

A Brief Discussion on the Aesthetic Connotations of Eastern Cinema

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Abstract: Looking back at the century-long development of Chinese cinema, the deep-rooted influence of traditional Chinese aesthetics has played a crucial role in promoting the sinicization and nationalization of films. The isomorphic relationship between universal film aesthetics and traditional Chinese aesthetics allows Chinese cinema to extract humanistic values, broaden aesthetic categories, and increasingly present the vibrant characteristics of "Eastern cinema." This paper aims to analyze the aesthetic changes during the development of Chinese cinema, explore the aesthetic implications of Eastern cinema, and reflect on the new formats of Eastern cinema in the context of the contemporary era.

Keywords: Film aesthetics, Eastern cinema, artistic conception

1. Introduction

In 1750, German philosopher Baumgarten first proposed the discipline of aesthetics. However, the theoretical form of aesthetic thought, as the theoretical form of aesthetic consciousness, has a history of more than two thousand years in both the East and the West [1]. From the perspective of classical Chinese aesthetics, many aesthetic concepts such as "image theory" and "artistic conception theory" are based on the ancient Chinese philosophical view of "one divided into three, and three giving birth to infinite possibilities" [2]. Therefore, the distinctive existence of Chinese aesthetics cannot be separated from the initial influence of philosophical thought, and the Chinese pursuit of beauty has deeply influenced the aesthetic requirements of various fields. Therefore, when films entered China, with continuous changes in society and culture, the aesthetic connotations of films have always been deeply rooted in traditional aesthetic genes, continuing to develop in line with the direction of the times. Ye Lang, in the book "Principles of Aesthetics," believes that aesthetic activities are a kind of experiential activity in which humans take the world of images as the object [3]. The mentioned "world of images," based on the aesthetic system centered around "images" established by Wang Fu in ancient China, can thus be attributed to the core representation of aesthetics. The introduction and development of film art in China have a history of more than 110 years. During this long period, the characteristics of classical Chinese aesthetics have continuously merged into films, opening up a film aesthetic system unique to China. Since the 21st century, Chinese cinema has entered an accelerator of a new era. With the addition of technology, old and new film styles collide, and Chinese film aesthetics also face tests and challenges in the new era. How to rewrite traditional essences in the

context of modernization, reshape the multi-dimensional trends of film aesthetics, has become a contemporary proposition that deserves our significant attention.

2. Germination and Continuation: Deep-rooted Traditional Aesthetic Genes

2.1. Pioneering and Exploration

In 1905, the birth and screening of China's first film, "Dingjun Mountain," marked the inception of Chinese cinema. However, before this, "Western-style moving pictures" had already entered China. In the late 19th century, the earliest records of Chinese moving pictures appeared, with the 1897 "Notes on Watching American Moving Pictures" being the earliest known film review published in Chinese newspapers [4]. In the early stages of Chinese cinema's pioneering and exploratory phase, we can observe continuous attempts by the Chinese people to use film art as a narrative expression, shaping an aesthetic discourse structure with Chinese characteristics—namely, aesthetic conception—while reflecting social realities. The concept of aesthetic conception mentioned here is a condensed representation of Chinese aesthetics in the externalization of films. Aesthetic conception is an imagery system of intermingling reality and illusion, first appearing in ancient Chinese literary creation and criticism. Tang Dynasty poets Wang Changling and Jiao Ran proposed theories such as "taking scenery" and "creating scenery," gradually refining the concept of artistic conception. With its structure of intermingling reality and illusion and the intrinsic mission of "life rhythm," aesthetic conception internalized and merged into early Chinese film art, constructing a unique aesthetic significance. For example, in 1933, the film "Torrents," directed by Cheng Bugao, told the story of Liu Tiesheng and the villagers fighting against floods, depicting the true face of the increasingly deteriorating Chinese countryside. The film symbolically conveyed the hidden currents in Chinese society through the use of realistic and symbolic scenes of the flood's devastation, reflecting the internal impact of the land revolution. The bleak aesthetic and the fervent struggle depicted in the images resonated, portraying the poverty and vulnerability of small farmers, addressing the era's strong voices, and shaping an aesthetic conception that resonates with the national psyche. Early Chinese films consistently reflected on traditional aesthetic dimensions in their artistic expressions, with filmmakers slowly navigating the path of inheriting and exploring classical arts.

