Analyzing the Evolution of Film Narrative Structure during China's 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up

Jiayang Chen *

Zhongshan No.1 Middle School, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China 528400

* Corresponding Author Email: zoe@student.cup.edu.cn

Abstract. Reform and opening have brought new opportunities for the development of China's film industry, and under the great changes of the times, the values of popular love have also quietly changed. Exploring a specific film theme such as romance can not only witness the commercialization of Chinese films but also perceive the influence of social material and ideological culture on the individual's concept of love through the differences in narratives. This paper will summarize the general characteristics of Chinese romance films based on previous studies and film-related data, and compare the narrative styles of films at the beginning and end of the 40-year reform period, to explore the changes in China's concept of love. The course of Western love narrative flux references Chinese loves narrative movies. From a materialistic point of view, this paper will focus on the aesthetics of the movie from the perspective of aesthetics of acceptance, and explain the connection between society, the audience, and the content of the romance movie.

Keywords: Reform and Opening Up, Romance Films, Narrative Structure.

1. Introduction

Reform and opening are China's political and economic reform, which has two main aspects. First, it has rehabilitated the political mistakes of the past and initiated a social debate on the truth of political thought. Second, it has restructured the highly centralized planned economy that had been in place since the 1960s and combined it with the advantages of a market economy to create a market-driven, state-adjusted market economy. The government's foreign policy has been gradually relaxed, foreign investment has been introduced, and import and export trade channels have been opened, which has gradually deepened the connection between China's market and the international market. The political and economic changes have transformed the lives of the masses, with rapid urbanization and a greatly enriched commodity structure in all parts of the country. The changes in the social environment also affected the film industry and its physical content; before the 1970s, Chinese films were financed by the state, but after that, Chinese films were officially put on the market, and the rules of the profit and loss market made it necessary to start the process of modernizing the film market. In addition to the artistry of films, the box-office value and mass entertainment characteristics of films were also recognized. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the number of entertainment films in China's film industry increased dramatically, which shows that film creators' awareness of the audience has increased significantly and that they have a target consumer group. Therefore, the film as a cultural carrier, the change of film content is a comprehensive effect of mass thinking and material economy.

Love, as a universal emotion, is one of the common elements in movies. Romance films are defined as films that take love as their main theme, and the emergence, development, twists and turns, trials and tribulations of love until the lovers' happy ending or tragic separation as their narrative thread. They usually take the artistic expression of love as the main attraction, the conflict between the pursuit of love and the obstacles to love as the main driving force of the narrative, and explore the eternal human emotion and the artistic theme of love by expressing the absolute transcendence of love. In the early 1980s, with the introduction of Western film concepts, the fourth and fifth generations of Chinese directors reached a creative peak in a relatively short period of time. The scar literature of this period is strongly marked, and most of the films are characterized by reflections on the Cultural Revolution and appeals to the goodness of human nature. At that time, the movies about love were

'Lushan Love', 'Life', 'Shepherd', 'Sunny Days', 'They're in Love', 'Princess Peacock', etc. With the innocence of the characters and the lightness of the picture as the main features, they were collectively called the purely beautiful movies that were deeply loved by the public. Among them, the movie "Lushan Love" was awarded the Guinness World Record for "the world's longest continuously shown movie in the same theater" by the Guinness World Headquarters in Britain.

Since the turn of the century, the commercialization of Chinese cinema has gradually matured, and the sixth generation of directors has quietly emerged. Compared to their predecessors, their cultural vision is more internationalized, and their aesthetic taste is more detached from the mainstream. More importantly, they no longer have the protection of state-run factories behind them but are more like a group of individual filmmakers with almost nothing but cameras and expired films in their hands. Under the banner of "My camera doesn't lie," they appeal to a kind of original and realistic realism that brings cinema back to personal experience and away from grand narratives [1]. The number of romance films has increased dramatically, and in the past ten years, the main romance films have been "Crush on Orange," "Passing Through Your World," "You at the Same Table," "To Youth," "Disappearing Valentine's Day," "The Man Who Wouldn't Fall," "The Freak," and "Old Man of the Moon," and so on. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact from 2020 to 2022, China's domestic film production capacity has significantly decreased, leading to a severe shortage in supply within the film and television industry. In 2022, this industry was officially categorized as a "special hardship industry" by the State Council. Despite these challenges, there were 18 urban romance films released during that year, achieving a combined box office revenue of 15 million [2], reflecting the huge consumer market for romance films and the huge number of audience groups.

