

The Old Dream of Legendary Shanghai

-- The Narrative and Visual Constructions of the Film "Song of Eternal Sorrow"

Zixuan Wang

Shanghai Film Academy, Shanghai University, 200444, Shanghai, China

Abstract. The film "Song of Eternal Sorrow" derives from an adaptation of the classic novel with the identical title by Wang Anyi. Director Guan Jinpeng developed an individual history that parallels the course of Chinese history, with the route and destination of the characters exiled from Shanghai to Hong Kong and then dispersed from Hong Kong to the other parts of the world, the implicit narrative of Hong Kong in the shift of the main perspective, as well as the characteristics of the female narrative, all of which constitute a dynamic and multi-perspective perspective of Shanghai. With regard to environmental styling, the film places great emphasis on integrating the urban culture of Shanghai by means of scene design and prop design, such as the settings of the alleyway, the film set, as well as the Shanghai Apartments. With regard to character styling, the cheongsam, which serves as the aesthetic label for Shanghai females, is the core and highlight of the clothing design of the film. The variations in texture, color, pattern and style of the cheongsam tends to underline the variations in personality and the transformation of fate and mentality of the characters.

Key words: Song of Eternal Sorrow; Multiview of Shanghai; Narrative; Visual Constructions.

1. Introduction

One of the significant contributors to the success of Wang Anyi's "Song of Eternal Sorrow" lies in the fact that "the hinting of the work to the cultural spirit of Shanghai has been accomplished in many cases through the depiction of the scenes of the metropolis infested with foreign adventurers and urban areas of Shanghai, as well as through the precise mastery and meticulous portrayal of the meaningful cultural aspects of the daily life of Shanghai citizens. The distinctive cultural spirit is identified in the fate of the characters, while the relationship between the two is brought to light in the midst of historical transformation." [1] There is no doubt that Wang Anyi's "Song of Eternal Sorrow" was a widely acclaimed novel in the 1990s, whose aura of "Mao Dun Literature Award" demonstrates that this urban work featuring a female narrative has been embraced and praised by the mainstream culture. It is equally auspicious that "Song of Eternal Sorrow" has unexpectedly caught the luxurious train of Shanghai Fever, while in turn emerging as the trendsetter of the flourishing Shanghai culture trend which is in the ascendant on both sides of the Taiwan Strait and in three places. The work has attracted enthusiastic attention from the film and television industry, leading to two parallel versions, a film and a TV series, which were directed by Hong Kong director Guan Jinpeng and mainland director Ding Hei respectively.

2. Narrative: Female Fate and Shanghai Complex

The directing style of Guan Jinpeng is meticulous and delicate, with a particular mastery of the psychology and destiny of females, whose films demonstrate an affinity for females and Shanghai. The images of Shanghai girls and Shanghai captured by his camera are certainly synonymous with nostalgia, popularity, reminiscence and sentimentality. "You cannot recognize the city in your own city, whereas in the wrong era you always assume you have bumped into the right person." [2] The film commences with this line of subtitles, which embodies the destiny of Wang Qiyao's life. The film sets, the tiny photos of the beauty, the Paramount Ballroom, the dance parties, the garden houses and so forth, all of which manifest the blooming scenery of Shanghai in the past, the wind of joy and drunkenness of the ten-mile metropolis infested with foreign adventurers intertwined with the sentimental old Shanghai love story, deducing a fantasy of old dreams of pomp and circumstance.

In the film “Song of Eternal Sorrow”, the director concentrates on the love entanglements between Wang Qiyao and four men throughout her life. Mr. Cheng, the man who was grateful to Wang Qiyao, devoted his life to her with his implicit love and devotion. Director Li, whom Wang Qiyao encountered at her most glorious moment as “Miss Shanghai”, was the everlasting love and heartache of her life. Kang Mingsun, the wealthy man she encountered in her urban life, was the father of her daughter, while ultimately failing to succeed as a family. The Old Color, whom she desperately attempted to keep regardless of generation, was her last companion and the final tragedy. The film eliminates the original A Er from the countryside of Wuqiao and Sasha, the half-breed who “took the blame” for Kang Mingxun, while blending the characters of Longfoot and Old Color into one, rewriting the destiny of Mr. Cheng, in addition to aggravating the role of Director Li in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, the film is about the reshaping of the image of Jiang Lili, who was involved in the dispute between the factions of the Kuomintang, the corruption of the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce, and the old love affair with Miss Mu. The magnificent Shanghai before the death of Director Li and the splendid life of Wang Qiyao are what the movie concentrates on, with the extravagance and pomp of the red-light district, and the explicit and secret struggles between the Kuomintang factions all being prominently featured in the film. Throughout the film, Wang Qiyao never departed from Shanghai, but only the men with whom she was associated, which served to sustain the interpretation of Guan Jinpeng regarding the fate of female and the Shanghai complex.

