

# Analysis of Theoretical Research on Chinese Film Performance from 1979 to 1984

Fengao Yi

Department of Cultural Management, Shanghai Publishing and Printing College, Shanghai 200093, China

## Abstract

China's research on Chinese film performance theory from 1979 to 1984 is characterized by lack and narrowness. They may focus on the character creation in the work from the perspective of dramatization, or use the perspective of film culture to overview the performance picture drawn by the director. They laid the foundation for the study of film performance theory from 1979 to 1984 in terms of perspective, direction of progress, methodology, etc., and paved the way for subsequent related research along the longitudinal lines of studying origins, exploring causes and conditions, and describing traits. This provides a scientific research opportunity to analyze the interaction and evolution of the theoretical life of film performance from 1979 to 1984 with elements such as politics, culture, era, and history from the perspectives of directors, actors, and audiences.

## Keywords

Chinese Film; Performance Theory; Research; Analysis; Lack; Narrowness.

## 1. Introduction

China's research on "Chinese Film Performance Theory 1979-1984" is characterized by lack and narrowness. "Lack" mainly refers to the lack of research on Chinese films from 1979 to 1984 that focuses on performance theory from an analytical perspective. "Narrow" mainly refers to the single perspective of discussing Chinese films from 1979 to 1984 that focused on performance theory.

## 2. "Lack": Fewer Studies on Performance Theory

"Lack" mainly refers to the lack of research on Chinese films from 1979 to 1984 that focuses on performance theory from an analytical perspective. Discussions about Chinese film performance theory from 1979 to 1984 are scattered in directors' creative descriptions, creative summaries, and interview records; actors' creative experiences and interviews; third parties including film critics, reporters, and audience review articles, news reviews, Notes on watching movies, etc. An actor composes a role in which a social person plays an artistic person. From actors to characters, they are bound to have inextricable and subtle connections with society, history, era, politics, economy, culture, life, life, spirit, soul, thinking, etc.

### 2.1. "Aesthetic Thoughts on Contemporary Chinese Film Performances" by Hui Zhang

Just like the research in the paper "Aesthetic Thoughts on Contemporary Chinese Film Performances" by Hui Zhang, a professor at Beijing Film Academy. The article elaborates on aspects such as "actors and roles", "nature and instinct", "lack of depth in performance", "form and content", "artistic self", "fragmentation and implication". The article expresses the view that "film performance aesthetics takes the expression of people's spiritual world as its core,

and the culture and social spirit of different nations are its background." [1] Its discussion provides a reference methodology for aesthetic interpretation at the level of actors' role creation.

From a macro perspective, the paper points out that "the current cultural status of Chinese film performing arts has been reflected by the utilitarian value that transcends the aesthetic connotation of the performing arts itself." "Currently, there is no 'predictability' and 'aesthetic evaluation' in the performing arts in the domestic film field." The aesthetic shortcomings of contemporary Chinese film performances, such as "Domestic information reviews and media communication mostly ignore the creativity of actors, pay little attention to the art of life and creativity conveyed by film performing arts, and mostly reflect a kind of eye-popping low level of concern or understanding" etc. [1] Although the article takes contemporary Chinese films as the research object, its thinking of exploring performance aesthetics from the perspectives of performance and capital, performance aesthetics and value evaluation, performance and media provides a reference for research in this direction. Based on the understanding of the historical methodology of performance theory and studying China's research results in this direction, it can be seen that the research on film performance theory from 1979 to 1984 using analytical thinking is a relatively weak direction.

## 2.2. "Leaning Tower: Rereading the Fourth Generation" by Jinhua Dai

The most studied films from 1979 to 1984 are the overall criticism of the fourth generation of film thought from a macro perspective in terms of film culture and film aesthetics. Just like Jinhua Dai, professor of the Chinese Department of Peking University, wrote the paper "Leaning Tower: Rereading the Fourth Generation". The article analyzes the reasons why the fourth generation directors used Bazin's documentary aesthetics to complete the historic strategy of modernizing film language. That is to say, "to escape from a designated social and political role, to escape from the instrumentalism, and to escape from the cantata-style model art norms." This allows the fourth generation of directors to escape the distinct identity of political vassals of Chinese films. The article believes that "their individuality cannot eliminate the uniform social structure, their fate can only be determined by the times, and their experiences can only be historical encounters." This makes the creation of self and personality of the fourth-generation directors only "caught in an escape". [2] In this way, the fourth generation of directors ended up under the two common narrative models of "small stories of the big era" and "civilization and ignorance". And this is accomplished under the antinomies of historical accusation and avoidance, the burden of reality and seclusion.

