The Countryside as an Inhospitable Frontier in Australian and Chinese Films

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Abstract

The Countryside as an inhospitable frontier, as a place where human beings live a harsh life, frequently appeared in both Australian film and Chinese leftist films in the period of nationalism, the 1920s and 1930s. In Australia, this construction manifests itself in the old idea of human beings in conflict with nature, working in an unfriendly environment to make the barest living. In China, it is a new construction, differing from the old motif of a "pastoral" countryside blessed by nature. In Australia, despite its challenges, the countryside was still regarded as a peaceful homeland for human beings to return to, but in Chinese leftist culture, the construction of a negative image of the countryside was so extreme that it was depicted as a totally wretched world.

Keywords: countryside, inhospitable, conflicts, bushman

1. Introduction

During the period of the 1920s and 1930s, in Australia, a number of films presented countryside as a negative force posing obstacles and trials to the white Australian bushmen. In these films, the pioneer conflict with the land was stressed—in a narrative that emphasized the harsh qualities of bush life in the face of fire, drought and other difficulties. It is a continuation of the late 19th century pioneer legend, in which the image of the brave bushman is not only an expression of a national sentiment, it reflects a new ideology of nationhood, baptized by the First World War. The war intensified the sense of national identity in the 1920s and reinforced the national character of "the Australian type" by relating the Anzac legend to the bush legend.

During the same period, in Chinese film there was also a recurring motif of representing the suffering of the rural lower-class people in countryside. In this motif, the economic bankruptcy of the countryside was worsened by the threat of natural phenomena. This is similar to the representation of the harshness of nature in Australian films of the 1920s. In this period, China was influenced by the endless civil wars coupled with foreign military and economic aggression. The New Culture movement brought about the nation-wide devaluation of traditional Chinese culture, and led to the importation of Western modes of thought. The filmmakers directly revealed the misery being experienced by country people, in an attempt to arouse the conscience and consciousness of national sentiments, and to construct a new national character.

In this paper, Australian film *The Breaking of the Drought* (1920) and Chinese film *Wild Torrents* (1933) will be used as representative examples to demonstrate this motif. In these films nationalist sentiment was prevalent. Some other films with similar representations will also be discussed briefly. The following section demonstrates the image of the countryside as a place where human beings live a harsh life, in conflict with the forces of nature, in Australian film, then in section 3 it is compared with the similar image in Chinese film. In section 4, the differences in this similar construction will be discussed, then comes the last section of conclusion.

2. The Countryside as an Inhospitable Frontier in Australian Film

The bushman's harsh life in the countryside was most clearly demonstrated in the Australian film *The Breaking of the Drought* (1920), one of the brilliant bush photographer Franklyn Barrett's (1873−1964) two surviving bush films. It not only describes the harsh life in the countryside, but also demonstrates a sharp contrast between city and countryside. Gilbert Galloway, the son of a country family, lives a corrupt life in the city (Sydney) with his friend Olive, a city girl who loves luxurious things and who symbolizes the exploitation and seduction of the city. Gilbert and Olive's lives are the antithesis of Majorie Galloway (Gilbert's sister) and her parents' ideal agrarian

way of life on Wallaby station. Majorie's parents represent the typical Australian man battling with the Australian bush and the typical Australian woman stoically enduring all hardships. The film featured natural disasters to intensify the moral message. Majorie and her parents pull through droughts, bush fires, dust storms, floods and rabbit plagues in the countryside, while Gilbert indulges in the pleasures of dancing, gambling and other temptations in the city. Country life is likened to a prolonged battle with "bitterness, dreariness and hunger, drought and sweat", whereas city life is seen as filled with wasted days and pleasure-making. Yet despite the problems of country life, something which is clearly manifest in this film (and in Australian cinema as a whole during this period) is its idealization of country values and its satirical vision of city dwellers. The country was constructed as a place of honest labour and moral purity, providing a reasonable living for all, while the city was represented as a place of sophisticated society rife with loose living and corruption. When Majorie's father, Mr Jo Galloway, asks her if she wants to live in the city, she answers, "No, Dad, I have no desire for city life. My place is here with you". Her answer is the central idea of this film, and is strengthened by her words to her "city" brother Gilbert: "Give up this evil life and go into the bush. There's plenty of honest work to be done". The country was also represented as a place of redemption and forgiveness where the family could be reunited and finds spiritual regeneration. Gilbert at last gives up his evil life in the city and seeks to expiate his follies and sins in the clear bracing air of the Outback. He returns to the countryside in time to witness his family's ruin and then their salvation from bushfire. He himself is also rescued both physically and spiritually, resulting in a baptism and regeneration of his soul.

