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## Calculated Empowerment: Algorithmic Feminism and Big Girl Performance in China

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**Abstract:** Since 2014, streaming platforms have gradually taken over the production and promotion of costume “Big Girl” dramas in China, a genre centered on female protagonists and explicitly targeting female audiences. By leveraging the dynamic interplay between algorithms and the emotional consumption of female audiences, these platforms have produced ever-evolving representations of “female subjectivity,” which creates an illusion of “subjectivity” among female viewers. Through a critical examination of the production history of these dramas and a close analysis of the emotional consumption, narrative empowerment, and gender performance embedded within them, this article argues that “algorithmic feminism” is in fact an instrumentalization of female subjective desire by platform capital. On-screen, it uses algorithmic calculation to produce “Big Girl” figures that cater to female viewers’ horizons of expectation, translating individualistic feminist discourse into consumable “pleasure points” to harvest their “emotional price.” Off-screen, through the dynamic mutual learning and co-performance between platform algorithms and audience emotional expression, it not only produces and reinforces new norms of gender representation but also, in a paradoxical form of “empowerment,” absorbs the subjective desires of modern urban women into the operational logic of digital capitalism.

**Keywords:** Algorithmic feminism; Platform capitalism; Chinese Big Girl drama; Performance; Instrumentalization; Female subjectivity; Emotional consumption; Procedural drama production

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**题目：**计算的赋权：算法女权主义与大女主表演

**摘要：**从2014年开始，流媒体平台逐渐接管古装大女主剧的制作与宣推，借助算法与观众情绪消费的动态互动，生产了不断迭代的“女性主体”再现，也让女性观众产生“主体”幻觉。然而，本文通过回顾大女主剧的生产历史，批判地审视其中的情感消费、叙事赋权与性别表演，指出“算法女权主义”实质是平台资本对女性观众主体欲望的工具化利用。在屏幕内，它通过算法的精确计算，生产“迎合”女性观众期待视域的“大女主”，将个人主义女权主义话语转译为可供消费的“爽点”文本，以收割观众的“情绪价格”；在屏幕外，则通过平台算法与观众情绪表达之间动态的相互学习、共同表演，不仅生产并固化了新的性别再现规范，更通过悖论性的“赋权”，将现代都市女性的主体欲望收编入数字资本的运行逻辑之中。

**关键词：**算法女权主义；平台资本主义；大女主；表演

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, streaming platforms in China have produced a large number of Big Girl (*danzhu*) dramas that algorithmically cater to female viewers' emotional consumption, satisfying their desire for subjectivity through featuring female protagonists, telling women's stories, and representing female agency. By exploiting the symbiotic interaction between algorithms and audience subjectivity, these dramas have continuously upgraded their “feminist” content. This has not only ignited a viewing craze among young female audiences but has also constructed a digital tradition for the coming AI drama production. How should we understand this “algorithmic feminism”? Does it genuinely grant subjectivity to female characters and audiences?

By reviewing the production history of these dramas and critically examining the emotional consumption, narrative empowerment, and gender performance within them, this article points out that “algorithmic feminism” is an instrumentalization and instrumental transformation of female subjective desire by platform capitalism in the digital age. On-screen, it performs a meticulously calculated form of “female subject” empowerment, legitimizing the individualistic feminism supported by consumerism and transforming it into a mechanism for producing “pleasure points” (*shuang*) through proceduralized narratives. Off-screen, through a mutually reinforcing, symbiotic relationship between algorithms and audience emotions, it continuously shapes subjective desires, harvests “emotional prices,” and ultimately serves the expansion of platform capital.

## 2. Algorithmic “Feminism”: How Emotional Consumption Produces Empowerment Illusions

On January 11, 2025, a news story about a 10-year-old girl having an AI boyfriend attracted attention. However, while the internet focused on whether minors should engage in romantic relationships with AI, it overlooked the role of the “Big Girl” in contemporary Chinese popular culture and its impact on the emotional and psychological patterns of adolescents. In the news, the little girl was imitating and learning

the tropes provided by Chinese Big Girl dramas of the past decade, including character settings (she liked to play the role of a “Big Girl” image in AI chat software, such as “rich girl,” “vicious female supporting character,” etc.), plot details (ordering her AI boyfriend to “grab her hair and slap her,” “cut her face with a knife,” etc.), and narrative styles (e.g., a pure-hearted boy confessing his love).<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the game replicates the storyline of Big Girl dramas -- algorithmic replication mirrors the very strategy used in the production of those dramas. In an interview about *The Story of the Cloud*, a Big Girl Drama ranking second in China’s online viewership 2024 and was successfully exported overseas, Yu Zheng, the producer who has dominated Chinese Big Girl dramas since 2010s, stated that it was necessary to satisfy women’s desire for the Big Girl archetype. He said, “Now that women are rising, their independence has increased.” He claimed that during the creation of *The Story of the Cloud*, “I was aiming for it to be a hit... this was carefully calculated.” The calculation includes at least the following steps. The platform 1. uses IP heat to gauge market trends; 2. monitors audience watch habits to trigger emotional resonance; 3. analyzes plot points and completion rates to identify audience pleasure points, and 4. Adjusts storylines based on real-time feedback from viewers during broadcast. In the end, as critic Mao Jian remarked, these platforms “physically cater to our emotions so comfortably, turning us neatly into cultural boors who seek pleasure and gain it.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, since 2014, Chinese TV drama production has shifted from an author/director-centered model to an algorithm/AI-centered one, forming a highly mature, safe, and stable procedure resembling an industrial assembly line: data screening - IP adaptation - module assembly - beat setting - algorithmic push. It has driven the evolution of “feminism” across multiple digital spaces, including web fiction, dramas, user data, and gaming. Platforms use data to calculate how to “cater to” female audiences, continuously iterating and upgrading the representation of the “Big Girl” and the narrative of “feminism,” thereby creating an illusion among off-screen audiences that they live in a “feminist world.”

On-screen, the performance of the “Big Girl” — the heroine customized for female viewers — is enacted; off-screen, audiences also perform the role of the “Big Girl” as viewing subjects. Platforms are also happy to use algorithms to reinforce audience “preferences,” satisfy their “needs” for emotional consumption and “subjective” desires, keep them in front of the screen, and engage them in paid viewing, likes, bullet comments, script explanations, reviews, and secondary creations. Through real-time rolling data calculation and customized rich media push, they perform the satisfaction of female audiences’ subjective desires, demanding that producers respond faster, stronger, and more intensely to their “subjective” needs, thus launching increasingly evolved Big Girl performances in an upward spiral.

Algorithms and audiences thus present an ambiguous symbiotic relationship, jointly producing a “feminist” expression paradigm. How should we understand this “feminism”? Is the algorithm a transparent

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<sup>1</sup> CCTV.com, “Sexually Suggestive and Values-Subverting: It’s Time to Take Action Against AI Story Chatting Apps That Trap Minors” <https://news.cctv.com/2025/01/11/ARTImgMMYiecYrqbO3iL5QzI250111.shtml>. (Accessed April 20, 2026)

<sup>2</sup> *Southern Weekly*, “Why Has Yu Zheng Been Making Hits for 15 Years?” <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20240630A07K3K00>. (Accessed April 20, 2026)

data collector or a neutral predictor? Is the audience the subject? How does their relationship affect drama production and distribution? Only by reviewing the history of Big Girl dramas can we find answers to these questions. This history is characterized by platforms dynamically responding to female “needs,” constantly breaking with “traditions” of gender representation, and iterating the production of Big Girl dramas. However, these “traditions” are merely “digital traditions” constructed over the past decade by TV libraries and user-generated content (UGC), following the rise of big data, including the sharp increase in Weibo users in 2011, the shift of Chinese TV dramas to online consumption in 2014, and the rise of short video platforms in 2018.

