

Confucianism in the Films of Edward Yang

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Abstract: As one of the most prestigious directors in the Chinese-speaking world, Edward Yang uses film as a way to construct and convey his own thinking. Like all Chinese literati since the New Culture Movement, Yang repeatedly wanders between modernity and traditional Chinese philosophy, calmly analyzing the existential dilemmas of the urban middle class as a masterful deconstructionist and authoritative critic. Confucianism, as the most deeply rooted traditional thought in Chinese society, has profoundly shaped interpersonal communication and social values in Chinese society. The principles of benevolence, morality, sacrificing life for righteousness, reverence for propriety, and patriarchal thinking have long been the rules of Chinese society and are still the supreme beliefs of some Chinese people. In Edward Yang, one can find both his idealized intellectual Confucianism and his self-deprecation and criticism of Confucianism. This research will analyze three of Yang's representative films, *A Brighter Summer Day*, *A Confucian Confusion*, and *A One and A Two*, and explore Yang's Confucian identity as a film author in the context of his other works, and analyze his thoughts and confusion in the intertwined and contradictory nature of modernity and Confucianism. In these three films, Edward Yang's inner contradiction in his thinking of Confucianism in Chinese society is insightful and inspiring.

Keywords: Edward Yang, Confucianism, New Taiwan cinema

1. Introduction

In 1901, the film was first introduced to Taiwan, which was under Japanese colonial rule. Over the years, the form of Taiwanese cinema has undoubtedly evolved from the Japanese imperialist colonial propaganda of the early twentieth century to the romantic melodramas and kung-fu action films of the 1960s. However, the most glorious period in the history of Taiwanese cinema remains the 1980s and 1990s, when pioneering filmmakers sought to use beautiful or poignant films as a medium to create masterpieces of social realism that spoke truth to those in power.

These works are collectively known as "Taiwan New Cinema" and are divided into two distinct periods: the First Wave (1982-1990) and the Second New Wave (1990-2010). Taiwan New Cinema is a chronicle of the socio-political, economic, and even spiritual transformations that this rapidly changing region is undergoing under the diverse and complex influences of modernization and urbanization [1].

Edward Yang was a leader in Taiwan's new film movement and a hall-of-fame master of Chinese cinema. During his great film career, he made a total of eight feature films. His rational and discursive

cinematic characteristics and complex and refined audiovisual language have made extraordinary contributions to the modernization of Chinese cinema. During this period, the Confucian image of Edward Yang in his reflections also penetrated the hearts of people through his works.

In past studies of Yang, scholars have mostly focused on the characterization, urban space and audiovisual language of Yang's films, trying to make a relatively detailed analysis of Yang's cinematic art. In the area of traditional Chinese culture in Yang's films, Nga-chun, Law and Chun-cheong, Lo of Lingnan University have conducted an insightful study of Confucianism in Yang's film *A Confucian Confusion*, but not in relation to other films of Yang, forming a complete systematic study of Confucianism in Yang's films [2]. An exhaustive study of traditional Confucianism as embodied in Yang's films can help academia better understand the unique appeal of Yang's thoughts. At the same time, a systematic study of how Yang used the unique audiovisual language of film to analyze the crux of modern cities with Confucianism can provide inspiration for the film-making of today's Chinese cinema and even world cinema.

Through the symbolic and textual analysis of the three representative films and other films of Edward Yang, this study aims to sort out and study the expression of Confucianism in the films of Edward Yang.

2. *A Brighter Summer Day*: Confucian Idealism under The Decline of Patriarchy and Ethical Dislocation

2.1. Idealistic Idol Suffers Setback

Confucianism emphasizes that an independent moral consciousness is a prerequisite for an ideal personality. As Mencius emphasized, "a man can be killed but not humiliated" man would rather give up life to maintain the dignity of a human being; not accommodate, not compromise, not pander to the vulgar, and never "bend a foot just to straighten eight feet" [3].

Edward Yang set Honey as one of the most idealistic teenagers in *A Brighter Summer Day*. Before Honey appears, Xiao Si and the audience know that he has an idealistic spirit in Xiao Ming's words. The first meeting between Honey and Xiao Si verifies Xiao Ming's statement that "Honey is just like you". When Xiao Si and Xiao Ming go to the park to give the translated lyrics of Big Sister's song to Little Elvis, they run into Honey, who returns to the park and understands from observing Xiao Si's words and actions that Xiao Si cares about Xiao Ming as much as he does and that Xiao Si is a man of love and loyalty. The scene of Honey and Xiao Si meeting at the Wanhua Gang's stronghold has a strong sense of ritual - Xiao Si has a strong identity with Honey and defines himself as Honey's "successor". In his second meeting with Xiao Si, Honey's interpretation of the storyline of *War and Peace* in his own words also reflects his idealistic complex.

