

# Cultural Construction Based on Shaping the Image of Writer Liu Qing on the Screen—Taking the Creative Practice of the Movie *Liu Qing* as an Example\*

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As a biopic focusing on the people's writer Liu Qing, the movie *Liu Qing* shows the creative process of Liu Qing's rooting in the countryside and sharing the fate of peasants through the fusion of realist aesthetics and poetic expression. Contemporary writer's biography movie is almost blank in the domestic movie history due to its special subject matter. The creation of *Liu Qing* required balancing the tension between historical truth, artistic aesthetics, and policy scrutiny. By deconstructing the multiple identities of the writer, reconstructing the logic of vernacular narrative, and exploring the innovation of melodramatic genre, the director has created the image of a people's writer rooted in the earth. Combining the perspective of director Tian Bo, this article discusses how to construct a writer's image on the screen with both depth of thought and humanistic temperature, and reveals the revelation of Liu Qing's spirit to contemporary literary creation.

*Keywords:* movie aesthetics, writer Liu Qing, movie *Liu Qing*, cultural construction, melodramatic film

## Creative Dilemma: The Double Challenge of Genre Gaps and Historical Risks

### Narrative Reconstruction in a Genre Desert

According to the data of Chinese film history, only two biographies of writers have been released since 1949 ("Lu Xun" and "Xiao Hong") (Ding, 2015, p. 178), and those involving contemporary writers are even rarer. The absence of this genre is not due to the barrenness of the subject matter, but stems from a threefold dilemma:

- Narrative dilemma: the writer's line of action is weak, and it is difficult to visualize the spiritual activities and profound thoughts, so it is necessary to transform the abstract thoughts into dramatic conflicts, and there is a lack of visual expressiveness.
- Audience dilemma: the decline of literary cult leads to audience cognitive fault, the need to rebuild the historical context, and the resonance of the current audience.
- Censorship dilemma: works involving contemporary history need to avoid political minefields. For example, the chapters of "Cooperative Movement", "Great Leap Forward", "Four Clean-ups", "Cultural Revolution", etc. in *Liu Qing* are not in the same scale.

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For this reason, *Liu Qing* adopts a threefold narrative strategy: the creative process of “History of Entrepreneurship” as the skeleton, the practice of life in Huangfu Village as the flesh and blood, and the spiritual purgatory of intellectuals as the soul. I told the producer Wang Miaoxia during the script writing stage:

Facing reality and molding good characters is the key, and these complicated movements are treated as the background of the characters, reflecting the changes of the times through the fate of the characters. I just need to grab a broken straw hat, a dry tobacco bag, a kerosene lamp, and a single glance may pry the weight of an era. (source)

### **The Balancing Act of “Dancing in Shackles”**

Facing the sensitive historical node, Liu Qing adopts the strategy of “white space” and “metaphor” in parallel: in the overnight establishment of the “High Society”, a yellow wind sweeps through the scene, reflecting the state of Liu Qing’s heart and his state of mind. In the “Four Clean-ups Movement”, the camera focuses on Liu Qing tearing up his manuscripts in pain, and he stayed emaciated. Under the high pressure of the times, Liu Qing’s line is “I’m not doing this for myself, we are sticking to seeking truth from facts, not for promotion and wealth.” (Liu, 2016). The Cultural Revolution swept through the country, and instead of positively showing the vandalism and fighting, I focused on the snowy night when Liu Qing stood alone in the courtyard and pondered, creating a mood of rain and wind. This kind of “metaphorical writing” not only passes censorship, but also conveys historical reality with poetic truth. This strategy confirms the validity of André Bazin’s assertion that “the highest state of realism is the presence of poetic reality.” (Bazin, 2017, p. 174).

## **The Dialectical Unity of Historical Truth and Artistic Truth**

### **“Six Nos and Three Insistences” to Soul Attachment**

The creation of biography movie is always facing the tension between historical truth and artistic fiction, I have established the principle of “six nos and three insistences” at the early stage of creation:

- Six Nos: no tampering, no exaltation, no degradation, no conceptualization, no sermonizing, and no pandering.
- Three adherences: adherence to excellence, adherence to seeking truth from facts, and adherence to artistic fiction.

