

The Resonance Between the Image of Su Lizhen in Wong Kar-wai's Films and Hong Kong's, China Post-modern Culture

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ABSTRACT

As one of the representative figures of Hong Kong, China cinema, Wong Kar-wai is renowned for his unique narrative style and delicate portrayal of emotions. He sets numerous scenes in Hong Kong, a city where Chinese and Western cultures converge, reflecting the spiritual world of marginalized social groups. His narratives exhibit typical post-modernist characteristics, namely, the connection of fragmented clips, the disruption of time, and the constant collage and reorganization of fantasies and memories according to the needs of the plot, forming a stream-of-consciousness film plot. In his films, the name "Su Lizhen" appears repeatedly, becoming a symbolic image that embodies the emotional and cultural traits of that era. This paper takes Su Lizhen in *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046* as the research objects, combines the context of Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture, analyzes the characteristics of her female image, explores its internal resonance with post-modern cultural features such as Hong Kong's identity, historical memory, and urban alienation, and reveals Wong Kar-wai's interpretation of Hong Kong's cultural spirit through this image.

KEYWORDS

Wong Kar-wai; Su Lizhen; Female image; Post-modern culture

1 Introduction

In the 1990s, Hong Kong was in a special historical transition period before its return to China. People were both confident and anxious in their thoughts and emotions, and felt confused amid the changes in reality. The post-modern culture emerging from this context made the society appear calm on the surface but restless underneath. Beneath this calm lies the deconstruction of tradition and the disintegration of totality, while the restlessness refers to people's lonely state like "Su Lizhen" in a post-modern society. Wong Kar-wai's films aptly capture the traits of this era. The image of "Su Lizhen", which appears repeatedly in his works, is not a simple repetition of a character, but a carrier of the spiritual core of Hong Kong's post-modern culture. Most scholars' studies on Wong Kar-wai's films focus on his aesthetic style and narrative techniques, and their analyses of Su Lizhen's image are merely limited to the restoration of her emotional level. Therefore, this paper, taking Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture as the entry point, aims to sort out and summarize its cultural characteristics, make a detailed comparison of Su Lizhen's images in the three films, explore the characteristics of Su Lizhen's image and the consistency of its connotations, and analyze the unique significance of the image of Su Lizhen behind the phenomenon of rich homogeneity.

2 Analysis of the Traits of Su Lizhen's Female Image

2.1 Ambiguity and Multiplicity of Identity

Su Lizhen's identity has never been clearly defined, showing the characteristics of ambiguity and multiplicity in different films. In *Days of Being Wild*, Su Lizhen tries to restrain Xu Zai with her identity as a fiancée, and is always torn between the identities of "suitor" and "abandoned person". In *In the Mood for Love*, Su Lizhen is the wife of a newspaper editor, but as her affection for Zhou Muyun grows, her identity becomes ambiguous—she is both a wife and an emotional confidant of Zhou Muyun, and she questions the possibility of having only one identity. This identity uncertainty is further continued in *2046*. At this time, Su Lizhen is both the landlady of a casino in Singapore and the "woman in a cheongsam" in Zhou Muyun's memory. Zhou Muyun keeps asking her "Who are you?", and Su Lizhen replies that identity symbols are "not important"—she can be anyone, which means Su Lizhen completely denies the singularity of identity. Su Lizhen's identity is always in an "unfinished" state, without a fixed social role or a clear life path. This uncertainty reflects the deconstruction of essence in post-modern culture—human identity is no longer a fixed social label, and individuals discover their own existential value and play their roles in the transformation of multiple identities.

2.2 Repression and Alienation of Emotions

Su Lizhen's emotions in Wong Kar-wai's lens are always in a state of repression. In *Days of Being Wild*, the repression of Su Lizhen's emotions is manifested in silent waiting—holding the receiver in the phone booth in long silence, tightly

grasping the small phone, trying to use this action to resist the struggle in her heart. In *In the Mood for Love*, she and Zhou Muyun meet because of their spouses' infidelity, and they have a strong emotional resonance with each other. However, they always restrain their feelings with the thought "We won't be like them", hiding themselves in hesitant conversations, and finally confide their secrets to the hollow of a tree in Angkor Wat. This repression is not the constraint of the traditional ethical code of "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues", but an individual's control over emotions. By 2046, Su Lizhen's emotions become more alienated. Her interactions with Zhou Muyun are full of temptation and vigilance, and the line "Some feelings will be buried in the heart for a lifetime" becomes a regret left to the audience. This sense of alienation is not indifference, but a normal state of emotional communication between people in a post-modern city. Su Lizhen's emotions show a trajectory from "silent waiting" to "active alienation". In this fluid city, any emotion is temporary. In the balance of not being hurt and not hurting others, Su Lizhen gradually turns her emotions into silent fragments.