However, in the film, the idealistic young Honey is killed by little punk Shandong's tricks. In this plot, Edward Yang expresses his sympathy for the idealist's frustration in that social environment from an almost invisible point of view, as well as his contempt for the money-oriented social atmosphere.

2.2. Declining Patriarchal Authority and Imbalance of Faith

In the *Analects of Confucius*, "Yan Yuan" section, Confucius answered the question of the Duke of Qi Jing about the relationship between ruler, minister and father and son by saying, "The king should act like the king, the minister should act like the minister, the father should act like the father, and the son should act like the son". It means the father should love and care for his children, and the children should respect their father [4]. In Confucius' thinking, the father must provide a role model for his children and establish an image of authority in front of them in order for society to be stable.

Although Xiao Si's father has always taught Xiao Si to control his own life, he is always fearful and submissive during the White Terror of the Nationalist government, being a yes-man facing the principal. The huge contrast between the former and the latter completely deconstructs the sanctity of the father figure. In the cruel social reality, fathers are completely powerless in life, and they cannot play a positive role as an example for their children. For those fathers who are "provincial" in Taiwan, they are questioned not only about their ability to cope with social change but also about their attitude toward history.

First, economic incompetence weakened the social status of fathers/patriarchy. The rise of the New Cinema Movement coincided with Taiwan's economic transformation, and the transition from a rural to an urban civilization was inevitably accompanied by the severe pain of those who did not adapt. They were at a loss in the tidal wave of economic reform and became abandoned by the times.

Secondly, the powerlessness of fathers against reality in Yang's films also dissolves the authority of fathers and patriarchal power. The decline of patriarchal authority in Yang's films is not only reflected in the decline of economic status but also in the lack of control over social life. The fathers seem to have difficulty facing the changes in social reality, and they are overwhelmed by the rapidly changing social life. This sense of powerlessness over reality stems from their helplessness over their trivial lives on the one hand and their confusion over Taiwan's colonial past on the other, both of which intertwine to create the bewilderment of the fathers in Yang's film over the reality of life [5].

When the parents are frightened of the unknown future, they are unable to take care of the upbringing of their children in the family, thus leading the teenagers to seek independence in the form of gangs. The film opens with reference to the lack of parents among the members of teenage gangs. This absence is either material (death of parents) or psychological (parents failing to teach their children) [5].

In the development of the story of *A Brighter Summer Day*, the identities of the father and Xiao Si are gradually switched: the father, who is supposed to be Xiao Si's spiritual role model, is unable to assume this responsibility under the erasure of society. The collapse of his father's identity is the trigger for the collapse of Xiao Si's inner world, and eventually, his father "dies" in his heart.

The author divides the "death" of Xiao Si's father into three stages: the first stage is when the father argues with the school about Xiao Si's grades at the beginning of the movie; the second stage is when the father argues with the head teacher about Xiao Si's demerits in the middle of the movie; the third stage is when Xiao Si has an altercation with the doctor, and the nurse in the infirmary, and the father asks the head teacher to forgive Xiao Si for his actions. In the second and third stages, the father experienced persecution, so his character changed drastically to a desperate man. In contrast, Xiao Si suffers the death of Honey and Shandong during this period, and the social atmosphere of the jungle makes him tough. As the film's plot develops, the identities of Xiao Si and his father are switched. In the first and second stages, the father teaches Xiao Si that people should fight for what they want and work hard to achieve their ideals, and at this time, the father is the instructor. In the third stage, Xiao Si's father's image collapses, so Xiao Si throws a baseball bat at the light bulb in the office to vent his frustration and later advises his father not to worry about dropping out of school.

Xiao Si knows that his father's change is a result of society. The destruction of his father presents the rules of survival in the adult world, forcing Xiao Si's heart to become closer to the world of teenage gangs. In the film, Yang establishes two spiritual icons for Xiao Si - Honey and his father. The role of the father is the traditional Confucian "idol" for children, and the narrative of his gradual "death" reflects Yang's dissatisfaction with a society that has reversed the identity of the moral order.

