

# The Charm of Transcending Times: Aesthetic Value Trends and Current Significance of Early Chinese Film Classics ——Taking 'Street Angel' as an example

Yuting Song

South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

**Abstract:** *Against the historical background of internal and external difficulties, early Chinese films did not give up exploration and growth, but instead emerged a batch of masterpieces that combine ideological connotation and artistic expression, demonstrating the charm of crossing the times. This article takes "Street Angel" as an example to explore the aesthetic tendencies of early Chinese film classics and their implications for contemporary cinema. By analyzing the film's grasp of the dual structure of reality, critical examination of modern cities, and display of humanistic care, its unique artistic charm is revealed. The film not only represents the peak of early Chinese film creation, but its aesthetic tendency also transcends the times and has a profound impact on contemporary film creation and social culture.*

**Keywords:** Early Chinese film 'Street Angel', Yuan Muzhi's aesthetic value.

## 1. The Glorious Chapter of Early Chinese Film: Overview and Perception of 'Street Angel' [2].

The 1930s was a historic period of turbulence and change in China. In the context of this era, the "September 18 Incident" and the "December 28 Incident" broke out one after another, not only pushing the country to a critical moment of life and death, but also profoundly influencing the direction of film art. During this period, Chinese film was deeply influenced by left-wing culture, experiencing a significant transformation from the "interest only" of ordinary citizens to the call of the masses to face the harsh reality. Many classic works emerged, among which "Street Angel" is undoubtedly a shining pearl of this period.

The film was produced by Star Film Company in 1937, directed by Yuan Muzhi, and brought together outstanding actors such as Zhao Dan, Zhou Xuan, and Wei Heling. The film tells the story of several people in the lower class society of Shanghai in the 1930s, including singer Xiaohong, secret prostitute Xiaoyun, drummer Xiaochen, and newspaper vendor Lao Wang, who rely on each other to escape their tragic fate but still cannot see a way out. It exposes the complex and cruel real world while also carrying critical scrutiny. But it is different from some left-wing films that show a tendency towards formulaic and conceptual expression. It has not been banned by the authorities due to its overly direct ideological expression, nor has it been edited beyond recognition. Instead, it attempts to package reality with artistic elements [1], integrate profound life insights and humanistic care, and allow vivid characters and real life scenes and political situations to naturally emerge. Although until the end of the film, there is only suppressed darkness and silence from the crowd, and no solution to social problems is proposed, it seems to be a complete tragedy. "But as Aristotle said, the function of tragedy is to evoke people's feelings of pity and fear, and the director also hopes to use this ending setting to" awaken and mobilize the audience's social reality experience, resonate with them, and make critical judgments

As a glorious chapter of early Chinese cinema, "Street Angel" has had an impact that transcends time. It won the Jury Prize at the 12th Figradaforz International Film Festival in 1983 and was also selected as one of the "100 Best Chinese Films of the Century" by the Hong Kong Film Awards Association in 2005. Until today, it still touches the hearts of generation after generation with its unique artistic charm, profound social insights, and timeless musical melodies.

## 2. The Aesthetic Value Tendency of Early Chinese Film Creation: Taking "Street Angel" as an Example

### 2.1 Grasping the Dual Structure of the Real World: The Social Texture of the Coexistence of Cruel Reality and Warm Elements

In the 1930s, the Film Inspection Commission under the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior of the Nationalist Government of China issued a decree prohibiting the filming of martial arts and supernatural films. Filmmakers also began to explore new production directions, giving birth to highly realistic film works. Since its inception, realism art has shouldered the mission of "observing the world" and "correctly reproducing it" [3]. "Street Angel" is precisely using its distinct realism spirit to depict the social texture of cruel reality and warm elements juxtaposed, touching on the living conditions and emotional world of ordinary people in difficult times at that time.

The cruelty of reality portrayed in 'Street Angel' is partly due to the turbulent times of invasion, oppression, and exile, but the director's direct portrayal of its shots is rare. Instead, he cleverly uses detailed clues to allow the audience to delve deeper into the era in which the characters are located. For example, "Lao Wang" likes to paste the newspapers he has

read on the wall, and the newspapers on the wall are like a mirror of the times. When several young people were writing 'Blessings are shared, difficulties are shared', they couldn't write the word 'difficult'. Lao Wang first speculated that 'half Tianjin and half Shanghai' formed the word 'difficult', implying that both Tianjin and Shanghai had fallen. I also found a newspaper on the wall that read 'In times of national crisis, every individual has a responsibility', subtly informing the audience of the social situation. The newspaper constantly appears in the film, running through the entire story, showcasing the era in which the characters live. And music is also an extremely important clue in this film. The song "Four Seasons Song" in the film conveys extraordinary emotional tension and infectiousness through Xiaohong's voice, interpreting the artistic conception of the song itself while also integrating her personal life's unstable and bumpy trajectory into it. Xiaohong, this seemingly innocent and naive girl, also bears deep sorrow, which leaves a deep imprint on every individual struggling in hardship in the tide of the times.

