

Body Aesthetics in Chinese Film and Television Dramas: Representations, Meanings and Logic

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Abstract

As an aesthetic element in film and television dramas, the body wields a potent symbolic expressiveness. It manifests in diverse types, such as the Life-Portrait Type, the Personality Micro-Expressive Type, the Integrating Spirit and Form Type, the Exaggerated Defect Type, the Metaphorical Value-added Type, and the Simulacrum Regeneration Type. Moreover, body aesthetics has attained certain significance in multiple aspects. From the perspectives of species-being and internal measure, it mirrors the core nature of human existence and the criteria by which people evaluate themselves. Regarding national quality and patriotism, it can embody the characteristics of a nation and evoke patriotic sentiments. In the realm of physiognomic logic and social mentality, it reveals the underlying psychological and social implications hidden within physical appearances. Concerning survival wisdom and humanistic feelings, it encapsulates the wisdom of life and the tender emotions of humanity. And in relation to the power system and the true nature of life, it exposes the function of the power structures and the fundamental nature of human existence. Having traversed through different periods such as the inclination towards imperfect aesthetics from the 1930s to 1940s, the rejection of imperfect aesthetics from the 1950s to 1960s, the resurgence of imperfect aesthetics from the 1970s to 1980s, and the flourishing of sexual aesthetics in the 21st century, body aesthetics in Chinese film and television dramas has unfurled the Chinese people's interpretations of the body, culture, and history across different historical epochs.

Keywords: Chinese film and television dramas; Body aesthetics; Representations; Meanings; Logic

Introduction

In the realm of culture, the human body serves as a profound and multi-faceted symbol, encapsulating the rich tapestry of human nature. This inherent richness is not static; rather, it undergoes a continuous process of becoming more complex and nuanced as human practical activities broaden in scope and depth. As human beings engage in a diverse range of social, economic, technological, and creative endeavors, the body's significance and the ways it is perceived and interpreted within cultural contexts also transform. Within the academic discourse, there exists a widely-accepted consensus that "the body has emerged as a central preoccupation in the contemporary ideological sphere." (Fang, 2016) This heightened focus on the body can be attributed to various factors, including the development of post-modern and post-structuralist theories, which have encouraged a re-evaluation of the relationship between the body, identity, and society. As a result, the study of body aesthetics has ascended to a position of prominence as a crucial dimension for conducting in-depth cultural reflection and incisive critique of human activities. In the context of film and television dramas, the body, endowed with its unique symbolic expressiveness, assumes an indispensable role as an aesthetic element. It serves as a medium through which emotions, identities, and cultural values can be conveyed to the audience. Whether it is through the physical postures, movements, or expressions of the actors, the body in film and television has the power to communicate complex ideas and evoke deep-seated emotional responses. Unsurprisingly, given its significance, body aesthetics has attracted substantial attention within the contemporary global film and television domain. Filmmakers and television producers around the world are increasingly recognizing the potential of body aesthetics to enhance the artistic quality and cultural resonance of their works. Objectively, when examining the trajectory of body aesthetics in Chinese film and television dramas, it becomes evident that there has been a notable transition. Initially, the engagement with body aesthetics was more of an unconscious, intuitive process. Filmmakers and actors might have incorporated physical elements into their works without a fully-formed theoretical understanding of body aesthetics. However, over time, with the influence of international film trends, the development of domestic film theory, and an increasing awareness of the cultural significance of the body, this has evolved into a more conscious and deliberate practice. Today, Chinese film and television practitioners are more likely

to actively consider the aesthetic implications of body representation, drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks and cultural references to create more meaningful and impactful works.

Representations of Body Aesthetics

Kant once said that “taste is the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion apart from any interest. The object of such a delight is called beautiful.” (Kant, 2007) That is, beauty is a kind of pleasant feeling caused by the object. Body aesthetics “extracts the body from the daily existence and makes it become the object and subject of aesthetics.” (Zhang, 2018) Firstly, in terms of object, body aesthetics can be divided into external and internal aspects. The former includes every part of the body and its clothing and hair style, while the latter refers to the disposition and lingering charm emanating from the body. Secondly, from the perspective of form, body aesthetics can be classified into two categories: static form and dynamic form. The former includes sitting, standing, lying and other shapes, as well as the formal beauty of the body in books, paintings, sculptures and print ads, while the latter includes the human body shapes in the production of labor, sports, games, gatherings, shopping, film and television drama works and dynamic advertising works. Thirdly, with regard to content, somatic aesthetics encompasses the beauty of nature, the beauty of society, the beauty of art, and the beauty of form.

