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Existence and Meaning: A Cultural Reinterpretation of the Image of Youth in Chinese Cinema in the Early Reform and Opening Up Period 1979–1989

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Abstract: In the early years of reform and opening up, especially the 1980s, the cultural production and aesthetic communication patterns of youth images in Chinese cinema changed markedly. The "aesthetic imagination" and "ideological discourse" carried by these domestic film images of youth were closely tied to the era's enlightenment by Western humanism and existentialism. They were an inevitable response to contemporary China's effort to integrate its own historical and humanistic traditions into the tides of globalisation and modernisation, and they formed a cultural self-reflection on the proposition of "human existence" during a specific period of social transformation in China. Building on existential psychology and phenomenology, and through close textual analysis of representative films from 1979 to 1989, this article reinterprets youth figures as cultural mediators of transition, bringing them into dialogue with scholarship on Fifth Generation cinema, national cinema, and post socialist modernity.

Keywords: Reform and Opening up; 1980s China; Chinese Cinema; Youth Image.

1. Introduction

Film art "fuses time and space, present and past, reality and illusion, imagination and the real. It combines reporting with narration, dream with observation. It integrates extended time and traces changes in people and things" [1]. From the basic features of its artistic production and expression, the image of the "ordinary person" in film stories often has not only aesthetic significance but also interpretive value in social, humanistic and intellectual terms. In the field of existential psychology, the American existential and humanistic psychologist Rollo May has had far-reaching influence. He effectively extended the theoretical scope of existential psychology to multiple narrative themes such as love, will, power, creativity, dreams, fate and myth, greatly transcending the traditional Freudian explanatory perspectives of "instinct determinism" and "pan-sexualism", transforming "psychoanalysis" into "existential analysis". "Existence" became the core component of May's psychological theory, leading him to stress in his insight into modern society the deep entanglement between "human existence" and "power intervention" in modern social situations. This brings modern people a sense of powerlessness, absurdity, indifference and repression, and, on the other hand, resistance, struggle and endeavour, which may also be change, rebellion or creation. On this basis, May put forward many distinctive theoretical viewpoints. For example, he held that only through creative activity that demands courage can a person express and determine their own existence. People are free, but constrained by fate. Conversely, only within freedom does fate have meaning. In the struggle and striving between the two, the person and human existence stand out [2].

In the intersecting perspective of film and "existential psychology", "it creates a reality of illusion. It sets up a space for an ideal point of view and thereby asserts the necessity of a priori existence." And "the 'reality' parodied by film is first the reality of the 'self'" [3]. In this light, we can divide the writing and metaphor of the essence, mode and features of "existence" in film art into the following levels. First, the objective level of filmic "existence". This mainly refers to the "existence" in film cultural-artistic texts having materiality and practicality consistent with human nature. "Through images we think of certain familiar things, meanings or emotions. The value of images lies in conveying the real world and eliciting emotional responses" [4]. Second, the spiritual level of filmic "existence". This mainly means that the construction and expression of "existence" in film culture carry the colour of media symbols and the possibility of artistic imagination, forming a meaningful system of symbolic metaphors. "The 'symbolic impulse' may allow a hypothesis to be proved. Any element, whether or not it violates convention, may constitute the basis of inner meaning" [5]. Third, the socio-historical level of filmi c "existence". This mainly means that "existence" is endowed with rich social meanings and historical connotations in film discursive practice: it "provides an imaginary relation and experience between the audience and the world, thereby constructing a subject outside the screen" [6], and the narrative techniques and rhetorical methods of on-screen time–space render "existence" an inevitable product of ideological construction. These levels also resonate with broader accounts of how Chinese cinema in the 1980s negotiated nation, modernity, and spectatorship [7,8].

