

Narrative Structure and Emotional Expression in Feng Zikai's Female-Themed Cartoons

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the cartoons of female characters created by Feng Zikai in the period 1922-1945 and places them in the context of socio-cultural change in China in the twentieth century. Although the focus on the biographical interpretation has been the predominant approach to the existing scholarship, this article deals with a crucial issue, namely the foregrounding of the visual and narrative mechanisms. In addition, it merges three-level iconological model with visual semiotics and feminist narratology, creating a Visual-Gender Analytical Model (VGAM) according to which the micro level (formal analysis spatial stratification, symbolic contrast, figure-text interaction) and macro level (ideological critique gender politics, cultural transformation) are systematically connected. Based on a collection of more than 5,525 cartoons, the research uses a systematic analysis through case studies. By employing spatial stratification, symbolic contrast and figure-text interaction, these cartoons renegotiate gender roles and make the daily life a vibrant space of gender negotiation. The results show VGAM moves iconological and semiotic analysis to non-Western popular visual media, and offers a framework of micro-macro that is related to visual form and ideological production. This model serves to bridge descriptive observation and theoretical explanation, providing a replicable tool for decoding gender narratives.

Keywords: *Feng Zikai; Female-Themed Cartoons; Narrative Structure; Iconology; Visual Semiotics; Feminist Narratology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual narratives with female themes have always played a key role in shaping public gender discourse. The shift from Humphrey & Walsh, (2024) subversive autobiographical cartoons to Li, (2026) cross-cultural visual memoirs marks a key development in feminist graphic narratives. However, global comic studies have long been dominated by research on the West and Japan, and gender-based visual strategies in early twentieth-century Chinese cartoons. Feng Zikai (1898–1975) was a pioneer of modern Chinese cartoons. Among his more than 5,500 works covering themes, female-themed cartoons consistently respond to questions of women and modernity by systematically mobilizing composition, symbolism, and the relationship between text and image. With the development of illustrated periodicals and modern printing culture in the early twentieth century, Feng Zikai's cartoons were widely disseminated through media such as *Literary Weekly* and *New Women*, becoming an important voice in the visual public sphere from the 1920s to the 1940s and actively participating in social discussions.

Driven by the *New Culture Movement*, the *May Fourth Movement*, and transnational feminist trends, issues such as education, marriage, and women's social participation became

central public topics. Feng Zikai published many works and articles in periodicals. He was especially attentive to their issues regarding education, family and marriage and insisted that women should be liberated. Making use of Annell, (2023) states that marriage devoid of love is immoral, he criticized the traditional marriage system and promoted the involvement of men in household matters. Another ideological trinity of education, marriage and family that Feng Zikai constructed also offered cultural resources to the movement of Chinese women. In the majority of existing literature, works by Feng Zikai, which are about women, are seen through the prism of social, which place them in contexts, such as feminism, cultural nationalism, and literary modernism. Although these approaches reveal the ideological context of the works, they pay limited attention to the internal mechanisms of visual narrative. Furthermore, symbolic systems have rarely been analyzed through the lens of visual grammar, resulting in a disconnection between macro-level cultural history and micro-level narrative structures.

This study moves beyond contextual interpretation to foreground visual grammar and narrative mechanisms. It discusses the ways in which the female-oriented cartoons of Feng Zikai make use of narrative frameworks and affective tactics to express cultural critique and redefine the female subjectivity. Accordingly, The research addresses the following questions:

RQ1: How do Feng Zikai's cartoons mobilize composition, spatial layering, and image-text to construct narrative structures?

RQ2: How symbolic structures mediate tensions between tradition culture and modernity culture?

RQ3: How does these narrative and affective strategies recalibrate gender roles?

Additionally, the paper incorporates the iconological framework by Panofsky in combination with visual semiotics and feminist narratology. It is a three-level analysis process, including a pre-iconographical description (formal composition and spatial arrangement), iconographical analysis (themes and symbolic motifs), and iconological interpretation (cultural and ideological meanings). The rest of the article is structured in the following way. Section 2 is a literature review and finds research gaps. Methodology is described in Section 3. In section 4, layered analyses of three representative works are provided. Part 5 is a synthesis of narrative types and affective strategies, and part 6 provides a wider implication to the gender studies, visual culture, and the modern Chinese art history.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The cartoons of Feng Zikai can be divided into two strands in general and each of them discloses significant flaws in the analysis. The former focuses on socio-historical situationalization and views his writings as an expression of the soul of the latent social constructions. It, however, is inclined to give preference to the external context, as opposed to the internal visual logic of the images, thus ignoring the active construction of meaning using formal and narrative resources.

The second strand is concerned with the gender representation and the cultural symbolism. This stream of enquiry, however, is not yet as involved as it needs to be with visual grammar and narrative strategies to mediate such meanings. Ye (2024) interprets rural female imagery via social time that she emphasizes practices that are also foot binding and arranged marriage in semi-colonial China.

On the same note, Peng, (2011) places the daily lives of women in the urban culture of early twentieth-century Shanghai, which uncovers the intersections of urban modernity and gender roles. However, this approach fails to systematically discuss how the compositional strategies and visual narration of Feng creates feminist sensibilities on the level of representation.

Xu (2021) who concentrates on housewives and educated women in the context of the discussion of the women liberation movement highlights how responsive Feng is towards the changing gender norms. However, the analysis is mostly discursive and does not pay much attention to the systems of symbols, space, and relations between images and texts which form the basis of these representations (Figure 1).