Body aesthetics are mainly achieved through body language and facial expressions. Body language expresses different meanings in different cultures. In Chinese culture, nodding corresponds to affirmation or consent and shaking the head means refusal or a negative. Raising the head can mean one is sentimental or helpless while lowering one’s head can indicate guilt or contemplation. Wagging one’s head corresponds to disapprobation or disappointment. A clenched fist shows rage or a threat. Bowing shows gratitude or obedience. Waving is to say farewell or respond with support. Squatting with hands on the head can mean one is annoyed, while slapping the head with both hands usually means one is anxious, manic or extremely distressed. Putting a finger on one’s mouth commands silence. Regarding facial expressions, frowning implies doubt, scrunching the nose denotes mockery, smiling expresses pleasure or agreement, laughing can convey happiness, anger, or schadenfreude, guffawing is associated with excitement or

indignation, sneering indicates scorn, a crafty smile suggests sinister intent, and an obsequious grin implies a sense of flattery.

The essence of body aesthetics in film and television dramas does not merely hinge on the physical allure or lack thereof of the actors' external appearances. Instead, it delves deep into the multifaceted potential harbored within body images, the fluidity of movements, the subtleties of expressions, and the symbolic power of costumes to effectively convey the overarching theme or the profound artistic conception unique to each scene. In fact, Chinese film and television drama creators have long been acutely aware of the far-reaching significance of body aesthetics. In the ceaseless pursuit of artistic excellence, they have been unremittingly engaged in the exploration and innovation of diverse modes of expression. This has been driven by their desire to break new ground in the field of visual storytelling and to offer audiences more immersive and thought-provoking viewing experiences. Up to now, body aesthetics in Chinese film and television dramas have crystallized and mainly manifested in the following distinct types. These manifestations not only reflect the current state-of-the-art in the application of somatic aesthetics but also serve as a testament to the continuous evolution and development of this important aspect of film and television art.

The first one is the life-portrait type. Film and television drama, which tend to be more realistic aesthetically, have transcended the limitations of stage drama scenes. Although modern stage dramas have enhanced their realism due to the rapid development of prop technology, there is still a fundamental difference from the grand realism of film and television creation. The popularity of model operas has a certain connection with the improvement of realism when they are later remade into movies. Therefore, in the creation of Chinese film and television dramas, the basic principle of body aesthetics lies in the fidelity of the life prototype in the performance. In other words, body performance is presented in accordance with the inherent nature of the characters and the historical background in the drama. Currently, actors with outstanding acting skills in the film and television industry have won the audience's approval, indicating that the acting style based on body aesthetics has become a trend in film and television performance creation. The so-called acting-skill type refers to the type that ensures the authenticity of physical performance. An acting-skill school performer can continuously achieve "authenticity-preservation" in different categories according to the requirements of different types of character

images, rather than being limited to single-type authenticity-preservation for only one category of characters. Of course, the term “acting-skill school” also implies a high degree of authenticity in character portrayal.

The second one is the personality micro-expressive type. Different from stage plays that are watched from a distance, film and television dramas continuously use close-up shots to reveal the inner world and emotional changes of characters. Therefore, there are different requirements for actors’ performances. From the perspective of body aesthetics, film and television performances demand more delicate or microscopic acting. Subtle facial expressions such as a slight twitch of the character’s mouth, a gentle frown of the brows, or a faint glance of the eyes are important aspects for testing an actor’s expressiveness and their expression of body aesthetics. The individuality of a character is embedded in the physical form. The infinite variations of the body convey the character’s thoughts, emotions, or consciousness, and control the development of the plot.

The third one is the integrating spirit and form type. Although the realistic style dominates Chinese film and television dramas, especially in TV dramas where the limitations of the screen are more conducive to realistic approaches. However, some innovative artists have absorbed the free-hand brushwork techniques from painting art. In the creation of film characters, they combine realism and free-hand brushwork to create a body aesthetics that integrates spirit and form. Zhao Dan, a renowned Chinese art performer, when playing Lin Zexu, started from the grand historical background of the character. With profound eyes, well-controlled gestures, and a magnificent manner, he vividly and accurately reproduced the image of an anti-imperialist and patriotic national hero in modern Chinese history. Meanwhile, he also created a performing style that is free and easy, with form within the spirit, profound in connotation, and broad in realm. Similarly, Li Moran’s portrayal of Deng Shichang in *The Naval Battle of 1894* (1962), Bao Guo’an’s performance as Cao Cao in the 1994 version of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and Wang Luoyong’s interpretation of Zhuge Liang in *The Advisors Alliance* (2017), all have vividly demonstrated the essence of “integrating spirit and form”.

