

Characters and Historical Facts: An Aesthetic Analysis of the Modern Chinese Historical Television Drama the Age of Awakening

Ruolan Gao *

Tianjin Conservatory of Music, Tianjin, China

* Corresponding Author Email: grl23tj@163.com

Abstract. The Age of Awakening is a historical drama with strong Chinese aesthetic characteristics, embodying the rigor of historical themes, the artistry of TV drama works and the poetry of Chinese aesthetics. Through the research of close reading of TV drama texts, this article found that in terms of TV drama texts, the drama constructs a realistic and artistically infectious pseudo-environment by carefully shaping symbolic historical characters and reproducing historical events with symbolic significance; In terms of aesthetic experience, an aesthetic pathway between subject and object has been established, creating a possible space for aesthetic consumption and achieving multi-level experiential perception. This article argues that the film and television adaptation of history should achieve a balance between the authenticity of historical texts and the artistic quality of film and television texts. Through a sound historical and aesthetic perspective, it can reveal historical facts and the hidden historical laws behind them.

Keywords: Chinese history; TV play; The Age of Awakening; Aesthetic analysis.

1. Introduction

On the vast stage of film and television media, the symbolic process of history has become a unique narrative art. It is not only a simple replica of past events, but also a creative reconstruction based on the spirit of the times and aesthetic taste. As a TV drama, The Age of Awakening deeply cultivates modern Chinese history and focuses on the emotional journey of revolutionary pioneers, it is undoubtedly a profound exploration and successful practice in this field. The drama uses symbolic techniques to carefully sculpt each historical figure, enabling them to transcend the limitations of time and space and become a bridge connecting the past and present. These characters are not only the witnesses of history, but also the carriers of the spirit of the times. Their words, deeds, thoughts, and emotions are endowed with profound symbolic meanings, becoming an important medium for the audience to understand that era and feel that spirit. At the same time, the symbolic historical facts portrayed in the drama, such as the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement, not only restore the true of history, but also bring new vitality to these historical events through the artistic processing of the television language, inspiring emotional resonance and profound thinking among the audience.

Through careful reading of the text, this study believes that The Age of Awakening demonstrates a high degree of innovation and inclusiveness in the creation of aesthetic scenes. It cleverly constructs an aesthetic pathway between the subject and object, guiding the audience into an immersive viewing experience through delicate emotional depiction, intense plot advancement, and profound thematic exploration. It is the leader in modern Chinese historical themed TV dramas. At the same time, the drama actively creates a possible space for aesthetic consumption, attracting and meeting the needs of audiences of different age groups and cultural backgrounds through excellent production, profound connotations, and extensive dissemination channels, enabling them to feel the weight and charm of history from multiple dimensions.

The Age of Awakening not only provides an unforgettable historical journey for the audience, but also offers valuable insights on how to better inherit and promote national culture, inspire national pride and responsibility in the context of the new era. This study believes that The Age of Awakening successfully integrates historical authenticity and television artistry. It does not solely pursue

historical restoration, but innovatively interprets history, reveals deep laws and the spirit of the times. Its symbolic techniques, profound themes, and artistic expression make it can provide an immersive historical experience and inspire cultural inheritance and national emotional resonance for the audience, becoming a model of modern historical drama. It provides reference for promoting national culture, inspiring national pride and sense of responsibility in the new era.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The TV drama *The Age of Awakening*

The TV drama *The Age of Awakening*, which is based on the major revolutionary history of modern China, was launched in 2015 and carefully polished for seven years. It was first broadcast on CCTV, Youku, and iQiyi on February 1, 2021. After 47 days of wonderful presentation, the play ended on March 19. On the closing day, the official WeChat official account of CCTV, "CCTV TV Drama", commented that " *The Age of Awakening* has sober historical self-consciousness, firm cultural self-confidence, and even exquisite artistic expression, all of which are worthy of reflection and arousal". The average viewership of the drama in 2021 was 1.290%, ranking 22nd on the 2021 annual viewership chart, and maintaining the top spot in viewership for the first three days of its premiere.