In this film, the ugliness of the bush is sometimes presented as hard and uncompromising, forcing settlers to constantly re-work their strategies for survival (Shirley & Adams, 1983, p. 57). This is a continuation of the 19th-century theme of bush-pioneering values and progress. However, in this construction human beings are still encouraged to return to the countryside. This is both a metaphorical and an actual retreat. The country is still represented as providing a better life for Australians. Through the construction of country life as one which provides a healthy contrast to life in the city, the film evokes a nostalgic feeling for a world of closer relationships and communication between man and nature. The film emphasizes the opposition between country and city through contrasting shots, with images of wild flowers and the freshness of the countryside shown beside potted ferns and flowers in a vase. Contrasted too is the pipe in the countryside, a symbol of bush fortitude, and the cigarette in the city, which signifies city seduction (Tulloch, 1981, p. 360). The independent country women who find pleasure in taming horses and the city women who dance for men are also constructed in contrast (Figure 1). The return to the country of the prodigal son Gilbert is a triumph of the virtues of a life in the natural world of the country over life in the city, although this is achieved by battle against, rather than unity with, nature.

This film demonstrates a country contempt for the "soft life" of the city. One reason for this city-country contrast which extolled the hardships of life in the country was that this harsh existence was thought to be the source of the Australian spirit. As Russell Ward suggests, the Australian spirit is derived from the isolated, ordinary people of the bush, in contrast to the fragmenting high-life of the people of the cities (Ward, 1966, p. 1). The director Charles Chauvel (1897−1959) also believed that the true spirit of the nation was constantly regenerated in its rural heartlands (Tulloch, 1981, pp. 269−285). During this period, Australian society was experiencing a mood of post-WWI nationalism, a consolidation of identity for a country which had only officially been a nation since 1901. In this time of cultural nationalism, the search for a national cultural identity preoccupied diverse groups of Australians (Butel, 1986, p. 50). A sense of nation was developed by filmmakers through the discovery of the uniqueness of their landscape, which can be seen through the popularity of landscape representation in constructing the national image. Although after the war a high proportion of Australians lived in cities, and it was therefore more difficult for filmmakers to focus on the representation of Australian landscape, there was still a fascination with Australian nature. Many filmmakers believed that city life was not a suitable subject for constructing a national identity (Tsokhas, 2001, p. 177). Instead, they thought that the nation's true identity was entirely to be found in the countryside or bush. The Anzac legend was in fact a new celebration of the bush legend. The creation of the Anzac legend contributed to the renewal of claims about mateship and the bush ethos in the countryside, which were said to spring from experiences of hardship and isolation. C. E. W. Bean, the great myth-maker of Anzac, reflected that on Anzac Day "the consciousness of Australian nationhood was born" (Alomes, 1988, p. 60). The propaganda produced during and after the war—the fabric of the Anzac myth—refurbished the bush legend and bridged the gap between the pioneer past and the present. It served to mythologize urban-living experience and staked a new claim to the bush ethos by proving that Australians living in the cities had the same character and qualities as those living in the bush. In the construction of a new national myth, the idea of distinctively Australian characteristics came to the fore. The un-European character of their landscape was often seen as a prime symbol of this distinctive Australianness. As a result, the quest for the soul

or spirit of true Australian nature became the preoccupation of filmmakers. The country provided the challenge which produced the stoic strength of the ideal Australian, someone capable of dealing with any adversity. In this city-country opposition, the contrast between city villainy and country purity was enhanced by the harshness of country life in which people worked hard and constantly struggled with nature.