This article analyzes the creative aesthetic pursuits of the fourth-generation directors in their heyday in 1982, and points out the embarrassing situation in which they both want to escape and must be trapped in the society/era. The article takes the following films as the analysis objects: *Narrow Street* (1981), *The Drive to Win* (1981), *The Neighborhood* (1982), *Ru Yi* (1982), *Backlight* (1982), *Village in the City* (1982), *My Memories of Old Beijing* (1983), *Sacrifice of Youth* (1985), etc. The article analyzes the reasons for the shift in creative aesthetics of the fourth generation of directors after 1982. The article takes the following films as examples: *Backlight* (1982), *Village in the City* (1982), *Country Couple* (1983), *At the Beach* (1984), *A Good Woman* (1985), *Country Folk* (1986), *Married to a Child* (1986), etc. These reasons are the tide of reform, cultural reflection, and the impact of the fifth generation. The article believes that this provides some rational reference for the fourth generation directors' film performances that hesitate between dramatic performance and documentary.

### **2.3. "A Community Connecting the Past and the Next - A Dialogue about the 'Fourth Generation' Film Directors" by Yigong Wu**

In this regard, we can also find rational clues to the theoretical life of film performance during this period from the development direction of the artistic life trajectory of Chinese film directors from 1979 to 1984. Just as director Yigong Wu discussed the formation of the creative trajectory of the fourth generation of directors from the perspective of cultural mentality development factors in the article "A Community Connecting the Past and the Next - a Dialogue about the 'Fourth Generation' Film Directors". From the perspective of the growth of the artistic life of the directors, the article analyzes the fourth generation film directors' inheritance of the sincere, innocent, serious and rigorous creative attitude of their predecessors. They then formed a creative aesthetic profile of friendship, warmth, beauty, health, positivity, and stable order. The article believes that "the fourth generation of film directors is a group with high professional capabilities, rapid progress, artistic maturity, huge potential, and a spectacular team. Once they were pushed onto the stage of history, society was surprised to find that they were not without talents, but had a lot of talents." [3] They are a generation that connects the past and the future. The article lists the directors to explain the above points, such as Nuanxin Zhang, Fei Xie, Tianming Hao, Bigliu Hu, Xingjia Qi, Yinnan Ding, Xiaolei Han, Dongtian Zheng, Junzheng Wang, Haowei Wang, Shuqin Huang, Jianzhong Huang, Xiaoya Lu, Xueshu Yan, Yanjin Yang, Shujun Shi, Benzhen Yu, Xiaohua Shi, etc.

At the same time, the article also pointed out that "theoretical orientation of 'overheating' and bias" has made the fourth generation "confused" and "has tied its hands and feet, weakened its enterprising edge, or become a 'setter'". [3] The article explains the formation, characteristics, and evolution of the fourth generation director's aesthetics from the creative life trajectory of the directors. From a macro perspective, it provides a general methodology and discussion clues for research in this direction. This is the key point of research on various theoretical issues in Chinese film performances from 1979 to 1984, starting from the elements that influence the artistic life course of the creator, such as culture, history, era, politics, theory, etc. They are important elements that influence film theory, including performance aesthetics.

### **2.4. "Inventory of the Fourth Generation - A Study on the Group of Chinese Film Directors" by Yijun Luo**

Yijun Luo, a researcher at the China Film Association, wrote his paper "Inventory of the Fourth Generation - A Study on the Group of Chinese Film Directors" to analyze the awakening of consciousness of the fourth generation and the aesthetic direction of the awakening of film consciousness with a detailed filmography. It also analyzes poetic films represented by Yigong Wu and Bigliu Hu; western films represented by Tianming Wu, Xueshu Yan, and Wenji Teng; major historical films represented by Xiepu Li, Junjie Zhai, Guangyuan Yang, Jun Li, Yinnan Ding, Qiankuan Li, and Guiyun Xiao; and the aesthetic characteristics of female directors represented by Shuqin Huang, Nuanxin Zhang, Shujun Shi, Haowei Wang and Junzheng Wang. At the same time, it also elaborates on the fourth generation represented by Fei Xie's unremitting efforts to develop a new creative ecology after the 1990s. [4]

Based on the logic of the history of director aesthetics and the subdivision of the creative tendencies of the fourth generation films, the article makes a point-by-point inventory. The research methods on the subdivision of films by fourth-generation directors provide methodological guidance for research in this direction. At the same time, the elaboration of the historical mission of awakening human and film consciousness faced by the fourth generation delineates the thinking field for research in this direction.