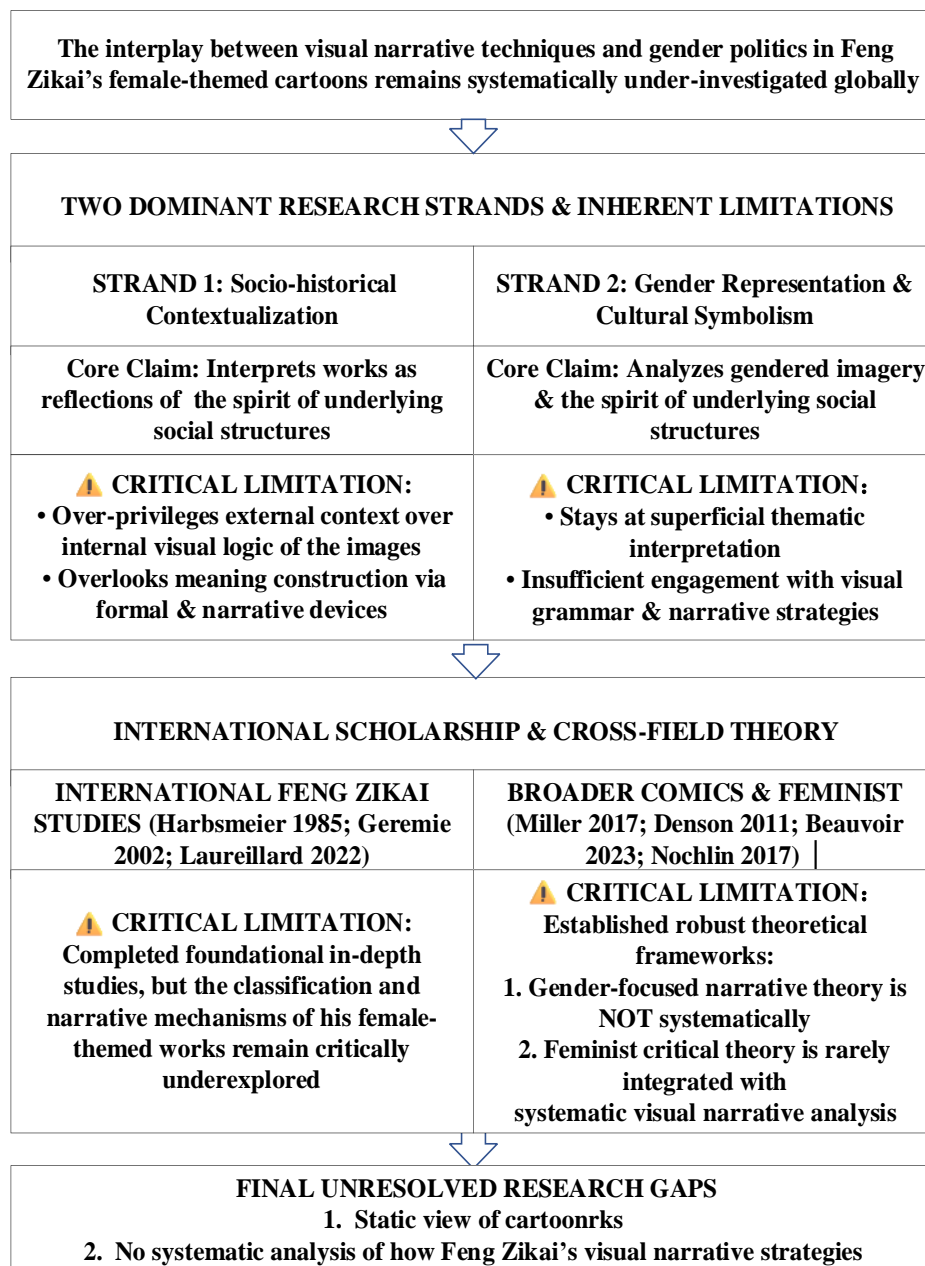


Figure 1: Research Status of Feng Zikai's Female themed Comics

In addition, Christoph Harbsmeier, (1985), Barmé, (2002), and Marie Laureillard, (2022) are among those who have carried out thorough research on the cartoons of Feng Zikai. Nevertheless, the ways of classification and narration of his works with female subjects have not been thoroughly studied. In comics studies, feminist theory has been applied to the study of female imagery, combining narratology and the visual culture to study the ways that gender identities are distributed. Specifically, the literature on artists such as Feng Zikai, who seems to be the only artist whose work can be seen as an amalgamation of cultural criticism and mass communication, is particularly weak."

As a result, Christoph Harbsmeier, (1985), Barmé, (2002) and Marie Laureillard, (2022) have carried out thorough researches on the cartoons of Feng Zikai. Miller (2017) and Denson (2011) have discussed female imagery in terms of narrative theory combining the narratology with visual culture to study the way female identities are shaped and distributed. Nevertheless, the strategies have not been applied to the present context of the Chinese in a systematic manner. Thus, the interaction of visual narrative style and gender politics in the artworks of Feng Zikai requires additional research.

Conversely, most studies are inclined to perceive his cartoons as the dead replicas of gender issues, ignoring the dynamic narrative processes in which the meaning is created based on the formal strategies. The story forms are based on compositional instructions and cultural symbolism to construct processes of meaning generation that are above individual themes. However, such visual dynamics are still mostly overlooked in the existing literature and lead to interpretations that remain on the plane of subject matter and theme, without considering the logic of the image-making or the narration processes.

In the meantime, feminist theories like that of Simone de Beauvoir. The reason why there have never been great women artists is a question that enlightens us more about the gendered politics of imagery by revealing the latent power relations of visual representation and reciprocity of art making and culture. However, these feminist approaches are rarely combined with the systematic studies of the visual narrative structures, and the interplay between narrative technique and gender ideology is still underresearched.

Thus, The cartoons of Feng Zikai about women are categorized into two major strands, i.e. socio-historical contextualization and thematic analysis of gender, both of which are likely to prioritize the external context or superficial visual and narrative processes of meaning construction. This leads to three inadequately addressed research gaps: 1) a non-dynamic approach to cartoons which fails to acknowledge the dynamic narrative aspects of cartoons; 2) a failure to analyse the functioning of visual narrative strategies in his works about women in a systematic way; and 3) inadequate recruitment of feminist critical theories into visual narrative analysis. Although the international Feng Zikai studies have provided significant backgrounds, these concerns have not been addressed. This paper therefore analyzes the negotiations that are made by the visual narrative strategies employed in the Feng Zikai cartoons of female themes.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview and Research Design

The paper follows a qualitative analysis methodology which is organized around a combined analytical framework that analytically systematically analyzes the narrative and affective processes in the female-themed cartoons by Feng Zikai. The four processes of the

research are intricately related and include theoretical framing, data sampling and coding, layered visual analysis and interpretive synthesis (Figure 2).