Through these three levels, the writing of "existence and meaning" in film has its uniqueness and irreplaceability. With these theoretical horizons, a rereading of the images of youth in domestic films of the 1980s and a renewed interpretation of the "existence" and "meaning" of such images in that period should have a degree of validity. Entering the human artistic world only in the twentieth century, cinema has folded the multiple human and emotional connections between "disappearance" and "seeking", between "individual" and "era", and between "existence" and "value" into film's "legend, dream and myth", attempting to reveal the helpless

yet fearless material state and spiritual space of human "existence". Facing youth stories in domestic films of the 1980s, an existential-psychological lens on film culture may be another effective angle for interpreting character images. The educational, economic and cultural prosperity conveyed in 1980s domestic cinema, the continual emergence of new ideas, fashions, mores and values, and the yearning and pursuit of freedom and independence by China's mainland youth of the 1980s together combined on the screen of a new historical period to create "spaces of existence" and "spiritual images" marked by humanism as the common faiths and lifestyles of a "generation", and with the charm of art they continue to call upon us, in the dual context of film and youth culture, to keep producing and reproducing the ideologies of "modernity" and "deconstructionism". This dynamic sits squarely within what scholars identify as the generational reimagining of Chinese cinema in the 1980s [9,10].

2. Methods

This paper conducted a qualitative textual study of feature films released in China's mainland between 1979 and 1989 that explicitly foreground youth as protagonists or central figures (e.g., *Look at This Family* [1979], *The Smile on the Face of the Troubled* [1979], *The Female Students' Dormitory* [1983], *The Yamaha Fish Stall* [1984], *Father and Son* [1986], *The Troubleshooters* [1988]). Selection followed three criteria: (1) sustained screen time and narrative centrality of youth characters; (2) contemporaneous critical or popular recognition; and (3) availability of authoritative scripts, synopses, or restored prints. We applied iterative close reading and thematic coding focused on three lenses derived from the theoretical frame, objective/material "existence," spiritual/symbolic "existence," and socio-historical "existence" and mapped motifs to existential psychology and phenomenology [1, 11]. To situate textual findings historically, we triangulated with standard film-historiographical sources on the 1980s, Fifth Generation, and national cinema. This combined approach clarifies how youth images both register and reshape discourses of "human liberation," marketisation, and cultural pluralisation.

3. The On-screen Shaping of Youth in 1980s Domestic Films Echoed the Era's Main Current of "Human Liberation"

Any observation and analysis of contemporary cinema in China's mainland cannot be separated from full consideration of the specific social and cultural context. Various changes in the social-cultural sphere have a direct and multi-dimensional impact on the content and form of contemporary China's mainland films. Especially under the penetration and reinforcement of the views of "literature conveying the Way" and "propaganda and education" in film art, contemporary China's mainland cinema once became the most important weapon for "educating the people", which influenced the institutional construction and rule-making of the entire film industry. On this understanding, when we discuss the relationship between contemporary socio-political and cultural transformation and changes in film creation in China's mainland, the series of youth images on screen in the domestic cinema of the 1980s at the beginning of reform and opening up, situated amid constant change, have special interpretive significance. The "worker-peasant-soldier" figures that occupied the central position in China's mainland films after 1949 were, in the 1980s, replaced by a series of young men and women full of nascent reformist spirit, revealing in their hesitation and confusion a sense of reflection and, beneath calm restraint, a deeply embedded rebellious temper [8,9].

A key reason for this profound shift in the focus of domestic film creation lies in the shock and renewal rapidly formed in the early 1980s under the mainstream spirit of reform and opening up, which may be named the context of "going to the world" and "going to the future". From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, China's historical development entered a new period. Changes in the socio-political environment inevitably brought transformations in cultural trends and artistic ideas. After the cultural despotism of the "ultra-left" political years, "rediscovering the world" and reconstructing an "optimistic imagination" of the future became a widespread anxiety and expectation for a kind of "re-enlightenment" across many cultural events and artistic stages of the 1980s. Thus, domestic film creation also increasingly showed, amid deliberate or incidental discussion and debate over "individualism" and "collective consciousness", "technological determinism" and "art for art's sake", the exploratory spirit and reflective awareness of a transitional phase of "entering the world and the future". A generation of young people who sensed the herald of the new historical period was destined to become the important "reflective medium" and "symbolic system" of new-era domestic screenwriting. Read against film-historical accounts of Fifth Generation emergence and audience reconfiguration, these shifts mark a broader refashioning of spectatorship and identity [12,13,14].

