

# Nostalgic Representation of "Old Shanghai" in Hong Kong and Taiwan Films

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## ABSTRACT

In today's media era, image text, as an important way to present the city image and interpret the city culture, becomes an important carrier of the image of city. Cine-writing, a concept proposed by Agnès Varda, the artist of French films, is also widely used in the analysis and interpretation of the city images through the medium of film. In this study, three works, such as "Flowers of Shanghai", "Lust, Caution" and "In the Mood for Love" that are directed by Hong Kong and Taiwan directors, were selected to analyze the image of "old Shanghai" constructed in the films, so as to interpret the nostalgia of "old Shanghai" in Hong Kong and Taiwan films.

**Keywords:** "Old Shanghai", Nostalgic imagination, Hong Kong and Taiwan films.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As an important way to present the city image and interpret the city culture, the visual text spreads the city image through motion pictures [1]. There is an important relationship between film and city image. With its unique artistic appeal and cultural communication, films have become the key media of urban image communication. Meanwhile, as the focus of image works, city image is the collection of a variety of urban elements in film.

Shanghai has a special status for modern China, . Many studies have shown that Shanghai is an "important cultural metaphor represented by urban symbols" and "the most important place where modern Chinese national crisis and modernity are strangely intertwined" [2]. At the same time, as the cradle of Chinese films, Shanghai is "an important proposition of Chinese film imagination and media construction", and also carries "historical memory and image landscape of China's modernization process" [3]. In the film of directors from Hong Kong and Taiwan, many of them have re-imagined and re-produced old Shanghai from an external perspective, either by choosing people from the "old times of Shanghai" as their prototypes, or by taking "old Shanghai" as the background of the

times to tell stories, or by adapting literary works related to the "old times of Shanghai".

This study selected three classic films directed by the directors from Hong Kong and Taiwan such as "Flowers of Shanghai", "Lust, Caution" and "In the Mood for Love" for case studies. "Flowers of Shanghai" was set in the world of Shanghai brothels; "Lust, Caution" systematically presented the urban elements of Shanghai from the four aspects of clothing, food, housing and transportation; and the background of "In the Mood for Love" was in Hong Kong, but the character modelling and language style showed a strong style of old Shanghai.

## 2. THE SPATIAL CONSTRUCTION OF "OLD SHANGHAI" IN "FLOWERS OF SHANGHAI"

Directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, a Taiwanese director, "Flowers of Shanghai" told the story of different fates and fortunes of several women in the British settlement in late 19th century. The story took place in the fourth street and fifth street, where the main characters lived, including Huifangli, Donghexingli and Shangrenli. Shen Xiaohong, the head mistress of the Changsan Shuyu, lived in the west part of Huifangli. Through the presentation of the characters' behaviour and activity space, a

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picture of old Shanghai in the late 19th and early 20th century was shown.

### **2.1 Riding in a Horse-drawn Carriage**

The horse-drawn carriage, the most fashionable means of transport in Shanghai in late 19th century, is also a typical symbol of urban culture of modern Shanghai. In the film "Flowers of Shanghai", the picture of riding in a horse-drawn carriage was presented according to several classic scenes. Video 1: When Tao Yunfu's brother left the banquet, Tao Yunfu said that his brother had not been out all day since he fell in love with the whore, and that he had only been in his room, so Tao Yunfu suggested to ride in a horse-drawn carriage to go to the theatre, but the brother refused that the carriage made his bones hurt. Video 2: Wang Liansheng mentioned Shen Xiaohong in a casual conversation with Zhang Huizhen, who was surprised at how much Shen Xiaohong spent on daily expenses. Wang Liansheng explained that in addition to providing daily expenses for her family, Shen Xiaohong's biggest pastime on weekdays was traveling in a carriage. In this regard, Zhang Huizhen said that the cost of riding in a carriage was limited. Of course, Zhang Huizhen's words in the film naturally have other implications, but it can also be seen that riding in a carriage is an important part of urban recreation culture in Shanghai at the end of the 19th century.

