

# The Lord Is Kind-Hearted And Cannot See The Poor: Social Reflections On The Film "Return To Dust"

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**Abstract.** Chinese cinema has always played an important role in spreading culture and transmitting values. As a kind of audio-visual media, it needs to be able to reflect social reality, moral concepts as well as cultural values in a profound way. However, in China, which has a strict film censorship system, the production and dissemination of films are strictly controlled and restricted by the government censorship system. There is a film *Return to Dust*, which created heat through many self-media, such as XiaoHongShu and DOUYIN, before its release, in which the previews showed real rural literary scenes that attracted wide attention. After its release, the social aspect of the film explored the deep-seated human emotions and regional issues, and a month later, the film was taken off the shelves, instantly triggering a wide-ranging discussion on censorship standards and artistic freedom [1]. *Return to Dust*, as a literary film, is sufficiently rich in cultural connotation and social significance for the audience. The film uses linear storytelling to show the current situation of the rural underclass in Northwest China during the four seasons of the year, the social ills and the complexity of human nature, which triggers the audience to think about "suffering". However, it is worth noting that although the film shows the "suffering", it also shows the warmth of the two underclass people, i.e. the goodness and beauty of human nature. However, such films with sensitive social issues are often restricted by the Chinese government's censorship. Exploring the reasons why *Return to Dust* has not been accepted by the modern Chinese government is not only a critical reflection on the censorship results of the film, but also a profound analysis of the censorship standards, value orientations, and the ideology of the censors behind the censorship system of Chinese cinema

**Keywords:** film poor political freedom censorship.

## 1. The Deeper Significance and Cultural Implications of the *Return to Dust*

### 1.1. Exploration of the themes and meanings of the content of the film

The film *Return to Dust* is a poverty-stricken farmer's love story that exposes the shortcomings of the governing government and ideology. In the vast and desolate lands of Northwest China, two typical marginal characters, Ma Youtie and Cao Guiying, write their arduous and heartfelt story. Abandoned by their own families, they find solace in each other's shared suffering and get married. Together they sow wheat, hatch chicks and build a new house. On rainy nights, they lean on each other and have a good laugh. They tied themselves to the roof with a rope and imprinted wheat flower petals on their arms. They never wallowed in the sea of suffering, but instead blossomed a flower of lively and sincere emotions in the midst of it. They faced their suffering head on, without exaggeration or glorification, and lived, endured, were kind and resilient. They sympathise with all kinds of injustice with tender compassion. In a sense, Ma Youtie and Cao Guiying are "life philosophers" in the theory of life poetry, and they write poems with their lives. They spontaneously, but not consciously, carry out their life poetry practice, highlighting the significance of seemingly trivial and mundane worldly existence for individual survival. The countryside is being washed away by the waves of urban civilisation. Powerful landowners and wealthy merchants dominate the prices of farmers' crops, and extravagant banquets in the city outnumber the farmers' ordinary buns. Bulldozers used for demolition knock down mud-brick houses one by one.

At the same time, marginalised characters such as Ma Youtie and Cao Guiying are unable to escape from the countryside and are psychologically unwilling to leave the land that belongs to them alone,

which truly represents the simplicity of rural life. Faced with a house worth 200,000-yuan, Ma Youtie is worried about what to do with the chickens and pigs, and what to do with the farmland, without which, how can the farmers survive?[2]

But on the other hand, the city still represents the pursuit of freedom and individuality. Ma Youtie sat on the kang and talked about his plans for the future. When he had money, he wanted to take Cao Guiying to the city to have fun and give her medical treatment. At that time, they shared the sentiment that they had never been to the city in their lives.[3]

But soon, Cao Guiying's death shattered their dreams like a heavy piano string. Their ideals were shattered, and they lost their loved ones who shared their pain and suffering. Their group is metaphorically described as "hidden in the dust and smoke", destined for obscurity.