The fourth type is the exaggerated defect type. In Chinese comedies or entertainment dramas, the exaggerated defect type is a common and highly distinctive expression technique. It often relies on presenting facial or physical defects in an exaggerated way to enhance the entertainment effect.

Take the *Country Love* series (2006) as an example. Characters such as Xie Dajiao (*da jiao* in Chinese means big feet), Liu Da Nao Dai (*da nao dai* in Chinese means big head), Mushang with a thick-tongue, Zhao Si with facial tics, and Xie Guangkun who is bald and once deaf. Their physical defects not only do not weaken the aesthetic value of the drama, but also greatly enhance the satirical flavor and entertainment atmosphere of the plot. With their unique defect settings, these characters have become key elements in promoting the development of the plot and triggering resonance among the audience, allowing the audience to feel the truth and humor of life in laughter. Nietzsche long ago made profound judgments on the role of ugliness or defects in artistic aesthetics. He believed that ugliness has its power and “in so far as it still communicates something of the artist’s victorious energy which has become master of this ugliness and awfulness.” (Nietzsche, 1968) This view has been fully verified in numerous film and television works. Some characters, such as the protagonist nicknamed Turkey with Two Knives in *The God of Cookery* (1996), Lin Wudi in *Invincible Ugly Girl* (2008), and Jiang Xiaohua in *Miss No Good* (2008), are made to appear ugly through elements like drooping eyes, buckteeth, thick glasses, twisted braids, steel-hoop teeth, frizzy hair, and gaudy hairpins. The physical defects of these characters indirectly reveal the deformities of society. While challenging the audience’s aesthetic perception, these defects prompt them to reflect on social reality, and ultimately, these characters become memorable. Fan Silly, the protagonist in the television drama *The Legend of Silly* (2014), is intelligent but appears stupid, completely subverting the traditional prototype of an anti-Japanese war hero. According to traditional aesthetic standards, such a hero should be a man with thick eyebrows, big eyes, and a strong heroic aura. In the drama, two supporting roles, Qian Hama (Hama means toad in Chinese) and Gun Dilong, especially the latter with his midget figure and cleverness, also generate many entertainment elements. The successful creation of these characters fully demonstrates the unique charm and important value of the exaggerated defect type in film and television creation. It not only brings joy to the audience but also guides the audience to examine life and society from different perspectives.

The fifth one is the metaphorical value-added type. Initially, as an expressive device, metaphor is extensively utilized in literary works. Metaphor involves one signifier of a word taking the place of another within the signifier chain, exhibiting the characteristics of dislocation and elusiveness. In literature, words serve as the intermediary, and the expression is relatively

straightforward. Naturally, metaphor is widely adopted as it can fulfill the functions of meaning-creation and imagination-evocation. In contrast, film and television dramas, which use sound and image as intermediaries, emphasize intuitiveness, sensibility, and clear-cut meaning. However, the performance techniques of film and television dramas differ significantly from those of literature, and the use of metaphors with obscure perception and ambiguous meaning is scarce. Nevertheless, when appropriately employed in film and television dramas, metaphors can be highly impactful. For instance, in the movie *Begonia* (1955), the cross-shaped scars on the face of the protagonist, Xiu Mei, metaphorically represent the map of China during the Anti-Japanese War. The shape of the scars implies the division of China into Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Japanese-occupied North China, and the area controlled by the Chinese Nationalist Party (CNP). The bruised and suffering protagonist Qiu Haitang is a metaphor for the millions of Chinese working people. Due to the presence of this metaphor, the national background presented in *Begonia* can strike a deep chord with the Chinese people and be ingrained as part of the nation's collective memory. Unlike analogy and symbol, which possess the characteristics of automatic perceptual association and meaning determination, metaphor requires the viewer's knowledge and values to be factored in. This is because its generative principle is a process of meaning diffusion, evolving from sensibility to intellectuality and finally to rationality.

The sixth one pertains to the simulacrum regeneration type. In the context of the rapid evolution of digital technology, within Chinese costume-themed swordsmen films and television dramas, particularly the former, characters and settings are frequently represented and presented through digital analogical means. In the 2010 film *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, the magnificent and sprawling Luoyang City, as well as the towering pagoda reaching a height of over two hundred meters, are all manifestations of digital simulacra. Evidently, these elements collaborate to construct a grand spectacle, yielding a far more impressive aesthetic outcome. Moreover, on the day when the Tongtian Stupa was on the cusp of completion, precisely at the moment when Empress Wu Zetian was ascending the imperial throne, several of her trusted ministers suddenly experienced the eruption of flames from their chests and were then inexplicably consumed by fire, reduced to ashes. In an instant, the conflagration engulfed their entire bodies, leaving behind only charred remnants at the scene. The manner of the characters' combustion and the rapidity of the process are astonishing. The audience can easily draw associations between this

