

# The Aesthetics of Survival in Li Ruijun's Rural-Themed Films

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## ABSTRACT

The Chinese nation has a deep-rooted connection with the land, yet in the process of modern industrialization, traditional agricultural culture has faced unprecedented challenges. "Rootlessness" not only reflects the mental and physical state of contemporary farmers but also that of Chinese intellectuals. This paper takes Li Ruijun's rural-themed films as an example to explore the implications of the aesthetics of survival in Chinese culture. Li Ruijun, with his unique stubbornness, prompts reflection on the simplicity, purity, and vastness of the land, and encourages people to continually "wander" towards villages, grasslands, and the edges of cities, seeking a poetic "homeland", and a freedom of "being towards death".

## KEYWORDS

Li Ruijun; Wandering; Homeland; Death

## 1 Introduction

China's long-standing agricultural traditions have fostered a unique bond between the Chinese people and the land. Phrases like "hard to leave one's homeland," and "returning to one's roots" all seem to express the Chinese people's deep attachment to the land. However, the acceleration of modern industrialization and the explosion of knowledge have all brought unprecedented challenges to the agricultural tradition. "Rootlessness" is not only a reflection of the physical and mental state of contemporary farmers but also a portrayal of the emotional state of Chinese intellectuals. This article takes Li Ruijun's rural-themed films as an example to explore the implications of survival aesthetics in Chinese culture.

Li Ruijun's deep attachment to the land has shaped a unique form of modern intellectual cultural nostalgia, giving his films a distinct narrative style. In his films, one can sense the rich regional characteristics and rustic charm of Northwest China, which carries profound historical and cultural memories and a wealth of folk traditions. This contrast between the "slow life" in his movies and the fast-paced urban life forces us to ponder: is land the origin of humans, and could it be the ultimate destination? What is death, and can humans choose their way of departure? Is there a "poetic dwelling" for humans, and is this dwelling always a "Never-Land"? The works of Li Ruijun's works answered these questions, which realize his ideal of "poetic dwelling," and inspire modern intellectuals to pursue the freedom of "being towards death."

## 2 The worship of the earth-mother

Li Ruijun's films consistently exude a profound longing and reverence for the earth, which borders on religious devotion and totemic worship. This is not merely Li Ruijun's artistic philosophy but also humans' collective unconsciousness of the divine nature of the Earth-Mother. "From dust we come, and to dust we return" reflects humans' contemplation of their origin and the ultimate destination, and also the insignificance and little value of life. However, under the dual pressures of modernization and consumption society, humans' pursuit of spiritual transcendence and the afterlife has grown weary. People now seek the extreme stimuli of the sensory world, and the expansion of technology, with the internet creating the illusion of immortality, triggering people into the "halo" of an eternal life.

Li Ruijun's nostalgia for the hometown is actually a utopian cultural imagination and spiritual refuge for today's intellectuals towards the traditional rural life. Li Ruijun is drawn to the simplicity, purity, and trustworthiness of the agrarian culture and is fond of the stability, perseverance, and warmth brought about by the "slow era". This is why we have "Iron" Ma (Fourth Brother) and Guiying in *Return to Dust*, Yao Ting and Xinmin in *Walking Past the Future*, Ma (Old Donkey) in *The Old Donkey*, and Bateer and Adikeer in *River Road*. In *Return to Dust*, even as the social outcasts, "Iron" Ma and Guiying supported each other through thick and thin. Yet, in their humility, they bloomed into vibrant flowers of life. When Guiying suffered from urinary incontinence, "Iron" Ma helped her clean up the urine and wash her pants; when Ma returned late, Guiying waited at the village entrance to hand him a bottle of hot water; the two built their own house using almost primitive methods: making bricks, laying walls, weaving mats, raising the beams, and constructing the roof. This "pure" lifestyle is completely detached from the hustle and bustle of postmodern consumer society. Furthermore, this "purity" and detachment is actually modern intellectuals' utopian-like imagination for agricultural civilization, which is also men's totemic worship for the land.

Myths about creating humans from clay abound around the world. In Christian culture, God creates Adam from dust and Eve from Adam's rib. In ancient Greek mythology, Prometheus shapes men from water and clay, and Athena endows them with wisdom and spirit. In North-American Indian mythology, the earth, regarded as a mother deity, together with the sky (sun father) deity, gives birth to their daughter, the grain. In Chinese mythology, it is Nuwa that creates human beings. In Ying Xun's *Fengsu Tongyi* in Han Dynasty, it is recorded "when heaven and earth were first created, there were