On the other hand, it accurately captures the tragic fate of people at the bottom of society in the turbulent times. In terms of character setting in the film, Xiaoyun and Xiaohong were originally girls from Northeast China. After the "September 18 Incident", they fled to Shanghai and were forced to fall into the hands of others to make a living. Xiaoyun became a secret prostitute and suffered humiliation, while Xiaohong became a singer and was sold to the bully Gu Chenglong at will. There are also five brothers, including lively Xiao Chen and introverted Lao Wang, who are also of the "lower middle class" and wander on the edge of the city. The film portrays the darkness of reality through the unfortunate experiences of a group of ordinary people.

But the director's artistic exploration is not limited to the cruel and dark era, but further showcases the analysis of human beings and a profound examination of human nature. For example, in the character construction of the protagonist Xiao Chen, the director did not choose to shape his single positive image, but instead made his image more complex. As a poor person, when facing Xiaoyun, who was also suffering and forced to become a secret prostitute, Xiaochen showed not the sympathy and empathy that the audience could accept, but exclusion and prejudice. When Xiaoyun encountered misfortune and Lao Wang wanted revenge for her, Xiaochen still responded coldly - "Do you have to fight for such a woman?" This reminded the audience of the possible mutual contempt within the same class. The director uses these subtle depictions of human nature to make the audience face the complexity and cruelty of human nature. At the end of the film, Xiaoyun's last words: "We are all equally miserable people. It's hard to say who forgives whom." With a helpless and profound tone, the audience realizes that "we are all poor people, there is nothing else to say." This also deepens the shadow of the cruel reality it depicts.

While depicting the cruelty of reality, the director also aimed the camera at the beauty of human nature and emotions that small individuals unconsciously reveal when struggling for their fate, adding a warm tone that cannot be ignored to the entire film. Xiaoyun was attracted by the lively and humorous Xiaochen, but Xiaochen was concerned about her younger sister Xiaohong. When she heard that the boss intended to sell

Xiaohong to Gu Chenglong, she was willing to match Xiaohong and Xiaochen to help them escape from the underworld and fulfill their love. In the end, the qin player and his group came to attack, and Xiaoyun sacrificed his own life to help Xiaohong escape time. In addition, Xiao Chen's brother barber was dismissed due to the closure of the store. Xiao Chen actively campaigned with his brothers to attract customers and mobilize the boss to reopen; Lao Wang, as another important character, sympathizes and understands Xiaoyun's unfortunate experience with the heart of "being a fallen person from the ends of the earth" [4], and gives her care and love. At the same time, the relaxed atmosphere and warm emotions displayed by Xiao Chen, Xiao Hong, Lao Wang and others in their daily interactions further enrich the heartwarming elements of the film.

## 2.2 Grasping the Dual Structure of the Real World: The Social Texture of the Coexistence of Cruel Reality and Warm Elements

Shanghai was once known as a modern city, where "Modern" represents modernity and fashion [5]. The thirty years from 1914 to 1945 are known as Shanghai's "Modern Era". During this period, Shanghai was known as the largest commercial port in the Far East, nurturing a "modern style" urban culture and having a prosperous history. Street Angel "was born in this era, but the modern city it portrays is not always glamorous, but rather presents the crisis and challenges under the urban landscape to the audience through a critical examination.

The city on the screen often appears as the background at the beginning of the film, and the director's techniques and style of handling the city in the opening image can reveal certain characteristics of the entire film [6]. Director Yuan Muzhi recreated the "modernity" of Shanghai in the 1930s for us at the beginning of "Street Angel". Modern girls, intersecting vehicles, Western bands, red tin cigarettes, towering skyscrapers. More than 70 short cut shots using real-life shooting have already showcased the highly popular entertainment landscape of the Eastern city, and piled up the prosperous and exquisite appearance of the upper class society in front of the audience. However, the opening subtitle "Autumn 1935, Shanghai Underground" shifts the camera from top to bottom, slowly moving down from the top of the high-rise building, and then uses an extremely long shake to show the underground floor covered with banners of "disregarding the cost" and "big discounts". This not only creates a significant visual contrast with the modern landscape of the world's "fifth largest city" previously presented, but also highlights the suffering history of the lower class people under the "modernity" and reveals the huge social class divide.