This principle stems from my understanding of Liu Qing’s creative attitude: Liu Qing insisted on seeking truth from facts, insisted on not handing over drafts to readers, insisted on rooting himself in the people, and insisted on being a writer (Liu, 2016). In order to restore the true texture of the character, I entered the character’s heart by “possessing his soul”, repeatedly reading *The Genealogy of Liu Youth* and Liu Kefeng’s *Biography of Liu Qing* (Liu, 2016), and visited Huangfu Village 13 times in six years, even dreaming of conversing with Liu Qing. After I understood some of the historical facts, I had to refine them artistically, and fictionalize some of the contents according to the plot in order to achieve artistic truth.

### **Measuring the Thickness of Creation With Life**

Liu Qing said, “If you want to write, you must first live, and if you want to create a heroic character, you must first create yourself” (Liu, 2005, p. 194). These words were like a seed buried deep in my heart for six years. When I first set foot in Huangfu Village, the hot wind of Guanzhong, wrapped in the scent of wheat, hit my face, and in a trance I thought I saw Mr. Liu Qing standing on the Loess Plateau with his crutches, looking at the land with a burning gaze. In order to restore the mutual cooperation scene in “History of Entrepreneurship”, the crew planted 30 acres of wheat, corn, and rice on the Shenhe Plateau. On the day of sowing rice, I stepped into the mud with my bare feet and bent down with the villagers to plant seedlings. With the hot sun scorching my back

and sweat dripping into the soil, I suddenly understood what Liu Qing said, “A writer’s labor is never just writing” (Liu, 2016). It was as if I had touched the temperature of Liu Qing’s writing. This physical practice eventually translates into poetic shots of Liu Qing’s hunched back and golden wheat waves on the screen.

### **The Complexity of Identity: The Triple Prism of Intellectuals**

#### **The Political Mission of Party Members and Cadres**

In the opening scene of the movie, Liu Qing appears as an “outsider”, a senior cadre in a suit, which is out of place in Huangfu Village. I completed the identity change through the ceremonial scene of “shaving my head and changing my clothes”, which dissolved the official style of “cadres going to the countryside” and replaced it with the “idealist in the soil”. This “transformation ceremony” dissolves the official style of “cadres going to the countryside” and replaces it with the “idealist in the soil” (Zhang, 2018, p. 36) appearing in Huangfu Village. In the livestock market “pinch yards” (Xing, 2018, p. 89) scene (Guanzhong peasants under the lapel with the finger implicit bargaining details), Liu Qing squatted like farmers, and, learned the language of the local peasants. Through these peasant action and language, the cultural superiority of intellectuals will be crushed into the yellow earth. Liu Qing’s transformation echoes his own words: “I just want to stick with the people.” He comes in as a policy advocate and material collector, but turns to details such as “advocating for the people” and “grabbing grain in the rain” to show his sense of service as a grassroots cadre.

#### **Writer’s Spiritual Breakthrough in the Flood of the Times**

In the face of the flood of the times, Liu Qing took the creation of this masterpiece as a mirror of the times, and the writing of “The History of Entrepreneurship” encountered various difficulties. The movie uses the prop of “Tolstoy’s photo” as a spiritual totem. The photo on the desk is juxtaposed with the manuscript of “History of Entrepreneurship”. During the three years of difficulties, he donated all the huge manuscript fees for the first part of “History of Entrepreneurship” to the people of Huangfu for production and construction, and lived a simple life himself. In the “Cultural Revolution”, Liu Qing was put into the “bullpen” of the rebels, and when he tore up the “confession of guilt”, he said: “If I sign it, I will no longer be a farmer’s son! Liu Qing!” (Liu, 2016).

By shaping typical characters in typical environments, the spiritual purgatory of this intellectual has to be portrayed, and as a director to portray this stylized image of the writer, he has to have the courage to tear open the historical wounds, so that the audience can see the pain of the growth of faith.