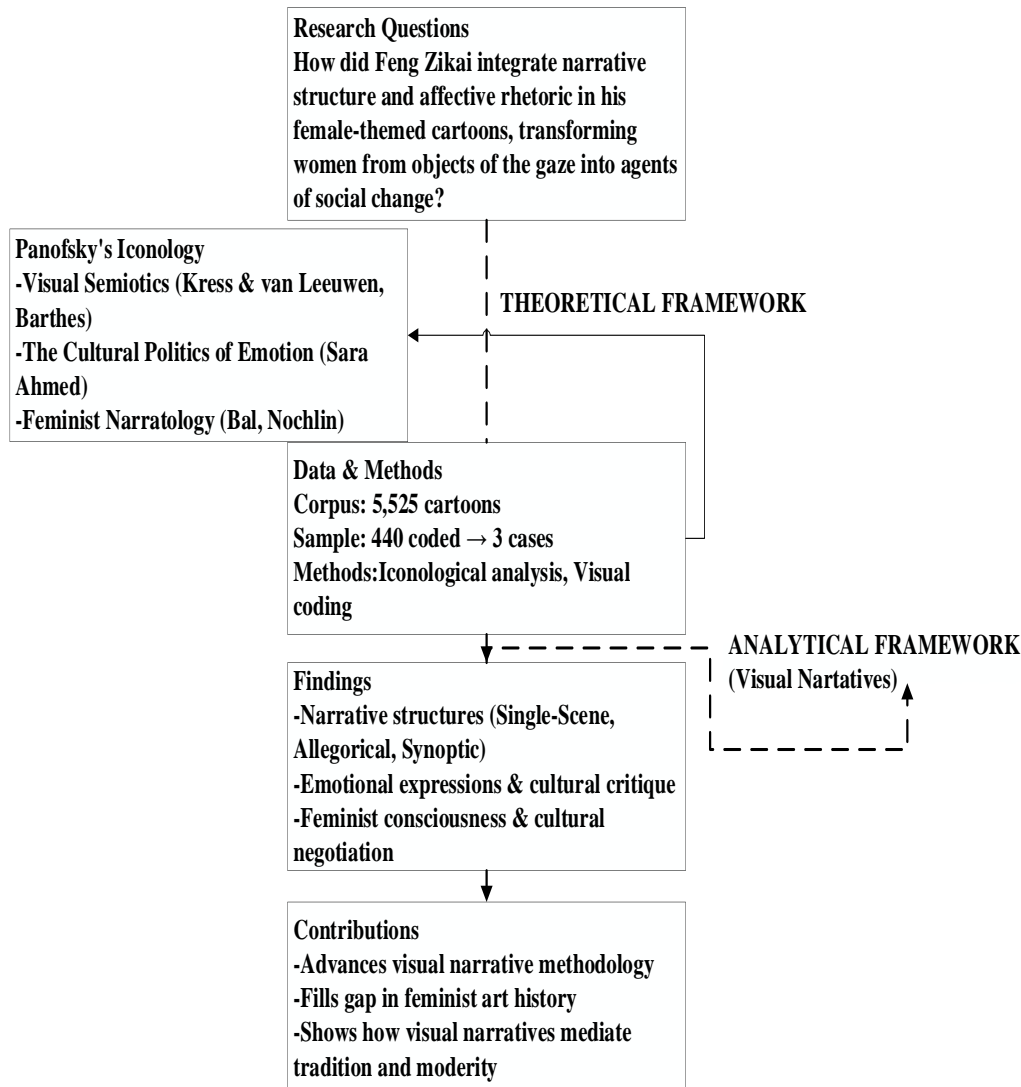


Figure 2: Research Framework

3.1.1 Visual-Gender Analytical Model (VGAM)

The work develops a VGAM that is a systematic connection between micro-level formal analysis and macro-level ideological critique (Figure 3). The model is operationalized based on Panofsky, three-tiered iconology, multimodal grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen, and feminist narratology to consider three aspects of iconology on the micro level: spatial stratification (foreground/middle ground/background as narrative logic), symbolic contrast (opposition of traditional and modern symbols), and figure-text interaction (anchorage, complementarity, tension).

The mentioned dimensions are subsequently projected onto two macro-level dimensions of ideological critique: gender politics (depiction of maternal roles, role reversal, transitional femininity) and cultural change (negotiation between tradition and modernity, the personal and the public).

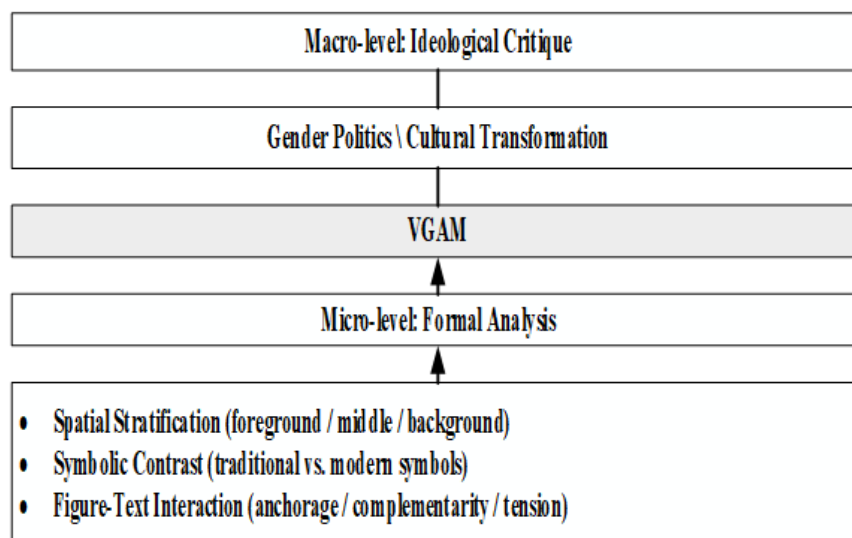


Figure 3: Visual-Gender Analytical Model

VGAM is principally a preventative measure, which guards against reductive formalism (description without critique) and unfounded ideological guesswork (critique without visual evidence).

Applying the model to the female-based cartoons by Feng Zikai, one can see that seemingly tender, banal landscapes actually engage in the gender negotiation process. The model is transferable as well: it can be used to study gender narratives in other non-Western popular visual media, such as advertising, digital comics, and propaganda posters.

The two-level structure is visualised in figure 3, which reveals how the two-level indicators (micro-level) (spatial stratification, symbolic contrast, figuretext interaction) lead to the two macro-level outcomes (gender politics, cultural transformation).

3.2 Sample Selection

The framework is the synthesis of three-level iconology and visual semiotics, which is aimed at creating an organized approach (Panofsky, 1989). It includes feminist narratology to reveal gendered narrative patterns, and cultural politics of emotion and concept of punctum offer the means of analyzing the intensity of emotions (Saxoni, 2025).

The empirical study is based on a rich collection of 5,525 cartoons by Feng Zikai. They are 440 works with female imagery was initially purposively sampled and coded based on visual categories such as compositional structure, spatial hierarchy, image-text relationship, and symbolic motifs. The choice of cartoons that focused on females is based on the theoretically informed purposive sampling plan that sought to capture the gender, modernity, and visual representation in early twentieth century China.

The research takes analytical relevance and conceptual richness as a priority, which is in accordance with the principles of the qualitative research method, which focuses on the information-rich cases (Paavilainen and Plakoyiannaki., 2025).

The standards are intended to make sure that the works chosen not only foreground gender as a main visual and narrative issue but also reflect more general ideological bargains. The choice of representative works is based on a purposive sampling strategy which focuses on analytical relevance and variation as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Representative Works

Work Title	Year & Source	Female Figures $\geq 50\%$	Cultural Conflict	Cultural Representativeness	Socio-Political Critique
<i>New Woman</i>	1926, New Woman Journal	$\geq 75\%$	✓	✓	✓
<i>Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club</i>	1926, Daily Fiction	50%	✓	✓	✓
<i>Father Who is also a mother</i>	1945, Children's Cartoons	$\geq 33\%$	✓	✓	✓

3.3 Analysis Framework and Typology of narrative Structure

The basic level of pre-iconography handles description of elements such as composition, arrangement of space, positioning of figures, and specifics of materials. This step lays the foundations for a visual guide of that interpretation. After this, the iconographic level focuses on motifs and symbolism. It also determines how visual elements relay meaning about gender, and how they evoke certain feelings.