2.2. Development and Stagnation

Fast forward to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and we encounter what is referred to as the "Seventeen Years" of cinema from 1949 to 1966, followed by a stagnation phase influenced by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Here, we will mainly discuss the development and aesthetic representations of cinema during the "Seventeen Years." Influenced by societal factors, films during this period exhibited strong political characteristics, establishing a significant connection between politics and art. In the early days of the nation, aligning with political purposes, the function of films shifted from entertainment to education, showcasing heterogeneity compared to early Chinese film aesthetics. Of course, the expression of heterogeneity during this period is undoubtedly a unique artistic text, an inevitable result born out of a specific historical stage. Films of this period, such as "Sisters Standing Up," "The Story of Liubao," "Soldier Zhang Ga," and "The Red Flag Song," consistently revolved around the theme of the growth of the common people in the dark and chaotic era. These films portrayed the notion that impoverished peasants could only achieve true liberation through the baptism and guidance of the Communist Party, embodying a political orientation within the cultural context. However, modern and contemporary Chinese cinema still carried rich poetic and tense elements. Through the coordination and use of different images, shots, compositions, and montage techniques, it conveyed the implicit beauty of the "principle of harmony" since ancient times, creating the poetic and picturesque texture of Eastern cinema. Taking the example of "The Story of

Liubao" mentioned earlier, although the film is filled with war and political colors and seems constrained within the framework of its time, it is delicately and softly handled in terms of visual style. With a fresh and eternal touch, elements like windmills and plank bridges are merged into the love story, combined with the accompaniment of lyrical music, creating a blend of scenes that are immersive and intoxicating, captivating audiences in the enchanting atmosphere of Chinese tenderness.

2.3. Revival and Prosperity

After the Cultural Revolution, China presented new opportunities for the development of cinema. In this new era, talented young directors emerged, forming a vibrant force in the cinematic landscape. A group of graduates from the Beijing Film Academy, known as the "Fifth Generation" directors, played a pivotal role. They deeply rooted themselves in the cultural heritage of the nation, contemplating the national culture with a profound sense. These directors embarked on exploring new perspectives in cinematic expression. In the macro perspective of contemporary Chinese cinema, a distinctive characteristic emerges. The visual and auditory language of New China's cinema leans towards close-up shots. Utilizing the expressive nature of close-ups, the filmmakers imbue facial shots with a powerful, direct impact on the audience's emotions. This approach carries a strong lyrical significance, portraying characters with clear love-hate dynamics and distinct positive or negative roles. There is no ambiguity or gray area in emotional tendencies; instead, the aesthetic direction guides the audience straightforwardly. For instance, in the film "The Anthem of the Red Flag," to shape the protagonist Zhu Laozhong's image of resistance, a combination of close-ups and high-angle shots is employed, providing the audience with an emotionally charged and aesthetically powerful experience [5]. Despite the dominance of the red political paradigm in the cinema of New China, which considers political efficacy as a prerequisite, a plethora of filmmakers emerged with exploratory value. Driven by fervent creative passion and humanistic sentiments, they attempted to integrate traditional artistic spirit into cinematic narratives, profoundly influencing the evolution of national visual styles. Taking Chen Kaige's film "Yellow Earth" as an illustrative example, the film delves into the vast expanse of the yellow earth, portraying the generational struggles of the people rooted in this land. The film embodies the director's deep humanistic concern, exploring the relationship between the yellow earth and the people who have lived and thrived in this environment for generations. The static quality of the cinematographic language contrasts sharply with the buried cries of the soul, overflowing with a sense of powerlessness and despair regarding the shackles of destiny. The overall aesthetic image of the Yellow River in the visuals is constructed through numerous empty frames. Each connection and collision between the Yellow River and the characters accentuates the erasure of human nature imposed by the national imprint.