2. Literature Review

Romance film as a branch of cinema, the commercialization course of Chinese cinema has an important influence on its content selection. The goal of the commercialization course of Chinese films is nothing but to strike a balance between market and art, individual expression, and mass consumption [1]. Under the premise of recognizing the audience as the main body, the filmmaker cannot ignore the enlightenment of reception aesthetics. Acceptance aesthetics believes that only by studying the audience's acceptance process, as well as understanding and feedback after acceptance, can the value of artworks be fully measured. After its introduction in China, reception aesthetics has been taken seriously by filmmakers, and in practice it has manifested itself in filmmakers' conscious efforts to meet audience expectations in all aspects to strive for better word-of-mouth and box-office returns [3]. In the study of romantic films, Chinese traditional culture, and foreign culture are factors to be considered. The audio-visual language of Chinese romantic films is characterized by traditional poetic expressions [4] and the conservative values of traditional Confucianism [5]. During the flux of the Western romance film (1950-1970), as the Production Code Administration (PCA) began to relax and views toward censorship altered, the representation of sexuality also increased in conjunction with the sexual and women's revolutions [6]. During this period Hollywood developed a basic model for the theme of romance. The introduction of the Western open concept of love has influenced the pace of development of Chinese romantic films. Hollywood genre films have provided Chinese films with the plot idea of "love plus", which has greatly enriched the composition of Chinese narrative elements [7]. In this research, Patrick Fuery points out the direction for us, explaining that the correlation between film and culture has two important issues, one is the influence of social culture on film, where social culture includes the ideology of superstructure, which implies Marx's materialist view of history that the economic base determines the superstructure; and the other is the influence of film on the social order, which is important to resist or promote the mainstream consciousness of society. or promote the important role of mainstream social consciousness [8]. Meanwhile, this paper finds the commonalities and characteristics of Chinese romantic movies through foreign studies on romantic movies, and Marga Cottino-Jones suggests that Western women always appeared in the movies as the image of snake and scorpion beauty at the very beginning, and getting a woman was as

basic a task for the male protagonist as competing for a career and saving the world, and the role of women was just like a tool to increase the passion of the movie. The female characters are just like a tool to increase the passion of the movie [9]. Veronica Hefner points out that the audience of romantic movies is always more romantic than those who do not watch romantic movies. This paper will also pay special attention to the change of female characters and the analysis of audience psychology [10].

In summary, the previous literature has focused on the traditional and innovative studies of Chinese romance films, elucidating the characteristics and trends of Chinese romance films from different angles, but lacked the analysis of the reasons for the process of change, and failed to compare and summarize the changes in the narrative structure of the century's films in the dimension of time. As the Chinese film market has gone through twists and turns during the 40 years of reform and opening, exploring the change in the narrative structure of Chinese romance films is not only a microcosm of the times, but also a reflection of the influence of external factors such as the material level and the social environment on the intrinsic emotional demands of the masses, and how the material changes have affected the nation's thinking on the theme of love.

Research Methods: This paper will take the 40-year development of Chinese cinema as the background and compare the romance movies at the beginning of the reform with those of the last decade. By comparing the romantic films at the beginning and end of the 40 years of reform, this paper will analyze the differences in three levels: characterization, linear narrative differences and narrative outcomes. Subsequently, the reasons for the flux are analyzed by applying the perspective of Marxian materialism. Given the mass point of view after the commercialization of films, mass psychology will be paid special attention to.

