

An Analysis of Character Design and Plot in the Taiwan Crime Film “The Pig, The Snake, and The Pigeon”

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Abstract. The film “The Pig, The Snake, and The Pigeon” has gained a huge response in East Asian film circles. This paper examines the characterization and narrative construction of the film. The characterisation and narrative construction of the film incorporate the ritual dogmas of “Tan”, “Chen”, and “Chi” of traditional religious culture in East Asia, and not only that, but the film symbols also that are implied by these dogmas will be used by the film making. The film's metaphorical film symbols will be analysed. This film is an important representative work of Taiwan's realist cinema in recent years. The director presents the struggles and sufferings of the marginal characters in Taiwan's existing society through the realist method of black humour, which to a certain extent unveils the problems and contradictions in the existing society. The film has a profound value for examination and analysis. This paper might offer some lessons for examining realist cinema in Taiwan.

Keywords: Taiwanese Movie, Realism, Semiotics of Cinema, Religion.

1. Introduction

The film made in Taiwan is one of the essential parts of Asia films. The development of film in Taiwan can be divided into five stages. During the period of Japanese rule (1895-1945), Taiwan's film industry was in its infancy, and the focus was on documentaries and propaganda films, the content of which was primarily related to the politics and society of the time [1]. At that time, the film industry in Taiwan was underdeveloped, and most of the movies were imported from foreign countries. Then, many filmmakers and film productions from mainland China moved to Taiwan, bringing new development opportunities for Taiwanese films between 1945 and 1970.

During the period between the 1970s and the 1980s, Taiwanese cinema saw considerable development. Many movies were produced that portrayed vernacular style and romantic literature. The Qiong Yao model of romance became famous during this period and became a significant characteristic of Taiwanese cinema. However, even though Qiong Yao dramas were popular for a while, they were disliked by young Taiwanese audiences and the new generation of filmmakers because of their formulaic plots. In the early 1980s, a new generation of directors emerged, including Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Yang Teh-chang, and Chen Kun-hou [2]. They spontaneously explored a diverse range of subjects, mainly focusing on the impact of the collision of Chinese and Western cultures on Taiwanese youths, which led to a break away from the suppression of film creation by politics and commerce to a certain extent, making Taiwanese cinema come into a new era of artistic film creation. Starting from the 1990s, Taiwan films started featuring urban irony as a prominent theme [3]. For example, Ang Lee's “Eat Drink Man Woman,” Hou Hsiao-Hsien's “A Time To Live, A Time To Die” and Edward Yang's “Taipei Story”. These films show the social phenomenon of Taiwan in this period by using multi-angle narrative techniques, which makes realistic films obtain specific achievements in Taiwan.

“The Pig, The Snake and The Pigeon” was filmed against the backdrop of Taiwan's rapid socio-economic changes. During this period, Taiwanese society faced the transformation of its economic structure, rapid urbanization, and increasing social conflicts. The film reflects the pressure of life and the psychological state of ordinary people in this context, especially the widespread feelings of social injustice. The film tells the story of crime in a small community in a Taiwanese city. The central character is Guilin Chen, an average member of the community who resorts to drastic actions to eliminate the harmful elements of society due to the prevalent issues of corruption, violence, and

fraud. The film depicts the progressive disintegration of a community and the tragic self-destruction of individuals due to social injustice, seen through the perspective of Guilin Chen's encounters and confrontations with characters from many backgrounds.

Director Wong Ching Po's unconventional and innovative presentation of the genre, which retains the tense atmosphere of a police procedural and incorporates the grotesque style of a cult film, makes the audience feel as if they are in a world that is both real and imaginative, which is why it was loved by many viewers upon its release. The film also had a significant impact on Asian cinema, it grossed 600 million RMB at the Chinese box office alone and won the Hong Kong Film Golden Elephant Award (2024) for Best Film at the same time.