From 2014 to 2024, platform algorithms used constantly evolving data traditions to compute changing audience viewing demands, prompting producers to continuously enhance the “feminist” content of their dramas. As a result, the increase in pleasure point density became proportional to the intensity of algorithmic intervention. From 2014 to 2016, the capital power of platforms enabled them to transition from drama distributors to content operators, pushing algorithms into drama production. Platforms added member acquisition to their KPIs. They not only bought exclusive copyrights but also took over production, implementing self-produced and exclusive drama strategies. Content capable of stimulating immediate user payment, such as strong IP, big-name casts, and compelling plot settings, became the focal point of platform competition.

After the normalization of membership models in 2016, platforms began to seek core drivers to retain deeply engaged users. Through big data and algorithms, they analyzed user viewing behavior in real-time, accurately summarizing the pleasure point patterns that retained users. They required producers to increase the density of pleasure points in scripts and editing. The platform evolved into a data-driven decision-maker and an invisible screenwriter, with algorithms determining content, narrative rhythm, and emotional structure. This gave rise to industry consensuses like the “golden 7 minutes, make-or-break first 3 episodes,” directly fueling the popularity of fast-paced, plot-driven, and lightly foreshadowed drama styles.

From 2017 to 2019, algorithms became the “invisible hand” controlling the entire process of creation, production, promotion, and distribution of Big Girl dramas. In pre-production, heat evaluation was conducted using an IP value evaluation system to assess potential. During production, traffic prediction was performed, including forecasts of viewership and trending topics throughout the production process. During broadcast, behavioral analysis and targeted push were used: user viewing behavior was analyzed to generate highlight clips for short-video promotion and precise content delivery. After 2018, secondary creation (fan edits, commentary) also became a focus. Algorithmic recommendation and drama production leaned toward content that was easy to edit, explain, and remix with beat-synced cuts, while long-form dramas also trended toward the pacing of short-form content.

From 2020 to 2024, algorithms came to control the entire chain from script selection to production to market testing, giving rise to modular AI script creation, plot optimization, and other models that further streamlined the assembly line. In pre-development, algorithms read scripts and output multi-dimensional reports on themes, characters, narrative rhythm, etc., filtering plots and training models using user bullet

comments, hot searches, and abandonment patterns. They quantify “audience preferences” into indicators such as character relationship strength and plot density, thereby governing the story framework. For role selection, based on actor databases, character profiles, past box office or viewership figures, algorithms provide matching rankings and conduct AI makeup tests, audition simulations, and the like.

During filming, technologies such as 3D modeling, AI stand-ins, and light field production are used to comprehensively improve shooting efficiency. Before the finished episode goes online, an algorithmic “physical examination” predicts where audiences might abandon the show, and producers re-edit accordingly. For promotion and broadcast, platforms produce personalized posters and auto-generated trailers based on user portraits to increase completion rates. A topic heat model grabs social media data in real time, guiding official accounts on when to release behind-the-scenes content or promote on-screen couples, and pre-manufactures trending searches. In terms of the entire industrial ecology, as of the time of this writing, AI-powered industrialization has entered a mode of one-click generation of scripts, scenes, and characters, continuously shortening the time to catch trending topics, pushing dramas toward short-form, low-cost, rapid iteration, and stably producing cultural fast-moving consumer goods.

The “author” is dead. Big Girl drama production has become homogenized, safe, and templated, consistent with general conclusions about the culture industry. However, the issue is not so simple, because algorithmic data monitoring and calculation seem to imply the rise of female audiences, working together with algorithms to drive the vertical evolution or iteration of historical Big Girl dramas, constantly deconstructing the genre’s self-constructed “traditions” and presenting increasingly “stronger” female lead images.

From 2014 to 2016, the focus was on “palace/domestic struggles, power revenge.” The narrative model was that of a woman climbing upward within a closed power system through personal wisdom and means. In survival dramas like *The Empress of China* (2014) and *The Legend of Miyue* (2014), or turbulent romance dramas like *Cruel Romance* (2015) and *Princess Weiyoung* (2016),<sup>3</sup> the female lead must overcome numerous obstacles from patriarchal society to achieve revenge and reach the peak of the harem or even power. However, although there is no lack of imagination of “female power,” love remains the core driving force. The narrative combines pleasure and suffering, stimulating audience emotions through delayed gratification: the more the woman is abused at the beginning, the more satisfying her later revenge.

From 2017 to 2019, the model shifted to “diverse exploration, survival wisdom.” Themes became more diverse, and the focus moved from vying for power to protecting the self, including passionate growth, e.g., *Princess Agents* (2017), where women transcend personal love and hate to protect the country and liberate slaves; immortal love stories with suffering, e.g., *Eternal Love* (2017), incorporating (vacuous) themes of saving all beings; “dark lotus” harem survival, e.g., *Story of Yanxi Palace* (2018), abandoning the naive and

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<sup>3</sup> *The Empress of China* (2014) was co-produced by Tange Film & Television, Youku, and others. *The Legend of Miyue* (2014) was co-produced by Dongyang Hua’er Film and Television Culture Co., Ltd., LeTV, and others. *Cruel Romance* (2015) was jointly produced by Shanghai Hongting Film and Television Co., Ltd. and Huang Xiaoming Studio. *Princess Weiyoung* (2016) was co-produced by Keton Media, Fengjing Media, and others.

sweet setting, presenting intelligent women who avenge every wrong; ancient life philosophy, e.g., *The Story of Minglan* (2018), showing how women use wisdom and worldly experience to “survive” in feudal ethics. <sup>4</sup>Narratively, the love line began to weaken, with personal growth and survival wisdom becoming the main line to trigger audience emotional resonance.

From 2020 to 2024, the model focused on “value reconstruction, career pursuit.” Due to policy adjustments <sup>5</sup>and changes in viewing habits, pure palace dramas receded, and Big Girls began to “build careers”, including business entrepreneurship -- using a skill to achieve economic and spiritual “independence,” e.g., *A Dream of Splendor* (2022), *Blossoms in Adversity* (2024), *The Story of Pearl Girl* (2024), *Shu Brocade Legend* (2024); identity exploration — finding identity and value in turbulent times, saving oneself and others, e.g., *The Long Ballad* (2021); immortal heroines saving the world — amplifying female redemption narratives within the frame of immortal dramas, e.g., *The Imperial Doctress* (2021), *Till the End of the Moon* (2023), *The Legend of Shen Li* (2024); rebirth and fate change — the female protagonist returns with memories of her past life to change her fate, protect her family, and build a career, e.g., *A Familiar Stranger* (2022), *The Story of the Cloud* (2024). <sup>6</sup>Narratively, love becomes a subplot; women have more important life goals, reflecting the values of personal struggle, self-confidence, self-reliance, and career success admired by modern independent women.

The image of the Big Girl has also changed accordingly, 1. from dependence to self-reliance, early leads relied on male power for success, later leads rely on their own skills and wisdom; 2. from serving others to self-interest; early leads revenged their families or turned dark for love, later leads strive for self-realization and career success; 3. from mutual rivalry to self-fulfillment, or from palace/domestic fighting to doing business, building careers, and self-improvement. These algorithm-based iterations do indeed exhibit characteristics of feminism, especially the popularity of career-oriented women, the retreat of emotional lines, the return of female friendship, and the deliberate inclusion of shots that objectify the male body.