3. Aesthetic Conception and Cinematic Meaning: On Eastern Film Aesthetics

China, as an ancient civilization, boasts a rich cultural heritage, and aesthetic consciousness has been present since the New Stone Age, evident in primitive vessel art. In the nonlinear course of life's changes, ancient Chinese aesthetic consciousness tended to become generalized. Aesthetics holds significant value for contemporary individuals, fostering theoretical awareness in aesthetic activities. It plays an indispensable role in enhancing character cultivation, elevating theoretical refinement, and improving the thinking and abilities of artistic creation. Therefore, engaging in aesthetic research is necessary and crucial. Aesthetic master Zong Baihua once remarked that aesthetic research cannot detach itself from art, the creation and appreciation of art, and the acts of "seeing" and "listening" [6]. As a form of audiovisual art, film aligns with the basic requirements of aesthetic research, making theoretical inquiries into film aesthetics notably effective and pivotal for aesthetic research. Distinct

from Western film aesthetics, Eastern film aesthetics possesses unique characteristics. Examining Eastern film aesthetics, constructing China's film evaluation system based on its aesthetic evaluation system, and comparing it with global film aesthetics enrich the aesthetic foundation of film theory research. Historically, from cultural perspectives, the origin of symbolic imagery can be traced back to mythological symbols, evolving through "64 hexagrams" concept in the "Yijing" ("I Ching") to the formation of aesthetic self-awareness in the mode of heaven and humanity. The widespread acceptance of imagery generation as a form of aesthetics is grounded in Chinese culture's enduring reverence for "shang xiang," or aesthetic imagery. Traditional Chinese aesthetics, centered around the creation, transmission, and interpretation of aesthetic imagery, has developed its aesthetic principles, supported by the traditional cognitive tradition of attaching importance to imagery [7]. The diverse realms showcasing the aesthetic taste of imagery encompass not only various categories within artistic domains such as poetry, calligraphy, music, dance, etc., but also extend to landscapes, vast and wild, into the azure sky, modest gentlemen, gentle and jade-like... Given this, how to grasp the structural power of imagery in cinematic aesthetics is a question worth considering. As mentioned above, imagery holds crucial significance in the language of cinema. Thus, when viewers watch a film, they essentially interpret it within their own symbolic system. From this perspective, the aesthetic imagery of a film and the symbolic representation of the film mutually illuminate each other. If film symbols serve as tools and means for the visual creation of narrative and thematic expression, imagery acts as a factor that harmoniously blends meaning and form, emotion and scene. Another important issue in aesthetic research is "aesthetic conception." "Aesthetic conception" encompasses emotion and reason, where "conception" embeds form and spirit. The interplay between the two creates "aesthetic conception." Imagery and aesthetic conception are both related and distinct. The former emphasizes the breadth of aesthetics, while the latter focuses on its depth. The latter is also the sublimation of the former. When embedded in the language of film, they can achieve the aesthetic height of "poetry and painting." Based on imagery and aesthetic conception, explorations into the ontological significance of film aesthetics seek to transform the topic and filming of specific creations into "taking imagery with intention." This involves directors searching for actual existence in the objective world according to their expressive intentions, creating a harmonious blend of scenarios. Through film narrative and audiovisual language, it stimulates the audience's emotions and expresses the abundant feelings within the creator. In the actual creative process, location scouting and scene viewing for a film require extensive research and preparation. After selecting the foundational scenes, set design and scene artistry work is undertaken to better create objective images, thus sincerely expressing the intended message.

Ang Lee, a globally acclaimed Chinese director, seamlessly integrates Eastern and Western cultural symbols in his works. Investigating his cinematic aesthetic style contributes to further understanding the aesthetic value of Eastern films. "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" is the first Chinese-language film in history to win an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, embodying boundless Eastern charm. The film's aesthetic treatment of visual space primarily revolves around landscapes such as ancient towns, bamboo forests, deserts, mountain streams, etc. The director draws from the essence of Chinese landscape aesthetics, presenting it on screen like unfolding a beautiful scroll, aligning with the film's narrative rhythm. Mountains and water, people and scenery, all form a dynamic and static interactive aesthetic sense, creating a tension that conveys both character psychology and visual expression, sparking the audience's empathy for the feelings and emotional fluctuations of fate. "Life of Pi," another international film that garnered four Oscars, sees Ang Lee skillfully integrating classical aesthetics and imagery. In Western cinema, graphic violence is often a significant means to attract attention and boost box office revenue, but in this film, Ang Lee consciously avoids the graphic scenes present in the original novel. For instance, the gruesome scene of a hyena devouring a zebra is subtly handled, highlighting the restrained beauty of the Eastern