2. Literature Review

As part of the cultural expression of Taiwanese crime cinema, many Taiwanese directors have provided unique perspectives in making several films that explore the sharp contradictory issues and historical backgrounds of society. Many researchers and scholars have also examined these cultural phenomena and the reality behind the movies through Taiwanese crime films. For example, James Tweedie said that The New Taiwanese Cinema trend emerged during the early 1980s as a form of cinema that focused on investigating local culture and cultural identity within the framework of globalization [4]. This movement not only rejuvenated the Taiwanese film industry but also facilitated the garnering of more international recognition for Taiwanese films. These films often exhibited distinct narrative styles and offered profound social critiques, effectively highlighting the diversity and intricacy of Taiwanese society. Song Hwee Lim reported that crime films in Taiwan, being a widely embraced genre, frequently serve as a medium to depict and denounce societal inequities [5]. These films depict marginalized persons and criminal actions to highlight the paradoxes and tensions in society, prompting viewers to contemplate matters of justice and morality. Faced with social conflicts and darkness, crime films often resonate widely with audiences, enhancing public awareness of social responsibility and prompting governments to optimize the social environment [6]. These films examine the difficulties presented by modernization to traditional values and depict how many generations navigate these changes through crime and conflict.

Some Taiwanese crime films typically portray the living circumstances of individuals at the margins of society, presenting intricate psychological transformations in the characters and dramatic storylines that challenge the audience's perspectives on morality and justice. For instance, the Taiwanese crime film *The Abandoned* explores issues of social marginalization and identity by depicting the struggle between police and crime. Through tense plots and in-depth character exploration, the films reflect the injustices and oppression in Taiwanese society.

All in all, at present, the development history of Taiwan's crime cinema and the value of the study has been a good achievement. All the research results obtained by these predecessors have laid a solid foundation for future promotion. However, the results of this film obtained by scholars have focused mainly on crime films and genre films. The oriental cultural elements embedded in this film have been less examined, especially in the analysis of the characterisation of the symbolic figures of the “pigeon”, the “pig”, and the “snake” in the film. Thus, theoretical studies on the social critique of Taiwanese crime films and characterisation under traditional Chinese cultural philosophies still have depth and potential to be explored.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to explore how Taiwanese crime films “The Pig, The Snake and The Pigeon” demonstrate the deeper issues of Taiwanese society through their unique narrative techniques and complex character construction. By sorting out and examining the social value of the birth, development and dissemination of Taiwan's crime films, and by using the method of documentary analysis to analyse the symbolism and contemporary significance of the characters in crime films in

the context of different times by applying the characteristics of the characters presented in different periods of Taiwan's cinema and traditional Chinese thought, and by concluding from them the special significance and connotations possessed by the characters under the changes of the times. Additionally, the article is to examine how traditional Chinese culture "greed", "anger", and "delusion" influence the character design of the Film the Pig, The Snake and The Pigeon. The article analyses "greed", "delusion", and "anger" through the main characters in the film, including the language of the film, the design of the character's lines and the design of the film's plot. Also, the soundtrack and the use of props in the film will be discussed and analysed in the essay.

4. Result

The literature cited and the scope discussed in this paper are limited to Taiwanese realist cinema. This paper argues that, as a leader of Taiwan's realist cinema, Hou Hsiao-hsien's early films put the object of expression on reflecting the people at the bottom of the hierarchy, reflecting a great era and its historical and cultural signs through film characters, summoning the conscience of intellectuals, and thus influencing the ideas of the later generation's image creation. Hou Hsiao-hsien's films focus on the unique style of poetry in the narrative technique, and pursue documentary in the image style, so that his films will be oriented towards Asia and the world. Beyond Taiwan's local community, absorbing multi-cultural, multi-dimensional thinking on real issues, and digging deep into the deep-rooted historical issues and the reality of the society, presenting to the people a world of cinema that will always be based on the theme of humanistic concern [7]. The film's director, Wong jing po, as a latecomer to Taiwan's New Cinema movement, has also clearly been inspired by his predecessors, and as a result, has made it possible for the film to pay great attention to Taiwan's society itself, as well as to the marginalized figures in local society. By analysing the plot, characters and language of the film, this paper argues that the main characters of the film will be greatly influenced by the traditional Chinese culture of "greed", "anger" and "delusion". For example, "greed", Lin Luhe drugged the food of the believers to make them believe that they were seriously ill and needed to dissipate their family's money in order to save themselves, but in the end, all of the believers' money became Lin Luhe's own; "anger", Xu Weiqiang randomly beats his loyal men and abuses his daughter; Chen Guilin, as a marginalised figure in the society, goes after the most wanted criminals in order to gain a respect from the society, regardless of the consequences. The director cleverly combines this religious creed with realism to show a unique side of Taiwanese society and to make people reflect on it.