These not only present the on-screen heroine as a “subject” but also give the audience an illusion of subjectivity, leading them to exclaim in bullet comments or secondary creations, “This is what we big

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<sup>4</sup> *Princess Agents* (2017) was co-produced by Mango TV, Keton Media, and others. *Eternal Love* (2017) was co-produced by Shanghai Juku Cultural Communication Co., Ltd., Jiaying Media, and others. *Story of Yanxi Palace* (2018) was co-produced by Dongyang Huanyu Film and Television Culture Co., Ltd., iQiyi, and others. *The Story of Minglan* (2018) was co-produced by Dongyang Zhengwu Sunshine Film and Television Co., Ltd., iQiyi, and others.

<sup>5</sup> In 2019, Chinese National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) began to strictly control the filing and public notification review as well as the content review of palace dramas and other similar genres.

<https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/156324281114587.html>

<sup>6</sup> *A Dream of Splendor* (2022) was co-produced by Penguin Pictures, Golden Media, and others. *Blossoms in Adversity* (2024) was co-produced by Youku, Mango Super Media, and others. *The Story of Pearl Girl* (2024) was co-produced by Youku, Alibaba Pictures, and others. *Shu Brocade Legend* (2024) was co-produced by Penguin Pictures, Sichuan Xingkong Film & TV, and others. *The Long Ballad* (2021) was co-produced by Huace Film & TV, Penguin Pictures, and others. *The Imperial Doctress* (2021) was co-produced by Penguin Pictures, Jiaying Media, and others. *Till the End of the Moon* (2023) was co-produced by Youku, Tata Culture, and others. *The Legend of Shen Li* (2024) was co-produced by Tencent Video, Jiaying Media, and others. *A Familiar Stranger* (2022) was co-produced by Mango TV, Horgos Wannian Film & TV, and others.

women want to see.” Terms like “female gaze,” “female supremacy,” and “male consort” are increasingly popular, and short video platforms have also seen marketing tactics like “Big Girl training camps.” Audiences self-insert into the position of female supremacy, and platforms increase the push of symbols like “Big Girl,” “building a career,” and “female-dominated” to perform how they cater to audience “needs” and break with gender representation “traditions,” all in service of the audience’s illusion of subjectivity.

### 3. Algorithmic Co-performance: How Desire Is Instrumentalized through Symbiosis

It is not difficult to see the on-screen performance of individualistic feminism within consumer culture. This is an aesthetic commodity provided by platforms after using big data to grasp the social pressures, emotions, and self-awareness of contemporary urban women, who face the tearing demands of economic independence on the one hand and traditional gender roles on the other. Like other forms of popular feminism, this kind of “market feminism” (Zeisler, 2016, p. xiii) pursues equality on the surface but actually reinforces individualistic market values, emphasizing women’s personal success within existing power structures. In particular, the popular “career-driven” Big Girl narratives directly replace social problem analysis with personal success, substituting gender issues for individualistic success mythology.

These narratives replace emotional lines with career lines, affirm women’s talents and wisdom, and proclaim women’s strength, independence, and self-control over their destinies. Yet they are all narratives about beautiful, elite women. They equate female empowerment with personal economic success and independence from the family. But they avoid critiquing (feudal) social systems and power relations, nor debating on structural inequality. This performance makes gender issues hyper-visible while undermining the foundations of feminist critique, co-opting and commodifying women’s identity, representational empowerment, and self-actualization needs (Clark-Parsons, 2022, p. 10).

It also, through a “traffic in feminism” (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017, p. 886), mimics and even maliciously distorts feminist ideas and discourse, creating a simulacrum of a “feminist society.” Over time, this has led to the popularity in 2025 of dramas boasting “female generals,” “female emperors,” and “female supremacy”, which perform little more than a little wife in military uniform or patriarchy in women’s clothing.<sup>7</sup> “Feminism” becomes a label, slogan, headline, an empty identity marker that severs the analysis of structural inequality (Gill, 2016, p. 618). Even the so-called balanced love (where the male lead is often still more powerful), sapiosexuality, and sisterhood that have been popular in recent years are merely repairs to the Big Girl drama’s self-constructed tradition of “female competition” (intrasexual competition). The plot is still full of scenes that tear apart female relationships, and the dramas are filled with the male gaze, yet they claim to cater to female viewing pleasure, becoming an even more complex and deceptive object of consumption.

However, even if we remove the most regressive stereotype reproduction, or the malicious “female

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<sup>7</sup> As exemplified in *Song of the Brocade Moon* (produced by Tencent Video, with Jinghe Media as a co-producer), *To Jin'an* (produced by iQiyi, with Shaanxi Wentou Yida Film & TV, Neutron Pictures), *The Max-Level Drifting Female Emperor* (co-produced by Hangzhou Xingshuo Culture and Bilibili), *Power and Favor* (produced by Mango TV).

supremacy” and “female gaze” representations that might trigger an anti-feminist backlash and a “new era of gender war” (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016, p. 171), it is still difficult to say that Big Girl dramas are aesthetic products that reflect female audiences’ needs, cater to their horizons of expectation, or satisfy their subjective desires. What is iterating is not a deeper exploration of social gender issues but data metrics driven by platform algorithms.

The algorithm uses the principle of maximization to extract online gender topics that represent “female desire,” converting them into data indicators that serve platform capital, guiding Big Girl dramas to “evolve” in the direction that best retains users, thereby forming a continuously “optimizing” iteration of “feminism” through an upward spiral. But such drama production neither originates from real life nor from the living experiences, social observations, or critical thinking of women (including screenwriters, directors, actors, and audiences). Instead, it comes from algorithmically reinforced hollowed-out topics, precisely calculated modular combinations, and procedural narrative progression, turning female subjective desire into a tool for platform traffic.

That is, “algorithmic feminism” is a manifestation of feminism co-shaped by digital platforms, capital, and streaming markets through data mining, user behavior analysis, and predictive algorithms. Its essence is the result of capital identifying, extracting, simplifying, and batch-producing feminist symbols, narratives, and emotions for the purpose of traffic acquisition, user retention, and profit maximization. It is a data-driven, highly commodified, screen-only “feminism.” It is the product of the combination of consumer feminism, commodification, and platform capitalism. Platform capitalism provides the infrastructure and core driving force (traffic and profit pursuit); commodification provides the basic methodology (everything can be commodified, including audiences’ intelligence, emotions, and feminist discourse); and consumer feminism provides ready-to-sell cultural symbols and ideologies (individual empowerment, choice, purchasing power, etc.).

In terms of drama production, algorithmic feminism is a paradoxical form of double empowerment: the algorithm empowers audiences by producing precisely calculated representations of empowerment to satisfy their subjective desires. By capturing and calculating the data produced by female audiences, the algorithm brings them into the drama production process (script selection, casting, production, promotion, post-editing), grants them subjectivity, and produces products that satisfy their subjective desires.

Audiences are subjectified. They not only regard the Big Girl they consume as a subject but also reproduce their own subjective desires through viewing behaviors. They perform their subject positions through purchases, on-demand viewing, bullet comments, reviews, completion rates, and secondary creations, and their agency promotes the iteration of Big Girl dramas. Yet, in this symbiotic relationship with the algorithm, do audiences truly become subjects? The answer is paradoxical, because platform capital uses the algorithm both to grant them subjectivity and to turn their subjective desires into the means of calculating their consumption, turning them into objects that submit to and serve the logic of the traffic economy.