2.3 Obsession with Time and Memory

In Su Lizhen's world, time has never developed linearly—she is always trapped in the "past" and "future", while the "present" is deliberately ignored. In *Days of Being Wild*, time is embodied in the line "From now on, we are friends for one minute", so Su Lizhen repeatedly confirms whether this minute is real. For her, this minute is an emotional anchor, and she tries to use this minute to break Xu Zai's uncertainty. In *In the Mood for Love*, she repeatedly adjusts the clock, which is essentially a fantasy of the controllability of time, and Zhou Muyun's line "If I had one more boat ticket" also reflects the uncertainty about the future. In 2046, the conversations between her and Zhou Muyun always revolve around the theme of "whether the past can be changed", which also reflects Su Lizhen's obsession with time. In the room 2046, all objects become symbols carrying memories, and these symbols gradually become blurred under the impact of time. This portrayal of time and memory shows the living state of individuals in a city with mixed time and space—after the disruption of grand historical narratives, people can only confirm the value of their own existence through fragmented time.

The image of Su Lizhen is a combination of ambiguous identity, repressed emotions, and obsession with time. Wong Kar-wai does not give Su Lizhen a traditionally satisfactory ending, just like the regrets and losses in real life. However, Su Lizhen still exists vividly somewhere in the world—she has not left, but just hasn't found her destination yet.

3 Core Characteristics of Hong Kong's Post-Modern Culture

Post-modernism is a trend of thought against Western modern philosophical systems that emerged in the West after the 1960s. It is a concept that is difficult to define accurately theoretically. Post-modernism mainly adapts to the needs of the development of the scientific and technological revolution by criticizing and deconstructing modern cultural philosophy and spiritual values. It opposes modernism, reflects the spiritual alienation of post-industrial society, information society, and late capitalism, and its core idea is anti-rationalism. It advocates rejecting absolute criteria for judgment, denying the existence of absolute truth, and negating core values. Post-modernism advocates decentralization, anti-authoritarianism, and multiculturalism, promotes a way of life characterized by mixing and integration, encourages people to express and think freely, and promotes the development of knowledge. It advocates the diversified development and inclusiveness of culture, focuses on human beings themselves, promotes the popularization of knowledge, and embodies cultural universality and democracy. Post-modernist philosophers point out the shortcomings of modern Western philosophy since Nietzsche, criticize the restraint of rationalism on people's imagination and creativity, and propose an open attitude towards diverse experiences. The emergence of post-modernism is also inseparable from the background of ideology, culture, and social history. The development of modern science represented by Einstein's theory of relativity, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and Gödel's incompleteness theorem has negated the belief in the absoluteness and a priori nature of reason in previous rationalism.

3.1 Fragmentation of Identity

Xi Xi describes Hong Kong, China in *Tales of a Floating City*: "Hong Kong, China is a floating city. When the monsoon comes, the floating city will sway... People in the floating city have no wings, so they cannot fly; they can only float, not talking to each other, standing silently in their own postures." The "floating city" is a metaphor for Hong Kong, which fully shows that identity is no longer a fixed reality, but a developing state that is constantly changing in the wave of globalization, with the characteristic of fragmentation.

3.2 Hybridity of Historical Culture

The background of Hong Kong's post-modern culture is "hybridity"—there is neither a coherent historical narrative nor pure traditional Chinese culture or pure Western culture. Instead, it is a state formed by the collision and reconstruction of two or more cultural symbols. The essence of this hybridity is the dissolution and reconstruction of one-dimensional historical culture. Its purpose is not to deny history, but to find the connection between individuals and history in an uncertain historical environment, and to resolve the extreme consequences brought by a single culture. Therefore, the dialectal background of Hong Kong has a hybrid linguistic style: Hong Kong-style Cantonese embeds a large number of English words, such as "巴士" (bus), "士多" (store), "冧把" (number), and even forms the habit of mixing Chinese and English in expression, making communication a part of cultural development.

