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The Modern Dilemma of Confucian Family Ethics: A Case Study of Intergenerational Responsibility and Female Individualization in the Film My Sister

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Abstract:
The film My Sister explores the struggle of the eldest daughter, An Ran, who is caught between the intergenerational responsibility of raising her younger brother and her desire to pursue a career in medicine. The film investigates the tensions between traditional Confucian family ethics, which emphasize obligations based on blood ties, gender roles, and family-centered values, and modern individualistic values that promote personal choice, contractual responsibility, and self-actualization. The narrative contrasts An Ran with her aunt, revealing how Chinese families, shaped by Confucian ethical traditions, face difficulties when individual consciousness emerges during the process of modernization. The film's open ending suggests that while Confucian ethics are being challenged in modern society, there is also potential for them to be reconfigured on the basis of mutual negotiation and respect.

Keywords:
Confucian Family Ethics, Intergenerational Responsibility, Female Individualization

1.Introduction

The film My Sister (directed by Yin Ruoxin) became a key text for analyzing the cultural transformation of contemporary Chinese society, grossing 860 million yuan at the box office and sparking widespread discussion about whether the eldest daughter must assume the responsibility of raising her younger brother. The film tells the story of An Ran, the eldest daughter, who, after the sudden death of her parents, faces a dilemma: to fulfill her medical aspirations or to take on the responsibility of raising her younger brother. The film reveals the conflict between Confucian family ethics and modern individualistic values through the contrasting characters of her aunt, who represents traditional sacrificial values, and An Ran, who seeks self-actualization. This article examines how My Sister and similar films reflect the shifting dynamics of intergenerational responsibility and gender roles in the context of China's ongoing modernization. It also explores the challenges and

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necessity of reconfiguring traditional Confucian family ethics amidst cultural and societal transformation.

2.The Ethical Dilemma of Intergenerational Responsibility

At the heart of traditional Chinese society lies Confucian family ethics, grounded in two fundamental concepts: "ren" (benevolence), which refers to an inner emotional state, and "li" (ritual propriety), the external norms that govern behavior. This ethical framework establishes a system of responsibilities anchored in familial bonds and a hierarchical order. It is reinforced through "assisted responsibilities in ethical roles" and "moral constraints," which often place the burden of care on women, especially the eldest daughters, who are expected to take on parental duties during times of family crisis. In this system, women are encouraged to internalize these roles as part of their emotional and moral identity [1]. While these values have deep roots in China's agrarian past and have shaped family structures for centuries, they now face unprecedented challenges as China undergoes rapid modernization.

The film My Sister presents the protagonist, An Ran, as she faces the dilemma between fulfilling intergenerational responsibilities and pursuing personal ambitions, exposing the clash between traditional Confucian ethics and the emergence of modern individual consciousness. Sociologist Yan Yunxiang, in The Individualization of Chinese Society (2016), points out that "the individualistic values arising from market-oriented reforms are dismantling the traditional family responsibility ethics that demand individual sacrifice" [2]. The film presents this conflict dramatically: after the tragic death of her parents, An Ran's relatives quickly focus on the need to care for her younger brother and, almost thoughtlessly, push this responsibility onto the newly-adult An Ran, repeatedly emphasizing the Confucian notion that "the eldest daughter is like a mother." When An Ran expresses her desire to study for the entrance exam and move to Beijing, her aunt immediately and unconditionally opposes her. The aunt draws from her own experience of sacrificing her dreams to support her brother, asserting that she made the right choice by abandoning her education and a business opportunity in Russia to care for him. Through flashbacks, the film juxtaposes the aunt's youthful dreams with her current reality, underscoring the significant impact of traditional ethics on the trajectories of women's lives.

This ethical dilemma regarding intergenerational responsibility is not unique to My Sister. Several other contemporary Chinese films explore similar themes. For example, in the film My Brothers and Sisters (2001), after the tragic loss of their parents, the eldest sister, Qi Sitian, is expected to fulfill the maternal role despite being a minor. In the film Tangshan Earthquake (2010), the mother, Li Yuanni, is forced to make the heart-wrenching choice of saving either her son or daughter after the earthquake, ultimately choosing her son. Gender scholar Harriet Evans notes that in Chinese families, the daughter's identity is often seen as "temporary," with her value placed second to that of male family members, a hierarchical gender role reinforced through daily practices [3](Evans, 2008). In the film Tangshan Earthquake, although Fang Deng survives, she is separated from her family for many years due to heavy psychological trauma. Her resentment and escape are a fierce resistance to this imposed generational responsibility based on gender ranking. .