Another reason was that the vicissitudes of country life were seen as purifying and character building (Tulloch, 1981, p. 349). The idea that labouring on the land helped people to escape the evils of city life was a long-established tradition in Australia. As early as 1817 when John Macarthur (1766−1834), the Australian wool industry pioneer, returned to New South Wales from London, he argued that farming was the most suitable activity the colony could offer for the reform of convicts:

> "From every observation I have been enabled to make upon the characters and conduct of convicts, both during the time of their servitude and after they are restored to freedom, I am confirmed in the opinion, that the labours which are connected with the tillage of the earth and the rearing and care of sheep and cattle, are but calculated to lead to the correction of their vicious habits—when men are engaged in rural occupations their days are chiefly spent in solitude—they have much time for reflection and self-examination, and they are less tempted to the preparation of crimes than [they] would [be] herded together in towns, a mass of disorders and vices" (Hoorn, 2007, p. 53).

The attitude of John Thomas Bigge (1780−1843), the Commissioner appointed to examine the government of New South Wales, was similar. The country was viewed by him as pure and removed from the crime of urban life, and thus conducive to law and order and to the reform of criminals. From this time on, cities were regarded as places where the impoverished gathered, presenting temptations that encouraged criminal behaviour; while the country represented a recuperative space for people from the city where they could rest and restore themselves (Hoorn, 2007, pp. 53−54). The simple act of cultivating the earth purifies them.

In this city-country contrast, the emphasis is placed, on the one hand, on the idea that in the countryside, it is man's toil and struggles that have triumphed over the extremes of the Australian climate. This is demonstrated in *The Breaking of the Drought*, which utilizes both the parallels and oppositions in nature and culture. In the city, there is spiritual drought; in the country, there is natural drought. But in the country, through the labour of humans and their ongoing battle with the land, both of these droughts can be broken, and both natural and social fulfillment can be attained. On the other hand, the emphasis is placed on the idea that the lives of human beings should not be distanced from this kind of humanized nature. Australian nature was constructed as a kind of extreme, where human beings and nature if separated, become both harsh and solipsistic, like drought and bushfire in the country and corruption in the city; but if they are united, they can produce both spiritual and physical fulfillment and prosperity (Tolloch, 1981, p. 376).

3. The Countryside as a Negative Image in Chinese Film

In a similar way to the construction of the harshness of rural life in the context of nationalism in Australian film, representation of a rural life challenged by hardship was also popular in the new trend of Chinese film during this period, especially in the leftist film of the 1930s which focused on rural bankruptcy in the countryside.

From 1928, influenced by the Communists, the mainstream literature began to lean toward the "left" with utilitarianism and fighting spirit as the guiding principle. Following the steps of leftist writers, in 1931, the China Leftist Dramatists Association launched a "leftist film movement" to criticize the feudal ideas in Chinese film, and became a leader in film production. The leftist film movement was a significant force which fundamentally changed the landscape of national cinema in the 1930s. According to an official definition, leftist films refer to those anti-imperialist, anti-feudal films produced between 1933 and 1935 in the leftist film movement under the leadership of the Cultural Alliance of Chinese Leftists. But many other films, although not made between 1933 and 1935, or under the leadership of leftists, can also be considered ideologically akin to leftist films if they were influenced greatly by leftist ideas. The term can be extended to include films released in 1937, and can be pushed back to account for film criticism that anticipated the emergence of leftist films (Zhang, 2004, p. 63).

Compared with Australian film, the construction of rural hardship went even further and destroyed the very concept of the fundamental harmony or unity of man and nature. This is demonstrated in the first leftist film, *Wild Torrents* (*Kuangliu*) (1933), directed by Cheng Bugao (1898−1966) and scripted by Xia Yan (1900−1995), an active leftist. Interestingly, in Chinese films about the country life it is usually "water" (not "fire") that stands for the destructive force of nature, such as in *Wild Torrents*, but the image of water has the same function as the image of (bush)fire in the Australian films. *Wild Torrents* is regarded as "the beginning of a new path for Chinese cinema" (Cheng, 1980, p. 204). It narrates the struggle between the peasants and the flood on the one hand, and on the other, the peasants and the landlord (Note 1). In this film, the central problem is the class struggle between

landlord and the peasantry, but nature plays an important role—as an enemy being fought against, just like the landlord class. The main scenery is the darting rain and clouds. The film is filled with intrigue, tension and struggle—between human beings themselves, and between human beings and nature. The threat posed by water and flood to the lower-class people's life is emphasized. In a similar way to the Australian bush legend, here, in order to demonstrate the strength of the peasants, who are regarded as symbolizing the Chinese spirit, the force of nature is represented negatively as the "other": the rainstorm, the thunderstorm and flooding, posing a threat to human "success".

