# A Comparative Study on the Shaping of Female Subjectivity in Chinese and Japanese Female-Oriented Games: From the Perspective of Foucault's Theory of Discursive Power

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## Abstract

This study employs Foucault's theory of discursive power to compare the shaping of female subjectivity in Chinese and Japanese female-oriented games, using Lovebrush Chronicles (China) and Uta no Prince-sama (Japan) as case studies. The analysis focuses on two dimensions: game text and user experience. Regarding game text analysis, distinct approaches emerge: Chinese games tend to emphasize female agency and self-actualization, often manifested through dynamic power relations and development narratives centered on social missions or personal transcendence. Japanese games place greater focus on women's roles in emotional bonds and supportive positioning, with their capability development and growth paths closely tied to shaping the male characters, forming specific interaction patterns. This divergence reflects underlying socio-cultural differences. In terms of user experience, player perceptions distinctly align with these textual characteristics: Chinese players report significantly stronger experiences of female characters' autonomous decision-making and resistance consciousness, while Japanese players more readily perceive supportive attributes and emotional resonance in the female roles, with relatively limited experience of their independent subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Foucault's theory of discursive power; Female-oriented games; Female subjectivity

## 1.   Introduction

### 1.1  Research Background

In recent years, fueled by the widespread adoption of mobile internet, the significant increase in women's consumption power, and evolving societal gender perceptions, the female gamer demographic has continuously expanded. The female-oriented game market is rapidly emerging. According to market research reports, China's female-oriented game market size has grown steadily, reaching ¥958 billion yuan in 2023, accounting for 32% of the total game market up from 19% in 2018[1].

Female-oriented games, through deconstructing traditional gender relations, open new pathways for exploring female identity formation and value realization, sparking widespread social discourse[2]. Consequently, this study employs Foucault's theory of discursive power as an analytical framework to examine the essential differences in female subjectivity construction between Chinese and Japanese female-oriented games. It explores how these differences reflect the lived realities of women within their respective socio-cultural contexts, and how the games' reflexivity prompts players to critically reflect on real-world gender norms.

### 1.2  Research Content and Methods

#### 1.2.1 Textual Analysis

This study employs textual analysis to examine narrative scripts from the Chinese game Lovebrush Chronicles and the Japanese PSP game Uta no Prince-sama. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of textual connotations and themes, revealing differences in female subjectivity construction. By comparing the discursive power frameworks shaping female subjectivity in Chinese and Japanese games, this analysis elucidates diverse feminist practices within female-oriented games. It thereby offers a transcultural perspective for gender studies grounded in new media.

#### 1.2.2 Questionnaire Survey

A digital questionnaire survey targets female players of both games. The instrument investigates dimensions including character interactions and narrative experience to gather direct player feedback on female subjectivity construction. Analysis of player responses clarifies how female-oriented games facilitate women's self-recognition while fostering contemporary women's self-awareness.

## 2.    Current Research Status (Chinese&International)

### 2.1  Female Subjectivity

Simone de Beauvoir, a foundational theorist of female subjectivity, argued in The Second Sex that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," systematically analyzing how women are constructed as the "Other" and denied subjectivity[3]. Luce Irigaray recognized women's confinement within male discourse, advocating for self-empowerment through constructing distinct female discourse[4]. Judith Butler contends that the category "woman" itself is produced and regulated by power systems, excluding and suppressing certain women; thus, gender and identity are fluid constructs, negating the need for a fixed feminist subject[5]. The trajectory of female subjectivity theory has evolved from recognizing its deprivation, to focusing on its construction, and finally to deconstructing traditional notions, offering diverse perspectives for women's self-identification and liberation.

Domestic research on female subjectivity includes: (1) Studies represented by He Ming primarily analyze female representation in literature and arts, focusing on subjectivity construction across social domains, though research specifically on female-oriented games remains limited; (2) Scholars like Chen Yimeng who study female-oriented games mainly concentrate on character portrayal and narrative structures. This study diverges by employing Foucault's discourse-power theory and a Sino-Japanese comparative perspective to examine female subjectivity.

## 3.    Definitions of Key Terms

### 3.1  Female-Oriented Games

The term "女性向" (josei-muke) originated in 1950s Japan, where "向け" (muke) denotes "targeted at" a specific group. Thus, female-oriented games are explicitly designed for a female audience. They encompass three subgenres: otome games (romance simulation), BL (boys' love) games, and raising simulation games. This study focuses specifically on otome games currently highly discussed centering on simulated romantic relationships between female players and male characters[6].