Algorithmic feminism thus exceeds the scope of traditional media gender critique, because what determines its mode of representation is not only the gender power relations in terms of concepts and content but also the algorithm that is symbiotic with female audience subjectivity in the mode of production: the mediating function of algorithms shapes drama production. Rosalind Gill (2007) systematically analyzed how contemporary media co-opts feminist language and symbols to serve consumerism and gender stereotypes: **absorption** — using slogans like empowerment, choice, and female power to appear modern and progressive; **depoliticization** — transforming collective demands for equality, rights, diversity, etc., into individual consumerism, avoiding challenges to the existing order; **resexualization** — maintaining gender differences and the male gaze by emphasizing “femininity,” “sexiness,” and “cuteness”; **responsibilization** — attributing women’s disadvantages to individual effort or lack of beauty, covering up structural inequality, turning feminist language into market-friendly symbols. In this structural relationship, the media dominates the audience, which passively accepts the cultural commodities provided.

The dynamic symbiotic relationship between algorithm and audience, however, grants the audience a certain subjectivity, bringing them the illusion that the algorithm captures my needs, the actors perform my desires, and the platform reproduces the object of my projective identification. But the illusion is a real illusion. Real because the audience is indeed granted some subjectivity; illusion because it obscures the nature of the algorithm. The algorithm is by no means a transparent tool. As Ted Striplas (2015) argues, it is a form of “culture.” With its massive data processing power and seemingly objective computational logic, it not only shapes users’ cultural tastes and cognitive frameworks through recommendation and filtering systems but also disciplines artistic creation and individual expression by establishing new taxonomies.

What it serves is not the audience but platform capital, with the goal of commodifying everything. As David Harvey (1990) argues, capital can turn all social relations, emotions, and even resistance into saleable commodities, stripping them of their originality and critical edge. “Platform capitalism” (Srnicke, 2017) further profits from user behavior by monitoring user behavior, extracting user data, and using algorithms to predict and optimize (Zuboff, 2019), achieving precise production and content delivery, capitalizing on user behavior, and turning audiences’ viewing and consumption into “digital labor” (Fuchs, 2014) that serves platform capital. The audience’s viewing pleasure, or *shuang*, becomes a means for platform capital to create surplus value.

Audience emotions are commodified, but this is achieved precisely through the subjectification of the audience. The relationship between algorithm and audience is not purely one of domination but of mutual learning. The platform uses the algorithm to empower the audience. The audience, placed in a subject position, learns and performs the consumption of emotional commodities through interaction with the algorithm, reproducing their own subjectivity. As Eva Illouz (2007) points out in her analysis of “emotional capitalism”, capital excels at identifying, stimulating, and managing user emotions, making them predictable and guidable. The platform, through the subjectification of the audience, commodifies their emotions, harvesting their emotions and expressions, making them pay for pleasure, and serving capital. It is this mutual learning, mutual reinforcement, and mutual causality that drives the iteration of audience viewing pleasure and drama pleasure-point production.

But “emotional commodification” (Illouz, 2019) is a process of co-production between emotion and commodity. They mutually learn, shape, and reinforce each other in consumption practices. First, **the commodity form trains emotion**. In this aspect, not all emotions can be commodified. Only those that are standardizable, repeatable, and quantifiable can enter the commodity logic. But these emotions are not falsified, but “real” ones shaped by the commodity form. Second, **consumers learn emotional consumption**. Consumers are not passive recipients but learn how to “correctly” experience emotions in the consumption process. For illustration, female audiences express their “pleasure” in viewing female revenge, or their “delight” in gazing at the male body in the dramas we are discussing in bullet comments.

As Illouz states, these emotional waves are not faked but are emotional scripts trained through platform recommendation mechanisms, bullet comment culture, and social media discussions. Finally, **emotion and commodity reinforce each other in a cycle**. The emotional experience, once commodified, reshapes consumers’ emotional expectations and expressions. For example, love requires roses and dramatic declarations, as represented on the screen, has become a daily need. It is not forced but is a “consensus” that consumers repeatedly confirm, reinforce, and reproduce in practice, extending into daily life.

Unlike the consumption of emotional commodities analyzed by Illouz (e.g., perfume), the consumption of aesthetic emotional commodities provided by streaming platforms gives audiences an augmented sense of agency through their interactive participation. The cyclical reinforcement between their emotional expression and the platform algorithm evolves into an interactive co-production relationship. The data-feedback loop between them drives the simultaneous forging and iteration of female pleasure and dramatic form within the Big Girl drama production chain. This process unfolds in three interconnected mechanisms:

**Emotional script prefabrication** — calculating what the audience most wants to take pleasure in. Platform big data quantifies user UGC and purchase records, extracting high-empathy coordinates such as “comeback,” “slaying the scumbag,” and “career peak” — all of which are self-constructed traditions of Big Girl dramas. Screenwriters then translate these into pleasure-point beats (e.g., one pleasure point every X minutes), creating predictable, repeatable, and comparable emotional rhythms, thereby prefabricating standardized emotional structures for audiences.

**Visual device training** — teaching audiences when to feel pleasure. Through narrative, camera movement, color, music, actor performance, and a beat-based technique of suffering and pleasure, they lock in and activate audience emotional pathways of anger, release, stress relief, and delight, effectively “factory-setting” both audience emotions and visual forms.

**Interactive reproduction** — audiences not only learn emotional consumption through paid viewing but also reproduce emotions through UGC. Through on-demand viewing, bullet comments, CP fan communities (*chaohua*), and comments like “What lipstick is she wearing? Please share the link,” they continuously recommodify pleasure.

Meanwhile, the platform uses algorithms to collect real-time data, providing timely feedback and adjustments. It quickly modifies promotion strategies and even drama content, validating and reinforcing audience emotions, and then incorporates them into drama production to prefabricate scripts with even more precise pleasure points for the next cycle.

This dynamic adjustment might cause narrative disconnection, but it satisfies and reinforces the audience's subjective desires, drawing them into drama production and consumption. The audience thus becomes not only a consumer of emotional commodities but also a producer of the emotional commodity form, turning their viewing into production, reproducing their own emotions through UGC, and also performing their illusion of "authorship." They produce not only data like bullet comments but also their own subjectivity. And through this self-reproduction, they serve the reproduction of platform capital. Platforms and producers encourage this self-understanding, not only deliberately incorporating shots like "online snacking" to make audiences exclaim "That's so me," but also forming representational modes that encourage audience identification.

In the mutual encouragement between platform and audience, plot and character presentation in dramas become more and more abstract, discarding plot developments with realistic or historical temporal characteristics that would hinder collective identification, as well as nuanced character portrayals determined by specific situations. They rely on a set of highly semiotized, batch-producible superficial action sequences to represent characters and relationships, shifting from endogenous emotional development to external emotional substitution, replacing psychological depth with action, authentic emotion with symbols, and logic with templates. This repetition trains audiences into highly conscious consumers of corresponding shots and emotions, who automatically follow plot lines in familiar formulas, participate in character emotional experiences, and transform from aesthetic consumers to drama producers through "anticipating" plot developments, pleasure point beats, or emotional structures — forming a tripartite unity of audience-author-character.