no people, so Nuwa molded humans from yellow earth" (11). Why does the motif of "creating humans from clay" appear in myths around the world? This stems from humans' subconscious reverence for female fertility and the Earth-Mother. In the eyes of primitive humans, "the Earth was also a woman of abundant fertility" and "in mythology, the Earth is often directly depicted as a woman in labor". For example, a Luoba tribe-myth states, "the earth is a woman in labor; her painful writhing during childbirth causes earthquakes and mountain collapses; her loud cries produce storms and thunder; the blood she bleeds during childbirth becomes rain and rivers; plants and trees are nourished by the earth mother's blood; the sun, tigers, and humans are all born from the earth mother" (Chen Jianxian 78). It is evident that the primitive imagination of the earth across the globe stems from humanity's reverence and love for nature. Ancient people had limited understanding of nature and could not explain many natural phenomena, so they imbued nature with mystical, unknown, and magical qualities, giving rise to various myths and legends. However, with the development of human productivity, especially with the advent of the industrial and commodity eras, people expanded their understanding through science and technology, stripping away the mystique of nature. Nature became an object for human exploitation, while humans became the dominant and exploitative subjects. Li Ruijun seeks to break this entrenched dualistic opposition, turning instead to an ecological and spiritual animism, using intuition and soul to feel nature and the departed. In *Return to Dust*, "Iron" Ma expresses a religious-like devotion to the land: "Everything is born from the earth; everything grows from the earth. If you plant a bag of wheat, you will harvest ten bags." The land in the film nurtures people with its vastness, generosity and profoundness. Li Ruijun said in an interview: "In *Return to Dust*, Ma and Guiying's life and love, and their ways of acting are all rooted in land, which reflects the Chinese understanding of nature and life. Even when faced with neglect, Ma and Guiying find acceptance and solace in land. It is precisely because of their humility and weakness that they are more compassionate and empathetic. Therefore, they have a unique care and understanding for wheats and donkeys" (Wuyao, Liu Xiaodong 26). Guiying and Ma felt sorry for the donkey beaten by others, and sometimes preferred to walk rather than ride the donkey. When Guiying accidentally uprooted wheat sprouts while weeding, she replanted them. When Ma was watering the fields, he discovered live tadpoles in the water bucket and quietly released them. When the old house was demolished and pushed over by a truck, Ma collected the scattered swallow nests and arranged new homes for them. These scenes demonstrate the characters' reverence for all things in nature, which is a belief in animism akin to shamanism.

Shamanic mythology holds that all things possess souls, and these souls are immortal. The death of the physical body does not mark the end of the soul; rather, it is the beginning of the soul's ascent. Shamanic mythology also includes the doctrine of "external soul", which is a unique way of "continuing" life. People entrust their souls to animals and plants such as eagles, bison, and trees. As long as these soul-possessed entities remain alive, the human soul can endure. Additionally, the human soul can transform into plants or animals. In ancient China, almost all the constituent elements of shamanism could be seen: "ascent to heaven, summoning and searching for the soul, incarnation of "spirits", mastery over fire and other fakiristic exploits, and so on" (Eliade 457). This incarnation of "spirits" essentially reflects humans' reliance on the bodies of animals and plants, rooted in the hope for the soul's eternity. British scholar James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* argues that wherever there is a totem system, the belief of external soul is widespread. "The idea is to establish a mutual sympathy, an intimate relation, between a man and an animal, a spirit, or other powerful being, whereby the man can deposit his soul or some part of it for security in the external creature, and draw it back again with a load of vital energy from his sturdy friend" (701). In *Fly with the Crane*, Grandpa Ma firmly believes that the soul persists after death, which will ride a white crane to a distant place. "In China, the crane, from Daoism to Chinese folklore, as a transcendent being, symbolizes purity, elegance, and immortality. When paired with a pine tree, it forms the phrase 'pine and crane for longevity'; when paired with a turtle, it is said to signify 'turtle and crane sharing the same lifespan'" (Wang Yongchun 9). Grandpa Ma's belief in riding a crane to the afterlife reflects his concern and anticipation for the world beyond. Though he may not have harbored the ambition to entrust his soul to a crane, he expressed the belief of immortality of the human soul.