terrifying scene and a cruel ancient Chinese punishment known as “pao luo”, or the purgatorial fire within Christian traditions. Indisputably, the film’s construction of human body aesthetics through imaging technology and the simulacrum concept has ushered body aesthetics into a virtual epoch. As Nietzsche posited, “the states in which we infuse a transfiguration and fullness into things and poetize about them until they reflect back our fullness and joy in life.” (Nietzsche, 1968) The aesthetic principle underlying the simulacrum does not hinge on restoration and reflection but rather on rebirth or rejuvenation. From this vantage point, it becomes evident that the generative logic does not proceed from reality to simulation; instead, it is oriented from simulation to reality.

Meanings of Body Aesthetics

In Kant’s opinion, “it is quite plain that in order to say that the object is beautiful, and to show that I have taste, every thing turns on what I make of this representation within myself, and not on any factor which makes me dependent on the existence of the object.” (Kant, 2007) Body aesthetics, in the context of the audience’s perception of the characters’ corporeal manifestations in film and television dramas, is the outcome of the comprehensive synthesis of sensibility, intellect, rationality, and irrationality. In every one of these dimensions, there exists a certain degree of either overt or latent personal value-based underpinnings and meaning-construction mechanisms. Given that film and television dramas are more straightforward in their presentation compared to novels, the aesthetic connotations associated with the body are correspondingly far more copious. In contrast to the solitary moment of enlightenment that a reader experiences when privately perusing a novel, the resonance generated when dozens or even hundreds of viewers simultaneously watch a movie within a specific spatial and temporal context evidently gives rise to understandings and emotional resonances that are fundamentally distinct.

The first one is referred to as species-being and internal measure. Kant’s stance on aesthetics furnishes a fundamental framework for comprehending the human aesthetic encounter. He postulated that the judgment of beauty is not a mere subjective fancy but is firmly rooted in a complex cognitive process. This concept holds profound implications when applied to the analysis of body aesthetics within the domain of film and television. From the very instant that humans become cognizant of their divergence from animals, the overarching aesthetic of humankind is to perceive the object through the fundamental criterion that demarcates human existence from that

of the animal kingdom. As Marx expounded, “man applies the internal measure to the object everywhere,” and “therefore, man also constructs according to the law of beauty.” (Marx and Engels, 1995) Essentially, the human aesthetic process intrinsically presupposes the species-being of humans. Self-realization, in this context, is attained through the grasp of the judgment of the beautiful. Consequently, the aesthetic history of humanity “is also the history of the development of the individual’s own power.” (Marx and Engels, 1995) Within the sphere of Chinese film and television, this concept is vividly manifested. For example, in sports-themed dramas like *Woman Basketball Player No.5*(1957), *A Female Diver* (1962), *Stalker* (1983) in the 20th century, and *Ambition* (2002), *Starting Paradise* (2005), *Mr. Swimmer* (2018) in the 21st century, the speed and strength of the human body depicted therein embody the indomitable life will and competitive spirit of humanity. These works construct a body aesthetics centered around health and vitality, vividly demonstrating how humans utilize the body as a medium to convey their distinctive qualities and values. The unique charm of Chinese swordsmen films resides in two principal aspects. Firstly, they present the primitive justice derived from the chivalrous spirit, which mirrors the moral and ethical dimensions of human nature. Secondly, they portray the boundless natural powers that are initially dormant within the bodies of reclusive chivalrous individuals but ultimately burst through the constraints of the physical form. The history of body aesthetics in Chinese swordsmen films can be regarded as a record of humanity’s exploration and understanding of its own latent strength. As Heidegger remarked, “the purpose that an individual must achieve is the status of a subject that he has never recognized in his life.” (Foucault, 2005) By taking the self-evidence of the subject’s physical existence as evidence of access to existence, the age-old adage of “knowing yourself” is transformed into a fundamental avenue towards truth. In an era replete with virtual technology and virtual art, film and television dramas continue to play a pivotal role. They offer impetus for humans to unearth the internal structure and associative mechanisms among truth, kindness, and beauty. Through the exploration of diverse body aesthetics, these dramas incite audiences to engage in profound reflection on the nature of human existence, the boundaries of physical and mental capabilities, and the intricate relationship between individual values and the broader social and cultural milieu.