### 3.2  Foucault's Discourse-Power Theory and Female Subjectivity

Within Foucault's discourse-power framework, power operates not in isolation but is constructed and sustained through complex "discourse" systems. Discourse functions not merely as language but as an implicit mechanism transmitting social norms and values. "The gaze" serves as a core exercise of power; endowed with socio-cultural legitimacy, it disciplines and surveils individuals, molding them into compliant "subjects" that meet specific power demands. This process shapes not only external behavior but also internal self-identity.

Introduced into feminist studies post-1980s, Foucault's analysis of the discourse-power relationship prompted critical examination of how female voices are suppressed and marginalized under patriarchy, and how female subjectivities are constructed and disciplined by power mechanisms. The absence or constraint of female subjectivity fundamentally reflects gendered power imbalances.

Consequently, Foucault's discourse-power theory provides a profound lens for analyzing female subjectivity, establishing itself as a vital theoretical tool in this field.

## 4.    Discourse and Power Analysis of Female Subject Construction through Game Texts

### 4.1  Sino-Japanese Comparison of Female Subjectivity Discourse Construction

4.1.1 Comparative Analysis of the "Gaze" Relationship between Female Subjects and Male Protagonists

From the "Gazing" Perspective: Both games diverge from patriarchal power relations, moving the female subject from passive object of the gaze to independent agent of independent decision and narrative command of the gameplay. In Lovebrush Chronicle, the lopsided abilities and roles of the female and male leads in timeframes create fluid power

relations—circumscribed by shifting statuses as well as shifting ally/enemy positions—betraying the heroine's power in defying the role of the gazer. In Uta no Prince-sama, the heroine, as gifted student of the academy's school of music, routinely helps male leads with her abilities as well as emotional perspicacity. Their reception of her mentoring makes them objects of her gaze, as she wields discursive power upon them. From the "Being Gazed Upon" Perspective:Lovebrush Chronicle, the heroine initially becomes an object of the male protagonist's gaze and utility due to her unique time-travel abilities. However, through repeated time-travel experiences, she ultimately masters her powers independently, refusing to let the others' gaze compromise her essential selfhood. Conversely, Uta no Prince-sama predominantly features a pattern where male protagonists overcome difficulties through the heroine's empathy and assistance. While the text meticulously crafts male charisma, the heroine's characterization remains underdeveloped. Consequently, as relationships deepen, she increasingly functions as a facilitator for male development and an object of the male gaze.

### 4.1.2 Comparative Analysis of Female Subjectivity Value Realization Paths

Zhao Xiaohua defines female subjectivity as "women's recognition of their own strengths and capabilities, asserting one's agency as a subject, and the conscious pursuit of continuous improvement in social status, lifestyle, skills, personality development, and mental health."[7] This section applies this definition to compare female value realization paths in Chinese and Japanese female-oriented games.

In terms of recognition of personal strength:

In Lovebrush Chronicle, the heroine's self-recognition stems from crisis-driven internal experiences and awakened subjectivity. She consciously identifies her combat, decision-making, and leadership abilities, intrinsically motivated to undertake significant responsibilities. Conversely, Uta no Prince-sama confines recognition of the heroine's capabilities primarily to emotional support and auxiliary tasks. Her musical talent receives minimal textual attention, while traits like empathy, selflessness, and emotional stability are framed as core competencies—rigidly bounded within servicing specific male characters' needs, neglecting exploration or affirmation of her independent agency.

With respect to personal strength growth:Lovebrush Chronicle frames the heroine's growth in the direction of protecting valued beliefs and pivoting the fates of the globe. Narrative critical decisions require her to formulate resistance and judgement in complex environments, necessitating resistance to pre-existing power relationships as well as culminating in self-transcendence—a free, adventurous growth trajectory. Uta no Prince-sama, in contrast, ties the heroine's growth to conquering challenges for the benefit of male heroes as well as advancing the men's musical careers. Her growth is strictly in the context of male-centered storylines, with little accommodation for autonomous purposes—even showing her sacrificing personal growth (e.g., forgoing study abroad) for the men's benefit—a reinforcement of pre-existing power relationships.