In conclusion, the challenge An Ran faces in My Sister of having to care for her younger brother, along with the heavy ethical pressure of the "eldest sister as mother" role, reflects a recurring theme in Chinese cinema that is deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions. Whether it is Qi Sitian's lifelong emotional burden or

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Fang Deng's forced sacrifice in a life-or-death situation, these narratives all illustrate how traditional Confucian family ethics, in the absence of parents, transfer the responsibility of caregiving to women, particularly the eldest daughters. This often comes at the cost of their personal development, life value, or emotional freedom. An Ran's struggles and questions, combined with the poignant flashbacks of her aunt's unfulfilled dreams, provide a direct and powerful critique of this oppressive expectation in contemporary society.

3.The Challenge of Female Individualization Against Confucian Gendered Ethics

The Confucian family ethics system establishes an ethical framework centered on bloodline continuity through constructing a "male supremacy and female subordination" gender hierarchy and a spatial division of "men managing external affairs and women managing domestic matters." Through the ethical design of "Three Bonds and Five Constants," Confucian culture alienates women's value into a "relational existence," subjugating their subjectivity to the patriarchal family hierarchy [4]. This system essentially reduces women's bodies, labor, and emotions to serving familial needs, defining their physicality primarily as carriers of bloodline inheritance, with their value realization heavily dependent on reproductive and nurturing functions. In the film, An Ran's witnessing high-risk pregnant women being forced to undergo risky childbirth under family demands for sons, along with her angry protest, serves both as a response to specific events and a protest against gender oppression.

The ethical oppression that instrumentalizes women's bodies as "carriers of bloodline inheritance" is vividly portrayed through the tragic experiences of women from diverse social strata and circumstances in contemporary Chinese cinema. In the 2018 film Find You, rural woman Sun Fang loses her status as a "reproductive vessel" when her daughter is born with congenital defects rather than a healthy boy, subsequently enduring cold stares, abuse, and eventual abandonment by her husband's family. The Confucian family ethic's "bloodline logic" ties reproductive outcomes to women's value, while the long-overlooked importance of "marriage logic" further reinforces women's objectified status within the family [5]. Sun Fang's plight reveals how the value of women's bodies and their status within families under Confucian gender ethics are heavily dependent on whether their reproductive outcomes meet patriarchal requirements for male heirs. When she fails to bear a son, her physical being along with her labor and emotional contributions are completely negated and rejected by her husband's family.

Sometimes, women try to break away from the single purpose of "continuing the family line for the patriarchal family", and their reproductive behavior itself will face great difficulties if it does not conform to the Confucian traditional family view. In the film "Spring Tide" (2019), reporter Guo Jianbo insists on having a daughter out of wedlock, which itself is a blatant challenge to the fundamental principle of Confucian ethics that childbearing should serve the legitimate and orderly inheritance of paternal family bloodline. In the film, her mother Ji Minglan represents the traditional ethical order. In Ji Minglan's eyes, Guo Jianbo's reproductive behavior is against rites and laws, worthless, and a disgrace to the family. This illustrates that in Confucian family ethics, if women's reproduction cannot serve the orthodox bloodline inheritance, its value will be ruthlessly denied. Confucian gendered ethics attaches the value of women to their reproductive function. It is essentially the alienation of the female body as a tool that can be used, evaluated and even sacrificed for the

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interests of the family. An Ran's indictment of high-risk pregnancy cases and her refusal to become a "surrogate mother" represent the most potent individualized challenge and critique against the deeply rooted logic of bodily objectification embedded in cultural traditions. These cinematic narratives collectively expose the cruelty of this ethical order and its suppression of women's individual lives.