The second one is called national quality and patriotism. within the landscape of Chinese cinematography, war-themed motion pictures, heroic biographical films, and those centered on

revolutionary history function as potent vehicles for the portrayal of a multitude of heroes who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of their nation. In these cinematic creations, body aesthetics occupies a pivotal position in the processes of meaning-making and value-construction during the crafting of heroic personas. Consider, for example, the highly-regarded film *Living Forever in Burning Flames* (1965). This work is characterized by a solemn, robust, and exalted stylistic approach. It serves to glorify qualities such as unwavering fortitude, a heroic conviction in life, and an indomitable heroic ethos. This is accomplished through the vivid and nuanced portrayal of imprisoned Communist Party members, including Xu Yunfeng, Sister Jiang, and Hua Ziliang. These characters have become indelible fixtures within the pantheon of heroic images in Chinese cultural heritage. The relief-like group representation of these heroes, in concert with the body aesthetics symbolically associated with the cypress, permeates the film with the sacrificial tenets of the Chinese Communist Party and the unyielding national temperament of the Chinese nation. Analogously, *Red Sorghum* (1988) also effectively communicates the themes of national quality and patriotism. The film presents the audience with a deeply-seared scene in which the heroine, Jiu Er, meets her end in the inferno of distillate spirits, simultaneously eliminating Japanese invaders. Her body ablaze within the flames, reminiscent of the mythological Phoenix undergoing nirvana, radiates a powerful artistic magnetism. This tableau not only reveals the sublimity of patriotic sentiment but also stands as a poignant testament to the unshakable resolve of the Chinese people in the face of external aggression. These films, by virtue of their artful employment of body aesthetics, have evolved into cultural cornerstones that strike a profound chord with the collective psyche of the Chinese nation. They foster a sense of national pride and a profound comprehension of the sacrifices made in the pursuit of national dignity and freedom.

The third one can be concluded as physiognomic logic and social mentality. Within the domain of film and television dramas, body aesthetics commonly materializes through the portrayal of positive characters as attractively tall men and gracefully beautiful women, while antagonists are depicted in diametrically opposite visual forms. This pattern is deeply rooted in the visual grammar of screen storytelling and mirrors more extensive cultural and psychological associations. For example, in *Intrepid Hero* (1958) and *Suppress Bandits in Wu Long Mountain* (1986), the character Du Yanlong, who has a visual impairment in one eye, is deliberately presented in a manner that diverges from the ideal of physical beauty. In *Railroad Guerrilla*

(1956), the traitor with a weasel-like visage, and in *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), the menacing-looking Zuo Shandiao, are all instances of villains whose appearances are intentionally distorted or made unappealing. This practice aligns with the traditional Chinese cultural concept that “the countenance is an outward manifestation of the inner spirit.” It suggests that a person’s moral character can be inferred from their physical attributes, with an unseemly or abnormal appearance acting as a visual indicator of a morally corrupt or villainous disposition. On the other hand, positive characters are crafted to embody specific desirable qualities through their physical presentations. Take Kong Guifei in *Blue Shield Safe Box* (1983) as an example. Her sultry and flirtatious demeanor is expressed through her body language and appearance, which effectively defines her character’s personality. Lu Ma in *The Thunderstorm* (1984), with an innocent and somewhat clumsy exterior, visually represents her naive and guile-free nature. Mu Wanqiu in *Lurk (qian fu)* (2009), with her shy and timid appearance, physically manifests her introverted and cautious character. Yang Lihua in *The Road We Have Taken* (2008) is depicted as dignified and elegant, and her appearance serves as a visual marker of her noble and composed inner self. In these cases, the external physical image of the body functions as a semiotic device for filmmakers to convey the intricate inner lives of characters. The logic of character construction based on appearance in film and television dramas not only simplifies the communication of character traits to the audience but also draws on deep - seated social and psychological understandings of the connection between appearance and character. It is a form of visual abbreviation that has been utilized throughout the history of cinema to rapidly establish character identities and moral stances within the narrative structure.

The forth one is survival wisdom and humanistic feelings. Modern film and television dramas, especially the body aesthetics presented within the realm of ancient - costume martial - arts movies, maintain a profound connection with life ethics and are replete with copious survival wisdom and the art of living. In the 2012 film *The Four*, Liu Yifei embodies the character of Wu Qing, who is afflicted with loneliness and physical disability. Despite her challenging circumstances, Wu Qing exhibits a resolute personality and remarkable telepathic skills. Notably, her wheelchair, reminiscent of the customized vehicles utilized by James Bond, is exquisitely engineered. This enables her to deftly evade a plethora of life-threatening situations, thereby transforming her physical impairment into a wellspring of creative potential. The body aesthetics manifested