## 2.5. Other Articles from the Perspective of Film Culture and Film Aesthetics

Similarly, there are some representative papers that analyze Chinese films from 1979 to 1984 from the perspective of film culture and film aesthetics. "On the Fourth Generation of Directors and Issues of Modernity" by Xuguang Chen, Peking University (originally published in "Journal of Peking University · Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition" Issue 1, 2004, pp. 102-113);[5] "Personality · Body · Existence: Analysis of Films by Contemporary Chinese Female Directors (1978-2012)" by Xia Zhou, China Film Art Research Center (originally published in "Contemporary Film" Issue 1, 2013, pp. 78-83); [6] "The Fourth Generation of Film Directors and Visual Enlightenment" by Ke Hu (originally published in "Film Art", Issue 3, 1990, pp. 125-135);[7] "The Aesthetic Dilemma of Chinese Films in the New Era" by Keyang Shi of Beijing Normal University (originally published in "Journal of Beijing Normal University · Social Sciences Edition" Issue 4, 2007, pp. 113-117);[8] "The Gender of Imagination: Thoughts from the 'Workshop of Chinese Female Directors since the 1980s'" (originally published in "Film Art" Issue 1, 1998, pp. 28-29);[9] "On the Historical Status of China's 'Fourth Generation' of Film Directors" by Zhou Shao (originally published in "Film Creation" Issue 5, 1999, pp. 66-70);[10] "Rediscovering the Fourth Generation" by Feng Xie and others (originally published in "Film Art" Issue 5, 2008, pp. 72-77);[11] "Retreat-style Creation: Adaptations of Films by the Fourth Generation of Filmmakers" by Guo Feng of East China Normal University (originally published in "Contemporary Film" Issue 12, 2012, pp. 154-156);[12] "The Divine Friendship between a Group of Young Chinese Filmmakers and a Foreign Wise Man" by Dongtian Zheng of Beijing Film Academy (originally published in "Contemporary Film" Issue 4, 2008, pp. 4-6);[13] Yigong Wu and others' "Ambition Remains Young and the Heart Remains Young - Excerpts from Speeches at the 'Growing with the Republic' Seminar" (originally published in "Film Art" Issue 5, 2003, pp. 31-43);[14] "On the Artistic Personality of the 'Fourth Generation' Film Directors" by Zhenlin Li of Shanghai Theater Academy (originally published in "Art Hundreds", Issue 2, 1996, pp. 77-83);[15] "Improved Taste: Discussions on Fourth Generation Directors" by Chen Dan (originally published in "Film Art" Issue 3, 1990, pp. 93-98),[16] etc. Representative works include "Globalization and the Transformation of Chinese Films" by Yiwu Zhang (China Renmin University Press, 2006);[17] "Trace of the Hourglass" by Jinhua Dai (Shandong Friendship Publishing House, 2006);[18] "Study on Contemporary Chinese Film Thoughts and Phenomenon 1979-2009" by Xiaoyun Chen (China Film Press, 2013);[19] "Growing up under the Sunshine of the Party: A Research Collection of Chinese Fourth Generation Film Directors" by Renyin Wang (China Film Press, 2003);[20] "The Turn of Film: The Modernization Movement of Chinese Films and Its Cultural Interpretation" by Zhenlin Li (Wenhui Press, 2010),[21] etc.

## 3. "Narrow": a Single Perspective on Performance Theory

### 3.1. "Film Performance - The Technique and History of Acting for the Camera" by O'brien Mary Allen

"Narrow" mainly refers to the single perspective of discussing Chinese films from 1979 to 1984 that focused on performance theory. The discussion of the theoretical ontology of film performance should be based on the study of the nature of performance, and the exploration of the nature of film performance should be based on the ontological artistic attributes of the film audio-visual language system. "Film Performance - The Technique and History of Acting for the Camera" by O'brien Mary Allen believes that the impact of the body and the appeal of the kinesthetic are the aesthetic nature of film performance. It is the compilation of this physical image Constructed the characters, story, and style of the film.