Wild Torrents is an unprecedented film, making a shift in the direction of Chinese cinema (Zhou, 2005, p. 64). It is representative of a series of films influenced by leftist ideas in which the representation of the plight and suffering of impoverished peasants in the countryside and nature's destructive force are stressed. These films include *Sea-burial (Haizang)* (1933) in which fishermen are swallowed by a typhoon (Figure 2), *Triumphant Song (Kaige)* (1935) in which peasants, with their collective power, win the battle against both landlord and drought in the countryside south of Yangtze River, *Song of the Fishermen (Yuguangqu)* (1934) (Figure 3) which articulates the leftist idea of "rural bankruptcy" and conveys an impressive sense of gloom. This genre of films demonstrates the miseries in all areas, such as *The Spring Worm (Chuncan)* (1933) and *Harvesting Year (Fengnian)* (1933), both depicting hardships experienced in the Jiangnan area (Figure 4), *Red Tears of Tie Ban (Tieban Hongleilu)* (1933) which shows suffering in the Sichuan countryside (Figure 5), *The Wave of the Salt (Yanchao)* (1933) (Figure 6) and *The Angry Waves in the Chinese Sea (Zhongguohai De Nuchao)* (1933) which represent the harsh realities of life in the south-eastern seaside villages.

In all these films, the force of nature as a threatening enemy is emphasized. For example, at the beginning of *Song of the Fishermen* the director makes it clear in the caption that although the sea was traditionally praised by poets, it is actually a disaster for the fishermen. The film exaggerates the conflict between man and nature through the use of depressing music, the lyrics of the song and the shots of storms which deprive the fishermen of their lives. All of this is in sharp contrast to the image of water in traditional representations. It needs to be clarified that in some of these films, in terms of technology (not ideology), there was a link between man and nature in the Confucian sense. Human emotions are projected onto natural objects or phenomena. For instance, in the movie Song of the Fisherman, when highlighting the grief felt at the grandma's death, the director cuts from the crying children to the shot of crying crows among the dead trees. This technique of using lyrical Montage to express the inner feelings of the characters is a main tradition of Chinese film. Catherine Yi-Yu Chowoo argues that montage mingling human image with natural image, which is prevalent in Chinese classical poetry, can be regarded as Chinese Montage (Chris, 1991). Through this type of montage, the director connects shots of character and shots of natural phenomena such as the wind, flower, snow or the moon. Nature is made use of to symbolize or suggest character. Through this the director achieves the integration of human psyche and natural atmosphere. In some scholars' opinion, this is a sort of "harmony of man and nature'" (Huang, 2001, p. 160). In fact, this is also "*Bixing*" in Chinese film. The directors and cameramen consciously or unconsciously bring this aesthetic from classical poetry into cinematic narrative, to achieve a poetic lyricism. However, in terms of ideology, all the above films focused on the conflict of humans and nature.

In a similar way to bush heroes in Australian film, in these Chinese films the force of nature is stressed in order to heighten the power of the human beings. The peasants are repressed not only by the landlord class, but also by hostile nature—both cause their bankruptcy and homelessness. Nature is an evil force, or works together with an evil force, to test the peasants' spirit and willpower.

The myth of a miserable countryside lacking any sense of a peaceful homeland, which is particularly evident in Chinese film in the 1930s, was the result of many factors. First, in reality, class conflicts between the peasantry and the landlords escalated dramatically during the 1930s. Faced with the deteriorating situation engulfing rural China, many filmmakers and audiences ceased to "daydream" or "imagine" a pastoral utopia aloof from strife. Second, although many intellectuals especially filmmakers had been influenced by the new May Fourth spirit and by Western culture as early as the 1920s, it was not until the 1930s that they realized the importance of film as a medium which could propagate their views. It was from this period that they began to incorporate new ideas into films, ten years after the May Fourth spirit had started to spread throughout China. These new ideas included criticism of the native agricultural system based on the Confucian hierarchy and the exploitation of peasants' labour by landlords. In this process of cultural reflection, the countryside—which once bore the weight of the idealized imagination of the filmmaker and audiences—ceased to be regarded as a spiritual home, a peaceful place, detached from social struggle. On the contrary, it now became a world of misery. Even the natural environment in the Jiangnan area, which was traditionally represented as mild, pleasant and gentle, was now constructed as harsh, inhospitable and destructive in leftist films (e.g., in *The Spring Worm (Chuncan)* and