through her leg disability lies in the expansive creative expanse it inaugurates. It defies the traditional expectations of physical prowess prevalent in a genre typically characterized by martial-arts- centered physicality, demonstrating that strength can assume unconventional forms. In *The Eternal Wave* (1958), Sun Daolin portrays Li Xia. As the enemy is on the verge of breaching his room, Li Xia surreptitiously moves his fingers to transmit a vital message. This scene not only vividly displays the fearless and self-sacrificing spirit of the Communists but also serves as a testament to the strategic acumen employed in the arduous struggle against the enemy. The close-up shot of the protagonist's fingers serves as the epicenter of body aesthetics in this particular instance. It accentuates the significance of a seemingly simple yet highly consequential physical gesture, underscoring how the human body can function as a medium for both survival and the conveyance of profound values. Through such illustrative examples, film and television leverage body-related elements to communicate not merely the physical capabilities but also the mental and emotional fortitude of characters, thereby enriching the narrative fabric with multifaceted layers of humanistic connotations.

The fifth one comes power system and true nature of life. In certain Chinese film and television dramas, the intricate internal mechanism between the body and power has been vividly revealed. These works lay bare a blatant desire for physical control. For instance, in *Don't Respond to Strangers* (2001), An Jiahe's acts of violating Mei Xiangnan are a harrowing display of power exerted over another's body. In *Lust, Caution* (2007), Mr. Yi's act of sexually abusing Wang Jiazhi with a belt showcases a disturbing manifestation of power dynamics. Similarly, in *Danger of Rhododendron* (2004), Lu Xiaona's ceaseless entanglement with Zhang Zhengjun reflects a complex web of power-based interactions over the body. Undoubtedly, aspects such as the body's strength, energy, health, and the very essence of life symbolize an unceasing expansion of modernity. There exists a complex matrix of political technology and mechanisms interwoven among the body, behavior, and social relations. The emergence of modern people's "physical consciousness" is intricately tied to the control exerted by social power. In this modern context, people have diverged from the bodily experiences of the ancients. The linkage mechanism between marriage and power often exerts control over the human body, thereby influencing human consciousness regarding feelings, passions, and the subtleties of physical pleasure. The modern knowledge system and power structure have coalesced to form a modern knowledge network.

Modern body hermeneutics encompasses multiple dimensions: the understanding of the body itself, the methods of stimulating the body, the enhancement of knowledge related to bodily enjoyment, the intervention of scientific language, the cultural contestation between control and anti-control, and the infiltration of power strategies within the body. As a result, people undergo a transformation. Their inquiries shift from questioning the realistic relationships among individuals to probing into body desires. This means delving into body feelings, body enjoyment, the mysterious impulses of the body, the pleasures it experiences, and the most primitive commitments associated with it. These shifts in the exploration of the body-power nexus in film and television dramas mirror the complex and evolving nature of modern society's understanding of the body and its place within the power-laden social fabric.

Progressing Logic of Body Aesthetics

Aesthetics can be both illogical and logical, and it encompasses aspects of knowledge as well as elements that transcend knowledge. The understanding and characteristics of body aesthetics in Chinese film and television dramas have traversed several distinct periods, as detailed below, vividly reflecting the profound impact of the times on the creation of film and television dramas.

The first period (1930-1940s) is a time demonstrating a strong inclination towards imperfect aesthetics. During this era, China witnessed a series of major historical events, such as the Japanese invasion and the Civil War. The turbulent backdrop of the times exposed the Chinese people to too many of the world's dark sides, further influencing their aesthetic sensibilities. Body aesthetics in film and television dramas deviated from past traditions and exhibited a tendency towards imperfect aesthetics. Among the most representative works from this period were *Song at Midnight* (1937), *Begonia*, and *Wanderings of Three Hairs the Orphan* (1949). *Song at Midnight* and *Begonia* achieved similar ends through different means. Both tell the story of an artist who becomes disfigured after falling in love with a woman. Song Danping in *Song at Midnight* is splashed with nitric acid, while the male protagonist in *Begonia* is brutally slashed in the face with a bayonet. These two disfigured men, due to their physical mutilations, are no longer willing to meet their lovers and even deliberately avoid others in their daily lives. At that time, film was still in its infancy, and filmmaking techniques were relatively immature. Compared with the more popular stage plays of the same period, these two movies broke through the limitations of the stage