This challenge is also reflected in women's claims to the right to development space. Through the norm of "women governing the inner", Confucian ethics strictly limits women's activity space to the private field of the family, which essentially deprives them of equal opportunities to enter the public space, participate in social production and realize personal development. Through a series of carefully designed visual symbols, the film "My Sister" constructs a strong spatial metaphor. In the small room where An Ran lives, medical books symbolizing professional pursuit, mottled maps of Beijing universities and scattered children's toys are forced to squeeze into the same physical space. The juxtaposition and confrontation of these spatial images directly show the conflict between the demand for self-realization and traditional gender norms. Her persistent pursuit of the goal of "going to Beijing for graduate study" is essentially to break through the spatial division between "internal and external", strive for the right to enter a broader public domain, so as to redefine her own value coordinates.

The 2024 film The Determination to Leave intensifies the confinement nature of domestic spheres through oppressive spatial compositions. In the kitchen scene, Li Hong's frantic movements are deliberately framed behind a four-panel window lattice. The cold window bars resemble prison bars, physically fragmenting her body and confining her within the rigid "domestic heroine" paradigm. Through visual symbols like "window frames" and "courtyards", feudal ethics transform women's spaces into "breeding cages" [6].

The image of diapers drying under the shadow of a security window's mesh is striking, it resembles the bars of a prison, casting a suffocating presence over domestic spaces. This imagery highlights how such spaces, often symbolic of women's roles, seem to confine their agency. In stark contrast, the steering wheel becomes a symbol of empowerment. When Li Hong drives across the Gobi Desert, the endless horizon and the spinning wheels create a powerful statement of spatial freedom. The steering wheel, in this context, represents control over her own body and autonomy, while the vast, open Gobi stands as a metaphor for liberation from domestic confines. From the narrow perspective of kitchen windows to the empowering grip of the steering wheel, Li Hong's journey marks a profound transformation. She shifts from being a passive figure in space to an active, self-determined agent. Her escape signifies more than just physical movement—it’s a reclaiming of her right to develop and define her own path. Women's struggles for developmental rights extend far beyond just relocating their bodies; they are about asserting control over their autonomy, participating in society, and defining their own value. Both An Ran’s gaze on maps and Li Hong’s firm grasp on the steering wheel serve as symbols of breaking down gendered spatial limitations and reimagining life’s possibilities through the freedom to move.

4.The Root of the Dilemma: The Clash Between Confucian Family Ethics and Modernity

An Ran's struggle between generational duties and personal desires is more than just an isolated personal

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tragedy; it represents a deep-rooted clash between Confucian family ethics and the values of modern civilization. At its core, this conflict arises from differing views on human nature, the formation of responsibility, and the pathways to realizing personal value across cultures. Confucian ethics sees humans as "ethical beings within relational contexts" [7], stressing that individual values must be shaped within the framework of family and community. In contrast, modern civilization views individuals as "independently autonomous entities with free will" [8], emphasizing the importance of personal autonomy that extends beyond familial ties.

The sudden loss of both parents in the film My Sister acts as a prism, refracting the intense clash between these two civilizational paradigms within the context of peaceful coexistence. This conflict first manifests in the fundamental opposition of generational responsibility concepts. Confucian ethics views family obligations as an inherent duty rooted in kinship, which carries non-transferable characteristics. As specific bloodline identities like "eldest sister" naturally attach to individuals, their boundaries can expand infinitely according to familial needs. The aunt's self-sacrificing life for her younger brother in the film My Sister, along with the Analects' statement that "filial piety and fraternal duty are the foundation of benevolence" [9], both exemplify this ethical framework that regards fulfilling generational responsibilities as the standard of moral fulfillment.

In sharp contrast, modern society anchors responsibility in individual autonomy, rational choice, and the concept of contractual obligations. Sociologist Robert Beck’s idea of "commitment to choice" [10] perfectly encapsulates the essence of modern social responsibility, where personal decisions and individual freedoms define one’s duties. My Sister highlights the tension between these two competing philosophies of responsibility. For instance, the uncle’s insistence that "He’s your biological brother" clashes with An Ran’s calm rebuttal of "So what?" An Ran rejects the idea that blood ties should automatically dictate her obligations. Instead, she redefines responsibility through the lens of adoption processes and legal contracts, all while staying true to her professional commitment as a doctor dedicated to saving lives. In doing so, she illustrates that both individual self-actualization and fulfilling intergenerational responsibilities can be morally legitimate in their own right.