Then, the iconological level situates all of these components in their socio-historical context, which in this case, is early 20th century China. From here, the analysis explains how the images relate to feminist theory.

After these three levels are complete, a semiotic approach is included which examines the relationship between the signifier and the signified and how they move from a referential meaning toward a more connotative meaning. This is understood through the lens of the cultural politics of the emotions.

3.4 Coding and Reliability

To make sure that the analysis is systematic, the study uses a coding manual that transforms the narrative structures and affective strategies into quantifiable elements. The researcher carried out first coding which was reviewed by five experts, and any disputes were resolved by way of repeated deliberations. This led to the creation of a coherent and replicable coding framework and thus enhanced the analytical reliability and methodological soundness (Table 2).

Table 2: Coding Scheme

Dimension	Code	Definition	Indicators
Narrative Structure	NS1	Single-scene narrative	Single focal point; moment capture
	NS2	Synoptic narrative	Multiple segments; parallel actions
	NS3	Allegorical narrative	Symbolic layering; nonlinearity
Temporal Structure	T1	Single time	Instantaneous moment
	T2	Multiple time	Parallel or segmented time
Symbolic System	SY1	Traditional symbols	Chinese cultural elements
	SY2	Modern/Western	Western or modern elements
Affective Strategy	A1	Defamiliarization	Unexpected contrast
	A2	Punctum	Emotionally striking detail
Gender Role	G1	Traditional	Domestic or passive role
	G2	Transitional	Mixed or shifting role
	G3	Subversive	Role reversal or agency

Table 3: Experts experience

Experts	Title	Area of research	Years
A	Professor	Visual culture, modern and contemporary art	21
B	Associate Professor	Literary theory, cross-cultural communication	17
C	Scholar	Chinese Art, Social Culture of China	19
D	Lecturer	Women's Studies	11
E	Professor	Illustration art, integration of tradition and modernity	23

3.5 Methodological rigor

Although there is always some interpretive subjectivity in qualitative analysis, this is minimized by triangulation and consistency tests. Triangulation is achieved through referring to different sources of evidence and the tests of coding consistency ensure even greater reliability of interpretations. Combining iconology (as proposed by Panofsky), semiotics (as proposed by Barthes), feminist narratology and cultural politics of emotion (as proposed by Ahmed), the analysis simultaneously reflects both the nuanced aesthetics and the general cultural significances. Moreover, the methodological framework cites the method employed in the research of European wartime comics (Grove, 2012), which gives a comparative reference to evaluate the cross-cultural applicability.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE WORKS

This paper employs a systematic analysis of the narrative structure (summary, fable, and fusion of the two) and emotional strategies (unfamiliarity, punctures) of Feng Zikai's three female themed comics to address the modern-traditional relationship dichotomy.

4.1 Pre-iconographical Description

The three works (*New Women* (1926), *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club* (1926), and *Father Who Is Also a Mother* (1945)) reflect Feng Zikai's concise and deliberate visual style. His creations integrate certain expressive techniques from early 20th-century, shaping a clear narrative focus through limited color use and precise composition.

For *New Women*, at the center of the image sits a young mother holding a naked baby, flanked symmetrically by two women in protective postures (Figure 4). The overall composition is enclosed within a circular frame, producing a visual effect reminiscent of a sacred halo. The work employs a two-tone woodcut in ochre and deep blue, a printing method commonly used in periodicals of the time to reduce costs while enhancing visual contrast. The warm ochre reinforces maternal tenderness and intimacy, while the cool blue conveys rationality and modernity. The half-length portrait and frontal gaze contribute to a sense of solemnity, directing the viewer's attention toward the figure itself rather than any implied action.

For *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club*, the middle ground depicts a couple engaged in a social dance, and the background faintly reveals a double bassist (Figure 5). The dancers' postures precisely capture the rhythm and intimacy of the movement. The composition presents a clear depth structure through the dynamic dance, to the distant accompanist. Despite the technical limitations, Feng Zikai enhanced spatial hierarchy by varying line thickness and using blank space to create depth and rhythm.

In *Father Who Is Also a Mother*, the foreground shows a man in a suit bending over to change a baby's diaper, while the middle ground depicts a modern woman with permed hair,

high heels, and a briefcase stepping out the door (Figure 6). The door frame serves as both a physical and symbolic boundary between interior and exterior spaces. The medium close-up composition juxtaposes the domestic and public spheres, creating layered spatial relationships that highlight a moment of gender transition and role reconfiguration.



Figure 4: New Women



Figure 5: Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club



Figure 6: Father Who Is Also a Mother

The three works differ in perspective and compositional proportion. *New Women* adopts a half-length, frontal composition that emphasizes solemnity and symbolism. *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club* employs a full-length vertical composition, guiding the viewer's gaze from the plum blossoms to the dancers and then to the background. *Father Who Is Also a Mother* combines interior and exterior scenes within a medium close-up. Across all three works, Feng Zikai uses minimalist brushstrokes and simplified facial features, relying on posture, costume, and spatial arrangement to convey meaning. This concise yet expressive approach continues the artistic language of traditional Chinese comic strips and woodcuts, while introducing fresh visual interpretations of modern urban life.

In the perspective of narrative structure and emotional expression, the three works illustrate unique use of strategies by Feng to tackle gender politics and tradition-modernity relationship. *New Women* uses an allegoric narrative (NS3): Madonna-and-Child imagery uplifts the nursing scene to contemporary allegory of motherhood. At the affective level, it appeals to the punctum (A2) introduced by Barthes, the frontal gaze of the mother and the halo-shaped frame are united in order to create an emotionally appealing center of gravity. The color scheme (SY2) of its ochre-blue color (tradition) and modernity (rationality) has been coded in such a way to make domesticity an issue of social importance. The encountering in Western dance (SY2) at the Plum Blossom Club utilizes a synoptic narrative (NS2): the plum blossom (SY1), Western dance (SY2), and musical elements are put in opposition in one frame, a defamiliarization effect is evident (A1). The juxtaposition of stillness of the traditional and the dynamism of the modern provokes critical reconsideration of their co-presence. Their coordinated steps also give an allusion to new standards of romantic collaboration, but the leading hand of the man and the following dress of the woman still has some elements of traditional gender roles, which is, again, a sign of a transitional gender role (G2).