Drama production thus evolves into simulacra reproduction. Only expression, narration, and "emotions" that have been detached from specific situations, specific experiences, and specific feelings can be shared. The emotions of audiences and characters are reduced to highly abstract, shareable, expressible, computable, and repeatable patterns, since algorithms can only extract clearly expressed emotions. Therefore, only three types of emotion, i.e., "pleasure" (*shuang*), "torturing" (*nue*), and "sweetness" (*tian*) are left in Chinese Big Girl dramas. Audiences familiar with the relevant process have long been trained with stimulus-response mechanisms. They automatically increase bullet comment production, complete viewing, and engage in secondary creation at corresponding pleasure points, performing the quantifiable, displayable, exchangeable "real pleasure" predetermined by the mode of drama production, or abandoning productions that fail to meet their expectations.

Their UGC is again incorporated into the next round of drama production. Audience emotions and algorithms thus reinforce each other in the cycle of production-consumption-reproduction of emotional commodities, jointly promoting the iterative upgrade of emotion-commodity. Audiences identify with both

character and “author” roles, turning the “successful” templates recommended by the algorithmic logic of convergence (Harvey, 1990) into “self-expression.” They reproduce a vast amount of video secondary creations and online fiction on social media, all of which can be reduced to tags like “face-slapping,” “punishing the scumbag,” and “female competition” that they learned through interaction with the algorithm, further reinforcing the use of these tags in dramas, turning plot iteration into the diversity of modular assembly and the intensity of emotional arousal.

Thus, algorithm and audience present a double performativity. The algorithm performs its understanding of the drama that “audiences like”, while the audience performs the viewing that is expected of them. They are mirror images of each other, jointly producing and reinforcing new norms of algorithmic feminism. As Judith Butler (1990) argues in *Gender Trouble*, identity is “performed” through repeated, stylized acts; the subject, by citing and repeating existing social norms, reinforces the “authenticity” of a certain identity.

The algorithm produces norms in its interaction with audience. It **“discovers” patterns**, forms “effective” drama paradigms through repeated data-driven instructions; **repeats production**, using paradigms to guide drama production, repeatedly declaring the paradigm “correct,” “successful,” and “popular”; **generates “truth”** by requiring producers and audiences to repeatedly cite norms, thereby reinforcing their importance, and performatively constructing a new regime of truth of “female empowerment” supported by data.

Audiences perform the identity of the “ideal audience” through their viewing behaviors, such as **internalizing discipline**, i.e., their aesthetic taste disciplined by long-term feeding of homogeneous content, or their horizons of expectation shaped by algorithms; **identifying with norms**, i.e., through likes for “slaying the scumbag,” shouting “sister is so cool,” and watching at double speed to skip expository scenes, they perform their identification with the dramatic paradigm; **rewarding the algorithm**, i.e., through paid consumption and UGC production, they affirm and encourage the algorithm’s understanding and the platform’s service.

The paradoxical nature of this double performative structure lies precisely in the fact that the audience is placed in the position of “master,” co-producing the dramas that display their own subjectivity together with the algorithm. The algorithm encourages and reinforces the audience’s illusion of subjectivity, bringing their consumption performance and online emotional expression into the iteration of Big Girl representation. The algorithm itself hides as the detective, matching agent, purifier, and amplifier of audience emotions. It looks like that it only discovers, purifies, and connects with audience emotions through UGC analysis, amplifying them into collective emotions. What is obscured thereby is the fact that the audience’s mode of consumption is cultivated through interaction with the commodity form, and that the Big Girl consumption form algorithmically matched to them is nothing but data modules that have been formed and proven “successful” over the past decade. As a results, the production and consumption of Big Girl dramas become highly repetitive, homogeneous, and normative.

On the other hand, the audience, placed in the subject position, does participate through viewing in the empowerment performance staged by platform algorithms, producers, and audiences. But the content and manner of performance are prefabricated. Their subjective functions, including the “power” to abandon a drama, do not challenge platform capitalism but rather reward the platform algorithm, encouraging it to provide products that even faster, higher, and more strongly satisfy their emotional consumption needs. So, the iteration of “feminism” does respond to audience emotions. For illustration, “dark lotus” (a cunning and ruthless woman who hides her true nature behind a gentle facade) has evolved from vying for power for herself (as in *Story of Yanxi Palace*) to fighting for sisterhood (as in *The Story of the Cloud*). But in essence, it is an emotion-commodity provided by platforms to cater to the consumer market that is continuously iterated through the algorithm-audience interaction. It is a means for platforms to profit.

In this interaction, a production paradigm for Big Girl dramas emerges. It must have 1. **predictable genre styles** that fit the algorithm’s “understanding” of classification tags such as “Big Girl,” “revenge,” “pleasure drama,” and “career”; 2. **quantifiable emotional hormones** that efficiently reproduce quantifiable emotional reactions (e.g., “pleasure,” “anguish,” “sweetness”), triggering audience behaviors that make them pay for pleasure and converting their emotional value into emotional price; 3. **repeatable hit formulas** that channel traffic for the platform, available for algorithms and audiences to repeatedly learn, and to serve platform capital through audiences’ viewing labor; 4. **mainstreamable safety expectations** that facilitate maximizing user scale. In the end, feminist discourse is performatively reconstructed, in the co-performance of platform algorithms and audiences, into a fixed script that serves the market, promotes personal success, and produces emotional pleasure. Those stories with social criticality, that challenge deep gender structures, or that overflow the digital tradition and algorithmic discipline, are quietly forgotten, co-opted, and hollowed out.

#### 4. Algorithmic Narration: How Calculated Empowerment Disciplines Subjectivity

*The Story of the Cloud*, which generated unprecedented buzz in 2024, is a product of this process and a representative of algorithm-centered drama production. Compared to author-centered dramas like *Empresses in the Palace*, *The Story of the Cloud* exhibits highly homogenized, abstract, and templated characteristics. This is because it is the product of algorithms calculating previous drama paradigms and audience expressions. But it is also because it needs to maximize the provision of a shareable viewing experience to audiences, trigger their viewing and performance, and use their subjective desires to channel traffic for the platform. **Calculated empowerment becomes empowerment that is calculated.**

The method is to empower the character with whom audiences are meant to identify, granting her agency on both the narrated and the narrating levels. On the narrated level, the female lead’s capacity for action is highlighted. Like other dramas, *The Story of the Cloud* taps into the anxiety caused by the dual demands of economic independence and traditional gender roles, offering an individualistic feminist solution that “caters to” her subjective desire: breaking free from traditional gender roles, becoming an autonomous individual, and fulfilling more social functions. The drama tells the story of the heroine Xue

Fangfei, who, after being framed by her snobbish in-laws and a princess who covets her husband, and then buried alive by her ex-husband, is reborn as Jiang Li, the daughter of a powerful minister's family who was killed by her stepmother. She returns to the Jiang household and, with the help of a noble duke, embarks on a path of revenge, self-rescue, and saving others.

The main plot revolves around Xue's struggle with Jiang's stepmother and the princess, and also incorporates the noble duke's power struggle to enter the court. The revenge process is roughly divided into four stages. First, in the Jiang household, after plotting her return, Xue uses her wits to counter the stepmother's suppression, the stepsister's competition, the servants' cunning, and the princess's teasing, and distinguishes herself in school. Then she goes out to save her father, using Jiang's power and the duke's help to rescue her maternal uncle, then saves her own father, exposes a secret gold mine, and leads refugees back to the capital to petition the emperor. She thereby changes the power balance between the emperor/duke and the princess/prince. Back in the Jiang household, the domestic struggle continues, but Xue now fully controls the situation, actively attacks, exposes the stepmother's schemes, driving her mad. In the final court plus female competition climax, Xue participates in planning, helping to defeat the rebel prince's army and the mad princess and hypocritical ex-husband, who both commit suicide.

