

A Narrative of Rural Storytelling in Intergenerational Succession among Chinese Film Directors

Jiaying Zhu *

School of journalism and communication, Hunan Normal University. Hunan, China

* Corresponding author Email: 18419787920@163.com

Abstract: Chinese society, at its essence, revolves around a core of agrarian culture. With a historical foundation deeply rooted in agriculture, the civilization of tilling the land has coursed through our collective veins for millennia, becoming an indelible facet of our identity. Chinese filmmakers, whether consciously or unconsciously, have exhibited a proclivity for rural themes, utilizing them as a canvas to convey sentiments of the countryside. This artistic inclination subsequently unfurls an exploration of the primal desires that smolder within the "peasant" at the core of one's being, obscured beneath the veneer of ancient asceticism. In the lexicon of Chinese cinematic discourse, the categorization and delineation of the Sixth Generation of directors have attained the status of established conventions. Surveying the spiritual odyssey and socio-cultural milieu of these directors throughout the 20th century, one discerns that they grappled with disparate historical imperatives, pursued divergent artistic ideals, and fashioned distinct cinematic personas. Yet, amidst this tapestry of variation, one common thread emerges as their unifying essence: the narrative of the rural heartland. It lies concealed at the very core of their artistic identities, resonating as the most profound "root" amidst the multiplicity of their individual endeavors.

Keywords: Inter-generational Legacy; Rural Narratives; Rural Sentiments; Inherent Desires.

1. Introduction

At its core, Chinese society is fundamentally rooted in agrarian culture. China's historical foundation is intricately intertwined with agriculture, and the legacy of agrarian civilization has coursed through our collective heritage for millennia, firmly embedding itself within our cultural identity. As Zhang Ning once astutely observed, the vast majority of Chinese individuals still retain an inherent connection to their agrarian roots or exhibit derivative aspects of the same (Zhang, 2012). Within the scholarly lexicon of Chinese cinematic analysis, the categorization and nomenclature surrounding the Sixth Generation of directors have crystallized as established conventions. While some dissenting voices may emerge, their objections often stem from concerns about downplaying stylistic disparities by emphasizing generational attributes, rather than questioning the fundamental legitimacy of this classification (Yang, 2003). The discourse surrounding the Sixth Generation in the realm of film studies is underpinned by a rationale rooted in the interplay between unique industry dynamics and shared extrinsic societal factors. These factors collectively shape the non-linear generational trajectory of Chinese film directors, with shifts in production paradigms, linguistic modes, and the succession of creative agents serving as foundational analytical cornerstones. Since the introduction of cinema to China in 1846, spanning nearly two centuries of exploration, Chinese filmmakers, whether consciously or unconsciously, have exhibited a predilection for rural themes. These themes serve as a canvas for the expression of rural sentiments, enabling an exploration of the innermost desires that smolder beneath the veneer of ancient restraint among the "peasantry." (Yeh, 2012)

2. Evolution of Chinese Cinematic Discourse

2.1. Pioneering Explorations of Rural Themes

During the early stages of Chinese cinema, spanning the era of the first and second-generation directors, a nascent exploration of rural themes was evident. However, their examination of concepts like "rural" and "national" was often intertwined, and the portrayal of desires was profoundly influenced by the changing times (Cui, 2000). Works such as "Nan Fu Nan Qi" and "Zhuangzi Shi Qi" sought to salvage intrinsic rural (or national) ideologies within marital relationships, affirming the rightful expression of innermost emotions and the pursuit of love. The theme of "suppressed emotions" appeared to be a consistent focus for these directors. Notable examples include Zhang Zhongliang's portrayal of unrestrained desire in "Yi Jiang Chun Shui Xiang Dong Liu," and the delicate depiction of rural sentiments in Yuan Muchu's "Si Ji Ge" and "Tian Ya Ge Nü." The films of Fei Mu, such as "Spring in a Small Town," subtly depicted emotional undercurrents, unspoken yet profoundly moving. This perhaps reflects a distinctive emotional facet of Chinese culture, where the silent land nurtures the most reserved, restrained, yet authentically courageous and enduring emotions (Xiao & Zhang, 2002).