### **2.2 Eating Chinese-style Western Food**

There is also a typical material image of the city in "Flowers of Shanghai", namely, eating Chinese-style Western food. At the beginning of the film, there was a scene in which everyone was gathered to eat. In addition to the Chinese daily food, Western food was also popular among the main characters of this film. However, as the Chinese were not keen on authentic Western food, the Richards Restaurant near the Suzhou Creek in the Hongkou District offered Chinese-style Western food, a large dish that met the Chinese palate. Although the film did not perform the picture of prostitutes eating a Western-style meal with their customers in the original novel, there were more than a dozen scenes in the film relating to eating, and all the characters were able to drink and eat at a girlie restaurant at the same table, reflecting another aspect of the unique urban social life of Shanghai at that time.

### **2.3 Tea and Shopping**

Tea and shopping was part of the urban amusement culture of the fashionable whore of the time. The *Foreign Language Bookshop* on Fuzhou Road was originally Qingliange Teahouse, which was a regular haunt for fashionable prostitutes. "Flowers of Shanghai" presented an accurate image of prostitutes drinking tea and watching a film around a table.

### **2.4 Taking Amusement in Garden**

The relationship among Wang Liansheng, Shen Xiaohong and Zhang Huizhen was complicated. Shen Xiaohong was upset when she learned that Wang Liansheng fell in love with Zhang Huizhen, and hit Zhang Suzhen in the Ming garden. Combined with the background of "Flowers of Shanghai", there were many privately owned gardens in Shanghai. These gardens were open to the public, and the Ming garden was a typical amusement space at that time.

## **3. BASIC NECESSITIES OF LIFE IN "LUST, CAUTION"**

Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution" is adapted from Zhang Ailing's novel of the same name. In order to restore the social living conditions at that time as much as possible, the crew spent more than 120 million Hong Kong dollars on the restoration of the old scenes in Shanghai, and spent a lot of money and manpower on the reconstruction of Nanjing West Road and landmark buildings, so as to restore the urban style of old Shanghai to the greatest extent.

### **3.1 Clothing: Cheongsam Combining Chinese and Western Elements**

The characteristics of costumes and accessories were important factors in shaping the role of the film. Combined with the social background of Shanghai at that time, old Shanghai was not only filled with traditional Orientalism elements, but also a large number of Western costume elements. The combination of Chinese and Western elements was also a major feature of the dress matching of ladies in Shanghai at that time. Wang Jiazhi, the protagonist of the film, worn cheongsam. When Wang Jiazhi went out, she took a windbreaker outside the cheongsam, sometimes worn a scarf, and matched it with a round hat. In addition, the character's curly hair, handbag, watch and other

accessories created a typical image of Shanghai modern women for the audience at that time. Ordinary residents of old Shanghai mainly took Chinese-style cheongsam and long gown, and the capitalists wore suits, which not only restored the real dress characteristics of ordinary people, but also formed a sharp class contrast.

### **3.2 Food: Coffee and Tea**

According to the film, people can see the scene of Wang Jiazhi listening to music, drinking tea, chatting with wives in Shanghai, playing cards, and dating in Kaisiling cafe. This blend of traditional tea culture and coffee culture with Western characteristics further confirmed the integration of Chinese and Western cultures in old Shanghai.

### **3.3 Housing: European-style House and Chinese-style Classical House**

The houses in the film were mostly European-style foreign houses and Chinese-style classical houses. Wang Jiazhi, the protagonist of the film, once lived in the classical old house in the ancient town of Shanghai. From the appearance, this is a typical architectural style in the south of the Yangtze River. The collocation of white walls and small tiles is unique, but the living space is limited, the dense population makes the housing crowded, and the living environment is too general, humid and noisy. In contrast, Yi family, the head of the intelligence agency of the Wang bogus government, lived in a typical European-style house. The house was full of Western decoration elements such as chandeliers, fireplaces and oil paintings, but the furniture was typical Chinese classical wooden furniture. The decoration style of the Yi residence was in line with the era when Western decoration elements were popular in Shanghai, at the same time, it also conformed to the identity and behavior habits of the protagonist of the house.