The drama uses burial and rebirth to symbolize women's desire to break free from traditional social roles and redefine their own personality, social attributes, and value pursuits. It is full of "female subject" imagination, showing how "rebellious" women break the feudal gender division of labor, stand strong, use their wits against villains, and uphold justice. Xue is endowed with a halo: she repays every wrong, returns every kindness, and acts in a timely manner, showcasing her agency, strength, and self-control as a Big Girl. The camera is also very tolerant of her "dark lotus" revenge tactics, giving explanations for the mad princess and evil stepmother based on individual psychology (rather than social factors), showing that women have the right and power to fight for love and power. They are fully "empowered" to satisfy the subjective imagination of the female audience.

On the narrative level, the female lead's capacity for action becomes the driving force of the plot. Except for the first episode's character introduction and backstory, the subsequent plot is mostly driven by Xue's actions. She seems fully endowed with subjectivity, not only accomplishing her revenge on the content level but also, on the narrative level, becoming the force that propels the plot. After rebirth, she transforms from a passive victim into an active agent. Her revenge actions draw other characters into the plot, making her the hidden hand behind the scenes. This gives the female audience the illusion of subjectivity, viewing this third-person narrative drama (directed by a man) as "female-centered" storytelling.

However, this is a precisely calculated form of empowerment. In content, besides the popular individualistic feminist stance, the algorithm determines the drama's material selection, narrative, and character representation. It replaces real issues with algorithmically captured online gender topics, problem analysis with algorithmically taggable plot displays, and problem-solving with algorithmically tabulated market preferences. Through algorithmic measurement, these are woven into the narrative rhythm, producing a tagged "Big Girl revenge pleasure drama" that performs catering to the audience's subjective desire.

The drama not only continues the “traditions” of Big Girl dramas. These include domestic fighting, female competition, and old tropes such as women scheming against women, women hitting women, women mocking women, women drugging women, women delivering women to be raped by men, women killing women’s children, and women fighting for male favor. At the same time, the drama also arranges “popular” new elements. These include women visiting brothels, swearing brotherhood with underworld figures, beating drums to petition the emperor, putting on armor, sisterhood (e.g., Xue avenging Jiang), outsmarting overconfident men, and sapiosexuality.

Not to mention the twisted gender concepts, this “algorithmic narrative” hollows out the realities women face. It also excludes those experiences and desires that overflow the algorithm. As a result, the entire drama replaces in-depth discussion of gender issues with a proceduralized narrative that strictly controls audience emotions. This leads to a drama with themes but no subject, narrative but no content, tropes but no meaning, and with stereotypical characterizations and externalized actor performances.

In terms of material selection, algorithmic narrative replaces problem presentation with material calculation. It replaces women’s real-life survival and experiential expression with online “feminist” topics, language, and emotions captured by platform algorithms. As a result, it evolves into a hyper-simulacrum production that lacks real-world problem referents. *The Story of the Cloud* not only chooses a popular online IP as its source material. Its adaptation and production also replace real problems with online topics, and replace problem-solving with market preferences cultivated through algorithm-audience interaction.

The drama uses the revenge mainline to string together many online hot topics that lack intrinsic connection. These topics can only be covered by the vague label of “feminism”, such as female revenge, building a career, cutting off relatives, slaying the scumbag, and sapiosexuality. Initially, these topics sparked controversy because of the historical and real-life difficulties women face. However, in online discussions, they have long become stereotyped symbols. In the production history of Big Girl dramas, they have been transformed into plots and “emotions” stripped of specificity and made shareable among audiences. Now, algorithms capture these topics and symbols for a new round of drama production. They become hyper-simulacra reproductions (text-to-text, text-to-image) that have lost their grounding in reality and historical-temporal limits.

Behind this lies the hollowing out of content and theme. The related topics are not only severed from their social roots and displaced into a hollowed-out ancient setting, but are also given “safe” explanations that are algorithmically extracted. Because of the lack of thematic content, the drama can pull in various loosely connected topics and even contradictory positions. For example, *The Story of the Cloud* uses the original sin of marriage and family, along with the proposition of individual independence, to respond to online stereotypical topics. These include the harm of the family of origin (equated with patriarchy), marriage as a cannibalistic institution, and the experience of encountering bad partners.

The drama then uses the basic Big Girl trope of “encountering a good man” to solve all problems. Xue Fangfei, after being betrayed by her in-laws and abandoned by her birth family, embarks on a path of self-rebirth, saving herself and others. However, her entire “opening the cheat” (i.e., using extraordinary

advantages) is only to fight the stepmother, the stepsister, the mistress, the scumbag, and the corrupt officials who act on their own selfish desires. This not only repeats the traditions that Big Girl dramas have built for themselves, but also turns her agency into a tool for maintaining feudal rule. Specifically, Xue's revenge is to save her father and brother. She fights against the stepmother, yet praises her father. The camera never questions the "father's" position in the feudal family; instead, it attributes the father's crime of abandonment to the stepmother's deception. Xue and the noble duke find beautiful love, and their joint career-building also serves to better support the feudal emperor.

The drama uses online topics to grasp audience emotions. It leverages contemporary women's dissatisfaction with traditional gender consciousness to perform respect for female audience subjectivity. Yet, when analyzing gender issues, the drama avoids pointing to any real power relations. It not only repeatedly produces representations that damage female relationships — such as female competition — but also offers a specific solution to online gender topics: women should maintain the feudal system and achieve personal success within it. This approach weakens the connection between these topics and genuine gender issues. It also hollows out the meaning of feminism.

Specifically, feminism's critique of traditional gender divisions is reduced to cutting off family ties. Its reflection on gender power relations is turned into personal revenge. Its demand for gender equality is replaced by the vulgar understanding that "women can also build careers" (while it is taken for granted that men build careers). This not only cancels the meaning of women's "rebirth" but also eliminates the demand for equality behind the audience's subjective desire. As a result, gender issues themselves become a pseudo-problem. The final product is a drama with themes but no subject, narrative but no content, topic tags but no real discussion of problems.

This is the result of algorithmic mediation. Algorithms guide the script by scraping online data. Although that data is the product of mutual learning and co-production between algorithms and audiences, it hollows out the reality women face. Moreover, the data is exploited by platform capital to turn female empowerment into the instrumentalization of female desire. Platforms use the most widespread online expressions to represent women's real experiences, emotions, and aspirations. They stereotype women's stories, tag gender issues, and turn the on-screen Big Girl into an object dominated by procedurally determined narratives, or a tool for completing narrative mechanisms.

This mechanism is the creation of pleasure points to satisfy the audience's subjective desire, thereby turning algorithmic feminism into a tool for capital reproduction. The tropes in *The Story of the Cloud* come from gender topics algorithmically selected by the maximization principle. Its emotional structure is a familiar combination of pleasure, suffering, and sweetness. Its narrative follows a cyclical formula common in Big Girl dramas: abuse → self-rescue → reward. The problem-solving adopts algorithmically extracted safe positions. With such homogenized narrative and stereotypical representation, how does the drama ensure audience retention? The answer lies in the novelty and intensity of audience emotional activation, that is, the level and density of pleasure point configuration.

Narrative drive is driven by pleasure point density, a formal feature of algorithmic narrative and a result of the dramatization (simulacration) of the drama. Everything in the drama can be (and is) algorithmically calculated, with the goal of triggering shareable audience emotions to retain users. After nearly a decade of development, Big Girl dramas have formed a “mature” production method: replacing problem presentation and discussion with emotional stimulation and release, turning women’s difficulties and resistance into the production of torturing/pleasure points, turning women’s real anxieties, subjective desires, and desire for change into emotional commodities for consumption.