Another significant adjustment to the characters in the novel involves the role of Jiang Lili. The character of Jiang Lili, portrayed by Wang Anyi, is an ordinary-looking female who took the path of socialist revolution after 1949. In the film, the character of Jiang Lili, played by Huang Yi, was exceptionally identical to Wang Qiyao in appearance and style, just like Wang’s sister. Moreover, she did not take part in the revolutionary construction on the mainland, but instead married and had children in Hong Kong, living a household life that Wang Qiyao failed to. This newly created character with the identical name evokes the narrative metaphor of “Hong Kong” as opposed to “Shanghai”. The image of her and Wang Qiyao as “sisters”, as well as the scenes of her fleeing from Shanghai to Hong Kong and then returning from Hong Kong to Shanghai to dance with Wang Qiyao. In the context of the series of interrelated narratives between Hong Kong and Shanghai in Guan Jinpeng’s film, it is apparent that the film “Song of Eternal Sorrow” presents Hong Kong as an implicit “mirror image” of Shanghai, alluding to the comparative colonial backgrounds and modern urban cultures of each other.

Furthermore, several of the main characters in the film, including Jiang Lili, Kang Mingsun and Mr. Cheng, all bear a tortuous relationship with Hong Kong, either by settling in Hong Kong at one time or by harboring a passionate yearning for it. Nevertheless, the disdain, reluctance and longing of these people towards Hong Kong in succession mirrors the opposite evolution of Shanghai and Hong Kong. It is more intriguing to note that the film is subtitled to illustrate that two Shanghainese who lived in Hong Kong before 1990 ended up dying elsewhere, indicating that the director has fabricated an individual history that resembles the course of Chinese history. With the characters in exile from Shanghai to Hong Kong, and then dispersed from Hong Kong to other parts of the world, and finally the route of one Shanghainese who died in Hong Kong, the film alludes to the process of separation and integration between Hong Kong and Shanghai, and Hong Kong and mainland China. As a result, the main perspective shifts and the implied narrative of Hong Kong in the film, comprising a dynamic and multi-perspective Shanghai. [3]

3. Environment: Cultural Symbols in the Minor Details

In the opening scene of the novel “Song of Eternal Sorrow”, Wang Anyi brings to the attention of the reader the most typical cultural symbol of the city of Shanghai -- the “alleyway”, which is the place where the life story of Wang Qiyao unfolded, but also the underlying color of Shanghai. Shanghai culture has always embodied Chinese urban culture, whereas in the film, Guan Jinpeng does not leave as much panoramic and distant shots of the alleyways as in the novel, but only inserts the

background of the alleyways at some moments when the narrative flavor needs to be increased. For instance, Wang Qiyao and Jiang Lili were walking in the alleyway with umbrellas in the rain, indicating that they had made up after a misunderstanding. Moreover, when Wang Qiyao returned home to visit her mother for the first time after cohabiting with Director Li, she smiled and carried a child who was playing in the alleyway to keep the child from being hit by a bicycle, which was a proud moment as she held a gift for her mother in her hand. In the meantime, this scene also signifies a fleeting return to the teenage years of the main character.