In addition, the film also presents modern absurdity to the audience. At that time, Shanghai was the most successful modern city model in traditional China. As one of the first port cities in China, it had a huge impact on the lives of modern Chinese citizens [7]. With the establishment of ports and concessions, Shanghai inevitably encountered the impact and challenges of foreign economy and culture. The welcoming ceremony in the film is a product of Shanghai's rigid combination of foreign culture and local lifestyle, forming a strange form of neither Chinese nor Western, half Chinese and

half Western, and both Chinese and Western. At the beginning of the film, there is a lively wedding ceremony lasting about 3 minutes and 48 seconds, featuring both suits and jackets, Western drums and trumpets, as well as traditional silk and bamboo sounds. This lively wedding ceremony, which combines Chinese and Western cultures, showcases a strong urban atmosphere and allows the audience to experience the absurd phenomenon of Shanghai, which is semi colonial and semi feudal.

Despite Shanghai's continuous absorption of Western industrial civilization, this process inevitably triggered a drastic change in social life, leading to the emergence of a more "modern" way of life - wealth and money [8]. In the film, Xiao Chen wants to prevent Xiaohong from being sold by the musician and madam through the "lawsuit" mentioned in the newspaper. He wears his only "face" to hire a lawyer. In this scene, Xiao Chen and Lao Wang cross the road and street, as if stepping from a dark "underground world" into a brilliant "paradise". The daily necessities of "modern" life, such as heating, water dispensers, glue, etc., placed in front of them were fresh things they had never encountered before. What's even more ironic is that Xiao Chen doesn't understand that "suing" means "filing a lawsuit", and asks, "Do you even need money to file a lawsuit?" This scene unabashedly reveals another side of Shanghai - modern life belongs only to the elite class, and the gap between "underground" and "heaven" is extremely great, which is regrettable.

However, even the dazzling "paradise" cannot remain isolated at the critical moment of national survival. The "December 8th Incident" in Shanghai followed the "September 18th Incident" in Northeast China. Although the film did not directly show the tragic scene of Shanghai's traffic, official buildings, private houses, shops and other places being bombed, the "Home Mountain Looking North, Tears Touching My Eyes" in the "Tianya Song" sung by Xiao Hong, and the tragic scenes of Japanese aggression, the volunteer army's resistance and the displacement of the people when singing the "Four Seasons Song", accumulated a kind of turbulence and anxiety, reflecting the hidden crisis under the "modern" Shanghai's prosperous appearance.

### **2.3 The Intrinsic Infiltration of Humanistic Care Consciousness: the Presentation of the Difficulties and Delicate Emotions of the Lower Class Characters**

Zhao Dan, who played the male lead Xiao Chen in "Street Angel", once shared the inspiration for filming "Street Angel". At that time, he frequently gathered with a group of economically struggling artist friends such as Yuan Muzhi, Zheng Junli, Nie Er, Wei Heling, etc. in an inconspicuous small tavern next to Shanghai Notre Dame Cathedral. Here, they not only exchanged life philosophies, love concepts, personal aspirations, and artistic pursuits, but also encountered a wide range of marginalized groups from the bottom of society, including prostitutes, newspaper vendors, and singers, in such an inclusive environment. These people at the bottom of society struggle day after day on the edge of survival, sacrificing their labor for a meager livelihood. Mr. Zhao Dan said, "We did not intentionally observe them, but due to our dissatisfaction with the society at that time and sympathy for the so-called 'lower class', over time, we

developed a desire to portray them [9]." Therefore, "Street Angels" incorporates the creators' humanistic care and attempts to reveal the survival difficulties and delicate emotions of the lower class characters.