### **3.4 Transport: the Coexistence Phenomenon in the Transformation of Means of Transport**

As an important representative of urban development, the change of transportation also reflects the level of urban development. This film not only retained the local bicycles and human tricycles, but also introduced modern trams, cars and other means of transportation, reflecting the special social phenomenon of the coexistence of various means of transportation against the

complex background at that time. At the same time, the film characters' choices of transportation represent the different backgrounds and strata of the characters to a certain extent. The heroine's choice of transportation changed many times, indicating the different changes of her identity. For example, Wang Jiazhi took a tram when she was a college student, took a car after she became Mrs. Yi, and left in a human tricycle after the assassination failed. There is an obvious fit between the choice of transportation and the role orientation of the characters.

## **4. SHANGHAI IN THE FILM "IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE"**

Directed by Wong Kar Wai, the film "In the Mood for Love" was released in Hong Kong in 2000. Although the background of the story was in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the film was full of a variety of Shanghai elements. On the one hand, due to the needs of the plot setting, the heroine Su Lizhen played by Maggie Cheung and her landlady were all Shanghainese who moved to Hong Kong from Shanghai; On the other hand, it was inseparable from Wong Kar Wai's personal feelings of Shanghai. When Mrs. Sun met Su Lizhen for the first time, she said: "Everyone is from Shanghai!" This sentence not only aroused their sense of identity, but also reflected Wong Kar Wai's complex of "Shanghai". When Wong Kar Wai was five years old, he moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong with his family. "Suddenly, he fell from the world full of the soft Wu dialect to the world full of sonorous Cantonese. If you are sensitive enough, you can feel the fault of life here. And Wong Kar Wai happens to be an extremely sensitive person." [4] The director himself once said, "In the Mood for Love" was the story of Shanghai [5].

### **4.1 Spatial Mirroring of Old Shanghai**

Director Wong Kar Wai once mentioned that "space was the protagonist... In this space, emotions would follow." [6] The story of "In the Mood for Love" took place in Hong Kong in the 1960s, but it continued the living atmosphere in Shanghai in the 1930s. In the luxurious hotel, Shanghai dialect and Symphony were blended together, and landlords were busy playing mahjong table. These scenes all present a picture of the customs of old Shanghai. Zhou Muyun and Su Lizhen passed by in the misty and rainy alley or narrow alley. Through the blurred street lights and the shift of lens viewpoint, an implicit and repressive mood was created. The

presentation of veiled and graceful screen implication space also coincides with the unique aesthetic characteristics of Shanghai alley.

#### **4.2 *Su Lizhen's Cheongsam and Embroidered Shoes***

Su Lizhen, the heroine who immigrated from Shanghai to Hong Kong, had a special preference for cheongsam. She had worn in cheongsam every time she appeared. Su Lizhen, the heroine, was played by Maggie Cheung. In the whole film, she put on more than 20 cheongsam of different styles. All these cheongsam were handmade by a master craftsman in Shanghai. Each cheongsam represented the heroine's mood and carried the time flow of the film. The design of this element not only improves the character's personal charm and shapes fashionable and elegant modern women, but also deeply integrates the Shanghai element into the film. The cheongsam in old Shanghai style not only reflects the changes of the characters' emotions in the film, but also endows the protagonist with the character image of pursuing fashion and self with Shanghai women's characteristics.