Through iterative and repetitive production of safe gender representations, they continuously upgrade the means, intensity, and frequency of emotional arousal, ultimately depriving the Big Girl of the agency she is nominally endowed with. *The Story of the Cloud*, as a representative example, has obvious narrative logic flaws and incoherent plot connections, but its pleasure/suffering points are precisely calculated, its narrative flow is neat, its module assembly is perfect, and its plot progression is fast, forming a perfect emotional Lego set that uses precise narrative calculation to shape and respond to the audience’s illusion of subjectivity.

In terms of narrative method, algorithmic narrative replaces specific experiential expression with narrative calculation. This results in a drama with narrative but no content, characters but no depth, performance but no portrayal, and shots but no meaning. It can only use proceduralized, stereotyped, and extreme representations to grasp audience emotions. The lack of thematic content stems from the “arbitrariness” of hyper-simulacra production. Detached from concrete historical reality and authentic experience, everything is determined by data calculation. This leads to a lack of classical plot development or narrative structure that is organized around a single problem and its resolution with tight internal connections.

In *The Story of the Cloud*, the female revenge story, the revenge process, character relationships, and shot editing all depend on topic heat or viewing preferences cultivated by audiences through interaction with algorithms. Therefore, it is difficult for the various tropes to form an event sequence that has internal thematic coherence, socially determined necessary motivational development, deep emotional connections, or a clear logic and temporality. Thus, the drama can only rely on character actions — specifically, Xue’s (and the noble duke’s) revenge actions — to link together those small tropes that lack internal theme and meaning, thereby advancing the narrative. This may seem to endow the Big Girl with agency, but in fact it facilitates bringing various contingent elements into the drama.

The guiding principle is pleasure point creation. Through precise calculation, various means of stimulating audience emotions are densely distributed across all levels of the drama: in material selection (online hot topics), in narrative (the Big Girl’s “rebellion”), in rhythm (the precise distribution of pleasure, suffering, and sweetness levels and densities), turning the whole drama into a collection of emotional packets that trigger audience viewing and performance. The Big Girl, as the object of audience identification, is the bridge to audience pleasure, the necessary medium: audiences get suffering/pleasure by identifying with her suffering and revenge. These suffering/pleasure feelings indirectly reflect their real anxieties and dissatisfaction, and also give them vicarious satisfaction from the Big Girl’s righteous revenge. So audiences

increase bullet comment production when Xue is buried alive, when her enemies die painfully or fail to get what they want, and when she has ambiguous interactions with the noble duke.

In narrative rhythm, *The Story of the Cloud* uses a strong-plot, short-form-paced mode of “three steps to pleasure, five steps to explosion.” Each episode is cut into multiple high-conflict, multi-twist, shareable emotional stimulus packets. These packets time the audience’s emotional rises and falls, turning the plot into a Lego assembly without internal necessity. Take the first episode as an example. It opens with the “golden 3-second rule” of micro-short dramas (attracting the audience within 3 seconds). Xue runs through the forest in a red dress, aesthetically striking yet full of danger. Within one minute, there is a kiss under falling pear blossoms; then the plot turns to misfortune. Within 9 minutes, she is framed, buried alive, and reborn. Then 5 minutes show the twisted relationship between the mad princess and Xue’s ex-husband. Another 5 minutes of action introduce the noble duke in red, who becomes suspicious of the ex-husband at a bizarre funeral with white banners everywhere.

The remaining 20 minutes complete the process of Xue being saved by Jiang, learning Jiang’s story, taking her identity, deciding on revenge, and making a plan. This is all achieved using strong colors, oppressive music, extreme character actions, and shocking visual representations to trigger high-intensity audience emotions. Kaleidoscopic transitions and trope connections maintain the emotional fluctuations. Accompanying this is the stereotyping of character portrayal, extremism of plot conflict, surface-level actor performance, and stylization of audiovisual presentation, all aimed at triggering shareable audience emotions.

Freed from the concrete reality and authentic experience that would overflow the algorithm, the tropes and character settings can be calculated. To maximize audience attraction, the drama simplifies the presentation of social background, character motivation analysis, emotional portrayal, identity struggle, self-growth, and other details that would hinder audience identification, resulting in stereotypical and tagged ways of representation. Because they need to present images and emotions available for audience sharing, characters are tagged according to their function in the algorithmic narrative.

In *The Story of the Cloud*, according to their relationship with the male and female leads, characters are simply divided into righteous and evil factions, and the plot unfolds in the conflicts between them. As a female avenger, Xue has a straightforward motivation. Once reborn, she leaps from victim to revenge tool, with full intelligence and precise strikes, hitting audience pleasure points everywhere. Her character arc gives way to leveling up. Her adversaries, the stepmother and princess, become tools to verify her ability, constantly setting obstacles for her, forming a pattern of obstacle-setting and obstacle-removing.

However, after experiencing a series of “events”, the characters undergo no change in emotions, values, or outlook. The evil remains evil, the good remains good. The camera only gives a little sympathy before the villains’ deaths, in order to avoid the pure palace and female competition narratives of which audiences have grown weary. The parallel subplot, the noble duke’s revenge line involving court struggle, is even further simplified into a narrative tool to get Xue involved in national affairs.

Conflicts are therefore pushed to extremes. This both adds to the Big Girl’s sense of agency and gives old plots new clothes, increasing the intensity of emotional stimulation to provide audiences with maximum

pleasure. The schemes and battles in the drama lack reasonable explanation and are taken to extremes. For example, Xue is framed by her in-laws, buried alive by her ex-husband, and her entire family is targeted for murder, only because the princess wants to steal her ex-husband. The stepmother will resort to any means to harm others for her daughter's sake.

From an individualistic standpoint, the stepmother's behavior is explained as a lack of security, and the princess's motives are explained as psychological distortion caused by being sent to make peace and experiencing domestic violence. The princess only wants to possess another's husband to compensate for her emotional deficit, and she is willing to sacrifice herself for him even when betrayed. Yet this does not conceal the drama's level of madness. All emotions and conflicts are extremized. The princess is utterly mad, the stepmother utterly insidious, and the ex-husband utterly hypocritical. Their ways of harming others exceed all legal and ethical limits, prompting audiences to exclaim, "So insane, but I love it."

Actor performances are also externalized. They expand outward rather than exploring inward, using facial muscles and body movements to trigger audience emotions. This forms what can be called "surface acting" (which is the literal meaning of Chinese word for performance). Because the narrative is woven from online symbols, the characters lack the motivational development that would come from deep background portrayal. The detailed depiction of psychological journeys, which would facilitate audience identification, is omitted.

The drama presents no detailed portrayal of the characters' psychological development. Such depth would have helped audiences to understand the characters. Hence, the drama can only rely on shots and actors' externalized performances to guide audience identification with character "emotions." The portrayal of "love" also omits inner experience. Instead, it relies on a series of external, formulaic actions, including mutually gazing looks, accidental touches, "eye-thread pulling" (a term for intense eye contact), holding hands, putting on a coat, carrying in arms, kissing, forced cohabitation, weddings, and consummation. All of these are familiar, externalized, formulaic, and proceduralized actions used to demonstrate love.