2.3. "Giving up life for righteousness", The Last Struggle of Idealism

With the collapse of his father's image and the death of Honey, Xiao Si grows up quickly. He tries to take care of the love between him and Xiao Ming. However, the relationship between Xiao Ma and

Xiao Ming makes the flower of love in his heart wither. Xiao Ming has put the ideal of love in Xiao Si, but the ideal object of Xiao Ming is scorned by others, making her at her wits' end.

Mencius said, "The fish is what I want, and the bear's paw is what I want. If I cannot have both, I will give up fish to take the bear's paw. Life is what I want, and righteousness is what I want. If I cannot have both, I will give up life to take righteousness."

Xiao Si has always longed for Xiao Ming to change for his own sake, but Xiao Ming often tells him that "the world will not change". For Xiao Si, "killing Xiao Ming" represents his salvation for her, and only through this way will Xiao Ming no longer be looked down upon by others. Zhan Hongzhi, the screenwriter of *A Brighter Summer Day*, summarizes the film as a story of "a boy meets a girl, he falls in love with her, he kills her, and the boy becomes a man".

The direct cause of Xiao Ming's murder is not only her impurity but also her unwillingness to obey, to change, and even to defy authority and deny it. Xiao Si's ideology and the foundation of his value system are thus challenged and shaken, and his intuitive reaction is to eliminate this rebellion and challenges in order to ensure his own survival and integrity.

Edward Yang's dissatisfaction with the "social killing" is reflected in *A Brighter Summer Day*, and he criticizes it from a Confucian standpoint - society has killed the idealistic youth, and the environment has dislocated the identity of father and son. However, we should also see the contradiction in "sacrificing one's life for righteousness" - the knife of murder, where should it be stabbed?

3. A Confucian Confusion: An Experiment in Detournement Across the Millennium

The film *A Confucian Confusion* is a well of Confucianism by Edward Yang. Before going to the Cannes Film Festival with *A Confucian Confusion*, Yang wrote an essay in which he said, "The theme of this film is 'us,' the most private side of us that the West has not yet had the chance to know." This most private side is the deep-rooted Confucianism in Chinese society and its dominant indoctrination [6]. Yang's *A Confucian Confusion*, filmed in 1994, after *A Brighter Summer Day*, before *A One and A Two*, corresponding to the time of Taipei, is the era when Taipei people got rich, and the cultural industry began to rise. According to Yang's own essay, it was the era when Neo-Confucianism began to gain popularity [7]. The opening caption of the film quote a conversation between Confucius and his disciple Ran You.

Confucius went to the state of Wei, and Ran You drove for him. Confucius said, "What a large population!" Ran You asks: "The population is already so large; what next?" Confucius said, "Make them rich." Ran You asked, "Having become rich, what next?"

Then, Edward Yang says in the caption, "After two thousand years, Taipei became the richest city in the world in just twenty years."

The quote ends abruptly here, omitting Confucius' last reply. Confucius' answer is: "Educate them." By omitting Confucius' answer, Yang leaves only Ran You's question, which is tantamount to cutting off the way beyond the reality that Confucius envisioned. The so-called education in Taipei at that time was what people called the "cultural industry". The film revolves around the various characters in Taipei's cultural industry and truly depicts the emptiness of the cultural industry at that time and the inevitable dilemma in human interaction [8].

The cultural industry, as the core of social education, takes up the burden of education. Thus, in this film, the main characters, with the exception of Kiki, are all well-spoken, with lines full of Confucianism and an overall very edifying style. The words of the over-the-top writer are cynical. The words of the TV hostess are sensational. The words of Xiao Ming argue between self-interest and conscience. The words of strong woman Melly are aggressive, and even Larry, who is despicable and unethical, can talk about his feelings and lecture others with a solemn face. The amazing thing is that these words are very "elegant" in their form, sounding moving; even Larry quote "Confucius" to

prove the correctness of his philosophy of life. The saying is, "You cannot have the heart of harm; you cannot prevent others from doing so!" Contrary to the words, the actions of the characters are incongruous everywhere. The writer pretends to be the conscience of society but only pities himself in his book. The hostess's program is pretentious and false, and Melly's capriciousness makes the company in trouble. Xiao Ming has a bad relationship with his father. The only thing behind eloquence is the lack of value, or rather, it is because of the lack of value and the fear of facing up to it that people need to speak eloquently [2].