and repeatedly presented the characters' disfigured faces to the audience through close-ups. For example, after Sun Xiao'ou won the trust of Song Danping, he finally saw his skull-like face. Similarly, in Meibao's mirror-dressing scene, Qiu Haitang appeared to confront his disfigured self in the mirror. Subsequently, he lost his mind and became hysterical. Moreover, the two movies have a similarly poignant ending. Song Danping threw himself into a river after being chased as a monster by people when he exposed his terrifying face in public. Qiu Haitang, unwilling to show his ugly face to his ex-girlfriend, finally jumped out of the window and committed suicide. Evidently, both *The Phantom Lover* and *Begonia* express the close connection between the body and society. Through the destruction of physical beauty, they expose the ugliness of society. The cruel plot of the hero's choice to commit suicide embodies the artistic conception of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which enhances the praise of "beauty" through the destruction of "beauty". Both movies caused a sensation upon their release because they mirrored the harrowing experiences of the Chinese people at that time. With strong realistic significance, they fully demonstrated the unique romantic aesthetic consciousness of the Chinese nation and expressed a strong desire for anti-feudalism, anti-warlord sentiment, personality pursuit, and national liberation. The ending of *Wanderings of Three Hairs the Orphan* is not as gloomy as the two aforementioned works, but the character's body also clearly exhibits a tendency towards imperfect beauty. A skinny physique, a big head with three hairs, and a round, bulbous nose constitute the protagonist's most prominent physical features. Compared with children from wealthy families, who are well-dressed and good-looking, San Mao, who roamed the streets of Shanghai before the founding of the People's Republic of China, has illustrated what is meant by "truth, kindness, and beauty" and what is "falsehood, vice, and ugliness". Objectively speaking, although the tendency towards imperfect aesthetics emerged in film and television dramas at that time, this inclination did not develop into a dominant trend. Aesthetic practitioners unconsciously incorporated this type of aesthetics into the creation of film and television dramas merely due to their self-awareness and dissatisfaction with social ills.

The second period (1950-1960s) saw the rejection of imperfect aesthetics. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the social and political situation underwent a dramatic transformation. To better present the new image of the Chinese people, Chinese film and television dramas began to consciously eschew imperfect beauty. This was because physical disabilities did

not align with the people's pursuit of morally upright and ideal character images during that era. If one could say that imperfect beauty still left a faint mark in the 1950s due to Liu Guazi (a cripple) in the movie *The Cold Before Dawn* (1957), then after the 1960s, Chinese film and television dramas no longer made any allowance for imperfect beauty, and it was thoroughly and mercilessly banished. For instance, *Begonia*, which was replete with imperfect aesthetics and had once been highly lauded, became the target of public criticism. In 1963, a review was published in *Shanghai Theatre* regarding the screenplay of *Begonia*:

Zhuge Wenqian pointed out that the serious issue with *Begonia* is that “it goes to great lengths to promote and manipulate the relationship between Qiu Haitang and Luo Xiangqi, yet fails to endow them with a more abundant and noble spiritual realm.” In my view, this is not a matter of artistic techniques; rather, it stems from the playwright's decadent bourgeois world-view. They are only capable of “indulging in romantic affairs” and dabbling in those “vulgar interests.” They simply have no means to discuss endowing their protagonists with “a more noble spiritual world.”... The author unhesitatingly resorts to a formulaic approach, rigidly pushing the story towards a tragic ending of lovers sacrificing their lives for love, showing no interest whatsoever in depicting the resistance of the young. (Murong, 1963)

Some people accused the work of advocating a bourgeois lifestyle and being permeated with negative life emotions. Consequently, this movie was regarded as a manifestation of bourgeois vulgarity, idleness, corruption, and obsolescence. “Yuan Baofan committed another crime by disfiguring and expelling Qiu Haitang. This seemingly demonstrates Yuan's cruelty. However, the script fails to consider that Qiu Haitang also bears some responsibility for his own tragedy.” (Dai, 1963) The protagonist of *Song at Midnight* was shunned by the public due to his disfigurement. The tragic ending of his suicide by jumping into the river was criticized for slandering revolutionary comrades and promoting pessimism, which ultimately led to the film's prohibition. These attacks confirm that the aesthetics of the disfigured body has been interpreted in a negative light. Moreover, the traditional aesthetics presented in film and television dramas has become somewhat paranoid due to the exclusion of imperfect beauty. As a result, this unrelenting rejection of imperfect beauty has not only given rise to a batch of low-quality, aesthetically

