

Hong Kong's Contested Modernity: Social Problematics in the Cinematic Works of Mabel Cheung

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ABSTRACT

Mabel Cheung is one of the directors of the Hong Kong New Wave cinema. Compared to other directors of the same period, Mabel Cheung's filmography is not extensive; most of her films focus on the mundane aspects of daily life, depicting the personal destinies of individuals amidst the grand changes of the era. "Wandering" has always been a key theme in her works, with almost all her films carrying a sense of wandering. At the same time, through the films directed by Mabel Cheung, we can glimpse a series of social phenomena that have emerged during Hong Kong's modernization. Therefore, this article attempts to explore the modern social issues presented in Mabel Cheung's films from three aspects: the characters in the films, the urban space in the films, and the structure of modern families.

KEYWORDS

Modern society; Mabel Cheung; Chinatown; Mobility

Mabel Cheung is one of the academic directors from Hong Kong. After graduating from the Hong Kong University, she went to the UK to study. It was during this time that she came into contact with film by chance. Subsequently, she worked at a Hong Kong television station in the 1980s and then went to New York University to pursue a master's degree. During this time, Mabel Cheung created her first film work, *Illegal Immigrant*, which garnered her initial attention. The early years of wandering provided material for Mabel Cheung's film creation. As the director mentioned in an interview, "Wandering is a theme that runs through modern China for me, especially in Hong Kong^[1]." Most of her films revolve around real-life people and events, and we can almost find the prototypes of the characters in her stories from her works. *Illegal Immigrant* revolves around Zhang Junqiu, who has always struggled with identity recognition. The identity issue of Hong Kong immigrants has long troubled the lives of local people. The director brought this issue to the screen to reflect on the immigrants living in the cracks. *Beijing Rocks* tells the story of three musicians who have drifted to Beijing. At that time, rock bands in Beijing had no stage and were even considered a form of rebellion. Against this backdrop, director Mabel Cheung focused on the dream-chasing journey of three young people to showcase the harsh realities. Additionally, in the 1980s, Hong Kong's economy soared, quickly becoming one of Asia's "Four Little Dragons." However, this was accompanied by a series of modern social issues. For example, modern people living in Hong Kong are experiencing psychological phenomena of nihilism and confusion, fast-food-style encounters and love, as well as the atomization of family structures and the rapid proliferation of individualistic consciousness in society.

1 The Urban Wanderer: The Characterization of Drifting In Cinema

In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong's economy rapidly soared, and its society also developed swiftly in various aspects. Alongside the rapid socio-economic development, a series of modernity-related consequences emerged. The population movement of modernity caused a rupture between time in the pre-modern sense and the solidified space. The modern liberal economy promised people a so-called freedom and limitless possibilities in their life choices. However, in this society, people have gained a certain degree of freedom of choice, but at the same time, they have lost the roots and sense of belonging that existed in traditional society. People are constantly striving to keep up with the pace of societal changes, but the rapid evolution of this society makes them feel alienated and confused. Under the impact of forces such as urbanization and the market economy, the meaning of "roots" in traditional concepts has been shattered in modern society. While people in modern times pursue science and technology, as Heidegger said, the greatest problem of modernity is the state of homelessness it creates through technological means, leaving people in a state of wandering, "forgetting the way back, not knowing the way forward^[2]." Drifting is a constant theme in director Mabel Cheung's works. In Mabel Cheung's films, we can see that the characters are always in a state of modern-day wanderers. These characters have not found a sense of belonging or identity, and throughout the films, they are in a perpetual state of losing and searching. Bauman wrote in *Liquidity Modernity*: "Liquids cannot maintain any shape for long; their forms are easily altered or often unstable. Therefore, for liquids, it is their flow through time that is more important than the space they occupy. Occupying a certain space is, after all, only temporary^[3]." In *Eight Taels of Gold*, Houzi is always on the move. From returning to the countryside to find his old home, on the road, *Eight Taels of Gold* encounters some bumps, such as hitting someone's pig and stall. While rowing a boat in the