5. Discussion

The full name of the Heart Sutra is the Mahabharata Paramita Heart Sutra, also known as the Many Hearts Sutra. The Mahabharata Heart Sutra is the shortest, most profound and most influential Buddhist classic in the existing Buddhist scriptures [8]. There are a total of eight translations, of which the one translated by Xuanzang in the Tang Dynasty is the most widely circulated version. The Heart Sutra condenses the huge Prajna Sutra into two hundred and seventy words, showing the core Buddhist doctrine of "all dharmas are empty" and "there is no colour and no appearance". It is a classic that tells people how to reach the other side of the world through the practice of wisdom.

From the Enlightenment Discourses, greed, anger, and delusion are the so-called "three poisons" in Buddhism. According to Buddhism, all human suffering originates from "greed, anger and delusion", and what Zen Master Wu Chao called "magic obstacles" can also be said to be brought about by "greed, anger and delusion".

Chen Guilin, the first male lead of the film, who represents the delusion. In Chinese, "Chi" is defined as the extreme pursuit of something, a word that means delusion. In the film The Pig, The Snake and The Pigeon, the main character Chen Guilin symbolises this very metaphor. Chen Guilin, a wanted criminal in Taiwanese society, has made a name for himself by successfully killing a

gangster, and Chen Guilin feels a respect he has never felt before. Unfortunately, a sudden onset of cancer has left him with no intention of living a life on the run, so he plans to turn himself in. When he arrived at the police station, Chen Guilin was not taken seriously because there were too many people lined up to turn themselves in. Chen Guilin believes that as an assassin who has killed a gangster, he cannot stand the fact that he is not taken seriously in the police station. Therefore, he decides to kill the remaining two most wanted criminals to gain fame. This is a simple piece of character development. Here, the director gives a special symbolic meaning to the character of Chen Guilin-----"Chi". Chen Guilin is in search of self-worth or rather enjoying the moment of being respected. As a wanted criminal in the film, this character is obsessed with the level of respect given by the society in which he lives and chooses to kill the most wanted criminal to raise his profile and gain social attention. Because of this character's background design, the audience can naturally relate to the fact that being on the fringe of Taiwanese society makes it very difficult to be recognized by society. The absurdity of the characters' motives is also used by the director to satirise the contradictions and accumulated problems in the existing Taiwanese society, so that when the audience sees the motives of the characters' behaviour, they do not find it humorous, but rather a kind of self-examination, that is, why the existing society would drive a person crazy like this. In addition, the symbol of "Chi" is not only reflected in the characters' motives, but also in the plot. Chen Guilin is stabbed and buried in the ground after he reveals his identity and is killed by Lin Luhe, one of the most wanted criminals. The bizarre thing that happens when things reach this stage is the resurrection of Chen Guilin. In the realm of realistic cinema, the depiction of a character's resurrection may appear unconventional. However, when considering scenarios where the character possesses an ability known as "Chi," the narrative dynamics undergo a unique transformation. All this would make sense again. Chen Guilin's spirit supports his body, and he needs to finish what he has not finished. Overall, the director provokes the audience to think deeply through the absurd motives of the character's behaviour and the almost irrational plot, but the only key factor that makes both plausible is the influence of "Chi".