The protagonist Wang Qiyao, played by Sammi Cheng, appeared with her back to the audience, and the set she encountered was a microcosm of a bedroom in a 1940s Shanghai apartment. The most symbolic part of the scene was the round glass window to which Wang Qiyao was oriented and the illuminated city buildings outside the window, which attracted Wang Qiyao to unwittingly climb onto the European-style iron bed placed by the window. This shot foreshadows the next trajectory of the life of Wang Qiyao doomed to be hooked up with the outside world. Apart from the set and the alleyway, there are numerous scenes and props in the film with typical Shanghai characteristics. For instance, the overall decoration style of the western restaurant where Wang Qiyao and Mr. Cheng first met was European style, with heavy revolving doors, European classical architectural columns and sofa seating with hollow metal design, in conjunction with coffee and cakes, constituting a highly elegant and ambiguous atmosphere. It allowed Wang and Cheng to meet each other in an extremely elegant and ambiguous manner, which was also perfectly in line with the cultural temperament of such social identities as female students and photographers.

Shanghai culture manifests an East-meets-West beauty, with Wang Qiyao in a cheongsam and knitted jacket sitting in a European-decorated Western restaurant, and a Western leather folding camera and a localized wooden box camera in the studio of Mr. Cheng. As for the environmental design, whether it is the scene design or the prop design, its ultimate purpose lies in serving the narrative construction and the emotion of the film. In the film “Song of Eternal Sorrow”, there was a set of empty shots with Shanghai characteristics and full of emotional meaning, namely the three empty shots inserted in the film when Mr. Cheng and Jiang Lili first visited the apartment where Wang Qiyao and Director Li lived. The first empty shot was taken to the bedroom, which contains crushed wallpaper, European wall-mounted oval dressing mirror, light pink silk bed sheets, double-layer fabric vintage curtains, European fabric bedside lamp, glass ashtray, as well as bedside soft package backdrop. The second empty shot was taken to the living room with blinds, silk curtains, vertical floor lamps, tea table, glass ashtrays and sofas with decorative cloths and so forth. The third empty shot was taken to the dining room, where a round table with a tablecloth and a glass plate was placed on the table, with a glass fruit plate full of fruits, five chairs could be seen around the table, a chandelier was hung above the table, while a blue vase with red flowers was placed on the table adjacent to the window. The prominent function of this group of empty shots is twofold. One is to render the daily life environment of an upper-class female in Shanghai by means of the set, which constitutes a stark contrast with the cramped and plainly furnished boudoir of Wang Qiyao during her student days. In this way, a great transformation of the life situation of the protagonist is demonstrated. The other serves as a reflection of the inner emotions of Wang Qiyao, which conveys her loneliness and solitude while awaiting Director Li in this apartment. Afterwards, this kind of emptiness and loneliness subsequently turned into the normal life of Wang Qiyao over a certain period of time.

4. Styling: The Aesthetic Label of Shanghai Female

Wang Qiyao in Wang Anyi’s novel represents a girl born in an ordinary family in Shanghai. Prior to the main story of the novel, the author describes “Wang Qiyao” as a group. “Wang Qiyao is the quintessential babe in the closet, those trainee students in the foreign banks, their eyes are all staring at Wang Qiyao. Wang Qiyao is the one who is so beautiful that the moon hides her face and the flowers blush for shame at sight of her, wearing a cheongsam of indanthrone blue, with a curving figure. Wang Qiyao is the one who keeps up with the trend, not outdated and not ahead of the curve,

but modern in groups. The fashion trend in Shanghai was made possible by the females like Wang Qiyao.” [4] In the book “The Cultural History of Chinese Cheongsam”, the discussion of Chinese cheongsam in the period from 1920 to 1949 by Liu Yu revolves around the “Republic of China cheongsam” or “Shanghai cheongsam”. The cheongsam style in these three decades embodied a tight-fitting effect as a result of the integration of Western ideas in the cut, which also turned the cheongsam into a trendy costume and served as a common dress code for Chinese urban females at that period. [5]