4.2 Iconographical Analysis

The three works, through their respective symbolic systems, construct multi-layered visual narratives that unfold within the tension between tradition and modernity, and between private and public spheres. *New Women* draws upon the schema of the Western "Madonna and

Child”. A centrally positioned mother, guardians on both sides, and a circular halo collectively create a sacred atmosphere. However, Feng Zikai transforms this motif into a secularized, collective image of motherhood through the popular print aesthetic of the two-color woodcut. The contrast between the naked body of the baby and the solemn dress of the mother disrupts the sense of distance often found in traditional sacred imagery, intensifying instead the private emotions of intimacy and vulnerability. The work resonates with the cover of the 1920s Japanese magazine *Fujin Konron* (Figure 7) and echoes the style of *Takehisa Yumeji* (Figure 8). It also engages in dialogue with Western-style mother-and-child images in domestic publications such as *Good Friend Magazine*, demonstrating the translation and reconstruction of cross-cultural symbols within the discourse of the “new woman.”



Figure 7: The cover of the magazine *Fujin Konron*



Figure 8: Works by *Takehisa Yumeji*

Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club positions the plum blossom in the foreground, juxtaposed with a Western-style ballroom dance scene. The arc of the woman’s skirt visually echoes the curve of the plum branches, breaking the stillness of the composition and adding poetic rhythm to the bodily movement. This cultural collage continues the late Qing dynasty tradition of juxtaposing the “classical and modern” in pictorial magazines, and it shares similarities with international representations of the “modern girl” on the cover of *Josei magazine* (Figure 9) and *Vogue* (Figure 10) during the early Showa period. Yet Feng Zikai avoids a simple opposition between old and new. By invoking the Confucian moral connotations of the plum blossom, he endows modern urban entertainment with cultural legitimacy, suggesting the potential for integration and renewal.



Figure 9: Cover of Josei magazine

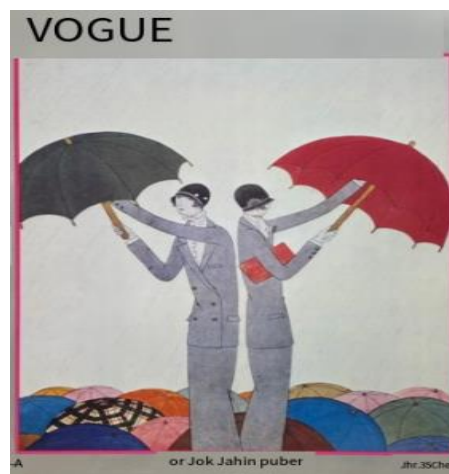


Figure 10: Vogue

Father Who Is Also a Mother constructs a visual allegory through the reversal of gender roles. The image depicts a man in a suit clumsily changing a baby's diaper while a woman, carrying a bag, steps out of the home. The man's forward-leaning body and tender gesture convey a touching sincerity that transcends the conceptual expression of gender equality and instead highlights an embodied fatherly experience. The doorframe functions as both a spatial boundary and a symbolic threshold, reflecting the uncertainties surrounding women's entry into the public sphere. Unlike the temporary role reversals found in Western wartime propaganda, this work implies a structural transformation in men's participation and support for women's public engagement.

Across all three works, Feng Zikai organizes composition through "framing" devices such as circular borders, windows, and doorframes, maintaining a balance of symbolic order even amid spatial divisions. Each piece also contains an emotional punctum: the naked baby in *New Women*, the dynamic interplay between the dancer's dress and the plum blossoms in *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club*, and the father's clumsy yet tender posture in *Father Who Is Also a Mother*. These subtle details evoke intimate emotional responses from viewers and serve as crucial nodes linking visual form with social critique, revealing the depth of reflection embedded in Feng Zikai's gentle and contemplative style.

4.3 Iconological Interpretation

Rooted in the socio-political context of the *New Culture Movement*, these works reflect the transformation of gender norms, the public discourse on women's liberation, and the cultural negotiation between tradition and modernity.

New Women reconstructs motherhood from a private familial role into a core element of nation-building and civic education within a localized Chinese context. The gesture of the mother holding the baby evokes emotional resonance, reattaching the private sentiment of maternal love to the public identity of women. The naked body of the infant functions as a punctum, drawing attention to the fragility of life and weaving together social narratives with genuine emotional experience. This treatment echoes the concept of "mother education" promoted in periodicals aligns with post, reflecting the redefinition of women's social roles in the new cultural order. However, while granting women modern citizenship, this strategy simultaneously confines them within the category of "motherhood," revealing the tension within modernity between liberation and disciplinary containment.

Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club constructs an emotional interplay between desire and morality through the juxtaposition of a ballroom dance scene and the image of the plum blossom. The intimacy of the dancers' bodies evokes sensual attraction, while the plum blossom symbolizes Confucian integrity. Feng Zikai refrains from imposing a one-sided moral judgment, instead presenting the coexistence and interaction of both values. Unlike the singular cultural orientation seen in depictions of Japanese modern girls or European dance hall illustrations, *Father Who Is Also a Mother* produces a defamiliarization effect through the reversal of gender roles. The traditional maternal responsibility of infant care is transferred to a male figure, assigning care and responsibility a universal quality and challenging the gender logic rooted in biological essentialism. The doorframe and surrounding blank space serve not only as compositional devices but also as symbols of the possibility and uncertainty surrounding women's entry into the public sphere, encouraging viewers to imagine future gender configurations. The work redefines gender boundaries on an emotional level through a tone that combines humor and warmth, thereby granting cultural legitimacy to the discourse of equality.

Taken together, Feng Zikai, by mobilizing both Chinese and Western visual symbol systems, creates a space for cultural dialogue in which tradition and modernity, private and public, male and female identities exist in dynamic interaction. His works demonstrate that modern Chinese visual art can respond thoughtfully to social issues through a gentle and understated style, contributing artistically to the transformation of gender concepts and cultural consciousness.

5. FINDING

Through the formal analysis of three representative works, this study identifies the core features of Feng Zikai's female-themed cartoons in terms of narrative structure and emotional expression.

5.1 Narrative Structures

Feng Zikai's female-themed cartoons construct a multi-layered visual narrative system through the arrangement of composition, spatial hierarchy, and cultural symbolism. Single-Scene Narrative captures a moment frozen in time, requiring viewers to infer the preceding and subsequent events through visual cues (Kemp, 1996; Carrier, 2008). The dynamic rotation of the dancer's dress echoes the curvature of the plum blossom branches, suspending a fleeting moment of elegance and desire. The costumes, gestures, and spatial order of the figures not only define their identities but also function as visual catalysts for narrative extension, allowing a seemingly static image to contain implicit story development. Synoptic Narrative organizes multiple focal points or time segments within a single frame, forming simultaneous narrative threads (Kemp, 1996; Carrier, 2008). The action of the father changing the baby's diaper in the foreground contrasts with the mother's poised departure in the background. The spatial juxtaposition symbolizes a redistribution of gender roles and reconfiguration of domestic and social spheres. Allegorical Narrative relies on the superimposition and interaction of densely layered symbols to transcend linear storytelling and generate a multi-dimensional network of meaning (Frye, 2020). The Western motif of the "Madonna and Child" is reinterpreted within a modern maternal discourse through the juxtaposition of plum blossoms and ballroom dancing. The coexistence of symbolic layers produces a polyphonic visual field that invites multiple cultural readings and interpretive possibilities.