2.2. A Paradigm Shift

The third-generation directors took a distinctive approach to portraying the "rural." They identified with the nation and the party, propagating cultural ideals rooted in politics and resistance against oppression. During the "Seventeen Years," films of this nature proliferated, depicting war and heroism, resulting in unique, red-themed classics within Chinese cinema (Bordwell, 2000). However, the onset of the Cultural Revolution disrupted this paradigm. Post-Cultural Revolution, director Xie Jin introduced his "Reflection Trilogy." Different

from "Tian Yun Shan Chuan Qi" and "Mu Ma Ren," "Fu Rong Zhen" went beyond portraying rural life, imbuing it with a deeper sense of sexual innuendo and primal vitality. From a Freudian perspective, the characters Wang Qiushen and Li Guoxiang in "Fu Rong Zhen" symbolize the "id." They pursue power and innate desires. Wang Qiushen peeks at Hu Yuyin's chest, commits adultery with Li Guoxiang, and fantasizes about liaisons with women in a brothel. Li Guoxiang voraciously consumes braised chicken, desiring relations with any man he encounters. Symbols such as broken gongs and pounding short sticks serve as props to convey their primal desires. However, intriguingly, the character Hu Yuyin, representing an almost "super-ego," experiences her most primal impulses when presented with a dish of tofu, delivered to her bedside by Shu Tian Ge on a tumultuous night. Food often arouses sexual desire, as the saying goes, "A full stomach makes for lascivious thoughts." Whether in domestic or foreign cinema, themes of "food" and "sex" consistently share the foundational tier of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Sun, 2016).

2.3. A Rich Exploration of Rural Sentiments and Human Nature

Fourth-generation directors such as Wu Yigong with "City of Sadness," Wu Tianming with "The King of Masks," Hu Bingliu with "Sounds of the Mountain," Xie Fei with "Black Snow," and Zhang Nuanxin with "Festival in Youth" have offered some of the most enriching expressions of rural sentiments and contemplations of human nature. Their films paint a poetic and tender picture of China, nurturing the cultural spirit that profoundly influences the aesthetic sensibilities of the fifth generation of directors (Chen & Haque, 2005).

2.4. Exploring Human Desires in Rural Settings

Among the fifth-generation directors, Zhang Yimou stands out as a filmmaker who ardently explores human desires within rural settings. With roots in the thriving agrarian culture of Xi'an, Zhang Yimou, alongside writers like Jia Pingwa and Chen Zhongshi, and directors like Wang Quan'an, embodies the essence of rural life. From the very beginning, starting with his cinematography work on "Yellow Earth," Zhang Yimou's films have clothed the ancient aspects of rural life with the attire of contemporary avant-garde (Yau, 1993). His films, characterized by extraordinary talent, introspection, and didacticism, artfully unveil the hidden desires within the rural populace. Films like "Red Sorghum" and "Ju Dou" are replete with the vivid colors of a China rife with violence and sexual desire (Curtin, 2007). "Raise the Red Lantern" symbolizes power and materialistic desires, while the mother's red cotton jacket, red suspenders, and red scarf in "The Road Home" represent the pursuit of idealized love. The enduring red hawthorn blossoms in "The Road Home" reside deep within Jingqiu's heart, symbolizing her enduring desire. Through this abstract reverence for the color red, Zhang Yimou intricately conveys the concealed desires of rural China (Kong, 2007).

2.5. Innovation, Insight, and a Return to Simplicity

In the realm of the sixth generation directors and emerging talents, we witness a keen enthusiasm for the expression of rural themes (Braester, 2005). Directors like Jia Zhangke, Li

Ruijun, and Wanma Caidan exhibit a profound love for their respective regions, be it Jia's attachment to Fenyang, Li's passion for Gansu, or Wanma Caidan's devotion to Tibet. Land gives birth to life, then endows it with a soul, and from the soul springs desire, ultimately giving rise to stories. Wanma Caidan's films on the pristine, sacred land reveal the most primal impulses of the "id." Examples include the portrayal of reproductive desire in "Qi Qiu," the exploration of desire for wealth (Yang Cu) and love (Ta Luo) in "Talo," and the pursuit of revenge in "Zhuang Si Liao Yi Zhi Yang." In "Jing Jing de Ma Ni Shi," the young lama's childlike desire is palpable. The emerging generation of directors also delves into the exploration of life, power, faith, and sexual desire, akin to a surge of creative vitality (Jia, 2018).