The Age of Awakening firmly anchored the special period of the historical transformation of modern China from 1915 to 1921. Taking the development of the periodical from *Youth Magazine* to *New Youth* as the narrative clue, it comprehensively and artistically described the historical development context and features from the New Culture Movement, the May Fourth Movement to the establishment of the Communist Party of China, and profoundly answered the questions of "why Marxism works" and "why the CPC can work". The drama reproduces the turbulent times and surging years of a hundred years ago, telling the story of the benevolent and ambitious individuals who sought to explore the future of China in the midst of adversity. It immerses contemporary people, especially young people, in the awakening age of the turbulent times and realizes the modernization of national spirit. It is known as a benchmark work of revolutionary historical themed television dramas. After receiving a good response to its broadcast, *The Age of Awakening* actively explored its IP value and formed various forms of expression, such as novels, stage plays, musicals, and so on, further expanding its influence and effects. Due to its high artistic level and excellent dissemination effect, *The Age of Awakening* won awards such as the 27th Shanghai Television Festival Magnolia Award, the 31st China Television Golden Eagle Award, the 32nd Huading Award, and the 33rd China Television Drama Flying Apsaras Award.

2.2. Modern Chinese Historical TV Dramas

A nation is an imagined community, and the sense of belonging shaped by television drama effectively strengthens the audience's sense of identity with the community. It can be seen that modern historical culture is an important resource of China's excellent traditional culture, and Chinese modern historical television dramas have helped shape a strong sense of national identity. History is the blueprint for observing social development, the carrier for inheriting humanistic spirit and reflecting oneself. With the flourishing development of popular culture, historical dramas with Chinese historical stories and events as the narrative core have become a unique genre of television art, shouldering the important mission of spreading and shaping history. Especially modern historical TV dramas, due to the special position of Chinese modern history in the development of Chinese civilization, stand out in historical dramas.

In the process of typological development of historical dramas, due to changes in the times, media, and audience, serious historical dramas have gradually declined, and the creative style has been deeply mired in the quagmire of vulgarization, arise some problem of uneven quality of works, such as "anti Japanese god dramas". In this creative context, some film art creators and theoretical workers face problems and gradually explore a path of transformational development in the new era, during

their creation and theoretical research work. They use new voices and modes of communication, target new young audiences, integrate into the mainstream market, and apply the concept of "new mainstream" to the television creation of modern Chinese historical dramas, forming a television style with unique Chinese aesthetic characteristics and historical concepts, influencing audiences to form a strong sense of national pride and cultural identity.

As a prominent representative, *The Age of Awakening* adheres to the materialist conception of history and provides a detailed environmental description of the historical background before the founding of the Party. It truthfully reproduces the enormous suffering endured by the people during the Republic of China period, the severe challenges faced by the Chinese nation, and the real situation of social unrest. It analyzes the contradictions and conflicts between feudal thought and social progress, and profoundly demonstrates the core essence and essential connotation of the Party's original intention. As director Zhang Yongxin said in the CCTV program *Face to Face*, in this drama, "you can see the real Republic of China, which is not the romantic state that some people claim, nor is it the kind of affectionate and luxurious state that some people long to return to. It is precisely a state of unbearable suffering, like a purgatory on earth."

3. Findings

3.1. Creating Symbolic Historical Figures

Characters are the key carriers for television viewers to receive the disseminated information. From the perspective of semiotics, symbols are carriers of meaning and have a positive role in conveying meaning. The symbolization of historical figures is an indispensable part of encoding in the visual dissemination of historical TV dramas, and it is also a prerequisite for TV dramas to play a communicative role as a medium. Under the effect of various television narrative techniques, *The Age of Awakening* takes character as the center, giving historical figures a distinct symbolic positioning, such as revolutionary Chen Duxiu, educator Cai Yuanpei, 'founding soldier' Qian Xuantong, and revolutionary fighter Li Dazhao who risked his own life and death for the people. Symbolized television characters with extensibility not only have a more comprehensive driving effect on the plot, making the story more profound, but also elevate and return to the theme of the "Awakening Age".

The Age of Awakening takes a historical cross-section from 1915 to 1921 as the narrative era background, adopts an artistic construction method rooted in historical reality, and selects representative historical figures from this period as the main narrative objects or character prototypes. In terms of historical restoration, the main characters of the drama can be divided into three categories: first, characters that replicate historical figures; the second is the collection of characters with historical prototypes, such as Ge Shugui, Liu Haiwei, Guo Xingang, Zhang Fengzai, etc; the third is functional fictional characters, such as Liu Mei, Liu Wenyao, Bai Lan, etc. Among the three types of characters, the first two characters with historical significance make up the majority. In addition, the drama has designed some minor characters with few appearances to help create a realistic mimetic environment. One of them are well documented roles, such as during Li Dazhao's investigation of Jiangnan, there was a "Mr. Bai" who claimed that "the Soviet Governor Li Chun has decided to appoint you as the legal advisor of the Governor's Office". By verifying, Mr. Bai, who only appeared once in this drama, is none other than Bai Jianwu, a former classmate of Li Dazhao. There also some fictional characters. For example, when Li Dazhao delivered the prepared New Year's goods to the work shed area, there was a boy called "Zhuzi" that referred to Ge Shugui as "master", which only appeared once in the drama.