## 4.2 Comparative Mechanisms of Female Subjectivity Discursive Power Formation in Chinese and Japanese Contexts

Mechanisms for constructing female subjectivity in discursive power differ distinctly among Chinese and Japanese socio-cultural contexts.

For China, in the new era of socialism in Chinese characteristics, national policies all place equal priority on women's irreplaceable role in the development of the nation. Chinese women now participate on a far broader scale in direct terms in the construction of society than ever before, achieving much greater social and economic status. This has provoked the awakening of the female subject, creating pressing appeals for fierce female presence in cultural fields—where "female thought, female presence, and female power" attract broad concern[8]. For this reason, Chinese female-centered game heroines commonly appear against the backdrop of grand narratives, undertaking vital missions, and actively dismantling stereotyped power relations of discourse.

In terms of Japan, following Japan's 1970s economic boom and evolving female employment policies, women's rights and status gradually improved. However, facing severe aging and low birth rates, recent government initiatives encourage women to return to domestic roles post-childbirth, strengthening the housewifization trend. Anchored predominantly within the domestic sphere, Japanese women often seek value affirmation and emotional fulfillment through female-oriented games centered on private relationships. Yet these games frequently perpetuate gender stereotypes and power imbalances. Empirical studies indicate that while initial power disparities between male and female characters may be minimal, female characters' agency diminishes progressively during narratives, whereas male characters experience sharp mid-to-late game power ascension—resulting in significant power gaps[9].

## 5.    Power Analysis of Female Subjectivity in Female-Oriented Game User Experience

### 5.1  Comparative Manifestations of Female Subject Discipline in Game Texts

Discipline in game texts refers to the imposition of specific behavioral norms, appearance standards, or emotional patterns that constrain female characters to align with societal expectations or stereotypes, thereby restricting their autonomous expression and development. Questionnaire results reveal divergent player perceptions of such implicit gender discipline.

in terms of China, data indicates 8.65% of players perceive discipline in Chinese games as "relatively obvious" and 5.77% as "very obvious," while 33.65% deem it "less obvious" and 37.5% "moderate." This reflects a nuanced textual negotiation between "modern independent woman" tropes and traditional constraints. Players note greater narrative legitimacy given to heroines' professional pursuits or personal goals—even when intertwined with romance—with minimal depiction of extreme self-sacrifice for male needs. This moderate approach renders discipline less overt, often interpreted as "pragmatic compromise" or "romantic narrative necessity" rather than fundamental subjectivity denial, reducing psychological resistance.

In terms of Japan,43.27% of players regard discipline in Japanese games as "relatively obvious" and 13.46% as "very obvious." Texts prioritize character subordination to traditional gender roles. Players strongly perceive heroines' personal dreams and careers subordinated to male demands, with scarce narrative validation for self-driven goals. This fosters player awareness of deep integration into male-centric narratives and conspicuous subjectivity constraints.
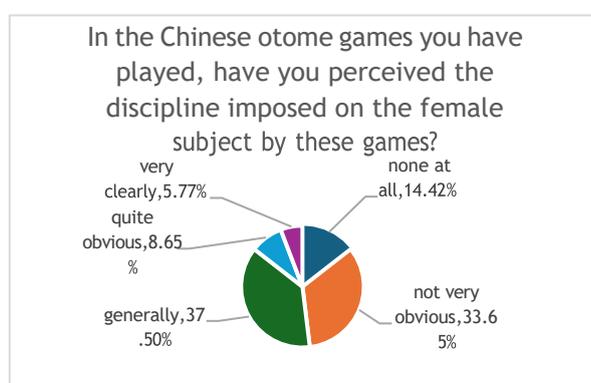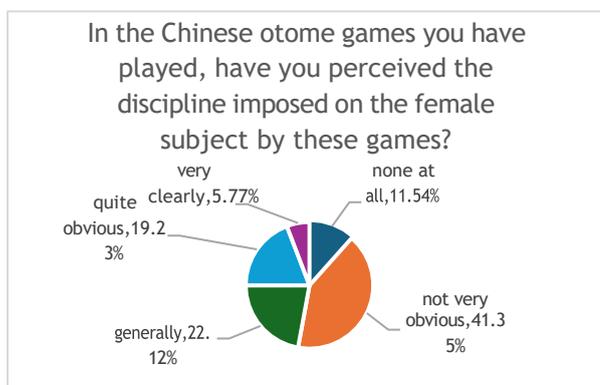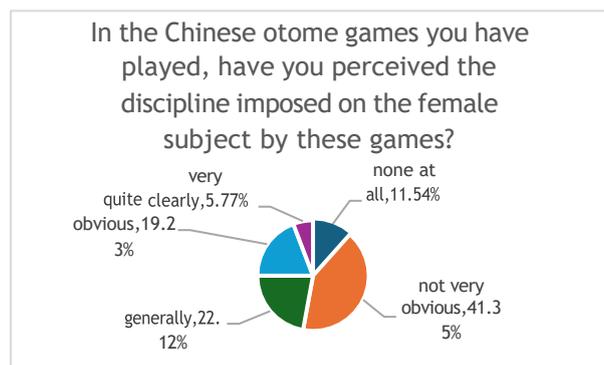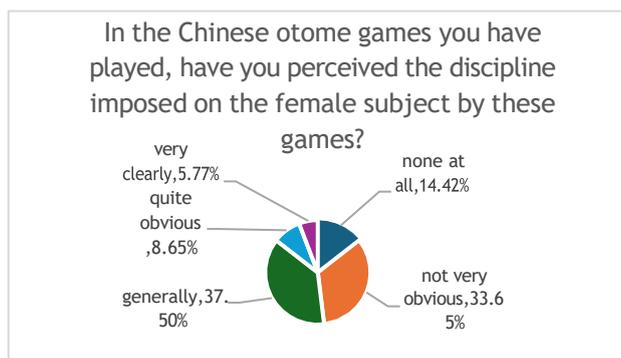