In the film, Wang Qiyao made an appearance in a cotton cheongsam in a gray and white fine check pattern with scattered red flower embellishments, wearing a thin tweed coat with a blue sea pine teal scarf around her neck. Meanwhile, her good friend Jiang Lili wore a small square cotton cheongsam in scarlet and iris colors, the design of the coat was much resembling a shawl, which was a large square texture in generating colors, stone bamboo and Sabiasagi colors. In terms of pattern and color scheme, the dress of Wang Qiyao was on the cooler and plainer side, matching her gentle and introverted personality, while the dress of Jiang Lili was on the warmer and more abundant side, echoing her vivacious and outspoken personality. In addition, the hairstyle adopted to match their age, identity and dress is also typical of the design of schoolgirls in the Republic of China -- thick, short hair with flaring bangs, also referred to as student head or May Fourth youth head, which practically falls into the category of bob head. Nevertheless, the identical hairstyle has subtle design variations as a result of the personality of the character, namely both ears of Wang Qiyao are perfectly covered by her hair, which appears to be more well-behaved and civilized, while the hair of Jiang Lili is pinned behind her ears, which appears to be generous and playful. As for the “refined” beauty of Wang Qiyao as a student in the film, Mr. Cheng borrowed the comments of the magazine’s staff to tell Wang Qiyao about it, while the black-and-white photo of Wang Qiyao in the magazine was still wearing the most ordinary cotton cheongsam with broken flowers. The variations in costumes and hairstyles are indicative of the variations in the identities, living environments and states of mind of the characters. After being crowned the “third Miss” in Shanghai and living with Director Li, the cheongsam of Wang Qiyao turned out to be luxurious and attractive. For the first time when she accompanied Director Li to the ball, she wore a golden silk sequin cheongsam, which seemed to be of great value in addition to the fabric. It was also designed to be extraordinarily daring in style, which means that despite the high collar, the cheongsam was processed with a tulle see-through effect from the collarbone to the top of the chest, which allowed the clothed person to reveal a dignified and sensual beauty. On this occasion, Wang Qiyao had thoroughly bidden farewell to the Wang Qiyao who was hiding behind Jiang Lili with her head bowed and her eyebrows lowered. When Jiang Lili and Mr. Cheng visited Wang Qiyao at her new apartment, Wang Qiyao wore a silk shoulder-padded cheongsam with a black backdrop and large silver vermilion flowers. She was laughing and holding a lit cigarette in her right hand, imitating the posture of the girl on the old Shanghai Beauty brand cigarette advertisement poster. The bashful innocence of her teenage years had long since ceased, but was substituted by the flirtatiousness and charm of a Shanghai celebrity. When a group of people searching for Director Li approached Wang Qiyao for questioning, Wang Qiyao had not received a glimpse of her beloved Director Li for a prolonged period of time. At this point, she was wearing a silk cheongsam with a black backdrop, which was embroidered with white lilies only on the upper front. The extensive black color symbolizes dullness, depression, and grayness, while the white lilies symbolize blooming, awaiting, and elegance, both of which are superimposed together to make the beauty of the desperate situation of Wang Qiyao. Corresponding to the dress code of this period, the hairstyle of Wang Qiyao also experienced a tremendous transformation. Not only did she cultivate her long hair, but she also wore the romantic long curly hair often reserved for celebrities in Shanghai. It was more subtle to note that her hair was pinned behind her ears from the time Wang Qiyao wore a white wedding dress to the beauty pageant, which was apparently a metaphor for the transformation of the personality and mentality of the character. Meanwhile, Miss Mu, who represented the image of the socialite in the Republic of China, wore a black lace cheongsam with padded shoulders in her

first ball scene, combing her hair in a swallowtail style, which was a classic costume of a celebrity who had been mingling in the Shanghai sex scene for a prolonged period of time.

5. Conclusion

On closer inspection, the film still fervently portrays the persistence and discernment of Guan Jinpeng's love affair and his imagination of old Shanghai. With regard to contextualization, Guan Jinpeng purposely failed to replicate the external landscape of Shanghai, but rather placed the shot in his favorite specific locked spaces -- film sets, dance halls, restaurants, apartments, photo studios and so forth. His nostalgic and tribute imagery of Shanghai was brought out in scenes with a compelling sense of form, including lighting, curtains, sets and furniture. The end credits read, "A city never turns senile, since there are people rushing to a radiant youth every day." Echoing the wounds of time and the vicissitudes of history, people and the city have attempted to refresh the aging magnificent memories and mirrored imaginations of the city with the constant renewal of charming youth. "Song of Eternal Sorrow" serves as another opportunity to revisit the nostalgic dream of Shanghai for numerous people who have been indulging in it with deep and persistent affection.

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