The director incorporated his keen observation and profound insights into the characters of the lower class, and Xiaoyun's character embodies the complex challenges that women at the bottom of society face. In Xiaoyun's performance design, the director chose to remove most of her lines. Even when scolded by the madam, she remained silent, making the audience think she couldn't speak. However, the audience could perceive her inferiority and oppression from her sorrowful expression and always hidden face in the darkness. Specifically, Xiaoyun was forced to flee to Shanghai due to Japanese invasion and the fall of Northeast China, which reflects the heavy shadow of national oppression. Furthermore, Xiaoyun's migration from the countryside to the bustling city (Shanghai) not only failed to be accepted by the city, but also became an object of gaze and display. She was no longer a "person", but a "commodity" that could be bought and sold freely. Her body and destiny were firmly controlled by strict power mechanisms, which not only imposed various historical restrictions and obligations, but also deprived her of the ability to independently control her destiny [10]. In this situation, Xiaoyun was forced to become a prostitute and suffered from the cold eyes and exclusion of society. Her crush, Xiaochen, also despised her greatly and did not understand the oppression of women who were at the bottom of society like him. Although she tried to resist and help her sister Xiaohong escape from the demon den, and chose to "run away" herself, she ultimately did not escape the tragic ending. After a short period of freedom, her fate was still destruction. Before her death, she murmured to herself, "Ants, ants." This is not only a self metaphor for her own insignificance and helplessness, but also a revelation and accusation of the survival difficulties faced by the lower class, especially women. At the end of the film, the director also used the visual technique of shaking the camera upwards to further reinforce this dilemma. The buildings in the camera are towering, cold, and oppressive, not only creating a sense of oppression in physical space, but also symbolizing the insurmountable wall of power and class.

In addition, the director's portrayal of the emotions of low-level characters, especially love, is particularly delicate and touching. At that time, there was a strong trend in society advocating for marriage freedom [11], which was vividly reflected in the art of film. In "Street Angel," the earliest kissing scenes in Chinese film history were presented - between newspaper vendor Lao Wang and prostitute Xiao Yun, as well as between drummer Xiao Chen and singer Xiao Hong with a passionate kiss, all showing an avant-garde attitude. The director also expressed their delicate emotions through music, using "Tianya Song" as a bridge for emotional communication between Xiao Chen and Xiao Hong on the emotional trajectory of their lovers. When their relationship was sweet, one person played the qin and the other sang in harmony, conveying their deep affection. However, when a misunderstanding arose between the two, Xiao Chen paid for Xiao Hong's performance of the same song "Tianya Song". The emotional rift suddenly appeared, and Xiao Hong's singing was mixed with uncontrollable grievances and pain.

Xiao Chen eventually lost control of his emotions and left angrily.

The director's keen insight and analysis of social reality enable him to accurately expose the difficulties faced by ordinary people at the bottom of society, as well as the sincere and touching emotions between characters. While expressing deep sympathy, he also guides the audience to think about broader social issues, demonstrating the director's sense of social responsibility and humanistic care.

### 3. Conclusion: Continuation and Innovation of Early Chinese Film Tradition

At the time of the birth of early Chinese cinema, the Chinese nation was deeply mired in internal and external turmoil, and political and economic development was extremely unstable. Despite facing numerous challenges, the influx of left-wing ideology in the 1930s and the innovation of film technology still filled early Chinese films with distinct characteristics of the times and artistic styles, containing reflections on social reality and explorations of art, making images an important carrier that touches the soul and showcases the call of the times.

As an outstanding example in the early Chinese film industry, 'Street Angel' achieved extremely high levels of intellectual depth and artistic accomplishment. Whether it is the profound exploration of the dual aspects of the real world, the keen insight into various social problems, or the high level of humanistic care revealed in the film, as well as the representation of urban space and sound processing in the film, all make the film have a charm that transcends the times and demonstrate profound influence.

This kind of observation of the real world and expression of humanistic care consciousness also has its continuation and innovation in contemporary times. From "Seventeen Years of Film", "Young People in Our Village", "Lin Family Shop", "Red Flag Handbook", "Song of Youth", "Southern Expedition and Northern Battle", to the new century's "Crazy Stone", "I am not a Medicine God", "Silent Breaking", and so on, filmmakers not only continue to capture social reality and explore multiple aspects of human nature through the lens, but also present more diverse and fascinating works to the audience through innovative narrative techniques, camera language, and cross-cultural communication and integration. They pay attention to social hot issues such as class division, moral dilemmas, patents and generic drugs, etc. Through the powerful medium of film, they demonstrate strong humanistic care and trigger public reflection and discussion on real problems. At the same time, contemporary films are actively exploring technological innovations, bringing unprecedented viewing experiences to audiences.

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