In Chinese, "Chen" is defined as the tendency to use violence, a word that means angry. The director chose an outdated gangster for the character design of this symbol. Xu Weiqiang is the second wanted criminal on the most wanted list, suspected of smuggling firearms, kidnapping, extortion, and other major criminal offenses, and has committed many shooting cases in the film. The director uses many moments to depict the brutality of Xu Weiqiang. For example, the first appearance of the character is ending a fight with other gang members with his face covered in blood. Xu Weiqiang can do anything he wants to do to his men, and his brutal character makes his men obey him. Xu Weiqiang sexually assaults his own daughter as well as violently abuses her. All these episodes portray the character's severe violent tendencies. The first time Xu Weiqiang meets Chen Guilin is at the hair salon where Xu Weiqiang's daughter works part-time, where Xu Weiqiang uses an eyebrow razor to scratch Chen Guilin's forehead. In this scene, Xu Weiqiang's calm and dignified scratching of Chen Guilin's forehead makes the plot extremely tense, and the director uses masterful cinematic language to complete the narrative of the two men's incompatibility and tensions in this small hair salon. This is a very clever narrative strategy, which depicts the plot clearly and brilliantly in a simple and concise manner. It is because of Xu Weiqiang's violence that Chen Guilin uses violence to kill him. Whenever the director tries to incorporate the religious significance of "Chen", the plot once again does not make sense. Chen Guilin has a pistol, but he doesn't use it, he uses it to kill Xu Weiqiang after he has done his best to defeat him with his bare hands. The director's use of it here might be the gun is a tool of judgement rather than a tool of punishment. Chen Guilin's use of violence to punish violence also responds to the fact that he is subject to a certain degree of behavioural regulation in what he is doing, rather than simply trying to understand Xu Weiqiang's life. Victory is signalled when Chen Guilin uses his gun to end Xu Weiqiang's life calmly. In this section, the fact that Xu Weiqiang, as a fugitive from justice, is still able to run roughshod over Taiwanese society remains one of the epitomes of the existing society in Taiwan [9].

In Chinese, "Tan" can be defined as an avarice, a word that means greed. It means the unlimited expansion of desires possessed by human beings [10]. In the film, the most wanted man, Lin Luhe, transforms from a wanted criminal to a godfather who saves his followers from their plight. In the film, the godfather lures the newcomers into the religion through food poisoning and destroys all the properties of the newcomers. However, the property of the Protestants was not destroyed. It was secretly transferred to the Godfather's secret room for storage. When Chen Guilin exposes Lin Luhe, he is threatened with a gun, but instead of begging for mercy, Lin Luhe continues to recite his own scriptures to free himself, in the delusion that his scriptures can save him again, and in the end, his life is self-evidently ended. The climax of the film is the scene where the believers are waiting to be shot by Chen Guilin. When the lies are exposed, the believers don't leave, they continue to sing with their decaying bodies in the vein hope that they can live under the shelter of their faith. This is people's desire for a better life, but it is also blinded by desire. There are many cults in Taiwanese society, and these religions gain the trust of their followers through shoddy means to cheat them out of money and other goods. The director uses such an absurd approach to show the ignorance of the masses in Taiwan's existing society. The desire of the human mind makes it easy to believe in an unrealistic faith. Overall, "greed" symbolizes desire in the film, which is materialized by the fact that he is a godfather who saves the people on the surface, but behind the scenes, he is an insatiable murderer. All human beings have desires in their hearts, and the many believers are a phenomenon of uncontrollable inner desires.

6. Conclusion

"The Pig, The Snake, and The Pigeon" is excellent in both character design and plot narrative. In East Asian cinema, the religious culture of "Tan", "Chen", "Chi" are known and accepted by the public. The film director cleverly uses greed and anger to design the characters and uses this religious code to screen the contradictions of the existing Taiwanese society, especially the torment of the marginalized characters. The director's creative inspiration is rooted in Italian realism's focus on real life and the Hitchcockian genre of suspense. The filmmaker's works exhibit a prominent documentary style and create a tense atmosphere. With a playful and witty disposition, the director instinctively grasps the challenges faced by ordinary individuals in society, showcasing a deep humanistic concern that defies verbal expression.

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