The core of the film is when the writer explains his book *A Confucian Confusion*. When Confucius was reincarnated in modern Taipei, he was welcomed by the people because they thought that Confucius was the best pretender and deliberately studied him. They all went to Confucius and asked: "How do you get to have everyone like you?" No one believed and accepted Confucius' sincerity, and Confucius suffered greatly.

The bright lights of Taipei are not dissimilar to *The Society of Spectacle* by Guy Debord: an upside-down world where visual representations become the ontological basis of society. In *The Society of Spectacle*, due to the lack of grasp of the world's reality, an identity crisis arises, which leads to a disregard for the moral value system. Due to the lack of awareness of the social reality, people have hung on to Confucianism to protect their shiny appearance. In reality, Confucius' benevolence and sincerity have long been disregarded and ignored to the point of incredulity. Edward Yang conceived a perfect Detournement experiment that brought Confucius to Taipei more than two thousand years later. In a society that is run by his own ideas, Confucius is in an unprecedented predicament. Yang perfectly achieves the effect of Detournement that deconstructs the image of bourgeois society by exposing the hidden logic of manipulation or inhibition, using the ideology itself to rebel against itself in a materially inverted way [9].

In the film, Yang even directly arranges the writer's meeting with Confucius. The writer chases after the cab in which Qiqi is riding. Qiqi cannot bear it and calls for the brakes, so the writer crashes into it. The driver of the car asked: Why did the front of the car not hit the person, but the rear of the car hit the person? Why did the car not hit the person when it was moving, but the brakes hit the person? This thing is absolutely contrary to common sense, but it really happened. The writer had an epiphany: the truth is the simplest, so simple that people cannot understand. The driver then denied the meaning of the writer's hard thinking: "Live a good life on the line; why think so much?" The writer had an epiphany: the so-called fear of death can be interpreted positively. He felt that the taxi driver was really the reincarnation of Confucius. Yang set the driver's hometown as Shandong, which is the same as Confucius. Moreover, in the cast list at the end of the film, it is clearly written: Driver (Confucius). This is a brilliant irony. No matter who came up with the theory, as long as it meets people's self-interest, he can be quoted, worshiped, and even treated as "Confucius".

Is Yang's purpose in constructing this experiment of Detournement to criticize Confucianism and blame Confucius for the plight of Taipei society? Yang says, "My goal is clear: to paint a portrait of Taipei City with the film [10]." What Yang criticizes is not Confucius but the fragmented social morality and social order in Taipei after the outbreak of wealth. What Yang's experiment of deviant tracks did was simply tear off the last shameful cloth of Taipei society - the misinterpreted Neo-Confucianism.

4. A One and A Two: The Confucian View of Love and Family

In the last and most mature film of Edward Yang, *A One and A Two*, he showed us the role of the pillar of Confucianism in Chinese society and his cinema.

4.1. Confucian View of love: Reason, Loyalty and Reticence

Confucius commented on the poem "Guan Ju" by saying, "Happy but not lustful, sad but not sad". This shows that Confucius' view of love is "started by love, stopped because of propriety". This is a very rational and stoic view of love. He pointed out that the love of a gentleman must be decent and appropriate. Otherwise, it would be difficult to cultivate a proper mind [11].

In Edward Yang's film, teenage love is immature and impossible to mature. From NJ's first love affair to the English teacher that Fatty kills for love, Yang rejects teenage love impulses. The rejection of teenage love in his film is rational, which is quite in line with the traditional Confucianism view of love [12].

The love of the teenage years in Yang's film is only cold and depressing. Otherwise, NJ would not have taken the initiative to give up their first love so loving. In Yang's long shot, there are only two options for teenage love, like either Xiao Si or Fatty. The only two options for teenage love are either to wield the knife in their hands to shatter the impossible love and let themselves be destroyed along with the wrong love in the murder. The only two options are to take the path that Alon and NJ have already taken and actively give up the love that they know they can get but are destined to get. The road of love that is more suitable for their own survival. When Tingting and Fatty get a room, teenage love comes to an end. If they finally close the door of the hotel room, Yang's film will not exist. The problems and confusion of reality will be gone, and Yang's rational thinking will no longer exist. In the open room, the slightly tilted camera keeps watching Tingting and Fatty, and Yang wants to treat these two young children as adults. The teenagers' love is something they have to solve by themselves in the end.