Harvesting Year (Fengnian)). It was seen as in league with the enemy, contributing to the misery of the peasantry. This idea dominated Chinese cinema in the 1930s. As Li Daoxin claims, Chinese film from the 1930s entered a new period of cultural reconstruction. This change in portrayal of the country was testimony to the shift towards self reflection in Chinese culture (Li, 2005, p. 58.).

During this time film came to be seen as a new art form which could lend itself to social education and reform. Cinema's didactic function of enlightening the masses to save the nation in crisis, was considered to be as important as, and at times as more vital than, its profit-making function (Zhu, 2003, p. 176). Endless civil war, coupled with foreign military and economic aggression during this period, caused film workers, who were seeking to save China in crisis, to see the portrayal of Chinese nationalism as critical. Ying Zhu (2003) also argues that the development of a leftist, progressive national cinema is to a great extent Chinese nationalistic reaction to both social and political disasters and Hollywood dominance. Even the director Zheng Zhengqiu (1888–1935), a representative of the traditionalists, proposed the slogan of "anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and anti-feudalism" to Chinese film circles (Zhang, 2004, p. 111). It was by the use of this propaganda, that the tradition of a Chinese cinema with "social responsibility" was first established and developed a close connection with social reality (Leo, 1991, p. 7). From then on, Chinese film has always been associated with political ideologies.

The third factor that influenced the myth of a miserable country in Chinese film, was a political one. At this time more and more intellectuals were coming under the influence of left-wing thought which advocated exposing the social evils and the harsh reality of life in both the city and the countryside in order to achieve social reform and revolution. In Chinese cinema of the 1930s, while there were also films promoting the traditional ideas of the National government, films with leftist ideas became dominant. These films were innovative in both style and content with their radical nationalistic spirit and revolutionary ideas. It can be argued that the leftism which activated most writers and filmmakers in the 1930s was basically an expression of social discontent. As a result, in film one finds an overriding obsession with the ills of contemporary society, in both country and city. The basic artistic mode in which this obsession was expressed may be termed "social realism" (or "critical realism", not to be confused with the later, more ideological mode of "socialist realism") (Leo, 1991, p. 8). The basic ethos of social realism was to criticize and expose the dark side of society, criticism which was motivated by a humanistic concern for the plight of the Chinese people, both in the city and in the country. This resulted in a series of radical transformations in many aspects of Chinese film in the 1930s: in artistic aesthetics (from representing peaceful harmony to constructing tragic struggle); in concept (from film as entertainment to film as a vehicle for reform); and in ideology (from film as means of praising the good to one responsible for revealing social evils). In this social criticism, the harmonious relationship of human beings with nature in the countryside was lost.

4. Differences in Similarities

In the above-mentioned Chinese films, in order to emphasize the sufferings of the peasantry, as with the emphasis on the farmers' pioneering spirit in Australian films, nature in the countryside was represented as gloomy, desolate, and threatening. However, there are some significant differences between them. First, in the process of dealing with city-country relationships, Chinese film-makers differed from their Australian peers. There was no simple denial of the city through a visual and emotionally rhetorical identification with the country. There was no encouragement to return to the countryside either. In Australian films human beings' division in the countryside was disguised by the urban division. In *The Breaking of the Drought* the differences between Damper and Gilbert are absent. They are both from the country, and for both of them city temptations are the cause of their downfall.