The symbolic portrayal of historical figures in this drama is mainly reflected in the following aspects. Firstly, the drama explains the characters' faith choices through their personalities. Secondly, the character positioning is differentiated by the externalization of personality, such as speech style, behavioral style, emotional characteristics, etc. Thirdly, using music to assist in the symbolic shaping of historical figures. The main composer of the drama, Kun, created 32 original scores for the drama,

including 10 exclusive portrait music tailored for Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Cai Yuanpei and others, as well as multiple specific plot music closely related to the plot, accounting for about one-third of all original scores and a relatively high proportion. The infectious national melody not only enhances the atmosphere and extends the character's life, but also makes the character's personality, emotions, image, and emotional journey more evident.

3.2. Reproduce Symbolic Historical Facts

The principle of "big things are not trivial, small things are not to be trifled with" has become a creative methodology for historical themed TV dramas. However, the key details that determine the quality of a work are what constitutes a big thing or a small thing, and how to grasp the scale of fiction. As a literary work with a major revolutionary historical theme, the restoration scale of historical facts is the primary consideration factor in the creation process of memory media for The Age of Awakening. In the drama, there is a history of being present, as well as a history of being absent; There is real history, refined history, and processed history.

The selected history. A famous Chinese allusion, "Three Visits to the Thatched Cottage", which means the decent invitation or visit, is used as a important story to express Cai Yuanpei urgently and sincerely invited Chen Duxiu to serve as the Senior of Humanities at Peking University three times, which is a key plot point in The Age of Awakening. From a historical perspective, there are two different types of historical records regarding this period. One is the self account of Shen Yinmo, who recommended Chen Duxiu to work at Peking University. After Cai Yuanpei became the president of Peking University, Shen obeyed Cai's commission, asked Chen twice about his attitude on serving at Peking University. After the second meeting, Chen readily agreed. Another type is recorded in Wang Mengzou's diary. In Wang's recollection, Cai went to the hotel to look for Chen in person and "came almost every day". "Sometimes he came very early and we hadn't woken up yet, so he asked the waiter do not to wake him up". After three visits, Chen cautiously agreed. For the same historical event, there are often different or even the opposite in individual memories, which means that the same historical fact may have multiple completely different forms of expression. In the creation of historical themed TV dramas, the presentation of historical materials should take into account both historical and artistic considerations. The Age of Awakening chose the second type of historical material as its creative blueprint and added a touch of romanticism to this period of history through camera language and music.

The history of being processed. The other highlight of the drama is the establishment of the Party. According to historical materials such as Li Dazhao's Brief (Gao Yihan's speech), the Great Beginning (the Annotations of the History of the CPC, Volume I), we can draw a conclusion that in order to avoid arrest, Li sent Chen out of Beijing. The two first stayed for several days in Li's hometown Daheitu Village, then turned around to Tianjin to discuss party building on the way. When describing this period of history, The Age of Awakening specifically mentions the location of the founding of the Communist Party in Tianjin's iconic geographical area, the Haihe River. On the way, Chen and Li analyzed the results of the May Fourth Movement and the way of future revolution. They reached the bank of the Haihe River and decided to establish a party after seeing thousands of starving people. This kind of narrative accumulation not only explains the historical cause and effect relationship of the founding of the Party, clarifies the necessity of building the Party, but also has a stronger guiding effect on emotions.

Extracted history. In the drama, Zhou Shuren once used a warehouse as a metaphor to compare and evaluate the strategic abilities of Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi with Zhou Zuoren. This history is from Zhou Shuren's personal essay Remembering Liu Bannong written to mourn the death of Liu Bannong. In the drama, Zhou Zuoren heard Zhou Shuren's remarks and asked, "What do you mean, Zhongfu(Chen Duxiu) is more reliable?" Zhou Shuren did not express his attitude and replied, "Think it over for yourself ". The attitude of the creator has already been expressed through Zhou Zuoren's problem. However the key point of the original text of "Remembering Liu Bannong Jun" is that "Liu is a person who makes people unaware of his arsenal , so I admire Chen, Hu, but I am close to Liu."

The handling of *The Age of Awakening* is in line with the original meaning, while also indicating the creator's emotional inclination.

