

From Ringside to Real Life: Cinematic Narratives and the Rise of Female Boxing in China

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Abstract: This essay examines the ways in which media and film representations construct audience perceptions and stereotypes regarding women's boxing. Using the Chinese comedy feature film *Never Say Die* as a case study, it examines how narrative techniques, character development, and media promotion invert traditional gendered expectations in the context of combat sports. By means of book review and film analysis, this research highlights the contribution of the film towards dismantling social stereotypes and engaging the general public in a wide-ranging discussion on gender equality in sport. By analyzing both the content of the film and its media power influence, this paper posits that films are effective tools. The significance of this research lies in the fact that, under the guise of entertainment, films have become an important medium for breaking through traditional gender discourse, providing new expression spaces for female characters, and having a positive impact on breaking gender stereotypes and promoting the dissemination of gender equality consciousness. As scholars have pointed out that movies are powerful communication tools.

Keywords: boxing, female, media, stereotype

1. Introduction

Boxing, also known as pugilism, is one of the oldest and most physically demanding combat sports, dating back centuries before the Common Era [1]. Traditionally, boxing has been closely associated with masculinity, emphasizing traits such as aggression, strength, and dominance—qualities historically deemed “male-exclusive.” For much of its history, women were excluded from the sport both institutionally and culturally. However, female participation has risen steadily, with key milestones such as the inclusion of women’s boxing in the World Championships in 1994 and in the Olympic Games in 2012 [2].

With the rise of gender equality movements and evolving societal values, media representations of women in sports have begun to shift. Films, in particular, have become powerful tools for challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes [3]. This study examines how film and media communication influence public perceptions of female boxing, with a specific focus on the 2017 Chinese comedy *Never Say Die*, a film adapted from a stage play and co-produced by the comedy troupe Mahua FunAge [4]. The film presents a narrative where a male boxer and a female sports journalist switch bodies due to an accidental electric shock, creating a comical yet thought-provoking perspective on gender identity and physicality [5].

Through an analysis of the film's storyline, character development, and its broader media impact, this paper explores how *Never Say Die* deconstructs gender stereotypes and reshapes audience attitudes toward female participation in combat sports. As noted in previous studies, movies are powerful tools for communication and public influence [3]. This paper argues that cinematic storytelling, when effectively executed, can act as a catalyst for greater inclusion and awareness, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields such as boxing. Movies are powerful tools for communication.

2. Analysis of the movie

Among the numerous films addressing both gender and boxing, *Never Say Die*, a Chinese comedy adapted from a play of the same name and performed by the popular comedy troupe Mahua FunAge, stands out for its reflection on the rigid social perceptions surrounding boxing and gender roles. By combining the intense, masculine-coded world of boxing with elements of humor and romance, *Never Say Die* tells the story of a male boxer, Ai Disheng, and a female sports journalist, Ma Xiao, who accidentally switch bodies after a lightning strike. Forced to live each other's lives, they confront personal and social challenges from a new perspective. As noted in reviews, *Never Say Die* not only satisfies the audience's desire for light entertainment but also subtly voices their dissatisfaction with the injustice embedded in traditional gender ideologies [5]. The film advocates mutual understanding between genders, presenting a refreshing narrative that challenges conventional norms.

The title itself juxtaposes the idea of "shyness" (traditionally associated with femininity) and "boxing" (a symbol of masculinity), thereby cleverly highlighting the societal expectations placed on men and women in terms of behavior and personality. Through the "gender-swapped" character setup—particularly a male body inhabited by a female consciousness—the film deconstructs stereotypes about gender in sports, especially in boxing, which is often regarded as a male-dominated arena. The story explores behavioral conflicts, internal struggles, and eventual self-acceptance, calling into question the legitimacy of binary gender roles and encouraging a more inclusive understanding of identity. Moreover, the film positively portrays female strength, using detailed storytelling and humorous contrasts to deliver a deeper message beneath its comedic surface.

After the soul swap, the male protagonist in the film delivers a striking sense of contrast through a series of gestures and emotional expressions that traditionally fall outside the scope of stereotypical masculinity. His feminine mannerisms and delicate psychological responses create a powerful visual and emotional dissonance, comparable to seeing a muscular man in a dress. This contrast is especially emphasized given his identity as a boxer, a profession deeply embedded with gender stereotypes. The "female heart in a male body" dynamic is vividly embodied in his character, from large movements like running posture to subtle details like the way he picks at his nails.

In terms of character construction, the film frequently showcases "Edison with Ma Xiao's soul" training and competing in boxing. These scenes emphasize his athletic professionalism, gradually challenging the audience's preconceived notions about gender roles in sports. Through these depictions, the film portrays female strength as tenacious, resilient, and fully capable of thriving in traditionally male-dominated arenas.

With Ma Xiao's female consciousness residing in Edison's male body, the character breaks gender boundaries and overcomes obstacles through hard work and intelligence. Her victories serve not only as proof of her individual value but also as a powerful statement that women are equally capable of excelling in high-intensity competitive sports like boxing. After the soul swap, the

“female lead” faces gender bias in the boxing world and is repeatedly questioned—“Can a woman really do this?” Initially, her presence in the ring provokes surprise and even contempt. However, as her performance improves, audience perceptions begin to shift.