Finally, there is the stylization of shots. *The Story of the Cloud* is filled with sensory stimulation from costumes, cinematography, colors, music, and actor performances. These include suffering points such as being harmed, buried alive, death, and family annihilation. They also include pleasure points such as sensationalism, resurrection, face-switching, domestic fighting, female competition, revenge, madness, face-slapping, and killing. The drama features endless plot twists and shots that highlight highly stylized, abstracted, and exaggerated actor performances. These elements trigger strong emotional swings in the audience, leading to a proceduralization of emotional release.

What's notable is the justice-compensation mechanism of "an eye for an eye." This mechanism turns female revenge into a precise pleasure-making machine that hits audience emotions and provides vicarious satisfaction. As a result, audiences exclaim things like "breast-friendly," "emotion-friendly," "stress-relief tool," and "emotional value consumption." A review from Xinhua Net (a Chinese state-owned media outlet) called the drama "a spiritual supplement for regulating health and relieving depression," stating that "through the three satisfactions of story, audio-visual, and emotion, it achieves the spiritual effect of stress relief." Watching the drama becomes emotional release, and audiences enter instant emotional consumption.

### 5. Algorithmic Iteration: How Simulacra Production Extracts Value

Yet it is precisely here that audiences lose access to authentic emotional experience. It is the result of the proceduralization of narrative, the stereotyping of characters, the extremization of conflicts, and the proliferation of simulacra. As Illouz (2019) argues, their emotions have become structured through interaction with the algorithm. Consequently, dramas are increasingly unable to accommodate complex, subtle, and diverse emotional experiences or narrative modes that exceed algorithmic measurement, let alone stories rooted in women's real lives.

Contemporary Big Girl narratives increasingly center on the pleasure of kin-killing, the thrill of retaliation and redemption, and the sweetness of romantic love, thereby providing audiences with proceduralized viewing pleasure and emotional stress relief through highly formulaic emotional structures. This dynamic is both an outcome of the algorithm's spiral progression and a key driver of its ongoing operation. As the cycle repeats, audiences' authentic emotions and real experiences will be further eroded and alienated.

Audiences also lose their critical capacity. Although *The Story of the Cloud* was hailed as a stress-relief tool, few have commented on the social injustices suffered by women and the lower classes within the drama. Even fewer mention the self-generated conventions of Big Girl dramas, such as "all women hate me, all men love me," "women's mistakes are always punished whereas men's evil is forgiven," "men's faults are women's faults," in addition to the subservience to and servicing of traditional gender roles.

This exposes the true "performativity" of Big Girl dramas. Set in a hollowed-out reality, they substitute simulacra for genuine problem discussion, emotional arousal for critical reflection, and systematically harvest the audience's emotional price through immersion. Their essence lies in demanding women's submission to outdated gender ideologies and platform capitalism by offering vicarious satisfaction for women. It is a form of spiritual "massage" (McLuhan).

The on-screen Big Girl, empowered only at the surface level, is stripped of subjectivity. The so-called decade of "feminist" iteration is nothing more than a replacement of old stereotypes with new ones constructed by Big Girl dramas themselves. For example, the stereotypical dependent housewife is replaced by the stereotypical career-oriented independent woman. In many recent dramas, before being buried, the female lead appears as a beautiful, gentle, and virtuous daughter-in-law and wife within a feudal family. Once that identity is, metaphorically speaking, buried alive, she is reborn as a strong-willed, strategic female elite, resembling a program operating purely in "revenge mode."

What is rejected are the stereotypes constructed by Big Girl dramas. For example, the stepmother who can only scheme for family interests, or tropes that netizens have grown weary of, such as the "love brain." Yet, although the labels attached to the female lead keep shifting, from "little white flower," "saint," and "love brain" to "dark lotus," "career brain," and "sisterhood," Big Girl dramas continue to recycle the same stale narrative structures, including domestic infighting, female rivalry, and personal vendettas. In doing so, they trivialize gender issues and the cause of gender equality. Such meaningless "feminist" iteration is merely a new tactic to deceive audiences.

The more fundamental deception lies in the avoidance of real problems. Without real problems, there are no real answers. Even real problems are transformed into new simulacra. On the one hand, historical Big Girl dramas “invent” women’s “suffering” within a hollowed-out feudal system at a time when the law has already granted women equal rights. On the other hand, they turn the real problems women face into simulacra. The dramas broadcast in 2024-2025 not only replicate previous material choices, narrative formulas, and emotional structures but also incorporate new audience concerns such as workplace bullying and sexual harassment (e.g., *The Story of Pearl Girl*). However, these issues are explained away as the evil or greed of individual characters, avoiding any deep analysis or critique.

It is this avoidance of real problems that leads to the paradoxical representation of Big Girl dramas. On the one hand, it performatively endows the Big Girl with subjectivity to satisfy women’s subjective desires; on the other hand, it makes the settings of “beautiful, strong, and miserable woman,” “career brain,” and “dark lotus” serve the algorithmically determined narrative program, plot assembly, and emotional structure, thereby turning female subjectivity into a programmatic performance determined by data. The “female lead” may not fully conform to the object of the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey (1975), though indeed, the directors of Big Girl dramas are still mostly male. Yet she becomes an object of algorithmic gaze or discipline, and thereby a “subject-to-be-looked at” in the symbiotic relationship between female audiences and the algorithm.

### Conclusion

In sum, the algorithm gives rise to an internal-loop iteration of representation, that is, the iteration of existing data traditions. It transforms artistic creation from author-centered expression into data-driven, iterative product development. Within a given framework, it iterates narrative production through spiral micro-adjustments. This manifests in four types of iteration:

**Character iteration** replaces deep character depiction with precise matching of the female lead to audience “preferences,” iterating traits, backgrounds, ability models, and growth paths.

**Narrative iteration** replaces internal narrative logic with algorithmic arrangement of pleasure point density, iterating plot rhythm, story types, and conflict settings.

**Emotional iteration** replaces authentic emotional logic with combinatorial formulas for maximizing traffic, iterating the type, quantity, and intensity of emotional modules.

**Promotion iteration** replaces traditional promotion with real-time data monitoring, iterating promotional focus, editing versions, and plot directions.

The determining factor in this iteration is, of course, platform capital. As long as the algorithm’s fundamental goal remains serving capital accumulation, with maximizing user retention as its ultimate orientation, drama production, especially under the AI factory model, will continue to merely approach the reproduction of “safe options.” It constantly takes in new data only to iteratively cater to the “aesthetic taste” or emotional structure cultivated through algorithm-audience interaction.

This process inevitably perpetuates a reproductive cycle, homogeneous themes, procedural narratives, stereotyped characters, extreme conflicts, structured emotions, and hollow values. Unless the algorithm's objective function is recalibrated -- from "how to create a hit" to the value-based question "why tell (this) story?" -- so as to push drama toward meta-narrative iteration, the fundamental direction of algorithm-driven narrative iteration is unlikely to change. In the near future, such a shift can only be a hope.

However, if Big Girl dramas cannot break free from their self-constructed digital traditions, they will only resort to increasingly stereotyped narratives, performances, and representations. This, in turn, reinforces ever more rigid emotional module combinations, intensifying the double performativity of algorithm and audience, as well as the hyper-simulacralization or outright nullification of gender issues. Algorithmic feminism will thus persist as an uncritical, highly commodified reproduction of gender simulacra. It privileges form over content, extracting feminism's symbolic surface while hollowing out its critical core. It promotes individualistic and consumerist solutions, avoiding structural issues. It constructs procedural narratives that follow highly replicable data templates to ensure stable return on investment. And, ultimately oriented by traffic, it provides the most "popular" emotion-commodity modules to serve platform capital, performing female empowerment on-screen while harvesting women's emotions and subjective desires off-screen.

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