homogeneous works with paranoid values but has also led to the unjust persecution of many outstanding artists.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the resurgence of the aesthetics of imperfection. In the 1970s, particularly in the late 1970s, with the development of Chinese society, the creative environment of the Chinese film and television industry improved significantly. Film and television practitioners gradually gained more aesthetic freedom. The aesthetics of imperfection began to re-emerge in film and television dramas with more profound connotations. Its manifestations could be either visually apparent physical disabilities or invisible internal psychological impairments. The 1972 film-ballet *The White-Haired Girl* revealed the irreconcilable contradiction between landlords and peasants during the Agrarian Revolution through the young girl Xi'er's completely white hair. In 1978, the film *He Never Gives Up* presented a disabled man, Zheng Fengxi, who had congenital foot deformities. The hero refused to submit to his fate and had the courage to face challenges. All these qualities compensated for his physical disability, enabling the audience to perceive the hidden spiritual strength behind the aesthetics of imperfection. The release of *Moonlight on Second Spring* in 1979 brought the renowned folk artist Blind Ah Bing to the screen. The hero's physical mutilation was juxtaposed with the beautiful music that has endured through the ages, fully interpreting the astonishment conveyed by the aesthetics of imperfection. Films such as *The Story of A Small Town* (1979), *My Memories of Old Beijing* (1982), *Below the Bridge* (1983), and *A Woman for Two* (1988) depicted characters like the mute girl Ah Xiu, the mad woman Xiuzhen, the paraplegic Xiao Yun, and the legless Li Mao. These groups with physical or internal impairments did not undermine the themes. Instead, their misfortunes and struggles in life provided the audience with a more realistic perspective on the world and a deeper understanding of the true meaning of life.

The 21st century has witnessed the flourishing of sexual aesthetics. Owing to the rapid development of Internet and new media technologies in this era, the "naked" body aesthetics has been fully revealed, and sexual aesthetics are no longer a taboo in Chinese film and television dramas. The movie *Lust, Caution* serves as a prime example. In this film, Mr. Yi, played by Tony Leung Chiu-wai, and Wang Jiazhi, portrayed by Tang Wei, are completely naked in a sex scene that lasts for over ten minutes. Lying naked, warm, and writhing with each other in bed, the two actors perform so convincingly that the audience can't help but feel that everything they see is both

real and breathtaking. Local Italian newspapers quickly commented that the explicit sexual content in the movie has tested the tolerance limits of Italians. The plot of the movie is almost identical to that of the novel, and it is even said to be faithful to the original. However, the aesthetic orientation has undergone a fundamental shift. The aesthetic tone of Eileen Chang's novel is magnificent, repressed, and reserved. What the author intends to convey is the depression and dullness of social relations. In contrast, Ang Lee's movie aims to express the primitive desires of the human body. Thus, the repressed beauty of the body forms the foundation of the love between Wang Jiazhi and Mr. Yi. Therefore, it can be argued that the aesthetics of Eileen Chang's novel is spiritual aesthetics, while Ang Lee's is body aesthetics. This transformation is far more than just a difference in expressive techniques—one is from text to media, and the other is from sobriety to passion. In Eileen Chang's novel, Wang Jiazhi is lonely, naive yet thoughtful. She feels insecure deep inside but appears calm on the surface. In Ang Lee's movie, Wang Jiazhi can only intuitively sense her "real" existence through physical contact with Mr. Yi. From Eileen Chang's perspective, there are numerous ways for women to please others, and those who are only attracted to a woman's body have missed out on many precious aspects of life. For Ang Lee, Mr. Yi consoles Wang Jiazhi with his power, while the latter attempts to destroy him with her beauty. Eileen Chang's aesthetics operates on a "body - spirit" mechanism within the artistic conception, while the aesthetics in the film is a "body-body" direct induction mechanism. There are also several other films and television dramas that straightforwardly embody sexual aesthetics, such as *2046* (2004), *Curiosity Kills the Cat* (2006), *Lost in Beijing* (2007), *Go Lala Go!* (2010), *White Deer Plain* (2011), *You Are My Sunshine* (2015). Their existence attests to the fact that "sex" has increasingly become a powerful footnote in the body aesthetics of Chinese film and television dramas in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Film and television dramas, functioning as a pivotal intermediary integrating modern commerce, mainstream values, popular culture, media, and the power matrix, assume a dual-role status in the sphere of ideology. They not only embody the content of ideological discourses but also serve as the carriers through which these ideologies are diffused. Body aesthetics, a fundamental constituent within the domain of film and television, has gradually undergone a transformation

into body ideology. Notably, “in the consumer-oriented society, the maintenance and preservation of the body have increasingly emerged as a core component of key industries. An extensive economic complex has been established, revolving around the development, management, beautification, sustenance, display, and commercial exploitation of the body. This body-centered economy has now become an essential linchpin of the overall economic structure.” (Tao, 2010) In light of the incontrovertible influence wielded by contemporary Chinese film and television dramas, and taking into account the diachronic and evolutionary logic of body aesthetics therein, it is of utmost necessity to intensify our research on body aesthetics. We must accurately discern the positive impacts of body aesthetics on film and television dramas, as well as on the overarching national ideological framework. Only by doing so can we furnish a more multifaceted and positive aesthetic experience for the audience engaged in the appreciation of film and television works. This, in turn, contributes to the enrichment and elevation of the cultural and aesthetic landscape in the context of the modern media-saturated society.

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