Second, Chinese films (e.g., *Wild Torrents*) undermine the traditional utopian vision of an idyllic countryside as a safe haven from society's evils. They depict class conflict in the countryside. In this conflict, nature's force plays the role of the enemy, or the malign natural forces are constructed as accomplices of the landlord. Class struggle was reinforced by the struggle of man with nature. In other words, natural disaster and man-made calamities—social conflict or class exploitation—are interwoven as an enemy to be defeated by the peasantry, who represent a new force in the Chinese national revolution. Here lies the difference between Chinese and Australian films. In the Australian myth, "the conflation of natural threats devalues the social divisiveness of class conflict" (Tulloch, 1981, p. 373). This can be seen in *The Breaking of the Drought* in which natural hazards repress the hostility between social classes. In this myth, what is absent is the question of the theft of one man's labour by another (Tulloch, 1981, p. 358). Although nature is represented as a similarly destructive enemy, the battlers are often constructed as escaping from politically or economically unpleasant realities. The idea of "national identity" or "national interest" is used to distract attention from the unpleasant realities of class

exploitation, whereas in the new Chinese myth, the image of nature is often constructed as a tool to criticize those unpleasant realities.

Third, Chinese films advocate the collective power of the mass, and calls on people to be the master of both country and nature through collective struggle. This political imperative was not seen in Australian cinema in the same way. In *The Breaking of the Drought* and *On Our Selection*, we witness the opposition between small, independent human qualities (such as those of the individual or family) and huge natural forces. The Australian myth seems to displace collective action from class consciousness to locate it in the more "natural" community: the family. There is a general reduction of a radical political dimension in the Australian bush legend during this period. However, from another perspective, individual experiences and pioneering individualism in Australian culture are constructed in so stereotyped a way that they virtually form a collective ethos. The battle with the natural environment is waged by "idealized" men or by women with manly characteristics. In this environment, one discovers the collective identity of the bushman battler.

5. Conclusion

From the discussion, it is clear that the construction of the rural image in Chinese film of the 1930s was similar to the construction of human beings' harsh life in the countryside in Australian film. The Chinese peasants exhibiting qualities of bravery, endurance and fighting spirit, were comparable to the Australian "bushmen". However, in Australia film, the hardship of rural life and the contrast between city and country always favored country life as the healthier alternative, yet Chinese leftist film devalued the countryside, equating it with the misery of the city, and undermined the traditional image of a refuge in which human beings could achieve spiritual fulfillment through close communication with nature.

Acknowledgements

Illustrations

Figure 1 *The Breaking of the Drought* (1920). City-country contrast: (i) the independent country woman Molly who finds pleasure in taming horses; (ii) the city women who dance for men—surface sensation and spiritual loss.

Figure 2 *Sea-burial* (*Haizang*) (1933). The survival fishermen after the typhoon.

Figure 3 *Song of the Fishermen* (*Yuguangqu*) (1934). Harsh life of the fishermen.

Figure 4 *The Spring Worm* (*Chuncan*) (1933). Peasants' harsh life in the Jiangnan area.

Figure 5 *Red Tears of Tie Ban* (*Tieban Hongleilu*) (1933). Peasants in the Sichuan countryside.

Figure 6 *The Waves of the Salt* (*Yanchao*). Peasants' harsh life in the south-eastern seaside villages.

(i)

(ii)

Figure 1. The Breaking of the Drought (1920)

Figure 2. Sea-burial (Haizang, 1933)

Figure 3. Song of the Fishermen (Yuguangqu, 1934)

Figure 4. The Spring Worm (Chuncan, 1933)

Figure 5. Red Tears of Tie Ban (Tieban Hongleilu, 1933)

Figure 6. The Waves of the Salt (Yanchao)

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Notes

Note 1. The main plot: in a village called Fuzhuang, beset by rain day after day, landlord Fu Boren collects money donated by villagers for building dykes and dams; however, he squanders it, causing the dykes of Fuzhuang to fall into a perilous condition. Led by Liu Tiesheng, all the peasants in the village fight against the flooding. Fu Boren and his family move to the city to escape the catastrophe. He collects lots of money donated by the peasants to build the dam, but he cheats them. Later, Hankou city is inundated by the flood, but the flood in Fuzhuang village is under the control of the peasants. With the arrival of another thunderstorm, the dam is in danger again. No longer able to tolerate this, the poor peasants defeat Fu Boren to get back the donated money to build the dam. Finally, the old dam breaks, and Fu Boren is drowned in the river.

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