aesthetic value system. The accumulated principles of Eastern harmony also infuse Ang Lee's treatment of tragic themes with compassion and sympathy. In the film, Ang Lee does not force the protagonist, Pi, into a rapid abandonment of humanity for survival in the face of adversity. Instead, he enlarges Pi's tears, integrating Eastern poetic elements into this cruel visual spectacle. "Life of Pi" contains numerous dualistic oppositions and symbolic languages, with the foundation laid in the expression of imagery where the real and the imaginary coexist. For example, Pi's gaze at the tiger constructs a relationship between the subject and the other, simultaneously implying a clash and confrontation between two versions of self. The two versions of the drifting story allow us to experience the coexistence of the real and the imaginary in Eastern aesthetics amid the fantastical.

4. Progress and Transformation: Restructuring the Modes of Film Aesthetics

Since entering the 21st century, propelled by technological advancements, the film industry has experienced new momentum and leaps, leading to a diverse development in Chinese film aesthetics. Zhang Yimou's directorial film "Hero" marked the beginning, unveiling the era of Chinese-style blockbusters, followed closely by "House of Flying Daggers" and "The Assassin," presenting visual expressions under the narrative of Chinese characteristics. Films such as Feng Xiaogang's productions "The Dream Factory" and "If You Are the One" initiated a wave of heartwarming comedies, contributing to the popularity of Feng's New Year films. Director Ning Hao's "Crazy Stone" even introduced black comedy into the narrative style of cinema [8]. In this manner, contemporary films of the new era, constantly progressing, face the public with diverse styles. With the relay between old and new films and actors, Chinese cinema has witnessed a spectacular scene of flourishing creativity and the transition between old and new. Amidst the progress and transformation of the cinematic landscape, it is evident that the Chinese audience increasingly demands entertainment value from films. The diverse genres and the aesthetic curiosity of the audience have strengthened concurrently. Technological development has facilitated the widespread professionalism of digital film production. As digital cinema leads the industry into new dimensions, its continuously evolving advanced technologies contribute new aesthetic values. Digital cinema, with its focus on creating wonders and pursuing sensory stimulation, further shifts the cinematic aesthetic from pure entertainment to thoughtful enjoyment. The originally rational aesthetics are gradually being replaced, prompting deep reflection. Within the cinematic realm, thoughtful consideration and rationality are still crucial, as deliberately entertaining films without substance lack vitality. Moreover, the evolution of media environments has given rise to new forms of film consumption. Increasingly, mobile media, such as online platforms, are substituting traditional cinemas for viewing experiences. The technological advancements in screens bring about a metamorphosis in aesthetic paradigms, reconstructing the modes of film aesthetics. Of course, film designs with a distinct Eastern cultural identity continue to captivate audiences. For example, in the film "Goodbye Mr. Loser," the hard-of-hearing old man and the "Ma what Mei? Ma Dong Mei" scene create localized humor rooted in the unique language system of Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, since its inception, Chinese cinema has developed a unique cultural essence, deeply influenced by the soil in which it has grown. Its Eastern aesthetic concepts have far-reaching implications, imprinted in the minds of every generation of filmmakers, and contribute to the backdrop and charm of each era of Eastern cinema. As we reflect on the evolution of film over the years, the aim is not only to better grasp the underlying aesthetic logic but also to articulate the interpretative flexibility of Eastern film aesthetics. This approach enables a precise identification of its own strengths across different dimensions, clarifying the representation of modern aesthetic

symbols and traditional aesthetic meanings. Continuous efforts are made to enhance the cultural cohesion of contemporary Chinese cinema, aligning with global film aesthetics, injecting vitality into Eastern cinema in the new era, and leaving new marks on its journey.

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