

Femmes fatales play leading role in sexing up smoking

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Smoking as a social habit is increasingly on the nose for many in modern society, but the reverse is true when it comes to portraying strong female characters in French and Chinese cinema, according to researchers from the University of Adelaide.

After studying films released in both countries since 2000, the University's Dr Peter Pugsley (Head, Department of Media) and Associate Professor Ben McCann (Head, Department of French Studies) found that [smoking](#) has been consistently glamorised in Chinese and French cinema in recent years.

"Smoking is one of those issues that continues to be contentious in our society. Representations of smoking in popular culture – in this case, cinema – are important because they reflect images of identity back to the audience, and they can be influential on that audience," Dr Pugsley says.

"As many US-based studies have shown, films can be instrumental in young people initiating smoking habits, especially when a favourite actor is seen smoking on screen. This is one of the reasons why smoking in American cinema has come under fire in recent decades. But French and Chinese cinema don't seem to have paid much attention to that debate."

Dr Pugsley and Associate Professor McCann found common elements in both the narrative and aesthetic representations of independent young women, which included [smoking behaviour](#).

"Smoking on screen can be viewed as a sign of potential change towards empowerment, individualism and increased risk taking for [young women](#)," Dr Pugsley says.

"For the 'femme fatale' characters, smoking is an ever-present prop, making it an integral part of that character type's identity and development.

"Technical and artistic methods, including backlighting and sexualised imagery, create desirable representations of the act of smoking. Combined with stylish costumes and perfect make-up, smoking is portrayed as an on-screen act of beauty, completely glossing over the reality," he says.

The researchers say that outside of cinema, China's anti-smoking lobby has had major wins over tobacco advertising, while France recently adopted plain packaging for cigarettes, and banned smoking in enclosed public places.

Associate Professor McCann says: "The 2009 film *Coco Before Chanel* is a good example of the world of cinema and the real world being in conflict. The poster for that film was banned throughout the Paris transport system because it contained an image of star Audrey Tatou holding a lit cigarette, which undermined the French government's anti-smoking policies.

"This reveals the paradox that frequently surrounds film advertising, smoking and the depiction of strong, independent female characters in France," he says.

More information: Peter C. Pugsley et al. Female protagonists and the role of smoking in Chinese and French cinema, *Asian Cinema* (2016).
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