For another example, Su Lizhen's embroidered shoes appeared many times in the film, which were similar to cheongsam. Su Lizhen's embroidered shoes were left in Zhou Muyun's room when she was with Zhou Muyun in a room for the first time. Zhou Muyun saw things and thought of Su Lizhen through these embroidered shoes. His nostalgia for embroidered shoes also showed his longing for Su Lizhen. Later, Su Lizhen took back her shoes. Zhou Muyun knew that she had come when he found that the shoes were missing. This pair of embroidered shoes became an emotional fether between Zhou and Su. Besides, this pair of embroidered shoes not only runs through their emotional development, but also is an important expression of the Shanghai element in the film. Su Lizhen's satin embroidered shoes were extremely simple in shape, but the embroidery on shoes was extremely complex and gorgeous, showing the heroine's exquisite life in Shanghai style and outlining her strong nostalgic thoughts in Shanghai.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

According to above analysis, it can be seen that the three different directors have a certain commonality in the construction and imagination of city image of Shanghai in the three films.

### **5.1 *Focusing on Details and Being Full of a Large Number of Urban Cultural Elements***

Although there are some differences in the background of the three films, they all use the unique cultural elements to render the urban image of Shanghai when presenting the urban image of Shanghai. The most obvious feature of cultural elements in Shanghai is that it is compatible with Chinese and Western elements, and it is the product of the collision of cultural elements in China and foreign countries. The cultural elements in the three films also show the characteristics of blending Western cultural elements in the eastern cultural elements or the insertion of eastern cultural elements in the Western cultural elements, which is the detailed presentation of the films.

### **5.2 *Realizing Connection among characters with the Help of Emotional Fetters***

The relationship among the characters in the three films is complex. The films realize the exchange of material image and emotional image through emotional fetters. "Flowers of Shanghai" mainly told the relationship between Wang Liansheng and Shen Xiaohong, Shuangyu and the fifth young master of the Zhu family. "Lust, Caution" told the story of the amateur secret service team composed of patriotic young students during the Anti-Japanese War, with Wang Jiazhi and Mr. Yi as the main emotional line. In the background of Hong Kong in the 1960s, "In the Mood for Love" told the life story of Su Lizhen and Zhou Muyun. The complex character relationships and ups and downs of the story plots of the three films all took place under the specific background of Shanghai. Among them, the most typical emotional images are in Shanghai-style love. Through the charming existence of seeing only trees but not forests, audiences follow and praise the films.

For Wang Liansheng in the film "Flowers of Shanghai", Tony Leung, the actor, added an extraordinary detail description on the basis of daily emotion, making the Shanghai love between Wang Liansheng and Shen Xiaohong rich and detailed, both husband-wife relationship and lover relationship. The combination of the normal and abnormal has also become the particularity of the film. For Mr. Yi in "Lust, Caution", Tony Leung presented the special emotions of the special historical period through the complex character

background and excessive full emotional expression. These details are designed to depict Mr. Yi, a person with complex heart and gloomy feelings. In the film "In the Mood for Love", Zhou Muyun was different from the first two, shuttling through relatively simple lust. Although the protagonist images of the three films have their own characteristics, they all show their desolate nature among the flashiness. The penetration of material and cultural elements and emotional symbols creates a unique urban image of Shanghai.

### **5.3 Nostalgic Representation of "Old Shanghai"**

Hou Hsiao-hsien used the city as a narrative vehicle to convey the emotions and attitudes of his films through the presentation of spatial subjects of old Shanghai; Ang Lee used the behaviour and activities of characters in the city to outline the mixed and complex characteristics of Shanghai in a particular historical period from four aspects: clothing, food, housing and transport; and Wong Kar-Wai's "Shanghaiization" of Hong Kong in his films presented a nostalgic imagination of "old Shanghai" beyond the narrative text.

"On the one hand, the emergence of nostalgic films recreates the city of the past times, satisfying people's urban imagination of old Shanghai; and on the other hand, they also find an outlet for people's confusion about the future in the present." [7] Among the three representative works of Hong Kong and Taiwan directors, through the cine-writing and nostalgic imagination of "old Shanghai", it not only carries the director's emotional sustenance for the past and future, but also reflects the Hong Kong and Taiwan directors' strategy of finding a new relationship with mainland culture against the new era background.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Nan Dai.

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