The obscured history. Historical themed TV dramas need to consider the narrative value of history, and while choosing which histories to present, and to choose which histories to obscure. The narrative core of *The Age of Awakening* focuses on the clash and collision of old and new ideas, and does not provide a detailed description of the role played by the working class in the democratic revolution. And when describing the May Fourth Movement, it emphasizes the actions of Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, as well as the scenes of student marches. In terms of reductionism, this narrative style does not highlight the importance and uniqueness of the May Fourth Movement as a patriotic movement with "young students as the main participants and the participation of the masses, citizens, business people and other social classes", and its representative "the first time the working class stepped onto the political stage in an independent manner". But from the perspective of the main idea and narrative logic, this approach emphasizes that the precursor of action consciousness is ideological consciousness, maintaining the overall consistency of the plot.

4. Discussion

4.1. Establishing an Aesthetic Pathway Between Subject and Object

In the aesthetic process of artistic works, the aesthetic subject must establish an effective aesthetic channel with the aesthetic object in order to achieve the audience's aesthetic acceptance of the work. If there is no aesthetic bridge, even if the subject's thoughts are profound and the aesthetic value is high, the audience cannot receive and understand the symbolic information and aesthetic connotation of the artwork. *The Age of Awakening* provides several reference experiences for historical themes TV dramas in this regard.

Firstly, adopt a precise and focused narrative technique. The drama takes the national awakening of the Chinese democratic revolution from the old democratic stage to the new democratic stage as the core narrative content. In the 43 episodes, it carefully arranges 40 episodes to show the historical context of the New Culture Movement, the May Fourth Movement, and the agreement to establish the Party in detail. Only in the last three episodes, it presents the actual work of building the Party, with appropriate details and clear themes.

Secondly, create a reasonable aesthetic distance. The drama deeply insight into the aesthetic habits of the vast audience, fully utilizing national Chinese art elements and aesthetic characteristics, providing the audience with an aesthetic "comfort zone", achieving the best fit with the audience in terms of aesthetic inertia, and enabling the audience to obtain a strong sense of aesthetic belonging.

Thirdly, fully consider the psychological schema of the audience and meet and exceed aesthetic expectations. From a typological perspective, *The Age of Awakening* has multiple labels such as "main melody", "tribute", "new mainstream", "Party's history", etc. These literary forms point to the same characteristic, "red", which means revolution. The accompanying texts of the drama, such as the three posters with high dissemination, the actors' speech gestures, oath gestures, firm gaze, and red pens and fists, represent the identity, positioning, confidence, determination, knowledge, wisdom, strength, and courage of the characters in the drama. They unify the imagery and point to the "The Age of Awakening", giving the audience a sense of aesthetic meaning and ideological connotation, namely national identity. The television text of *The Age of Awakening* has a clear aesthetic tendency of "red", "awakening", and "national identity", which conforms to the audience's accumulated aesthetic experience and psychological schema in the past aesthetic perception process, meeting and surpassing the audience's expectations of literary style, imagery, and connotation in aesthetic perception.

Fourth, form a text summoning structure and provide the audience with an open space for participatory interpretation. German aesthetician Wolfgang Iser believed that the ambiguity of the meaning of the text and the blank spaces in the text form an open text summoning structure, allowing the audience to consciously or unconsciously enter into the co-creation of the text during the aesthetic

process, filling in the "blank spaces" in the text. The Age of Awakening creates numerous imagery and references numerous allusions, expressing endless meaning through unfinished words, enabling the audience to generate multiple interpretations in the aesthetic acceptance process, while enhancing the audience's level of thinking and participation, and endowing the work with vitality.

4.2. Create a Potential Space for Aesthetic Consumption

For historical themes television works that promote the main theme, the growing audience always carries a hint of nitpicking, even if not deliberately rebellious. The Age of Awakening adopts a life oriented narrative style, incorporates comedic elements, and creates a possible space for aesthetic consumption, making the audience more inclined to accept the expression of the mainstream discourse of the drama.

The life oriented narrative of the drama is reflected in the following aspects. Firstly, in the multi episode narrative, the drama spans across spring, summer, autumn, winter, and across thousands of mountains and rivers, providing a realistic and detailed depiction of life scenes in different time and space. Secondly, the drama adopts a zero degree narrative, which is an omniscient narrative perspective, showcasing the daily life scenes of ordinary people in different regions through the design and control of the details. Thirdly, the drama carefully depicts the details of life through colloquial dialogue and simulated real-life scenarios, creating a realistic and perceptible historical scene.