*Return to Dust* portrays "Iron" Ma and Guiying's deep love for nature and their reverence for life: a seedling, a fish, a swallow, and a donkey, which are living beings, deserving respect and praise. Here, it seems to echo the Shamanist belief, animism, that all things have a spirit. All living beings in nature share equal status with humans. People should respect all creatures in the universe and accept nature's arrangements with composure, whether it be the joy of life or the silence of death. When the audience cannot accept the deaths of "Iron" Ma and Guiying, Li Ruijun says, "Death is a very important theme in this film. An egg becomes a chick, and a chick becomes a chicken; a grain of wheat becomes a sprout, and a sprout becomes wheat; wheat becomes grain, and grain returns to the field. Earth becomes mud, and mud becomes bricks; bricks become walls, walls become houses and houses become earth again. This is the endless cycle of life, and death is what this film has been talking about all along" (Wu Yao, Liu Xiaodong 28). Death is not a means for Li Ruijun to deliberately emphasize tragedy, but rather a way to express a natural and cosmic view filled with chance and constant change. In nature and the universe, humans are no different from a grain of wheat, a fish, or a donkey. Humans should accept their own death and fate, their own insignificance and irrelevance, not out of nihilism, but as a broad, egalitarian, naturalistic view filled with chance and unpredictability, which is the best interpretation of "all things come from dust and return to dust". Li Ruijun explains the cycle of life in this way: "In *Return to Dust*, the house is eventually demolished, but

this does not mean that the house truly ceases to exist; it simply returns to its original state as earth. This is akin to the cycle of life, which also encompasses philosophical exploration" (Li Ruijun, Chen Gang 58).

### 3 Probing the nature of death

Li Ruijun's films are also filled with questions about death: how should people face death, and when life comes to an end, can people choose their own way of departure? In *Fly with the Crane*, the focus is the departure of the elderly. Li Ruijun said in an interview: "in *Return to Dust*, what concerns me is how this elderly generation, who are facing emptiness, loss of land, and inadequate social security, can live their lives. I want to explore the meaning of life for this group of people, who have dedicated their lives, yet are subjected to the dual oppression of neglect by their children and abandonment by society. *Fly with the Crane* is also loaded with the same concern. If a person cannot even choose the time and place of their own departure, what's the meaning of their existence and where are their rights as human beings?" (Wu Yao, Liu Xiaodong 25)

Here, we must distinguish between two types of death: one is the natural death of the elderly, and the other is the sudden and accidental death of the non-elderly. The first type of death is the one faced by the grandparents in *Fly with the Crane*. These elders longed to choose their way of leaving, the burial, which conflicts with Chinese present funeral system of cremation, and all these led to the absurd outcome of "live burial" in the end. *Fly with the Crane* depicts how, after Elderly Cao, the grandfather's old friend, was secretly buried, civil affairs department staff demanded that the deceased's family remove the body for cremation, leading to a fierce conflict with the family. Ultimately, after coordination among multiple departments, Elderly Cao's earthen grave was demolished, and his remains were removed for cremation. The film does not intend to oppose cremation, but rather highlights that in the rapid development of China's modernization and urbanization, those who have not kept pace with the times, the elderly, who cling to traditional rural sentiments, are left far behind. How to arrange their final journey should be a matter for people to ponder and an area where policies need to be more flexible. In 2012, the State Council amended the 20th item of the *Funeral Management Regulations*: "Those who bury bodies that should be cremated in the ground, or build graves in places other than public cemeteries and rural public-welfare cemeteries, shall be ordered by the civil affairs department to rectify within a specified time limit." The new regulation removed the clause stating that "those who refuse to correct the violation may be subject to the forced execution," meaning that unauthorized burial or the construction of graves will no longer be subject to a forced demolition by civil affairs departments. This represents the integration of law and life and the ethical manifestation of the law respecting humanity.

The second type is accidental and sudden death in the non-elderly, such as one of "Iron" Ma and Guiying in *Return to Dust*. Guiying drowned accidentally, while Ma committed suicide out of love. The former was filled with chance and absurdity, while the latter ended his life voluntarily to escape suffering. Li Ruijun reviews this film as follows, "This is the endless cycle of life, and death is what this film has been about all along" (Wu Yao, Liu Xiaodong 28). Li Ruijun's view is similar to Diderot's philosophical principle of "The Indestructibility of Matter". Diderot argued, "Life is a series of actions and reactions. While I am alive, I act and react upon the world as a coherent whole, a 'mass'. When I am dead, I act and react not as a whole, but as separate molecules" (*Eighteenth-Century French Philosophy* 365), and what Diderot means is that life and death are merely changes in the form of material existence rather than changes in its nature. Diderot's "the Indestructibility of Matter" contains an optimistic outlook on life and the contempt towards death. Here, Li Ruijun's view of the cycle of life aligns with Diderot's principle of the eternal nature of matter; both regard death as a natural part of existence and adopt an attitude of calm acceptance towards it. Regarding the second type of sudden death, such as the tragic love story in *Return to Dust*, Li Ruijun offers a different perspective. *Return to Dust* does not criticize suicide; "Iron" Ma's death is more like an attempt to break free from the control of fate. While it may seem foolish and absurd to others, this suicide revealed a different kind of courage and a pure, resolute pursuit of love. Li Ruijun did not glorify suicide, but instead revealed the tragic and futile nature of life, "This is the endless cycle of life" (Wu Yao, Liu Xiaodong 28).