5.2 Image–Text Interaction and Cross-Cultural Re-encoding

The analysis identifies two related narrative strategies, namely, image-text interplay and cross-cultural symbolic re-encoding. To create image-text interplay, the use of titles, poetic inscriptions, and artist seals by Feng follows the multimodal theory, creating three different modes of relationships between texts and images: anchorage (guiding interpretive framing), complementarity (expanding semantic meaning), and tension (contradiction inviting critical re-reading). The title itself is a direct linguistic inversion between gender roles as it grounds the attention of viewers on conventional gender and family relationships and precludes a shallow sentimental interpretation. The poetic inscription, historically documented, is used to supplement the image, connecting motherhood to the civic education and modern social valorization, which resonates with the discourse in the present-day. In contrast to the descriptive captions that are popular with the political cartoons in the West, the inscriptions of Feng combine lyrical poetic echo with the contextual historical commentary. Even textual elements generate fruitful semantic conflict: a very traditional Chinese image (plum blossom, associated with Confucian literati virtue) against an up-to-date, morally charged Western social environment (the club), which makes the viewers renegotiate Confucian moral values with the morally relaxed urban leisure.

Moreover, Feng selectively incorporates Western visual symbols (Madonna and Child, ballroom dance, formal suits, briefcases, high heels) and classical elements of Chinese art (plum blossoms, calligraphic linework, domestic interiors, two-tone woodcut aesthetic) in *New Women*. This intentional juxtaposition creates a hybrid cultural visual field that is congruent, but has a particular localized inflection of Chinese modernism. In the case of *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club*, the ballroom background not only creates a sense of urban modernity, but also creates a sense of moral ambivalence towards western leisure. However, the foreground plum blossom reinvigorates this ambivalence as a legitimate part of the culture. The sweeping curve of the dancers costumes (skirt) resembles the sweeping plum branches, which forms a visual rhyme that blends and does not contradict tradition and modernity. The two-color woodcut popular print aesthetic of the popular print media practiced by the Western religious framing (circular halo, Madonna-like maternal figure) is re-framed by New Women in terms of Chinese folk traditions of mass circulation. The result is not mere facade importation of Western iconography, but rather a conscious re-codification: the religious mother of the world is re-codified as a secular, popular type of contemporary Chinese motherhood, to which both urban elite and popular readers can relate. For *Father Who Is Also a Mother*, the formal suit (a symbol of Western masculine professionalism) of the man is contrasted with feminized domestic child care work, and the permed hair and the briefcase of the woman are the symbols of the Western-inflected female professional identity. These imported symbols are vigorously re-read through a Chinese visual grammar, implicit moral commentary and the synthesis of contradictory elements. Cross-cultural re-encoding thus serves as a critical tactic of dealing with cultural anxiety about Westernization, producing multi-layered polysemy instead of the ideological closure.

5.3 Synthesis

Feng Zikai integrates the formal economy with the symbolic richness to form a consistent system of visual narrative strategies to form aesthetic form and the ideological depth of his cartoons on female subjects. The interaction of image and text is one of the crucial characteristics of this system, and it is a multimodal layout based on the theory. The title helps to ground the interpretation of a viewer, focusing on the questions of gender and family roles.

The inscriptions are used to supplement the image and enhance the association between motherhood and civic education. At other moments, verbal components add semantic tension to the work, allowing the viewer to think about the discrepancies between visual expression and verbal meaning. In contrast to Western style explanatory captions, the inscriptions of Feng are a blend of poetic resonance and historical commentary, which follows the Chinese tradition of painting-literature combination to form a multi-layered meaning.

The re-encoding of symbols with cross-cultural synthesis is also another important strategy. Feng chooses to selectively use Western icons like Madonna and Child and popular modern culture (ballroom dancing, etc.) to contrast with traditional Chinese icons (plum blossoms, etc.). To illustrate, the dance hall scene is both a reminder of urban modernity and moral ambiguity. In this stratified context, foreign symbols are not passively borrowed but are actively re-read to produce new meanings in Chinese visual culture, and create a zone of cultural dialogue and negotiation. Another way that Feng builds on the layered spatial narratives is the way he converts the depth of the visual to the narrative logic and symbolic development. A traditional gender role is put into question by the father taking care of the child in the foreground, an openness to the future is created by the empty distance, and the movement of the woman in the middle-ground indicates a shift in social roles. This spatial sequencing enables the viewer to switch between the literal narration and metaphorical interpretation, as the viewer shifts both between the narration of the events and commentaries about the social change.

Table 4: Comparison of Narrative Strategies in Feng Zikai's female-themed Cartoons

Narrative Strategies	Core Features	Theoretical Support	Work Case	Viewer Role/Cultural Function
Image-text interaction	Anchorage, complementarity, tension; Inscription: poetic-painting intertextuality	Barthes; Kress & van Leeuwen	"Father Who is also a mother" "New Women"	Expand themes; provoke reflection; comparison between Chinese and Western contexts
Cross-cultural re-encoding	Juxtaposition of Western symbols + Chinese imagery	Bhabha, Hybridity	"New Women" "Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club"	Polysemy; cultural negotiation; modern anxiety
Layered spatial narrative	Foreground – middle ground – background progression	Panofsky; Bakhtin	"Father Who is also a mother"	Narrative logic; blank space = futurity
Visual form & viewer engagement	Monochrome/colour; blank space; geometric composition	Visual Semiotics	"Father Who is also a mother" "New Women"	Contemplation; focus; enhanced symbolism

5.4 Emotional Expression and Affective Rhetoric

The cartoons made by Feng Zikai, involving female themes, form a multi-level system of emotional expression through visual form and symbolic functioning, which is achieved with the help of particular strategies of affective rhetoric. Regarding the emotional type and the visual mechanisms, the works arouse multi-faceted affective reactions by the arrangement of visual objects as summarized in Table 4. The juxtaposition between the gentle curves of the mother and child and the harsh lines of the adult figures to produce a contrast between alluring motherhood and sober responsibility. Gathering in the Plum Blossom Club creates an ambiance

of desire, anxiety, and romance through contrasting the plum blossoms with the dancing postures, using poetic writing and relocation of Chinese and Western symbols. *Father Who Is Also a Mother* splits the pictorial space into door frames and blank spaces, one of the fathers clumsy movements, and the other delicacy of the details of the baby, which creates a state of emotional tension, where humor and criticism collide.