3.3 Collage of Living Spaces

Hong Kong, China has limited geographical space but a population of 7.34 million. People artificially stack many spatial symbols of different eras, different cultures, and different functions, resulting in spatial collage—a unique feature of Hong Kong's urban space. This spatial collage is essentially a post-modern deconstruction of spatial order. Each symbol maintains its own integrity in the scene, and new symbols are generated in coexistence, and new values are born in this series of existences.

4 The resonance Between the Image of Su Lizhen and Hong Kong's Post-Modern Culture

4.1 The correspondence Between the Ambiguity of Su Lizhen's Identity and the Rootlessness of Post-Modern Culture

Su Lizhen's identity is always in a vague and fluid state: she is a wife, a neighbor, a lover, but has never become a self with complete subjectivity. As a fusion zone of colonialism and globalization, Hong Kong, China itself does not have its own grand narrative, and the characteristic of the "third space" makes it difficult for the individual identity of Hong Kong people to stay in a single cultural coordinate. The image of Su Lizhen is a metaphor for this state: her cheongsam and permed hair, and the mixture of Cantonese and English are direct manifestations of the hybridity of Hong Kong, China culture. At the same time, she switches identities again and again, and no fixed identity can summarize her completely, which is consistent with the core proposition of post-modern culture that identity is constructed rather than essential.

4.2 Fragmented Narration and Non-Linear Time

Wong Kar-wai's narration of Su Lizhen's story breaks the linear narrative of traditional temporal logic: the repeated paradoxical hypothetical question "If I had one more boat ticket" in *In the Mood for Love*, and the constant cycle of time between 1966 and 2046 in 2046 make Su Lizhen's experience present as a series of disconnected fragments rather than a coherent history. This narrative strategy directly reflects the non-linear development of time in Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture. The discontinuity between Hong Kong's urbanization process and its colonial history has compressed the sense of history in its culture. The characteristic of "eternal present" in post-modern theory is manifested in Hong Kong as the selective reconstruction of the "past" and the anxiety about the uncertainty of the "future". Just like Su Lizhen, she recalls the people and things of the past but does not complete the memory, and looks forward to the arrival of the future but cannot predict it. As a result, the "past" and "future" are always suspended, leaving only the momentary meaning of the "present"—the fact that meaning lies in the moment is exactly a feature of Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture.

4.3 Spatial Compression and Urban Collage

The space where Su Lizhen moves shows typical characteristics of "Hong Kong-style space": narrow space and multiple functions are stacked together, forming a collage-like urban space, which corresponds to the characteristic of "symbolic collage of space" in Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture. Hong Kong's, China urban space itself is the most typical "heterotopia" in post-modern architectural theory—high-rise buildings coexist with low houses, and European-style buildings interweave with Chinese-style buildings. This "boundarylessness" of space is exactly a prominent symbol of the fact that "space becomes an anchor of identity" in Hong Kong's post-modern culture.

5 The Cultural Significance of the Image of Su Lizhen

The image of Su Lizhen is not a simple reproduction of Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture, but the result of

Wong Kar-wai's extraction of the spirit of the times through film art. As a typical female image in Hong Kong, Su Lizhen is not only a portrayal of the individual living state, but also a reflection of Hong Kong's cultural traits, showing more ambiguity, sense of alienation, and obsession with time. At the same time, her multiple identities break the shackles of traditional gender roles, implying the universal inclusiveness of Hong Kong, China culture; her repression and alienation reveal the desire of urban people for intimate relationships, which is related to the warm side pursued by post-modern society; her obsession with time is also a reminder to people that even in an era of fragmentation, there is still a need for a way to connect the past and the future.

6 Conclusion

The image of Su Lizhen in Wong Kar-wai's films is the embodiment and carrier of Hong Kong's, China post-modern culture. Its characteristics such as ambiguous identity, emotional alienation, and obsession with time resonate with Hong Kong's cultural identity dilemma, urban loneliness, and historical memory characteristics. The image of Su Lizhen is not a simple criticism of the times or an escape from reality, but a reflection on Hong Kong culture based on literature and art. Su Lizhen's story is still continuing, just as the exploration of Hong Kong, China culture has never stopped. When the tide of globalization sweeps across the world and approaches everything, we might as well interpret Hong Kong's culture through the role of Su Lizhen from her fading figure and incomplete words.

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