## 1.2. Discussion and reflection on social issues

*Return to Dust* is a reflection of the impact of the so-called elite class and ideology on the lower echelons of society, with a focus on exposing the possible flaws and painful realities of policy. The film focuses on the survival of ordinary peasants in Chinese society and their powerlessness against the elite class.

Under the relentless onslaught of urban civilisation, the fissures caused by class and social divisions have exacerbated the dichotomy between urban and rural areas. Social relations are newly constructed and reconstructed, with economic relations overriding geographical relations and the space for emotional ties being squeezed by functional relations. Some of those assimilated into the urban mindset, such as the relatives, villagers, and rural cadres depicted in the film, driven by personal interests and controlled by the privileged elite, turn to "kidnap" Ma Youtie, Cao Guiying, and others in the lower classes, creating "group observation and group violence." Instead of forming a "class alliance" to become the dominant discourse, they became "bystanders" and "accomplices" under the influence of modern thinking, breaking the cultural tendency of poetic idyll and spiritual belonging, and becoming the "driving force" for the accelerated loss of rural civilisation and the rapid invasion of urban civilisation.

At the same time, the film itself inevitably carries some concepts that cater to middle-class emotions and value systems: delicate and aesthetic tones and visual styles; dialogues full of philosophical meanings; no absolute conflicts, no aggressive rushes and bloodshed, replaced by a submissive, restrained attitude of tolerance and compromise. The moderate conservatism and refined egoism of the middle class are obvious: they observe the sufferings of the weak, are moved with self-indulgence by insignificant pity and sympathy, and make a big show of waving their flags in areas that have nothing to do with their own interests, while at the same time constantly reinforcing and consolidating the middle-class-dominated mechanism of emotions and interests. As a result, the attribute of rural space as a spiritual harbour was weakened, and rural subjects began to lose their spiritual home. The irreconcilable contradiction of urban-rural dichotomy will become more prominent when the farmers who hold fast to the rural civilisation are marginalised and lose their initiative, and when the rural civilisation loses its development potential and is swallowed up by the urbanisation process. No one can stop the wheel of progress of the times, but in this process, whether the "marginal individuals" and "zero surplus" left behind like Ma Youtie and Cao Guiying will move forward on their own initiative or be forced to perish, how to retain their essence and individual differences, and how to empower the "marginal voices" with the power to listen and respond, are issues yet to be resolved in the development of the country![4]

## 2. Political censorship and ideological influence

In any country, the government imposes a degree of censorship and control over cultural products in order to maintain social order and values. Practices vary from country to country, but this is generally the case.

From the perspective of creators, censorship restricts the freedom of artistic expression to a certain extent, which may affect the diversity and creativity of works. But on the other hand, a moderate degree of restraint can also encourage creators to give full play to their creativity within the established framework and produce even better works.

From the audience's point of view, censorship may lead to the filtering of certain topics and viewpoints, but at the same time, it can also prevent some vulgar, illegal or overly extreme content from having a negative impact on society. Protecting minors from inappropriate content and safeguarding the public interest is also an important purpose of censorship.

From the perspective of social development, cultural products not only need to present diversity, but also reflect positive energy and core socialist values. It is important to encourage artistic innovation, but also to comply with laws and regulations to ensure a healthy culture. This requires mutual understanding, tolerance and co-ordination among creators, audiences and administrators.

Overall, there is no simple black-and-white answer to this question. We need to look at it comprehensively and objectively, and seek a reasonable balance between freedom and order, diversity and unity. Only in this way can China's film industry continue to develop healthily in a regulated and orderly environment.

*Return to Dust*, as a film embodying real-life social issues, touches on many socially sensitive topics, such as poverty and oppression and exploitation. These topics challenge some of the realities and values in the current Chinese society, provoking the audience to think deeply about social issues and reflect on government policies.[5]

However, the Chinese government usually adopts strict censorship measures against films that deal with these sensitive topics, restricting the broadcast and dissemination of these works. To some extent, this restriction hinders the discussion of social issues and challenges the concepts of contemporary Chinese society.