This transformation in spectator attitudes mirrors real-world changes in how society views female athletes in male-dominated sports. Ma Xiao represents the often overlooked and underestimated strength of women. Her journey—from a marginalized female sports journalist to someone forced into the boxing world in a male body—illustrates her growth through adversity. Ultimately, she undergoes a profound transformation, gaining both internal strength and external recognition. Her story reclaims space and legitimacy for women in the world of boxing.

3. Film marketing analysis

Following its release, *Never Say Die* sparked widespread media coverage, particularly focusing on the theme of female boxing and the film’s effort to challenge gender bias within this traditionally male-dominated sport. Media platforms across the board used the film as a starting point to promote public discourse on gender equality in sports, generating a wave of positive responses. These discussions reflected a shift in public perception, highlighting a growing recognition of the significance of female boxers and their rightful place in strength-based athletic competitions.

Beyond discussions of the film itself, many media outlets leveraged its popularity to spotlight the real-world achievements of female boxers who had previously received little exposure. For instance, Sina News published an article using a headline inspired by the film—“She Used a ‘Never Say Die’ Iron Fist to Show the World That Women Can Fight Like Men in the Ring”—which told the story of Lin Heqin, a world champion in women’s MMA [6]. Through such coverage, female athletes gained greater visibility and recognition, helping to further the promotion and societal acceptance of women in boxing.

According to data from Meituan, since the film’s release on February 10, the search volume for keywords related to “boxing” has surged by 388.4% compared to the same period during last year’s Spring Festival. On the Dianping platform, search volume increased by 257.2%, and the number of reviews grew by 337.53% year-over-year. Specifically, searches for terms such as “adult boxing,” “boxing experience class,” “boxing monthly pass,” and “female boxing” have all increased more than tenfold compared to the same period last year [7].

4. Discussion

Films like this have significantly increased women's voice and participation in the field of sports. Firstly, riding on the film’s popularity, more successful and prominent female boxers have entered the public eye. For example, in 2024, Chinese boxer Chang Yuan won the gold medal in the women’s 54kg boxing final at the Paris Olympics [8]. Numerous media outlets eagerly covered this achievement, often referencing the film *Never Say Die* in their headlines. The film’s widespread popularity amplified media attention, helping more people recognize outstanding athletes like Chang Yuan. For instance, *The Paper* published an article titled “Cheers for You | *Never Say Die*, Chang Yuan’s Dream Comes True.” This increased exposure has brought greater recognition to many successful female boxers, helping them achieve higher personal value.

Secondly, as the film gained massive popularity, public interest in boxing as a sport grew, successfully integrating it into everyday life and shifting the focus toward the benefits of boxing rather than limiting it to gender stereotypes. Discussions around female boxing have increasingly connected to topics such as “fitness,” “weight loss,” “self-defense,” and “hobby,” moving away

from outdated attitudes like the dismissive remark from Maggie's mother in *Million Dollar Baby*: "Find a man, live proper."

The author believes that films like these have elevated the public's acceptance of boxing, breaking down gender distinctions and placing greater emphasis on the sport itself. This represents a significant step forward in challenging and overcoming gender stereotypes in the realm of athletics.

As a form of mass media, films play an agenda-setting role from the perspective of news communication. In the short term, a film can highlight specific individuals and topics, drawing public attention. In the long term, films help shape values and guide lifestyles, including fitness habits. Through carefully designed plots, character development, and extensive promotion, such films have successfully increased public discourse around women participating in boxing, encompassing both positive perceptions and critical viewpoints.

These discussions have elevated women's voices in traditionally male-dominated sports and fostered greater public interest and engagement with the topic. Popular films, through media coverage and social media promotion, raise awareness of gender equality in sports and prompt reflection on gender stereotypes and limitations, effectively helping to weaken the gender divide caused by such stereotypes. Sufficient discussion and exposure are key to this promotion, not only as a challenge to gender stereotypes but also as a form of validation for female boxers.

Overall, film is a powerful medium for conveying diverse perspectives and serves as an effective catalyst for public reflection. From multiple angles, movies about women in boxing have successfully increased female participation and voice in the sport while significantly reducing traditional stereotypes associated with boxing.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the film *Never Say Die* and its role in challenging gender stereotypes within the traditionally male-dominated sport of boxing. By examining the film's plot, character development, and the public and media responses it generated, the research highlights how *Never Say Die* effectively promotes gender equality in sports, increases female visibility and voice, and sparks broader social discussions about women's participation in boxing. The film's success demonstrates the powerful influence of media in reshaping public perceptions and advancing gender inclusivity in athletics.

However, this study has certain limitations. It primarily relied on qualitative analysis of the film and media reports without incorporating direct audience surveys or interviews, which could provide deeper insights into individual perceptions and behavioral changes. Future research could adopt mixed-method approaches, including empirical data collection and comparative studies across different cultural contexts, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the film's social impact.

Looking ahead, the intersection of media representation and gender equality in sports holds promising potential. Continued exploration into how films and other media forms influence societal attitudes can help inform strategies to further dismantle stereotypes and encourage female participation in various athletic disciplines. As media continues to evolve, its role as a catalyst for social change will likely grow stronger, fostering a more inclusive environment in the world of sports and beyond.

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