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

### 5.2  Comparative Manifestations of Female Resistance Consciousness in Game Texts

Foucault's discourse-power theory posits that liberation requires resistance against power's constraints[10]. Here, female resistance consciousness denotes characters' behaviors or attitudes challenging traditional gender roles, norms, or authority, reflecting their pursuit of subjectivity. Survey data reveals marked cross-cultural differences in player perceptions.

In terms of China,47.12% of players perceive resistance as "relatively obvious"; 12.5% as "very obvious." This indicates narratives successfully construct agentic, defiant female images. Players readily experience heroines actively overcoming constraints, fostering empathy for their self-value assertion and vitality as autonomous individuals beyond disciplined objects.

In terms of Japan,19.23% of players perceive resistance as "relatively obvious"; 5.77% as "very obvious". Players predominantly identify heroines as "auxiliary roles" and "objects of protection," where their capabilities serve male-centric growth narratives. This dilutes experiences of independent subjectivity and subversive defiance against traditional discursive power.

In the Chinese otome games you have played, have you perceived the discipline imposed on the female subject by these games?

very clearly,5.77%
quite obvious,8.65%
generally,37.50%
none at all,14.42%
not very obvious,33.65%

In the Chinese otome games you have played, have you perceived the discipline imposed on the female subject by these games?

very quite clearly,5.77%
obvious,19.23%
generally,22.12%
none at all,11.54%
not very obvious,41.35%

Employing the discourse-power theory of Foucault, this analysis discovers fundamental distinction in female subject construction between Japanese female-centered games and Chinese games. Chinese games posit female agency and resistance in fluid power relations as well as large narratives, in favoring autonomous growth beyond the controls of disciplinary mechanisms. Japanese games demonstrate significant female subject compromise, trading personal ambition for bonding relationships as well as abilities limiting to emotional aid. Such contrasts reflect women's power-structures of society embedded in game narratives. Mostly, Chinese games that develop at incredible velocities hold more deconstruction of classical discipline along with increased assignment of critical discourse sites.

## 6.  Conclusion

Using Foucault's discourse-power theory, this paper identifies marked difference in construction of female subjectivity between Chinese and Japanese female-centered games. Chinese games center on female resistance and agency in the form of fluid power relations as well as large-scale narratives, given the priority of growth outside the limits of discipline. Japanese games cannot hide marked female subjectivity compromise, trading personal ambitions for romance as well as constriction of abilities for affective support. These contrasts mirror society's gender-power relations inscribed in game narratives. Conversely, fast-transforming Chinese games feature increased subversion of classic discipline as well as creation of site-critical discourse spaces.

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