

Research on the Evolution of Thematic Expression in Chinese Western Films Since the 1980s

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Abstract: Since the 1980s, the thematic expression of Chinese Western films has undergone multiple transformations. Early works focused on national history and collective destiny, shifted to individual survival and emotional dilemmas in the 1990s, and achieved thematic innovation through genre fusion and globalization in the 21st century. This paper employs methods such as literature analysis and case studies, incorporating classic films like **Yellow Earth** (1984), **The Story of Qiu Ju** (1992), and **No Man's Land** (2013), to outline thematic characteristics across different stages. Recent works like **Balloon** (2019) are introduced as case studies to explore the cultural expression and social significance of Western films in the new era. The research indicates that Chinese Western films, rooted in regional distinctiveness, have consistently echoed social transformations through thematic evolution, showcasing the vitality of Chinese cinema in cultural self-awareness and genre exploration.

Keywords: Chinese western films, thematic evolution, genre fusion

1. Introduction

The concept of “Chinese Western films” was proposed by Zhong Dianfei in 1984, emphasizing narratives set in the Northwest region that integrate natural landscapes with humanistic spirit[5]. As a unique genre in Chinese cinema, Western films have always functioned as a mirror reflecting social realities. From the 1980s to the 21st century, Chinese society underwent reforms, market economy transitions, and globalization, prompting corresponding shifts in the thematic expression of Western films: from grand narratives of national history to humanistic care for individual destinies, and eventually toward diversified genre integration. This paper analyzes the internal logic and social motivations behind these thematic evolutions through classic and recent case studies[4].

2. The 1980s: Manifestations of National History and Collective Destiny

In the 1980s, the ideological liberation during the early stages of reform and opening-up spurred profound reflections on national history and collective memory in Western films. The desolate landscapes of the Northwest became metaphors for historical suffering, with films using collective destinies to mirror the pains of social transformation.

2.1 Yellow Earth: Historical Reflection and Collective Memory

Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), set against the Loess Plateau of northern Shaanxi, exposes the oppression of feudal ethics through the tragic fate of Cuiqiao. The yellow earth symbolizes both material poverty and the resilience of the national spirit. The director's detached cinematography — long shots of barren landscapes juxtaposed with close-ups of weathered faces — intertwines personal fate with collective history, provoking critical reflections on traditional culture[1]. The film's minimalist dialogue amplifies the silence of marginalized voices, a technique later adopted by Sixth Generation directors to deconstruct authoritative narratives.

2.2 Red Sorghum: Celebration of Untamed Vitality

Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1988) employs high-saturation colors and unrestrained storytelling to depict the resistance spirit of Northwestern people during the Anti-Japanese War. Jiu'er's rebellion and sacrifice defy feudal marriage norms while glorifying national vitality. Centered on the “Dionysian spirit,” the film elevates Western landscapes into totems of national identity. The iconic sorghum fields, drenched in blood-red hues, serve as a visual metaphor for both life and death, critiquing patriarchal structures while celebrating indigenous resilience. This aesthetic boldness marked a departure from socialist realism, paving the way for experimental narratives in the 1990s.

3. The 1990s: Shifts Toward Individual Destiny and Emotional Expression

In the 1990s, market economy reforms accelerated societal commercialization and urban migration, shifting the focus

to individual survival. Western films began addressing ordinary people's emotional struggles, revealing contradictions in modernization through nuanced narratives.

3.1 Ashes of Time: Emotional Solitude in a Martial Arts Framework

Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* (1994) reimagines the Western desert as a psychological landscape. The film's fragmented narrative and desolate backdrop mirror the existential disorientation of urbanized individuals. Characters like Ouyang Feng, trapped between memory and oblivion, embody the spiritual vacuum of a society transitioning from collectivism to individualism. The absence of traditional heroic arcs critiques the erosion of communal values in an increasingly fragmented world. The use of non-linear storytelling and impressionistic cinematography — such as blurred motion and saturated hues — further destabilizes viewers' perceptions, mirroring the chaos of market-driven modernity.

3.2 The Story of Qiu Ju: Awakening of Modern Consciousness in the Underclass

Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1993) employs a quasi-documentary style to chronicle a rural woman's legal battle. Qiu Ju's insistence on an apology — despite the impersonal bureaucracy — symbolizes grassroots resistance against institutional inertia. The film's open-ended conclusion, where justice remains ambiguous, underscores the complexities of reconciling traditional ethics with modern legal frameworks. Her journey reflects the broader tension between rural autonomy and state-led modernization policies. The use of hidden cameras and non-professional actors enhances authenticity, a technique that influenced later independent filmmakers to prioritize social realism over commercial appeal.

4. The 21st Century: Diversified Themes and Genre Fusion

The 21st century saw Chinese Western films embracing genre hybridity and globalized narratives. Filmmakers integrated environmental critiques, existential absurdity, and ethnic identity into the genre, responding to urbanization and cultural globalization.

4.1 No Man's Land : Human Struggles and Absurd Realities

Ning Hao's *No Man's Land* (2013) merges Western motifs with dark comedy, depicting lawyer Pan Xiao's moral descent in a lawless desert. The barren landscape becomes a metaphor for ethical decay in a profit-driven society. Through absurdist violence and road movie tropes, the film questions the myth of "civilized progress," highlighting how capitalism exacerbates human greed. The protagonist's transformation from a self-serving opportunist to a reluctant moral agent critiques the commodification of ethics in post-reform China[2].

4.2 Balloon: Female Dilemmas and Tibetan Modernity

Pema Tseden's *Balloon* (2019) explores Tibetan cultural conflicts through a family's struggle with reproductive rights. A misplaced condom triggers debates between Buddhist beliefs and state-imposed family planning. The red balloon, symbolizing both liberation and societal control, visualizes the paradox of modernity[3]. Drolkar's silent resistance against patriarchal and religious pressures critiques the marginalization of ethnic women in national discourses. The film's poetic realism — such as slow pans across vast plateaus — contrasts with the claustrophobia of domestic spaces, emphasizing the tension between individual agency and cultural constraints.

4.3 Tharlo: Ecological Alienation and Identity Fragmentation

Pema Tseden's earlier work *Tharlo* (2015) adds an environmental dimension to the genre. The protagonist, a Tibetan shepherd, faces an existential crisis when forced to obtain an ID card in the city. The bureaucratic process, juxtaposed with scenes of shrinking grasslands, critiques modernization's ecological and cultural costs. The black-and-white cinematography starkly contrasts traditional pastoral life with the sterile urban landscape, symbolizing the irreversible loss of indigenous habitats. *Tharlo*'s shaved head — a metaphor for erased identity — mirrors the erasure of ethnic cultures under homogenizing policies[1].

5. Conclusion and Prospects

The thematic evolution of Chinese Western films remains closely tied to historical contexts: the national introspection of the 1980s, the individual awakening of the 1990s, and the diversified integration of the 21st century all reflect filmmakers' acute insights into social realities. Recent works like *Balloon* retain regional authenticity while innovating within the genre, further expanding the narrative boundaries of Western cinema[3]. Moving forward, balancing globalization with localization to achieve both cultural expression and commercial success will remain a critical challenge for the development of Chinese Western films.

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