3. Results

The characterization is different. In the characterization of both sexes, the differentiation between the sexes becomes more and more obvious, and it breaks the aura of perfection of the characters and gives them shortcomings that bring them closer to ordinary people. In the middle of the last century, there is a kind of door-to-door complementarity and compatibility between male and female characters. For example, in “The Horseherder” (1982), Li Xiuzhi is virtuous and vivacious, and Lao Xu is down-to-earth and kind, both of whom are down and out under the influence of the Cultural Revolution. Zhou Yun is warm and bold and Geng Hua is loyal and sincere in “Lushan Loves” (1980), where one is the Huihua daughter of a Kuomintang member, and the other is a high-ranking son of the CCP. In the new century, characters usually create contrast and conflict in their apparent differentiation. For example, the contrast between the image of the innocent girl and the prodigal son in Evil Angel. The contrast between the image of Old Bai, who is simple and honest but involved with several women, and the image of Ms. Li, who is fussy and wants to save face, in Love Myth. Such a contrast is conducive to conflict and has the power of attractive contrast.

For women's roles, the construction of women's image at the beginning of the reform and the new century both have the aspect of independence and autonomy, in the embodiment of this character element, the new century is more consciously emphasized in the narrative, and as a narrative element to promote the plot. With the development of feminism, the promotion of women's individuality and the changes in the gender structure of the workplace, the mainstream values are more in favor of the image of warm, free and capable women, where capable does not refer to the traditional ability to take care of family and life, but the image of a strong woman in the profession. For example, Li Xiuzhi in the last century's The Shepherd is the image of a gentle woman who takes care of her family's needs. In the division of labor between the sexes, Li Xiuzhi is willing to share the housework, although as a spiritually independent female figure, she is always financially dependent on the male protagonist. Li Xiuzhi's ability to be stoic is an important factor in sustaining their love under difficult circumstances. The image of Xiaorong in this century's “Passing Through Your World “(2016) is that of a woman who is good at managing money and has a career. Instead of pursuing pure love, Xiaorong demands appropriateness and breaks up with Chen Mu. Even the more petite girl in the film, Missy

Chicken, has episodes where she angrily scolds and rejects Chen Mo's retention during the broadcast. In terms of female characters, this century's films have focused more on portraying characters who are economically autonomous and have a rational view of love.

The narrative focus is different. In the movies of the last century, much of the story focused on the process of two lovers falling in love, with the hero and heroine always having an uncanny understanding, and then obstacles are created to add twists and turns to the story. These obstacles are usually created for external reasons, with basic tropes such as cancer, car accidents, and family issues. Romantic films of this century put most of the story space on the progress of the two people after the confirmation of the relationship, some spanning a long period of up to ten years, but usually end with marriage as the end of the story, the storyline of child rearing is hidden from the story of conflict from the outside to the inside, that is, is the internal conflict of the two people of externalization. Such a story goes deeper into the heart of the character and reflects the inner changes of the character. In Crush - Tangerine Huai Nan, mutual crushes are separated by a misunderstanding over a diary, and the truth comes out when they meet years later, but because of the entanglement between the girl's father and the man's father's company, the girl leaves the boy with a feeling of guilt, and the boy doesn't contact the girl because of a big family change, and the two end up not being together. Through monologues, the audience can delve into the characters' perspectives. The first half of the movie is dominated by the girl's point of view, telling the psychological journey of the girl from full of enthusiasm to quiet study, while the second half is the story of the boy who chases the girl and wanders through society with shame, and the two perspectives are united in the line: preferring cloudy or rainy days. Such an interactive narrative perspective reflects the differentiation of love, i.e. the common love of the two is divided into two individual loves, ostensibly a love story, but the experiences and feelings of the two are very different, which may have something to do with the elements of the story of a crush, and is also reflected in Passing Through Your World, a narrow perspective that tells a love story from the emotional subjectivity of one character. The difference with the love stories of the last century is that this narrative, with its focus on inner development, makes the love story multifaceted and generates many topics for the audience to discuss or debate.

Narrative outcomes vary. The concept of love in the romantic films of this century is generally pessimistic. Character differentiation constitutes conflict, and inner change is externalized in conflict, but in the end the characters do not overcome the conflict and reconcile, but rather the conflict intensifies, resulting in separation. Compared with the films of the last century, the endgame of the romantic films of this century is always dominated by separation, and it is a combination of realistic departure and romantic memories. Pressure, economy, and studies may be the reasons for separation, and then subjective memories are processed to produce "If only ..... could be together! " To channel the audience's feelings of regret and loss. Overall, this century's romance film does not have the beauty of the last century's romance film. Love in this century's romance films is like a kind of faith, and it likes to lyricize this faith and then shatter it to create a tragic effect. In The Myth of Love (2020), Old Bai and some women watch a movie called The Myth of Love, and in the end, no one cares about the content of the film, but rather sits around chatting and eating melon seeds, which is a dark satire on the unreality of perfect love.