#### **The Thinking Man’s Spiritual Tear**

This movie made an attempt to break through the paradigm of melodramatic creation. *Liu Qing* boldly presents the spiritual dilemma of a thinker: the destruction of ideals, the tearing of books, the near collapse after the death of his wife, crying in front of the spirit of Ma Wei, the doubts about the political movement, and the lamentation of not being able to finish writing the “History of Entrepreneurship”, all these traumas suffered by an idealist truly show the doubtful and fragile side of Liu Qing. Through the excavation and reconstruction of the depth of human nature, the “demystification” treatment has not weakened the character’s sublimity, but made the character more flesh and blood, and made Liu Qing’s sublimity more persuasive and more real.

### **Aesthetic Practice: Poetic Translation of Realism**

With an art background, I have carefully studied Balazs Bella’s book *Aesthetics of Cinema* (Bela, 2003, p. 67), and I hope to explore a set of “new melodrama” aesthetic expressions in this movie. In the past, melodramatic

movies were often preachy and lacked aesthetic value, but I hope to use light and shadow to let ideas flow naturally.

### **Spiritual Metaphors of Vernacular Landscape**

Zhonggong Temple: symbolizing the spiritual inheritance of traditional Chinese scholars and literati, the ascetic writing under the oil lamp, the scene alludes to the long nights of literary creation.

The big tree at the entrance of the village: a tall old acacia tree, where Liu Qing and the villagers chat and communicate, the tree is a metaphor for Liu Qing's spirit of being rooted in the earth, which is everlasting.

Cornfield: Harvesting corn in a rainstorm, Liu Qing's collapse in a mud puddle, and the wheels unable to move forward in the rainstorm and mud, symbolize the plight of the times.

Rice field: an overhead shot of golden waves, a metaphor for the torrent of collectivism and a symbol of the tenacity of individual life.

Stone man and stone horse: symbolizing the 13 ancient dynasties of the Guanzhong Plain and the rolling forward of history, this poetic "earthy aesthetics" makes the Guanzhong Plain an externalized carrier of humanism.

### **The Triple Variations of the Rhetoric of Light and Shadow**

When he first arrives at Huangfu Village, the backlight gives Liu Qing the aura of divinity as an "enlightened man"; after the setback of the cooperative, the gloomy cold tones imply the disillusionment of the ideal; in the scene of the sunrise before his death, the warm light sprinkles over the Shenhe Plateau, completing the sublimation of the spirit of "embracing a hundred rivers". Color Logic: The three-part color spectrum of golden yellow (ideal)-grayish blue (distress)-warm red (nirvana) constitutes the spiritual spectrum of the intellectuals. This color spectrum system echoes the "visual metaphor" theory of Balazs Bella (Bela, 2003, p. 67).

## **Creative Revelation**

### **Dialectic Between Historical Truth and Artistic Fiction**

Following the principle of "six nos and three insistences", *Liu Qing* finds a balance between detailed verification and dramatic processing. It retains the epic nature of the cooperative movement and creates the three-dimensionality of the characters.

### **Creative Wisdom Under the Censorship Framework**

In the face of sensitive historical issues, the principle of "white space and poetry" is adopted: through sounds, props, colors, environment, and other symbols, the changes of the times are implied. This strategy of "combining the obvious and the hidden" realizes historical reflection within the red line of policy.

### **The Cultural Mission of Genre Pioneers**

The creative practice of *Liu Qing* proves that biographical movies of writers can break through the dilemma through two paths:

- Thematically, it focuses on the core proposition of "literature for the people" and transcends grand narratives.
- Aesthetics: integrate documentary and poetic expression to build a new melodramatic paradigm.

## **Conclusion**

The creative practice of the movie *Liu Qing* shows that shaping the image of a writer needs to be based on humanistic concern as the kernel, aesthetic innovation as the path, historical truth as the foundation, and character

spiritual purgatory as the soul. Through the immersive presentation of the vernacular landscape, the multi-dimensional excavation of character identity, and the symbolic expression of audiovisual language, the balanced wisdom of freedom is reconstructed in shackles. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized, “The most fundamental method of literary and artistic creation is to be rooted in the people and in life.” (Xi, 2015, p. 18), the cultural construction of Liu Qing’s image reveals to us that true art is always rooted in the earth, and the mission of the filmmaker is precisely to use light and shadow to make the humanistic spirit of this land alive and well.

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