At the start of reform and opening up, domestic films first responded to the era's surge of "human liberation". In the early 1980s, many films such as *Romance on Lushan Mountain*, *The Smile on the Face of the Troubled*, *The Female Students' Dormitory*, *Evening Rain in Bashan* and *Love What Is Your Surname?* presented the reality that even when "spring" had arrived, it was still hard to forget the injuries suffered in that "winter". There was the suffering of intellectuals, the banishment for family background, and the shadow of class struggle. The interactions between the younger generation and the older generation released a signal of reconciliation with history. A new era had indeed arrived, and all the idealistic narratives woven about the future gave rise to a strong resonance of a "thawing era", artistically both hesitant and impetuous. And this resonance, carrying a distinct imprint of the times, first touched upon the issue of the "second liberation" of the "person" in the process of emerging from the years of "thought bondage" and "rediscovering the world".

Although *The Smile on the Face of the Troubled* is a 1979 work, it directly treated "human liberation" as an obstinate and troubled struggle to fight for and defend personal freedom permeated by the spirit of the age, and this subject consciousness became deeply embedded thereafter in the "historical writing" and "textual construction" of many realist films of the 1980s. The film tells the story of a reporter at a city newspaper in the mid-1970s who insists on "telling the truth". In textual logic, it cuts to the anxieties and courage generated when the basic values of the individual as "human existence" are threatened and intimidated by ideology and bureaucracy. "Anxiety and fear are closely related to values. Fear is a response when a part of oneself is threatened. Fear

has a specific object, whereas anxiety does not. Anxiety is one of the characteristics of existence and is a positive sign of ego maturity" [15]. The so-called "troubled people" in the film are not only the protagonist, the reporter Fu Bin, but also the publicly humiliated medical professor and surgeon, and, in a broader sense, "intellectuals" or "upright people", including the teacher who once taught Fu Bin journalistic ideals and skills. These "troubled people" involuntarily lost spiritual vitality and were forced to abandon independent personal worlds. The definite and firm self-consciousness of "intellectuals" was trampled by "the discourse of power", leading to a proliferation of hypocritical human relations. The protagonist Fu Bin had experienced too many unpleasant incidents brought on by "newspaper lies" and "false reporting". The narrative subject of the film directly conveys Fu Bin's anxious and painful emotional experience in the face of "coercion by power", even resorting to somewhat exaggerated stream-of-consciousness styling to heighten the anxiety aggravated by repression and powerlessness. On another, more implicit level, the film also actively shows how Fu Bin, cautiously and conscientiously, held to his belief and capacity for "free choice", and thus he bravely accepted the responsibility and punishment brought by his choice, and with "it will not be long" he foretold and allegorised the imminent advent of a reforming era. By exposing and condemning the reality in which "ultra-left politics" insulted and oppressed people, the film achieved a restrained yet forceful call for "human liberation", which was also the general and basic consensus of new-era domestic films in the 1980s. These textual features align with broader patterns of the period's cultural thaw and its reframing of youth subjectivity [8,9].

In the youth stories of the 1980s, university students could of course not be absent. In the 1980s, undergraduates were "the pride of heaven", the spirited "new generation of the 1980s". *The Female Students' Dormitory* directed by Shi Shujun in 1983 was the first film in the early reform era to enter the lives of university students. It was more than a film about university life. It was a response to the spirit of the 1980s through the confusions and reflections of young people, including "enlightenment and awakening", "humanitarianism" and the "return of human nature" necessarily contained in the proposition of "human liberation". The film does not try to shape "model youth", but centres on specific and affective young individuals, demanding liberation from the trampling of "gods" as the alienated form of rationality. The protagonist, the undergraduate Kuang Yalan, is a typical figure who, while stepping into "spring", still carries the scars of "winter". In the absurd political years, her mother denounced her father. The father died young and the mother left. This was the common "growth memory" of many youths in the early 1980s. There is a deep spiritual connection between the opening of the 1980s as a so-called new historical period and this "growth memory". The 1980s was an era with a real chance of regaining freedom, because the "gods" and "heroes" of high-pressure politics were gradually fading, and a spirit akin to the May Fourth era returned. In the 1980s university campus, Kuang Yalan regained the possibility of returning to her own "existence". She took on responsibility and acted with courage, thereby reshaping her future. The spiritual appeals of the "young generation" on Chinese screens in the 1980s became more passionate and active, expressing an emphatic affirmation of a new, progressive humanism after emerging from confusion, melancholy and dejection, and an optimistic recognition of further social reform. Read alongside accounts of shifting campus cultures and audience formation, these representations exemplify the reform-era recalibration of cinematic youth [10,12].