The article analyzes the thinking method of performance aesthetics from the perspective of body image, which is in line with the characteristics of the film's audio-visual language

ideographic system. This provides methodological guidance for research in this direction. The article scientifically clarifies that performance aesthetics is the process of psychological interaction between actors and audiences. It is believed that physical images are the trigger for resonance between actors and audiences. An actor's physical movements are formed naturally as he or she grows up. It is not only a representation of the actor's style, but also unintentionally highlights the character's temperament. The article starts from the body image and explores the thinking logic of performance aesthetics from the perspective of the psychological interactive relationship between actors and audiences and the formation of actors' performance style.[22] This provides a reference for this direction to conduct in-depth analysis of performance theory through the analysis of performance patterns. Currently, there are very few specialized works on Chinese film performance theory from 1979 to 1984. Some of them are usually discussed in isolation from the film itself, or just focus on the performance.

### **3.2. "Fourth Generation Film Directors - A Brief Exploration into the Characteristics of Aesthetic Concepts of Film Performance" by Donggang Zhang**

"Fourth Generation Film Directors - A Brief Exploration into the Characteristics of Aesthetic Concepts of Film Performance" by Donggang Zhang analyzes how actors portray characters in the films of the fourth generation directors. It is believed that the films of the fourth generation directors have the following performance aesthetic characteristics. They "follow the documentary principles of performance creation, emphasize the combination of high skills and intuitive improvisation, and naturally reveal human nature." [23] Although the article's discussion has traces of thinking based on the character analysis of the play, the article dialectically puts forward the inheritance and development of the fourth generation's performance aesthetics.

The article discusses the fourth generation's absorption and reference from the national performance view and the performance view of its predecessors from three aspects: maintaining the "action" view, following the "sublation" view, and developing the "documentary" view. The article uses dialectical and historical logic to analyze the film performance aesthetics of fourth-generation directors, providing a thinking guide for research in this direction. At the same time, the article mentioned that the fourth-generation performance view and the contemporary Western performance view, especially the American "Method", "objectively have some internal similarity." However, the article does not elaborate on the fourth generation performance aesthetics and performance theory. This not only leaves room for related discussions, but also points out a perspective for related research. In addition, the article also sorts out the limitations of character creation in film performances after the founding of New China under the perspectives of drama performance, shadow play performance perspective, and Stanislavsky's performance perspective. The article also believes that the fourth generation "has inheritance and inheritance in the evolution of performance aesthetic concepts, and has its own unique aesthetic contributions." [23] The article considers them to be "a fusion of theory and practice." They "played a positive influence on subsequent film directors and their works with their continuous artistic exploration." [23] However, the article does not specifically analyze the inherited characteristics of its performance aesthetics, and subsequent related research can carry out detailed analysis at the theoretical level.

Performance is directly oriented to "people" in terms of both its creator and its creative objects. The fourth generation directors' attention to people has become their distinctive intergenerational aesthetic imprint. The article points out the focus of the fourth generation of film directors on the little people. Urban civilians, rural farmers, and old people have all become the objects of care for the fourth generation. Behind these "grounded" little characters lies the "character" that the fourth generation cannot abandon. This makes the complex hearts of the

little characters in the fourth generation's works have a strong theme of the times. The article analyzes the director's aesthetics of the fourth generation in character creation from the perspective of class character creation. However, the article does not elaborate on the character creation of specific classes and the themes of the times, nor does it analyze it from the perspective of performance aesthetics or even performance theory. This provides a research perspective and research space for subsequent related discussions. Follow-up research can conduct horizontal research on the class affiliation of minor characters in movies from 1979 to 1984. From the perspective of performance culture, the issue of "ideological guidance" between the inner screen presentation of ordinary people in the film and the themes of the times is explored from both the director and actor levels. In this regard, the article believes that "the path that expresses the artist's subjective connotation and integrates the individuation of specific characters and the universal significance contained in human nature itself" originates from the fourth generation's "re-understanding and re-creation of 'typical images' guided by the principles of realist performance aesthetics." [23] There seems to be a certain contradiction between documentary performance aesthetics and the "typification" principle of character creation, which provides a more pioneering discussion point for subsequent research.

The article points out the representational expression of real life and character activities by the fourth generation of performance aesthetics, and believes that this emphasizes the audience's interpretation of "people" in the film during the movie viewing process, and has a modern film consciousness. The core technique of documentary is representation. However, the article does not discuss this in depth. It can become the key to subsequent related discussions. Follow-up research can focus on the representation and expression of real life and character activities in Chinese films from 1979 to 1984, starting from the image analysis of the works and using visual culture to analyze the director's performance aesthetics and the actors' performance aesthetics, and then further discuss the life cycle proposition of their performance theory.