There is no shortage of dramatic emotional shifts. For example, after Chen Duxiu returned to China for the first time, he discussed national affairs with many friends at the reception banquet prepared by Wang Mengzou, and proposed a national salvation prescription of "ideological enlightenment and social transformation", which was thought-provoking. Then Chen Duxiu changed the subject and said, 'It's time for dinner,' and the atmosphere instantly relaxed. At the banquet, when faced with my son's teasing and accusations, he didn't get angry but instead praised, but his sense of disappointment was evident in my words. This fluctuating emotional transition is like a mountain stream, with ups and downs.

In addition, The Age of Awakening incorporates comedic elements into its serious historical narrative, adding a unique touch to the show. The role of Zhang Fengzai not only plays the role of a "villain" in narrative, but also provides many comedic elements in various plotlines. In dramatic emotional twists, the power of emotions displays tension and dynamic charm, which can more deeply touch people's hearts than straightforward narration.

The horizontal acceptance of aesthetic acceptance in the temporal dimension and the vertical acceptance over time together constitute the possible space for aesthetic consumption. The life oriented narrative style of incorporating comedic elements into The Age of Awakening has won the horizontal acceptance of audiences with different social experiences. Although the vertical acceptance of the drama remains to be verified, there are still many audiences engaging in aesthetic appreciation and commentary activities three years after its premiere. From this, it can be seen that after the beginning of the dissemination of The Age of Awakening, it created a potential space for aesthetic consumption among audiences of different eras and social backgrounds.

4.3. Realizing Multi-Level Experience Perception

During the multi-point outbreak of the dissemination process of The Age of Awakening, the drama was loved by the general audience, especially a large number of young viewers, because of the youth attributes of the television text and dissemination media, It realized three kinds of aesthetic experiences, such as emotional resonance, knowledge exchange, and dissident communication. In the process of aesthetic acceptance of the original TV texts, the audience, mainly composed of young people, first got emotional and identity resonance. On social network platforms such as Zhihu, Douban, and Weibo, viewers with different educational backgrounds launched in-depth discussions on topics such as historical details, materialist concept of history, and principles of Marxism related to the drama and shared their own insights, forming a common learning trend of knowledge

discussion. In this mutual agitation of various views, there were inevitably dissidents with different views who initiated heated discussions. This kind of dissenting communication echoes and mirrors the ideological exchanges of social trends in the New Culture Movement depicted in the play.

5. Conclusion

In the symbolic construction of film and television media, history is constantly reshaped, and this process is deeply guided by the aesthetic concepts behind it. It determines how the media can dress up history with a contemporary perspective and thinking framework, and achieve the modern restoration of history. As a modern Chinese historical theme, *The Age of Awakening* is a model work that successfully showcases the artistic charm of this process. The drama provides symbolic historical figures and facts, not only building an aesthetic bridge between the audience and history, but also creating a vast space for aesthetic consumption. By developing diverse experiential texts, such as delicate plots, profound dialogues, rich visual symbols, and expanding all media experience channels, such as online and offline interaction, cross platform dissemination, it achieves multi-level and multi-dimensional aesthetic perception for the audience. This study suggests that the creation of historical dramas achieves a balance between the authenticity of historical texts and the artistry of film and television texts. Through a comprehensive historical and aesthetic perspective, historical facts and hidden historical laws are revealed. The creation of modern historical TV dramas still needs to rely on historical facts and highlight characters, influencing the audience to construct a strong sense of national pride and cultural identity.

References

- [1] Xiao Wei: "Peking University Times, Peking University Celebrities and Peking University Spirit", Inner Mongolia Cultural Publishing House, first edition, 2001, pages 274-275.
- [2] Tang Baolin, "The Complete Biography of Chen Duxiu", Social Science Literature Press, 1st edition, 2013, pages 150-155.
- [3] Lu Xun: "Remembering Liu Bannong Jun", "High School Reading (First Half of the Year)", Issue 4, 2016, page 23.
- [4] Quoted from: Liu Tao: "Interpretation of Iser's 'Summoning Structure'", *Literary Review*, Issue 3, 2016, p. 58.
- [5] Tao Qingmei: "Reconstruction of Historical View: From 'Main Melody' to 'New Mainstream'", *Cultural Landscape*, Issue 3, 2022, p. 92.
- [6] Long Pingping and Ding Yu: "Several Issues on Adhering to the Correct Historical View in the Creation of Major Revolutionary Historical Themes - Taking 'The Awakening Era' and 'Deng Xiaoping in the Historical Turning Point' as Examples", *Research on Historical Theory*, Issue 5, 2022, p. 40.