Table 5: Comparison Table of Emotional Expression in Feng Zikai's female-themed Cartoons

The work	Emotional Types	Visual Mechanisms	Cultural Functions	Typical Modes
"New Women"	Maternal warmth + National responsibility	Mother–baby curves vs. adult straight lines; Madonna-style composition	Maternal love → Public responsibility; Women gain social identity	Lyricism; Sublime
"Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club"	Coexistence of desire and anxiety	Juxtaposition of plum blossoms (purity) and ballroom (desire); Misalignment of Chinese and Western symbols	Emotion reflects conflict between modernity and tradition	Lyricism; Sublime; Irony
"Father Who is also a mother"	Humorous warmth + Critical allegory	Separation of home/public space; Father clumsily changing diaper	Family warmth → Social criticism; Challenge to patriarchal division of labor	Humor; Critique

These works are based on the three fundamental rhetorical strategies, as they are presented in Table 5, to generate emotion. The former is defamiliarization that breaks the traditional perception with the use of symbolic displacement and role reversal. The addition of a secular maternal element to the traditional Madonna and Child motif in *New Women* shifts a religious icon into a contemporary maternal image. Likewise, in *Father Who Is Also a Mother*, the contrast between the father in his formal clothes and the way he takes care of things creates the effect of dissonance, which may make one consider the gender norms. The second is the symbolic and allegorical approach which raises the personal experience to the national relevance by reinventing cultural symbols. The motherly figure in the *New Women* is allegorized as national responsibility and the dialogue between the plum blossom and the ballroom club setting in the *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club* is the negotiation between the traditional morality and the modern desire. The third is the strategy of punctum that is based on a bright detail, entering into the cultural code, and provoking the immediate emotional response of viewers. The naked body of the baby, the connection of the dancers skirt to the plum branch and the bending posture of the father serve as emotional centers. These specifics facilitate relationships between personal feeling and larger questions of gender, modernity and social change, and enable affect to act as both aesthetic experience and cultural critique.

Table 6: Affective Rhetoric Strategies in Feng Zikai's female-themed Cartoons

Works	Defamiliarization (Shklovsky, 1917)	Symbolism/Allegory (Burke, 1969)	Punctum (Barthes, 2012)
"New Women"	Transplanting the Western Madonna and Child into the Chinese context; maternal love alienated into social responsibility.	Mother–baby = symbol of maternal love + allegory of the nation's future; Private intimacy transformed into public significance.	Naked baby in mother's arms → Dual emotion of warmth and responsibility.

"Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club"	Juxtaposition of plum blossoms and Western ballroom, creating cultural incongruity.	Plum blossoms = Purity; Ballroom = desire; Reveals the conflict between tradition and modernity.	Plum branches touch the hem of a dancing skirt → Tremor of conflict between desire and morality.
"Father Who is Also a mother"	Gender role reversal: father assumes maternal duties, mother enters the public sphere.	Father = "new male"; Mother's absence = expansion of female public identity.	Father clumsily changing a diaper → Coexistence of humor and critique.

5.5 Application of VGAM to Feng Zikai's Works

VGAM is a systematic method of analysis in that first, micro-level formal features of Feng are extracted and coded in order to allow rigorous macro-ideological analysis. The model records in *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club* include stratification of space between traditional plum blossom foregrounds and modern dancing bodies, tension between symbolism of the classical culture and modern urban spaces of leisure through the juxtaposition of symbolism and urban spaces. In *New Women*, VGAM breaks down symmetrical circular framing and Madonna-and-Child visual tropes, the ochre-blue colour contrast in motherly warmth and modern rationality and complementary poetic texts that re-brand motherhood as a civic virtue. Most importantly, VGAM goes beyond single-handedly describing images, by mapping these coded formalities structurally onto broader social discussions of gender and cultural change. In *Father Who Is also a Mother*, it relates tiered spatial orders and incompatible gendered signs to evidence enduring structural changes in family and societal responsibilities, to normalize male nurturing in contemporary social existence. VGAM, in *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club*, demonstrates the ability of layered spatial composition to provide a system of continuous polyphonic negotiation between tradition and modernity opposing both radical Westernization and dogmatic conservatism, whereas in *New Women*, the model shows how aesthetic framing raises the ideological value of the household role of women in early modern China.

Table 7: VGAM Analytical Summary of Feng Zikai's Three Cartoons

Work Title	Features	VGAM Analytical Effect
<i>New Woman</i>	Stacked space, after-image, tension between the text and image	Discusses tradition and modernity negotiation hybridity
<i>Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club</i>	Multi-layered space, visual resonance, tension of text/image	Re-contextualizes motherhood as modern civic and public value
<i>Father Who is also a mother</i>	Space threshold, symbolic contrast gender	Redefines domestic gender roles

6. DISCUSSION

The paper concludes that female-based cartoons by Feng Zikai, with their unique storyline, and their emotional tricks. They are not merely the reflections of the gender politics of the social change but are constitutive of modernity and feminine subjectivity. Feng is gentle in comparison with the clamorous propaganda of most of the writings of the May Fourth period, and pensive--not of critical action, by any means, does she abdicate it. *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club* and *Father Who Is Also a Mother* both expose visual narratives of *New Women*, layered space arrangement, cross-cultural re-encoded symbolism, and affective puncta transforms Feng into didactic messages into embodied experience. The interpretation of these findings in the context of broader theoretical arguments about visual narrative, cultural hybridity and politics of emotion and the contextualization of the work of Feng in cross-cultural and history are discussed further below (Figure 11).

