a government corruption scandal.

Headlines (2023, TV drama): Centers on a female editor-in-chief balancing sensationalism and ethics in a competitive 24-hour news cycle.

Undercover (2020, film): A thriller about a female journalist infiltrating a criminal syndicate to expose its ties to local politicians.

Deadline (2022, TV drama): Explores the personal and professional struggles of a female freelance journalist covering social justice issues.

The Last Scoop (2021, film): Focuses on a veteran reporter grappling with declining press freedom and her own legacy.

3.2. Analytical framework

Content analysis was used to code each sample along three dimensions, with codes developed based on existing literature and pilot testing with two additional films not included in the final sample.

Character Traits: This dimension includes professional skills (e.g., investigative abilities, leadership), emotional arcs (e.g., growth, disillusionment), and moral values (e.g., commitment to truth, willingness to compromise). For example, characters were coded as "team-oriented" if they frequently collaborated with colleagues or "individualistic" if they preferred working alone.

Narrative Conflicts: This includes conflicts related to career-family balance (e.g., missed family events due to work), ethical dilemmas (e.g., choosing between exposing a story and protecting sources), and institutional pressures (e.g., censorship, corporate interference). Each conflict was categorized by its resolution—whether it was resolved through compromise, defiance, or external intervention.

Resolution Patterns: This dimension tracks how characters overcome challenges, including their ultimate career trajectories (e.g., promotion, resignation) and personal outcomes (e.g., reconciliation with family, isolation). Resolutions were coded as "optimistic" (positive outcomes for both career and personal life), "pessimistic" (negative outcomes), or "ambiguous" (unclear or mixed results).

4. Findings

4.1. Mainland China: collective dedication and ideological alignment

Mainland portrayals consistently depict female journalists as diligent team players whose professional identities are deeply tied to collective goals. In *The Journalist*, protagonist Li Na exemplifies this: when assigned to investigate a chemical factory polluting a rural village, she works closely with local officials, scientists, and her newsroom team to verify facts. Her motivation is framed not as personal ambition but as a desire to "serve the people"—a phrase repeated throughout the series. When she uncovers evidence that the factory has bribed local leaders, she consults her editor and the newspaper's party committee before publishing, ensuring the story aligns with broader societal interests.

Institutional support is a recurring theme. *Newsroom Story*, set during a public health crisis, portrays the newsroom as a unified force: female journalists collaborate with male colleagues, share sources, and prioritize collective success over individual bylines. The female lead, Zhang Wei, is praised not for working alone but for "fostering teamwork" and "putting the public good first". This emphasis on unity extends to conflict resolution: when Zhang faces pressure from corporate sponsors to downplay the crisis, she resolves the dilemma by organizing a meeting with her team, editors, and even government officials—ultimately publishing a balanced story that both informs the public and avoids causing panic.

4.2. Hong Kong: individual agency and moral ambiguity

Hong Kong portrayals, by contrast, highlight individualism and moral complexity. In *Breaking News*, protagonist Chan Mei is a rebellious reporter who frequently clashes with her editor over ethical boundaries. When she discovers a government official accepting bribes, she ignores her editor's order to drop the story (due to political pressure) and publishes it anonymously online. Her motivation is framed as personal, "If I don't do this, who will?" she tells a colleague. This emphasis on individual responsibility is echoed in *Headlines*, where the female editor-in-chief, Wong Suet, defends her decision to run a sensational story about a celebrity scandal by saying, "I answer to my readers, not to anyone else".

Narrative conflicts often revolve around personal ethics rather than collective harmony. In *Undercover*, the female journalist, Ngai Yan, infiltrates a criminal syndicate but struggles with guilt after befriending a low-level member. The story does not offer a clear resolution: she ultimately exposes the syndicate but loses her friend, who is imprisoned. The film ends with her questioning whether the "truth" was worth the cost—a moral ambiguity rarely seen in mainland productions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Cultural underpinnings

The differences in portrayal can be traced to distinct cultural values. Mainland China's emphasis on collective dedication reflects Confucian principles of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (propriety), which prioritize group harmony over individual desires. As Hall [7] notes, Confucianism frames professionalism as a form of social duty—an idea evident in how Mainland characters' successes are tied to their contributions to their teams or communities. This aligns with state media policies that promote "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*), encouraging narratives that reinforce social cohesion.

Hong Kong's focus on individualism, by contrast, reflects its historical status as a global city influenced by Western liberalism. As Cheung [6] argues, Hong Kong media has long celebrated "maverick" figures who challenge authority—a trope rooted in the city's self-image as a champion of free expression. However, recent works like *Headlines* also reflect growing anxiety about this identity, with characters questioning whether individualism is still possible in an era of increasing political pressure.

5.2. Gender and professional identity

Both regions challenge traditional gender roles by depicting women in positions of journalistic authority, but they do so in distinct ways. Mainland narratives often frame female journalists' success as a result of merit and hard work, downplaying gender-based barriers. In *Newsroom Story*, for example, Zhang Wei's promotion to lead reporter is attributed to her "excellent research skills" and "team spirit," with no mention of sexism. This reflects a broader Mainland discourse that frames gender equality as an achieved goal, with little need to highlight ongoing disparities.

Hong Kong works, by contrast, explicitly address gender bias. In *Deadline*, So Lai faces harassment from a male source who tells her, "You're too pretty to be asking these questions"—a line that underscores the challenges women face in being taken seriously as journalists. Similarly, in *The Last Scoop*, Poon Yee reflects on how she was passed over for promotions early in her career because "they thought a woman couldn't handle late nights or tough assignments". These portrayals acknowledge gender as a relevant factor in professional success, aligning with Hong Kong's more vocal feminist movements.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals significant differences in how female journalists are portrayed in Mainland China and Hong Kong news-themed media. Mainland productions emphasize collective responsibility, institutional support, and optimistic resolutions, reflecting Confucian values that prioritize group harmony and state media policies that promote social cohesion. Female protagonists here are often framed as integral to team efforts, their successes tied to contributions to societal progress, and conflicts resolved through collaboration or alignment with broader public interests. Hong Kong works, by contrast, highlight individual agency, moral ambiguity, and the personal costs of professionalism, mirroring the city's historical emphasis on liberal values and its current sociopolitical uncertainties. These characters frequently navigate ethical dilemmas alone, with narratives underscoring tensions between personal ambition and moral compromise, and resolutions that often carry a sense of loss or regret.

These differences matter because media representations shape public perceptions of gender roles and journalistic ethics. Mainland narratives may inspire trust in institutions and reinforce ideals of collective progress but risk oversimplifying the systemic challenges women face in male-dominated fields, such as implicit bias or work-family conflicts. Hong Kong's more critical portrayals, while offering a nuanced view of professional struggles, may also reinforce cynicism about journalism's ability to effect meaningful change, particularly amid ongoing debates about press freedom.

Future research could expand the sample to include more genres (e.g., documentaries, web dramas) or explore audience reception, examining how viewers in each region interpret these portrayals and whether they influence real-world attitudes toward female journalists. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track how representations evolve in response to shifting sociopolitical landscapes, such as changes in media regulation or feminist movements. Ultimately, understanding these narratives is crucial for assessing progress toward gender equality in media and its impact on real-world opportunities for women in journalism, as well as for unpacking the broader cultural and ideological dynamics that shape media production in Chinese-speaking societies.

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