4. The On-screen Shaping of Youth in 1980s Domestic Films Explored the Positive Meaning of "Returning to Life"

When contemporary Chinese film art, having gone through political calamities, set out again, we found that only by telling family stories well could we tell Chinese stories well. The camera of film turned once more to the everyday family lives of ordinary people. The 1979 film *Look at This Family* was a good start and also an important signal. Although also a 1979 production, this story's compensation for the disappointments and helplessness of the time that had been forced "lost", and its construction of ideal states of love and kinship, aligned with the main tone of family stories throughout the 1980s. This "main tone" can be simply summed up as returning to life, with scars yet with ardour, without looking back. "The life-world is the primordial field of self-evidence. What is given in self-evidence is, depending on the case, experienced as 'itself' in perception as present-to-hand, or remembered as itself in recollection" [11]. On Husserl's description, at the aesthetic level, any realist expression of "life" inevitably harbours the imagination and memory that the "people in life" have of their past spiritual journeys. This arc from injury to ordinary joy also threads through discussions of postsocialist everydayness in film studies [8,13].

Thus, when domestic films of the late 1970s and early 1980s sought to reopen a "daily dialogue" with ordinary people, film creation chose to have everyone, including the younger generation, emerge from the contemporary historical experiences that each of us could feel, rediscover the "life-world", share in the "reconstruction" of freedom, and unconsciously vent the joy of rediscovering personal and private space. In this sense, the comic style of *Look at This Family* became inevitable, for "the people need laughter". The "family" in the film is an extremely ordinary interpersonal world and thus a broadly representative interpersonal space. Rollo May pointed out that modern people live across three worlds, namely the "umwelt", the "mitwelt" and the "eigenwelt". The umwelt refers largely to the objective environment. The mitwelt is the interpersonal world where "people group with their kind". The eigenwelt corresponds to the relationship between the person and the world and belongs mainly to a privatised spiritual world [16]. In *Look at This Family*, in terms of class relations, this is a "worker family" with impeccable "red roots". In ethical relations, it is a four-person household of parents, elder sister and younger brother, with the classic combination of a "stern father and kindly mother", a "compliant sister" and a "rebellious brother". In temporal terms, it still narrates how the "father's generation" and the "children's generation" bridge their "value gap". Any reading of a narrative text is a product of its context. When we place such a story in the socio-cultural context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, neither the working-class younger generation nor the urban unemployed youth are any longer abstract, high-sounding ideological vehicles. They return to the basic emotions and responses of individuals, and the vivid "life scenes" in their interpersonal world become an existentially free personal

choice. This "freedom" can be expressed as "the self-evidence of the basic value of being human" [17], brimming with a plain yet utterly optimistic mood in the face of a new atmosphere. This confirms the judgement that "existentialism is a manifestation of the profound dimension of the emotional and spiritual characteristics of modernity" [18]. The film text escapes the trap of the individual "existence" losing individuality within the collective, magnifying through a forthright comic mode the true living will and action logic of ordinary people.