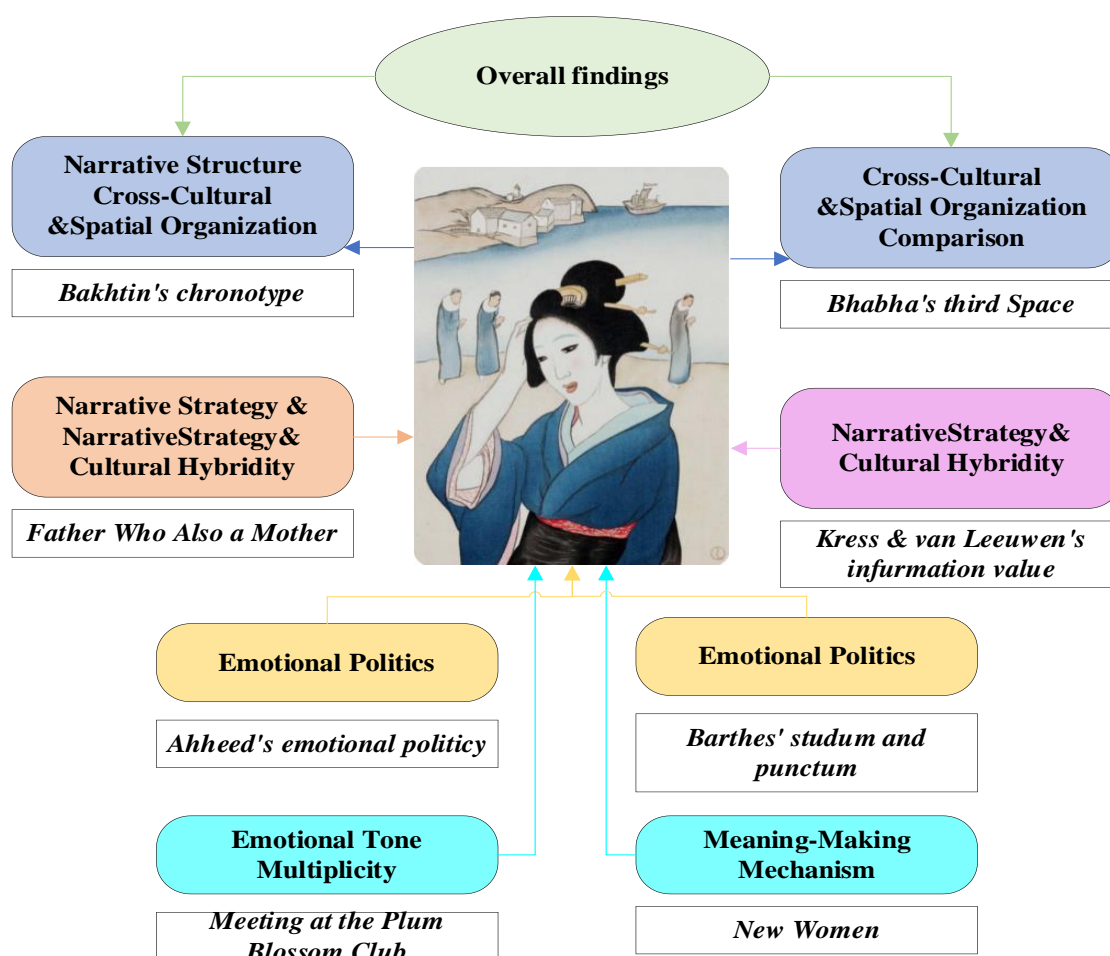


Figure 11: Narrative Structure, Cultural Hybridity, and Emotional Politics in Feng Zikais' Female-Themed Cartoons

On the narrative structure, the thematic content of Feng Zikai has an intense form and thematic structural isomorphism. In themes of gender role inversion he always employs a three-layered spatial narrative. The structure transfers the temporal logic (family-society-future) into a visible chain of narration, creating a chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981), in which the doorway is used as a transition point between two movements. In contrast to Western wartime propaganda that casts domestic work of men as a transient phenomenon, the space discourse of Feng suggests that reconfiguration of the structure takes place, where men are allowed to take care of children. To negotiate cultural contrast and modernity, Feng gives precedence to symbolic juxtaposition as opposed to linear sequencing. Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club the traditional plum blossoms and new Western dance live together in a single visual grammar and create a polyphonic tension between tradition and modernity, as the dancers costume, that resembles plum branches, contributes to the development of an unresolved dialogue, not opposition. This structure alignment in the form of a theme is a validation of narrative structure as a fundamental meaning-making mechanism rather than an impromptu tool.

The difference in culture also shows the individuality of the narrative style used by Feng. Though his work has formal similarities in symbolic overlay and depictions of modern femininity, his mixed-sequence approach is more akin to European traditions of satirical print, where a multiplicity of meanings is generated as opposed to a single one. In contrast to Japanese

modern girl visuals where the focus is on sexual appeal or consumerism, the female characters of Feng are incorporated within moral and social questions that cannot be commodified. In contrast to the linear, ideologically overt arrangement of American wartime cartoons, the metaphorical temporality and spatial hierarchy of Feng generate interpretive openness, which leaves interpretations of gendered cartoon meaning to the viewers. This is a purposeful approach that situates the audience as active meaning co-constructors, which is in line with multimodal audience participation theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

It is possible to see how affect acquires political power through social circulation in the works of Feng (Ahmed, 2004). The vulnerable baby disrupts the solemnity of the circle of the piece, and the feeling of visceral tenderness is created. The aesthetic paralleling of the dance movements and the plum branches brings about a consistent tension between the urge and ethical restraint in *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club*. *Father Who Is Also a Mother* is a defamiliarization of gender roles, and the humorous nature of the role reversal makes the work rooted in the authenticity of the affect. The emotions spread throughout the visual field to restructure social relations as Ahmed (2004) suggests and situate the work of Feng in the cultural politics of emotion where affect is a locus of political contest in gender, family and modernity. In the polyphonic, open narrative context, Feng grounds her works in the modern cultural transformation of China, and conducts a conversation with the world visual traditions, showing the dual nature of popular visual art as a tool of cultural critique and social change. His cartoons on women are essential visual records on Chinese gender politics today, reflecting the ambivalence of the discourse of new woman.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we build a Visual-Gender Analytical Model (VGAM) that allows us to systematically relate the micro-level formal visual analysis (spatial stratification, symbolic contrast, image-text interplay) to the macro-level ideological critique of gender politics and cultural change.

Contrary to the prevailing biographical and thematic interpretations of literature in the current scholarship, VGAM offers a repeatable method to unpack the reengineering of gender conventions by banal visual cues. The model applied to three main works of Feng Zikai such as *New Women*, *Meeting at the Plum Blossom Club*, and *Father Who Is also a Mother*, discloses a critical visual discourse with layered composition, cross-cultural re-encoding, and affective puncta not only reflecting but also negotiating the unresolved conflicts between tradition and modernity, domesticity and public life.

VGAM combines Panofsky and Bakhtin on iconology and the chronotope, Bhabha on the third space, Barthes on punctum into a unified structure, which contributes to the study of feminist visual cultures by demonstrating that the creation of gendered meaning is impossible without formal visual strategies.

In terms of methodology, it solves a long-standing dualism of visual analysis, without recourse to reductive formalism, basing ideological interpretation on perceivable visual facts. Historically, this piece re-positions the cartoons by Feng as location of structural gender negotiation, maternal care as civic ambivalence, dance as embodied moral ambivalence, role reversal as one of the essential reworking of domestic-public boundaries, instead of individualized satire. Limitations of this study are that it only analyzes three canonical works; future studies can expand VGAM to bigger corpora of visual materials through digital

annotation, and determine its cross-cultural applicability in Japanese manga, Latin American graphic satire, and other non-Western visual modernities.

Finally, this paper affirms that implicit, introspective aesthetic forms may have a rich social commentary to make, and VGAM provides a transferable mode of reading gender discourse in transnational popular visual culture outside of the Chinese setting.

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