Like Confucius, Edward Yang is frighteningly calm about love. The middle-aged NJ's rejection of his first love is a big ethical difference from his first rejection, but the audience can imagine how cold NJ's first rejection was. NJ's second rejection and Xue's elopement are a repetition but essentially a leap forward from a subconscious state of rejection to a mature and rational one. NJ's maturity, in a sense, can also be seen as the conclusion of Yang's film through rational thinking: Confucianism in Taiwanese society is maturing. Therefore, the films of Edward Yang never forget to present the content of love to the audience objectively and calmly.

4.2. Confucian View of Family: Order, Dependence & Filial Piety

Confucius said, "It is not possible to be ignorant of the age of one's parents. On the one hand, be happy because of their high life expectancy. On the other hand, be worried because of their old age." He also said, "To serve one's parents, and (when they are at fault) to dissuade them politely, and to see that one's will is not heeded, and still to respectfully refrain from offending them, though sorrowful, but not resentful."

In Confucianism, family is bonded not only by blood but also rules, orders and dependence. It is the social and spiritual bond that makes the family complete and intimate. In *A One* and *A Two*, the family behaved well under the order of Confucianism.

NJ's family is an improved family under the guidance of Confucianism that has undergone the baptism of modern Western civilization. This improved family is a great improvement over the families built with modern Western civilization in real Taiwanese urban society. Although everyone, as Yang Yang says, cannot see the back of his head, it is not impossible to achieve this. The reason for not being able to see is that no one has ever thought to look; that is, the best form of family is already there, but everyone is blind to it. This is why Tingting is likely to continue the failed path of love that her father has experienced; thus, NJ's brother-in-law repeatedly falls into the same old and uninspired scams in business; thus, Yang Yang's study environment is likely to be a continuation of Xiao Si's study environment; thus NJ's wife Min will go to a fake monk to arrange a non-existent

retreat for herself [13]. From the wedding, the film hints at the inevitable reversal of the cart before the horse in modern Taiwanese urban society, where the traditional family is the basic unit; however, it is not until Yang Yang says, "I am old too" at the funeral that all the viewers wake up to the fact that they may be living in such an environment. How to solve such a family crisis? People all need a frank and sincere attitude toward each other to abandon the hypocrisy under cover of modern capitalist progress. It is necessary to abandon the hypocrisy under cover of modernized capitalism and face the difficulties in the real environment seriously. Only a family formed in this way is what Yang's films bring to the world, or at least he hopes so.

The film starts with a wedding and ends with a funeral: the two big ceremonies that change a family greatly. Grandma's coma is what brings the story and family together. After Grandma has a coma, every family member has to come to her bed and tell her what is going on in his life. Grandma becomes not only a bond but also a vent and comfort. From this ritual, Edward Yang expressed his view of the family: filial piety is the most important connection in a family, and it benefits all family members.

5. Conclusion

The Western Christian tradition holds that human life is created by God and that each person is an individual. Therefore, "justice" is synonymous with "equality". Each person is morally equal, they are all the same unit in the moral sphere, and their moral claims should be treated the same way. Although Confucianism believes that every person can be a "moral subject," the moral achievement of each person can be different: the greater the scope of one's "benevolence," the higher the moral achievement of that person. In this system, because of the special emphasis on morality and rewarding moral behavior (so that China is called a moral kingdom), anything that an individual cannot do as an "ego", such as self-interest, disobedience, and competition, can be done when the individual claims to represent a "greater ego". When an individual claim represents a "greater ego," he can be "rationalized" and justified in doing so and even labeled as moral.

Edward Yang saw that in Confucianism and how it runs the whole of Taiwan's modern society. Confucius' thought is more than idealism, making itself difficult to practice in reality. Edward Yang saw that too. With Confucianism being misinterpreted and used for personal purposes, the city puts on a bizarre show every single day.

Edward Yang, as a believer in Confucianism, used Confucianism to accuse society of killing and then criticized society for misinterpreting Confucianism. After the long paradox with Confucianism, Edward Yang, in his last film, *The One and a Two*, showed the simplest and warmest form of Confucianism. When characters have their own confusions and difficulties, they choose to follow the order of Confucianism. Thus, a peaceful and sorrowful story is narrated calmly, just like every ordinary Chinese person's life.

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