The "father–son relationship" of *Look at This Family* was carried on in the 1980s by the real father and son actors Chen Qiang and Chen Peisi on screen. Beginning with the 1986 film *Father and Son*, a series named "Heaven Born I Must Be of Use" (including *Father and Son*, *Erzi Opens a Shop*, *The Foolish Manager*, *The Father-and-Son Jalopy* and others) created throughout the 1980s the classic character of "Erzi", an unemployed youth constantly trying all kinds of "hustles". This figure carried the cultural construction of the filmic imagination of such youth groups as the "returning sent-down educated youth", the "university entrance exam failures" and China's unique "beat generation", regarding self, reality and the future. In the series, the seemingly "rebellious" 1980s urban youths represented by "Erzi" did not intend to be "rebels". Rather, following the mode of "mutual regard" between people, they cautiously yet warmly tried to examine the past and open new paths in life. In once more being accepted into everyday life they "experienced themselves as a unified being who can think, perceive, feel and act" [18]. Coincidentally, if the "Heaven Born I Must Be of Use" series represented the efforts of "northern youths" to reintegrate into daily social life, then the earlier 1984 film *The Yamaha Fish Stall* told how three unemployed youths in Guangzhou in the early 1980s became self-employed and opened a fish stall. To make money they resorted to any means, but eventually they understood that doing business is being a person, and only by doing things diligently and being honest can one succeed. The greater meaning of the film perhaps lies elsewhere. It finely depicts and conveys the era's atmosphere of "restlessness and creativity" already wafting through the southern Chinese metropolis at the forefront of reform and opening up. The yearning for money and a good life had become irresistible. Through the "life enlightenment" of the commodity economy for vulnerable youth, these films allowed young people once more to gain the possibility of changing their destinies and thus obtain due self-respect, confirming Rollo May's classic judgement: "A person who inwardly feels themselves worthless must boast to establish their personality. But one who fully experiences their own value, the self-loving person, can treat their neighbours with generosity and forbearance" [18]. The anxious yet confused "unemployed" in cities, under the surge of the social economy, returned to the vivid scene of life by recovering personal value and dignity. "Returning to life" thus became a powerful "discursive appeal" in these film texts. Behind the "discourse" was the material benefit and decision-making power that the reanimated commodity economy of the early reform years conferred on young people. In the everyday lives of a certain group of youths represented in films of this period, family structure and economic structure changed. They no longer accustomed themselves to following preset life arrangements or the strong traditional norms of their parents' generation, and in the process they kept seeking the meaning of individual life and the adaptive relations between the individual and the collective and society. These dynamics are consistent with accounts of consumer culture's rise and its inscription in screen narratives [13,14].

In the domestic film creation of the 1980s, Mi Jiashan's 1988 film *The Troubleshooters* was a divergent text in its thinking on "youth issues". If the "Heaven Born I Must Be of Use" series and *The Yamaha Fish Stall* expressed the desire for a "professional identity" amid the tide of the social economy, then *The Troubleshooters*, together with the "Wang Shuo novels" of that year, treated "profession" as a kind of "institutional oppression", expressing a strong air of disobedience and, with postmodern subversive discourse, mocking and deconstructing the so-called "serious" and "sacred". It thereby conferred on the recently "returned" life a halo of "black humour", and to a degree displayed the new generation's scepticism towards and cynicism about reality. As a late-1980s domestic film, *The Troubleshooters* sensitively touched upon the confusions and crises in the spiritual sphere of youths after material life had improved to some extent. It told of youths Yu Guan, Ma Qing and Yang Zhong opening an outlandish "Triple T Company", whose business was "worrying on behalf of others, solving problems on behalf of others and taking the blame on behalf of others". This perverse, jocular over-emphasis on such banal trifles as "worry-solving" and "taking the rap" had, at the level of cultural values, challenged the ideological tradition that once banished and erased personal value through grand political, economic and social movements. With the long-missing sense of personal worth and self-respect, the "presence" in the stream of real life seemed to become an "outsider". The prankish speech and behaviour of the characters make us see "people in life who become performers rather than living and acting as themselves in the way they should by nature" [19]. From the angle of cultural critique, this is itself a subversion of positive significance. The long-constructed "perfect images" or "moral types" of youth designed to meet the needs of mainstream ideology were thoroughly broken. The filmmakers, with wit and persistence, refused to "set an example", skilfully showing a "noble" "worldliness" and "compromise", writing down the desires and vitality, impulses and interests that youths should possess after their "return to life", and they facilitated the quiet emergence of a plural cultural pattern at the end of the 1980s. The film's irreverent stance exemplifies what Chow terms the reconfiguration of visuality and subject formation, albeit in a local key that speaks to urban satire [20].