### **3. Return to Dust ,a discussion of artistic language and social issues**

In the *Return to Dust*, the director profoundly demonstrates the conflict and integration between traditional Chinese culture and modern society through unique artistic language and narrative techniques. The film shows the delicate relationship between family and social class with delicate camera composition and music fusion. Through the emotional intertwining and conflict of the main characters, the audience is able to think deeply about the complexity of human nature and the difficulties of society.

The film also ventures into socially sensitive issues such as poverty, power struggles and morality, provoking the audience to reflect on social realities and question government policies. Through delicate emotional expression and characterisation, the director demonstrates the power of ordinary people and their will to fight against the rule of the elite in Chinese society. This artistic expression triggers challenges and reflections on social concepts and inspires and resonates with the audience emotionally and intellectually.

## **4. Social Reflections Among Chinese Governments Behind Censorship**

### **4.1. Balance between censorship and cultural freedom**

Exploring the balance between artistic creation and social values has always been a complex subject worthy of in-depth exploration. Undeniably, any society has its own unique cultural traditions and values, and it is inevitable that art works will be guided and restrained to a certain extent in their forms of expression. However, overly stringent restrictions may stifle the germ of innovation and hinder the development of art forms.

Ideally, the censorship mechanism should be open and accommodating, allowing a moderate amount of creative space for artists and encouraging positive content, while avoiding overly extreme negative influences. The vetting criteria should be clear and transparent, rather than subjective and

vague, thereby reducing uncertainty for creators. It is only in this relatively loose but bounded environment that art can blossom and take on a diverse and rich appearance.

At the same time, the public's aesthetic level and value orientation are constantly evolving. Therefore, the formulation of censorship standards should not be stuck in a rut, but should keep abreast of the times, reflecting the concepts of inclusiveness and openness. Through continuous reflection and dialogue, we can find the best balance between artistic freedom and social responsibility and promote the continuous progress of the arts.[6]

#### **4.2. The impact of policies on social values**

The government's censorship policy not only affects the content and form of cultural and artistic works, but also subtly influences public values. China's censorship system emphasises main theme values such as patriotism and social harmony, which is not unrelated to the current ruling party's ideology. However, at the same time, these censorship-orientated social values are also universal, such as maintaining social stability and promoting positive energy, which are consistent with the value expectations of the general public.

The guidance of policies on values is often two-way. On the one hand, censorship policies have a normative effect on public values; on the other hand, public feedback on censorship also affects the adjustment of policies. For example, in recent years, public resistance to vulgar content in entertainment has pushed censorship departments to strengthen regulation of such content; while public calls for freedom of expression have also prompted censorship to relax in certain areas.[7]

There is a complex reciprocal relationship between policy and social values. While guiding the mainstream value orientation, censorship policies also need to pay close attention to changes in public value demands and make rational responses in a timely manner. Only in this way can censorship policy interact positively with social development and promote the harmonisation of cultural construction and social values.

### **5. Concluding**

"From the masses, to the masses". As a people's socialist country government should to closely concerned about people's livelihood issues, in the vigorous development of the coastal economic zone today, Changjiang Delta and Zhujiang Delta is not the whole of China, whether it should also focus on some of the Northwest China, the same as the people, why favour one and discriminate against the other?

Ostrich in the desert with its head buried in the sand is not far from the danger. Only the danger is not seen. Society needs young people who speak the truth and do practical things. For the great renaissance of China, there is no time to lose, no responsibility.

In the future, society should also think about how to balance the relationship between government censorship and artistic freedom. Firstly, the government should be more open and tolerant, respecting the creative freedom of artists, while also ensuring that the content of films will not cause social instability and harm the public interest. Second, it should establish a more transparent and fair censorship mechanism to ensure the impartiality and objectivity of censorship decisions. At the same time, more censors with aesthetic literacy and cultural background should be trained so that they can better understand and assess film works.

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A great tribute to the creators of art.

Proud of every Chinese who has a conscience, can empathize and dare to speak.

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