The second layer of conflict arises from the breakdown of traditional family structures and the rise of modern individualism. Confucian ethical concepts emphasize patriarchal authority and gender-specific role divisions. In the film My Sister, on one hand, the absence of both parents creates a vacuum in paternal authority: the uncle who should have assumed paternal roles becomes addicted to gambling, while the role of the maternal uncle diminishes. On the other hand, An Ran's refusal to be confined by the sisterly role completely subverts traditional gender roles. The medical texts on her desk, the Beijing university campus map on the wall, and the white coats symbolizing professional identity collectively form a modern professional woman's identity system, marking the transition of women from family reproduction tools to social production subjects.

The third layer of conflict arises from the tension between the family-centered perspective and individual autonomy. In Confucian ethics, an individual's value is entirely integrated into the broader framework of "family continuity." The Classic of Filial Piety articulates this philosophy through the saying, "Establish oneself in virtue, gain renown for posterity, and honor one's parents" [11], which outlines how personal fulfillment is seen as a means to serve the interests of the family. This ideology often results in individuals sacrificing their present selves for the sake of the family’s future, as seen in the aunt's loss of youth, or the way

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women's bodies are reduced to tools, such as when high-risk pregnant women are forced to give birth despite the dangers.

In contrast, modernity places "self-actualization" at the pinnacle of value, emphasizing that the meaning of life lies in the maximization of an individual's potential and the achievement of self-defined goals. An Ran's dedication to medicine and her ideal of saving lives is a vivid embodiment of this pursuit of individual value and autonomy. The film highlights the irreconcilable nature of these two values through stark spatial contrasts: the dim, oppressive old house and cramped hospital rooms, which symbolize traditional constraints, are sharply opposed to the bright, expansive library, the recruitment poster for Beijing Medical University, and the train pointing toward a broader horizon—symbols of individual opportunity and development. When the aunt gifts An Ran a Russian nesting doll with "thank you" written on it and says, "The dolls don't always have to fit together," she subtly suggests that women need not be forced into a preordained destiny, but can exist as independent individuals with their own paths.

The film My Sister reflects the intense clash between Confucian family ethics and modern civilization through the character of An Ran, particularly during a period of historical transformation. The thousand-year-old Confucian ethical framework shows significant fractures under the pressure of modern values. However, the film's open-ended conclusion,where An Ran rips up the agreement and takes her brother's hand,suggests that this conflict does not necessarily lead to a complete break. The light An Ran gazes at before the elevator doors close symbolizes not only her emotional choice as an individual but also the potential for a reconfiguration of ethical relationships. When responsibility is based on autonomous choice and negotiation rather than forced by blood ties, when familial love is built on mutual respect and recognition, and when women redefine their role as active subjects in these relationships, a new family ethical paradigm may emerge. This paradigm could blend individual rights and dignity with traditional emotional bonds, gradually forming amidst the complexities of civilization's transformation. The image of An Ran and her brother running together becomes a symbol of the search for balance and transition between traditional ethics and modernity.

5.Conclusions

The film My Sister centers on a sudden family tragedy, which serves as a narrative lens to reflect the challenges faced by Confucian family ethics in the context of modern society. The life trajectories of the aunt, An Ran, and her younger brother, An Zi Heng, together form a portrait of the shifting ethical paradigms. The aunt, as an embodiment of traditional ethics, represents the self-sacrificial nature of Confucian family obligations, her unfulfilled personal dreams, symbolized by the Russian nesting doll, and her life dedicated to her younger brother, powerfully illustrate the inherent duty of Confucian family ethics, where individual value is subordinated to the collective goals of the family. An Ran, positioned at the fracture point of this cultural transformation, makes a pivotal choice when she rips up the adoption agreement and clings to her medical textbooks, an act that signifies the clash between women's individual aspirations and the gendered expectations of the eldest sister as mother role. Meanwhile, An Zi Heng, reaching out in innocent confusion, symbolizes the potential for new emotional bonds to emerge after the disintegration of traditional family structures. These three figures collectively highlight the historical shift occurring within Chinese modern families: from an inescapable fate dictated by Confucian ethics to a negotiable sense of responsibility.

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