5. The Cultural Production Mechanism and Its Limits for Youth Images in 1980s Cinema

The 1980s saw China's economic reforms and its efforts to reshape relations with the outside world, which reorganised the social structure and ways of life of communities at the time, and further reshaped the mass-culture production mechanism of domestic cinema. The screen construction and dissemination of youth images, as the content form of this production mechanism, collectively signified the "metabolic" power of Chinese cultural renewal in that period and the limitations confined by its historical context.

5.1. The Rediscovery of the "Human" and the Reorganisation of 1980s Film-culture Production

The youths whom 1980s domestic films focused on, in the

context of changed lifestyles, experienced shifts in the meanings of values and in the observation and reflection on their own experience. They became the possibilities for a generation to reconstruct new "communication and dialogue" between the individual and the interpersonal world, and between the individual and the self, as the country restarted socio-economic reform. "What has occurred is a phenomenon our era cannot avoid. It is the inevitable result of collectivism, centralised education, centralised communication, centralised technology and other 'centralising' processes that shape the psychology and emotions of modern people" [21]. Thus, after the long-term stigma and harm to the "human" by the "collective submission" of despotic political culture, one of the most distinctive cultural features of the many "human" stories told by 1980s domestic films lies in the narrative expressions that rebuild "human dignity" and "human value". These carried ardour for reality and hope for the future, yet were always tied by a thousand threads to the "scars" of the past. In countless stories of "spring", the "winter" not far behind made one sense the anxiety, emptiness, helplessness, resignation, loneliness, confusion, hesitation and pain that belonged to each person. In the cultural stance of 1980s domestic film, family ethics and political ethics aligned. Almost all mainstream films repeatedly told us that without the rectification of political ethics there could be no harmony and fulfilment in family ethics. This may be a harmonious progress in artistic fiction, yet it is also the helplessness and awkwardness of real life at the level of everyday logic. The contradiction between "political interference that can conjure clouds with a turn of the hand and bring rain with a turn of the hand" and young people's free choices faintly reflected most people's yearning for future life along with a still-uncertain longing and anxiety. From a film-historical angle, these ambivalences parallel the tensions charted in accounts of nation-building and cultural modernisation [9,12].

In the cultural meanings released by many films of this period, it is not hard to taste that "the greatest threat and cause of anxiety is not castration but banishment, that is, the terrifying fate of being driven out of the group. Many modern people would rather be castrated than banished. For this they give up power and submit to adversity" [22]. This most richly "transitional" aesthetic and intellectual character of 1980s domestic cinema also leads our thinking on film-culture production to the various dialectical relations that may and must exist, against the backdrop of social reform, between the biologically "bodily" youth and the sociologically "spiritual" youth displayed by every young on-screen figure of the 1980s based on the value stance of "existence". The bodily and mental contradictions of youth in education, employment, enrichment, romance and enjoyment became key factors in reshaping the "youth culture" of contemporary China in the 1980s. The discussion of this "youth culture" in domestic films highlighted the artistic "associations" and textual "narratives" between "transition", "exploration", "change", "margins", "pleasure", "subversion" and "agility" as attributes between body and mind for youth in a particular era [8,13,14].