3. Conclusion: An Evolution of Expression

The trajectory of Chinese cinema, spanning multiple generations of directors, reflects a remarkable evolution in the expression of rural themes and desires. From the early explorations tinged with cultural nuances to the bold articulation of suppressed emotions, and from the political fervor to the subtle nuances of human desires, these filmmakers have collectively enriched the cinematic landscape (Cao, 2018). This evolution continues with contemporary directors, demonstrating a passionate engagement with the rural and a profound exploration of human desires. Each generation adds a unique layer to the tapestry of Chinese cinema, reflecting the country's ever-evolving cultural and social dynamics. Throughout the 20th century, the spiritual odyssey and existential milieu of China's Sixth Generation directors reveal a profound tapestry of historical imperatives, diverse artistic ideals, and distinct cinematic personas. Amidst this extended yet ephemeral chronology, the imagery of the nation in their films oscillates with a peculiar rhythm, sometimes shrouded in obscurity, at other times illuminated, occasionally exuberant, and yet, occasionally melancholic. Raised within the crucible of a century marked by tumultuous transitions, each generation of directors weathered intense physical and intellectual tumult, undergoing profound ideological shifts (Deppman, 2010).

Over the course of a century, marked by the shifting sands of time and the vicissitudes of history, these filmmakers translated personal artistic aspirations and political pursuits into the realm of cinema, thereby crafting a rich tapestry of Chinese characters embedded within the landscape of their rural narratives. It is evident that wherever rural narratives abound, emotions rooted in the rustic soil are bound to flourish. As these emotions mature and evolve, they give rise to desires of varying degrees and forms, indelibly imprinted within the genetic totems of humanity. This enduring connection remains steadfast and indomitable. Much like Wong Kar-wai's insistence on not creating flightless birds and his perpetual yearning for never-expiring cans of pineapples in his cinematic world, these directors, too, manifest their desires within the context of their rural landscapes. In their intimate rural domains, Ah Hsiao grapples with the essence of life, Zu Fan confronts matters of life and death, while Ula and Alexander contend with the specter of their father's legacy. In the realm of rural areas, desires take root and flourish. Perhaps, within the context of the rural, none wish to be flightless birds, and, as for desires, perhaps they, too, are akin to cans of pineapple that never expire (Lau, 1995).

References

- [1] Zhang, Y. (2012). Directors, aesthetics, genres: Chinese postsocialist cinema, 1979–2010. *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, 57-74.
- [2] Xiao, Z., & Zhang, Y. (2002). *Encyclopedia of Chinese film*. Routledge.
- [3] Sun, S. (2016). An overview of the Chinese film industry. *The movie business book*, 528-540.
- [4] Kong, S. (2007). Genre film, media corporations, and the commercialization of the Chinese film industry: The case of “New Year Comedies”. *Asian Studies Review*, 31(3), 227-242.
- [5] Jia, L. (2018). Research issues on martial arts directors in Chinese Cinema. *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 5, 287-291.
- [6] Deppman, H. C. (2010). *Adapted for the Screen: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Fiction and Film*. University of Hawaii Press.
- [7] Curtin, M. (2007). *Playing to the world's biggest audience: The globalization of Chinese film and TV*. Univ of California Press.
- [8] Cui, S. (2000). Working from the margins: Urban cinema and independent directors in contemporary China. *Post Script*, 20(2-3), 77-93.
- [9] Cao, J. (2018). Deviation and Restoration of Mundaneness and Mythological Nature in Chinese Cinema—Evolution of Chinese Directors of Different Generations over the Past Forty Years after the Reform and Opening-up Policy. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 2(2), 135-150.
- [10] Chen, M. M. J., & Haque, M. (2005). The Chinese Fifth Generation Directors and Their Films. *Asian Cinema*, 16(1), 306-324.
- [11] Braester, Y. (2005). Chinese cinema in the age of advertisement: the filmmaker as a cultural broker. *The China Quarterly*, (183), 549.
- [12] Bordwell, D. (2000). Transcultural spaces: Toward a poetics of Chinese film. *Post Script*, 20(2-3), 9-24.
- [13] Yeh, E. Y. Y. (2012). Wenyi and the branding of early Chinese film. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 6(1), 65-94.
- [14] Yang, J. (2003). *Once upon a time in China: A guide to Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and mainland Chinese cinema*. Simon and Schuster.
- [15] Lau, J. K. W. (1995). "Farewell My Concubine": History, Melodrama, and Ideology in Contemporary Pan-Chinese Cinema. *Film Quarterly*, 16-27.
- [16] Yau, E. C. (1993). International fantasy and the “New Chinese cinema”. *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 14(3), 95-107.