### 4 The search for home

Li Ruijun's films also depict the relentless pursuit of a lost homeland by modern intellectuals. This quest for "home," is akin to the Western religious "Holy Grail quest", Both of which reveal a longing for the lost spiritual homeland. In post-modern society, capital and industrialization have disrupted the tranquility and harmony of the grasslands and countryside, while the money-driven survival tactics of urban life have left society riddled with flaws. Modern intellectuals continue to navigate the irreconcilable contradictions between city and countryside, history and future, and reality and ideal. Li Ruijun's films *River Road*, *Walking Past the Future*, and *The Old Donkey* deeply depict this contradiction and wandering.

*River Road* tells a story of two Yugur children, Bateer and Adikeer, who set out alone on the journey home from the Hexi Corridor in Gansu Province. The picture they encountered along the way was unpretty: grassland desertification, the decline and loss of the historical relics of the Hexi Corridor, the reduction and disappearance of minority populations and their dialects, and the deepening of urbanization and the shrinking of grassland margins. The two children left the town and headed toward the remote grasslands on the outskirts of the city because their father was one of the last Yugur herders who still relied on grazing for a living. However, the grasslands that should have been lush and fertile had

become, as the old lama described, “the once-lush father- grasslands are now barren, and the once-flowing mother-springs are now dried up.” The film uses magical realism to recreate the lush scenery of the grasslands at that time. It is clear that in the conflict between nature and civilization, nature is the defeated party. Li Ruijun said in an interview: “I feel helpless. On one hand, I hope they can preserve the original way of life; but on the other hand, I also think they should be able to enjoy modern conveniences like communication, transportation, and electricity. This is a paradox, a natural outcome of development. You can’t ask others to continue living in hardship just to preserve something. This is a global issue.” (Li Ruijun, Chen Xuguang 28)

Li Ruijun’s other film, *Walking Past the Future*, also highlights the conflict between urban and rural life. The two young people in the city, Yao Ting and Xin Min, were both children of migrant workers in Shenzhen. They grew up in this city but feel no sense of belonging to it. Yao Ting underwent a liver transplant as a child, depleting her parents’ savings intended for a home purchase. Now, as her parents’ health declined and they were marginalized by the city’s relentless pace, they were forced to return to their long-abandoned hometown. However, the hometown didn’t welcome these “city dwellers” who had returned. At the end of the film, the two young lovers boarded the train back to their hometown. In her dream, Yao Ting saw herself as a goddess in white robes riding a horse away, while another version of herself was shouting in the desert, searching.

Through the protagonists’ spiritual “wandering,” a form of actively seeking freedom in life, the films *River Road* and *Walking Past the Future* express a longing to return to a specific geographical and spiritual space. “Wandering” is not only a physical form of departure but also a spiritual state for Chinese modern people. For Bateer, Adikeer, Yaoting, Xinmin, and their parents, the city is a home that has become alienated, while the countryside and grasslands are distant homes. They cannot find a place to settle in the city nor return to the countryside or grasslands to seek inner peace. They wander from the city to the countryside and grasslands, and then wander back to the city from the countryside and grasslands. “Home” seems to always exist in “Never-Land”. This awkward, contradictory and endless “wandering” is also a true reflection of the mental state of urban intellectuals: They feel anxious and disoriented in the cramped, closed, and oppressive living environment of the city, wanting to break away from the loneliness and coldness of the city, yet unwilling and afraid to give up the various opportunities the city offers. Yet they are restless, constantly wandering and drifting, constantly thinking and seeking. People like Li Ruijun, though hesitant in the hardships of the city, firmly believe in the nourishment of their hometown’s roots and bloodline, finding solace in the “homeland” complex. This sentiment is not an escape from social responsibility, but a stubborn sense of participation, seeking to place the purity and superiority of the “homeland” before humans, urging people to seek a “poetic dwelling”.

## 5 Conclusion

Li Ruijun presents the folk customs and daily life of Northwest China in a unique and persistent manner. The simplicity and purity of these scenes evoke a sense of “shock” to the postmodern society. He insists on prompting people to reflect on the simplicity, authenticity, and vastness of the land, and encourages them to continually “wander”—to the edges of villages and grasslands—in search of a poetic homeland. This “wandering” is not a Tao Yuanming-like escape, but rather a quest for a “freedom toward death,” a worldview that fears death not, treats all things equally, and joyfully accepts nature’s arrangements, a philosophy that encompasses the myriad possibilities of the future, and an ideology and philosophy of life that actively explores, strives to articulate, and continuously reflects and transcends.

## Funding

2022 Tianjin Philosophy and Social Sciences Project, “The Visual Arts in the Contemporary American Short Stories” (NO: TJWW22-003)

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