water, wandering and reminiscing about the time when he left home, Houzi gradually starts to recall the beautiful life he once had. However, Houzi himself has never been clear about what he truly wants, not even having the courage to express his love. In the end, the love between Houzi and Zuipo Wu with the beak ended with her departure. The story of Houzi returning home is essentially about he trying to find its spiritual home. However, at the end of the film, we see he with an old boat, which symbolizes the profound changes in society over time, evoking a sense of loneliness and confusion in Houzi. The director does not provide a clear answer on how Houzi should choose its future path, but instead leaves the scene at this point, depicting his state of spiritual confusion, wandering, and emptiness. Just as Yang Huiqiong mentioned in her book about the two aspects of modern people's wandering: one is the modernity of wandering as a state of existence and experience^[4]. Like Zhang Junqiu in the movie *Illegal Immigrant*, Zhang Junqiu came to the United States as an immigrant. He came to the United States to find his identity. In the film, Zhang Junqiu is in a state of not having a Hong Kong identity or a U. S. green card. He has never found a place to settle, either materially or spiritually. The second type refers to rootless modernity, where the homeland we rely on for survival is in a state of fragmented meaning both culturally and physically. This person's life is in a state of value emptiness, just like Zhang Junqiu in the film, who, upon learning at the end that a green card can be bought on the black market, says, "So what?" After obtaining the green card, Zhang Junqiu himself didn't know where he should go in this society. The stable family he once tried to establish with Xuehong also collapsed instantly with the gunfire. The numerous city skyscrapers and the tombstones in the foreground at the end create a sense of irony. Modern people in the cold city cannot find their way out, and people in modern society are in a state of emptiness, even becoming the victims of modern societal development. Traveling as an escape can be seen as a form of rebellion against modern societal issues. In *Beijing Rocks*, the members of the band are all people who have left home with the determination to become drifters in Beijing. Through their own journeys, they attempt to struggle against the cage of modernization. They seek to find their own freedom and pursue their musical dreams. This wandering is an escape from the city's strict bureaucratic systems and regulations, a rebellion against the nomadic life in the city. However, these people can never truly escape the city. Their wandering is a psychological solace, but ultimately, where they go from there remains unknown.

2 Spatial Pictures of the City: Images of Marginalized Space in Cinema

In the latter half of the 20th century, there was a spatial turn in Western academia. Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* linked space with production, while Foucault focused on the interplay between space and power. Subsequently, building on the work of his predecessors, Soja proposed the theory of the Third Space, considering it an open space that transcends the dichotomy of material and spiritual, and a conglomerate of multiple, mixed meanings. Thus, the field of film theory has been influenced by the spatial turn in Western academia, and film scholars have begun to connect space with film. Space is both the presentation of scenes within film frames and a medium for the production of various cultural values and meanings in film. Through the presentation of space in films, we can see beyond the surface imagery to uncover the underlying social power issues that are often obscured. In the era of rapid development of capitalism and globalization, cities are expanding rapidly and becoming the mainstream spaces of modern society. At the same time, cities are gradually encroaching on old architectural spaces, homogenizing these localized spatial landmarks to serve the production of modern spaces. The film *Eight Taels of Gold* opens with the protagonist's first-person perspective driving through the city's busy streets, with towering buildings on both sides squeezing people into the narrow roads. On an outdoor platform, people gather to play cards, with dense urban skyscrapers behind them. In this modern urban space, people find themselves surrounded by the city's high-rises. The open-air space for playing chess and socializing contrasts with the cement-like high walls behind it. In this open-air space, people can always feel like outsiders in the city; they have not found a space that truly belongs to the city. At the beginning of the film *Beijing Rocks*, we see people hurrying along the road. Like *Eight Taels of Gold*, the characters still appear sitting in cars, rushing along the road. The neon landscapes of Beijing at night and the bustling scenes of the commercial streets appear before the protagonist's eyes. Next, the protagonist faces the camera and recounts his own experiences of drifting. Because he cannot speak Mandarin, he chooses silence, rendering himself mute on the mainland. The protagonist finds himself in a position of being unrecognized in this city, and he does not know his ultimate direction here. His initial purpose for coming here was simply to escape. Moreover, the ballroom is a social space for modern people, where encounters between individuals are merely fleeting. Amidst the intoxication of wealth and the rush to keep up with the so-called trends of the times, people have also lost their own direction. In *Beijing Rocks*, we can see scenes of bands performing in ballrooms appearing multiple times. Here, these young people can find a brief respite, enjoying sensory pleasures and temporarily escaping the oppression of external order and power. However, stepping out of the dance hall, we see the futility of this idealistic band selling records on the street and being chased by urban management. At the same time, their activity space is often seen by outsiders as synonymous with rebellion and chaos, typically located in the outskirts of the city and confined spaces. *Echoes of the Rainbow* contrasts with the modern skyscrapers. In this space, the march of modernization has not yet fully arrived, and the relationships between neighbors are more intimate compared to the coldness of people in high-rise buildings. The director constructs through imagery the