5.2. Rapid Changes in Social Structure and Social Psychology under the Impact of the Commodity Economy

In the ten years of the 1980s, the impact of the "West" on China's socio-economic and cultural development was great. Over this decade, the country gradually re-entered the world from a semi-closed isolation, shifted from a planned economy to a commodity economy, moved from strict ideological control to recognising the reasonable value of cultural pluralism, and turned from class struggle as the main line to acknowledging that commodity capitalism occupied the dominant position in global dissemination. All this indicates that "modernity" became an important indicator of social change in China in this period. Under the influence of "modernity", mass culture and consumer culture became mainstream. Secularism and irony surpassed elitism, and Chinese film creation began to deconstruct the monopolising single political or cultural authority. In a state of self-awareness "the possibility of the individual separating and becoming independent arises. Anxiety here is reflective. Through self-awareness the individual can to some extent guide their own development and participate in human history" [18]. Hence, we see that, in adapting to and reflecting on social transformation, youths in 1980s films largely relied on the consumptive power of the commodity economy, asserting, through the diversity and pluralism of individual behaviour and lifestyle, a strong interest in material things. This interest implicitly rejected and resisted the "sanctimonious" and dogmatic restrictions and trampling of personal rights in past years. This may answer why domestic films of the 1980s gradually shifted from the youthful intellectual "sufferers" and "redeemers" of works like *The Smile on the Face of the Troubled*, *Evening Rain in Bashan* and *The Tremor of Life* which restored the human dignity of young cultural individuals and re-evaluated the elite value of youthful intellectuals towards the dissolution of elite superiority and a strong emotional identification with "living in the present" in works like *The Troubleshooters*, *Add Some Sugar to the Coffee* and *Mandarin Duck Mansion*. With the progressive development of economism and consumer society in the 1980s, the cultural meaning of youth images became increasingly secular. We came to understand that, for the contemporary people who "grew up in the Cultural Revolution" or "experienced the Cultural Revolution", those "youths in the movies", breaking free from traditional values and bodily repression and in a stance of resisting a certain "patriarchal order", prized most their personal experience and satisfaction as their common real confusion and pursuit [13,14].

5.3. The Specificity of the Construction of "Youth Culture" in 1980s Domestic Films

At the level of social thought and culture, the 1980s in effect began in the late 1970s. Confusion bred doubt, thinking nurtured independence, and reform achieved great change. The renewed "eastward spread of Western learning" in cultural thought and the reopening of dialogue between tradition and modernity made the cultural sphere of the 1980s polyphonic and full of life. The new modes of cultural production that emerged inevitably sought new pathways of expression at the level of philosophy and aesthetics. Looking back at 1980s Chinese cinema from Rollo May's intellectual vantage point, there is a certain similarity in explaining particular social-cultural phenomena between the "transitional" character of 1980s culture and the equally "spontaneous" and "marginal" youth group. Mass film culture in the 1980s, regarding the youth of the time as "beings of existence", cared more about their "symbolisation" and "allegorisation" as a hypothetical recognition and reading of a generation's spiritual predicament and disorder, rather than

shaping youth-culture icons capable of broad social mobilisation and impact as in Western cultural production. In theoretical terms, this difference in youth figuration corresponds to distinct regimes of visuality and nation-imagining[7,20].

Thus, under the influence of the specific national historical background and cultural tradition, 1980s domestic films, by shaping youth images, constructed a kind of "youth psychological culture" whose essence was mainly a flourish of film-aesthetic style, a release of social and personal emotions in film culture, and never a truly independent power of resistance and change that could contend with mainstream ideology. Therefore, the highly similar youth images in most 1980s films were basically the conscious bearers of idealistic "moral spirit" and "human compassion". The narrative purpose of most film texts was the expectation that, after the "irrational" past years, relations between people, between people and organisations, and between people and society could possess an ideally harmonious state. Youth figures who occupied the centre of the screen in the 1980s ultimately were ordinary people living amid the smoke and fire of everyday life. Though there was no shortage of satire, mockery and deconstruction in films, when it came to practising personal independence and pursuing new lifestyles, they never obtained "a room of one's own" in the texts of the 1980s, nor a distinct and durable psychological-cultural space. They were still on the way.

6. Conclusion

The richness and complexity of Chinese film art in the 1980s often appeared as the on-screen writing of the "human". This attention and writing highlighted an acceptance and struggle with the "web of life". Trivial yet inescapable "substantial" needs and worries submerged almost all hopes and pursuits for life, and all these fragments of life were pushed before the audience through film narrative that wisely did not over-stress "dramatic conflict". Ideals, pursuits and meanings of life were interrogated by the "web of life". Those mundane images of daily life, that firm acceptance of worldly living, and that inner tenacity and courage of ordinary people together formed film art's authentic and vivid reflection on "existence and meaning". Film art often seeks, through narrating "existence and meaning" in particular times and spaces, to reach the depths of the human heart and to explore the deep psychology of people. Placed within the established historiography of 1980s Chinese cinema and its global reception, these youth images appear not only as reflections but as active sites where modernity, marketisation, and the re-centring of the human are negotiated.

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