4. Discussion

The different narrative contents of romantic films are the joint result of social environment and audience factors. Changes in the social environment affect the psychological aspirations of the masses and reflect the characteristics of the concept of love at a particular time.

The individualization of gender images is related to the narrative style of the times, when the main works of film and television after 1978 were still focused on the grand framework of socialist construction. The main theme of love films in this period is not love, but the feeling that family and national feelings override children's personal feelings. After that, the new generation of directors who grew up in the environment of reform and opening were more avant-garde and focused more on the

fate of individuals, so the characters created were deliberately imperfect and their experiences were closer to the masses, and the main theme of love films gradually returned to love itself.

The changing image of women is determined by the changing role of women in the social division of labor. Women are moving from the family to the workplace, and the emergence of female presidents and secretaries has inspired young women to look at the world in a broader perspective than just family affairs. Therefore, the changing image of women is a manifestation of the improvement of women's social status. At the same time, the division of labor between the two sexes exists objectively, and these love stories about the image of self-improving and self-supporting women also explore the new generation's trade-offs between love and career, and how women can balance their work and relationships, their self-pursuits and romantic compromises.

For the films of the 1980s, its commerciality was still immature, and it was not made with a specific audience in mind. It was more of a collective reflection on the deep-seated problems of society at that time. Because the Cultural Revolution had traumatized many people, people expressed their desire for beauty in art, which was a form of self-soothing. In addition, at that time, parent-arranged marriages were very common, and men and women were prone to being punished for their private relationships, and their thinking was more conservative. As a result, most romances of the time appealed to the beauty of human nature and showed the purity of love through the process of love between a man and a woman, challenging tradition rather than expressing reality. With the increase in the supply of films in China, romantic films gradually gained a specific audience, mainly young people. The protagonists of the movies also tend to be younger, characterized by the simplicity and impatience of young people's view of love. Coupled with the openness of the social atmosphere, men and women establish their relationships at a fast pace, so the center of the narrative is shifted to the latter part of the film, and the time span is extended.

The tragic endings of romantic movies are related to the contemporary concept of love. In the last century, the concept of love was always from one to another, so there was no reason to break up because of unsuitability. In this century, "fast food", "gold-digging" and "blind" relationships are prevalent. Under the influence of the Western concepts of gender freedom, personal orientation, pleasure in personal experience and personal interests, the concept of marriage and love has gradually shifted from open-mindedness to localization, resulting in college students focusing more and more on interests rather than responsibilities, senses rather than perspectives, and process rather than results [11]. Such a casual way of love is not easy to maintain a long-term intimate relationship to the point of breaking up, so the seed of pessimism is planted in the consciousness of young people who prefer the end of failed love, and this kind of movie plot is a kind of pseudo-tragedy. Love movies to meet the audience's imagination, the content of the movie will be exaggerated, spontaneous and irresponsible love part of the detachment from reality, and the results of the imposition of career and other practical factors to justify the breakup, in fact, only put on the skin of realism. The deeper reason is that young people's single capital is getting thicker and thicker, and getting married and having a family is a burden. To get married, today's young people must give up much more than in the last century, the increase in the cost of living has deepened the fear of young people's marriage, and the emergence of the "love not for marriage" argument.

5. Conclusion

Compared with the romance film narratives of the last century, the romance films of this century are fuller in characterization, the narrative center of gravity is shifted back in the linear narrative, and the narrative elements are rich, forming a unique style of Chinese romance films under the combination of foreign film culture and local love concepts, which reflects the maturity of Chinese romance films. Restricted by the nature of commercial films, this century's romance films tend to cater to audience tastes, the age of characters tends to be younger, the interpretation of love is shallow and artificial, and the overall artistry is not as good as that of last century's romance films and television works. Movies should not only be consumed by the audience's emotions, but also take the

initiative to teach correct values and give the audience a correct value orientation. On the premise that Chinese romance films will not be marginalized by the market, how to make them artistic is another issue worth exploring.

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