impending disappearance of the old street, which faces the invasion of capital and power, and the demolition also signifies the transition of power and traditional social structures. The city's expansion gradually reached here, but the people living here did not gain the status of "city dwellers." They still struggled to survive in the cramped and crowded spaces amid the great changes of the era. Finally, Chinatown in the United States was referred to as a "localized heterotopia," a place where Chinese people lived in the U.S., but this space was marginalized by American power. Many films have mystified Chinatown, this enclave, and further explored it through the eyes of others, delving into this space that strives to survive within American society. However, in director Mabel Cheung's works, we see a Chinatown community center that is no different from everyday life. In *Illegal Immigrant*, the living spaces of people in Chinatown are cramped. Through the lens, we see that the office spaces in American society are more orderly and spacious compared to the living spaces of people in Chinatown. The contrast between the lives of those in Chinatown and the mainstream American street spaces highlights the difficulties faced by immigrants and the spatial pressure they endure.

3 Concepts of Love in the City: Modern Love Narrated in the Movies

With the rapid economic growth of Hong Kong and the rise of individualism brought about by modernization, the concept of love among Hong Kong people has also changed. The depiction of love stories in Hong Kong films of the 1980s broke free from the shackles of traditional Confucian ethics and began to emphasize individual emotional freedom. At the same time, Zhao Weifang once said, "In the 1980s, the middle class rose to become social leaders, marking the entry of Hong Kong society into the modern era in terms of thought and culture, thereby further increasing the autonomy of Hong Kong's social culture. This autonomy is reflected on one hand in the self-awareness and cultural awakening of Hong Kong people, and on the other hand in the emphasis on the inherent desires of individuals^[5]." The romantic relationships depicted in Hong Kong films during this period are mostly individualistic and based on free love, breaking away from traditional family constraints and societal moral norms. The love between the male and female protagonists in these films follows their true feelings, while also carrying a sense of mutual warmth amidst the turmoil of society. In *City of Glass*, the story of the male and female protagonists depicts the fragile and unstable love of modern people in contemporary society. Director Mabel Cheung's films almost never feature a perfect ending for love. The love between Zuiwu Po and Houzi in *Eight Taels of Gold* ends with Zuiwu Po's departure. In *Beijing Rocks*, the male and female leads feel a spark of love between them at one point, but such love is fleeting in modern society. *Autumn Fairy Tale* is no different. The male and female protagonists are both in a state of uncertainty and wandering. We see two modern people seeking warmth together in a foreign land. They share a brief romance, but more importantly, they rely on each other as lonely souls drifting away from home. However, in the end, due to conflicts, the two part ways. In the works of director Mabel Cheung, we see that the male and female protagonists once had a brief yet beautiful love, but this process ultimately did not have a perfect ending. They experienced the beauty of falling in love but were also forced to accept the difficulties brought by real life. This also reflects the sense of helplessness in maintaining long-term emotions in the rapidly developing modern era. As Marx said, "All that is solid melts into air^[6]." In the era of modern liberalism, individual love has become fragile, and the sense of powerlessness that reality imparts to individuals has made modern love fragile and unpredictable.

4 Conclusion

Director Zhang Wanting's works focus on the plight of people in modern Hong Kong society. From the themes of drifting and transience, we can see Mabel Cheung's keen observations of Hong Kong society, which also raises existential questions for us: how should people living in modern society find their direction amidst drifting and confusion, and what kind of lifestyle should we adopt to combat nihilism. Immigration and displacement are recurring themes in director Mabel Cheung's works, but at the same time, we cannot ignore the portrayal of modern social issues in the films and further contemplate how modern people can "inhabit the world poetically."

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