At the same time, the article also pointed out that the performance aesthetic concepts of the fourth generation directors have gone through the process of "calling and reflecting" on human nature, and the actors' performances have also completed the transformation from "single surface to multi-faceted three-dimensional". The article's general trend analysis of the "changes" in the film performance aesthetics of fourth-generation directors has laid the foundation for subsequent research on the dimensions and dimensions of thinking. However, the article has not yet elaborated on it in depth. Follow-up related research can explore the origins and characteristics of the 1979-1984 film's revelation of human nature from the two dimensions of director and actor, both at the performance aesthetic level and even at the theoretical level. This kind of performance aesthetics is formed from "calling-reflection" and consists of "single surface to multi-dimensional three-dimensional".

### **3.3. "History of Chinese Film Performance Aesthetics (1979-2015)" by Zhenlin Li**

Also discussing the performance aesthetics and theory of Chinese films from 1979 to 1984 is Chapter 2 "Dramatization Performance: The Era of Revaluation of Performance Aesthetics" and Chapter 3 "Documentary Performance: The Trend of Performance Aesthetics with Chinese Characteristics" in Professor Zhenlin Li's monograph "History of Chinese Film Performance Aesthetics (1979-2015)" (China Film Press, 2017). Among them, "Dramatization Performance: The Era of Revaluation of Performance Aesthetics" believes that the fourth-generation director's film performance aesthetics "inherited the performance aesthetics before the 'Cultural Revolution' and initiated the performance aesthetics revolution of the 'fifth generation' and 'new wave'". "Political impulses and aesthetic impulses are mixed, artistic rationality and personal sensuality are both combined." The article points out that "performance is not just about the performance itself, but also about various explicit and non-

explicit elements of politics, culture and industry." This conclusion points out that speculation on film performance aesthetics and theory from 1979 to 1984 needs to clarify the relationship between performance and elements such as politics, culture, and industry. This conclusion also provides reference for the writing framework of subsequent research. The article also discusses the scientific nature of "taking the period from 1979 to 1984 as an era stage in the study of Chinese film performance aesthetics." It also analyzes the aesthetic characteristics of the "Performance Retro Movement" and "Performance Westernization Movement" demonstrated by Chinese film performance aesthetics at this stage.

Among them, "Documentary Performance: The Trend of Performance Aesthetics with Chinese Characteristics" believes that "the performance documentary aesthetic movement with Chinese characteristics is the acceptance, adaptation, supplement and development of Bazin and Kracauer's documentary aesthetics against the background of China's real-life political and aesthetic needs and the Chinese film aesthetic tradition." "Moreover, it will eventually move towards the path of integration with image aesthetics." [24] The article discusses in detail the encounter, cover-up, and misunderstanding between the documentary performance aesthetics trend under the "Performance Westernization Movement" [24] and Bazin and Kracauer's documentary theory. It also analyzes in detail the qualifications, forms, and flaws of film performances in this era. The article analyzes the aesthetic format of documentary performance from "actor selection, performance posture, performance method, long-shot performance, non-professional actors, etc." [24] and points out that documentary performance aesthetics "naturalistic tendency, non-stylization, technicality and charm" and other "weak performance phenomena", which provides methodological guidance for subsequent related discussions. The article provides an opportunity for subsequent exploration of the historical origins and performance characteristics of documentary performance cultural formats and its weak performance phenomena in the field of performance aesthetics and "the politics, culture and ideology of the times". [24] At the same time, it also provides an opportunity for subsequent examination of the film performance theory from 1979 to 1984 from the perspectives of actors' performance and third party's performance.

#### 4. Conclusion

Most of the approximately 300 papers and monographs that discuss "Chinese Cinema from 1979-1984" focus on the two liberations faced by the fourth generation: the liberation of human nature and the liberation of film. More research perspectives are to explore the historical origins, realistic causes, and character representation of film culture and film aesthetics, but there is a lack of in-depth discussion of performance theory at this time with analytical thinking. Among the several papers and monographs that discuss "Chinese Film Performance from 1979 to 1984", they either focus on the character creation in the work from the perspective of dramatization, or use the perspective of film culture to overview the performance picture drawn by the director. They laid the foundation for the study of film performance theory from 1979 to 1984 in terms of perspective, direction of progress, methodology, etc., and provided a longitudinal way of exploring origins, analyzing causes and conditions, and describing traits for subsequent related research. This provides a scientific research opportunity to analyze the interaction and evolution of the theoretical life of film performance from 1979 to 1984 with elements such as politics, culture, era, and history from the perspectives of directors, actors, and audiences.

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