

# *Aesthetics of Chinese Neorealism Film*

## *– A Case Study of Xiaoshuai’s The Days*

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**Abstract:** This study examines the field of Chinese neorealism through the lens of acclaimed director Wang Xiaoshuai. Through an in-depth examination of Wang Xiaoshuai’s filmography, the significant influence of neorealism on the development of Chinese cinema will be teased out. The article concentrates on Wang Xiaoshuai’s works *The Days* and seeks to elucidate the distinctive style traits and artistic techniques he used to create his works. Also, the study examines how Wang Xiaoshuai depicts reality and investigates in depth the complex relationship between individuals and society depicted in his films. Through the analysis of themes and visual styles in Wang Xiaoshuai’s neorealist works, this study intends to disclose the characteristics of sixth-generation filmmakers who reinterpret the realist tradition. This helps us better comprehend the artistic portrayal of individual lives by Chinese filmmakers during the period of accelerated social change in the Chinese film industry during the late 1990s.

**Keywords:** Chinese neorealism, Wang Xiaoshuai, six-generation director, *The Days*

## 1. Introduction

Realism as an aesthetic style holds significant importance in the evolution and progress of Chinese cinema [1]. The realist work centers on the issue of everyday experiences and offers a profound reflection of the dramatic sociopolitical transformations in the late 20th century, as well as a contemplation of one of the inherent challenges of human nature.

Among the innovative group of filmmakers known as the “Sixth Generation”, Wang Xiaoshuai’s works showcased exceptional directorial skills within his realist works, in which he demonstrates a remarkable ability to offer insightful societal observations and display a genuine concern for humanity.

This article will examine the characteristics and evolution of the Chinese neorealism films by analyzing Wang Xiaoshuai’s films. This research aims to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the pivotal role that realism occupies in the landscape of Chinese cinema. The analysis will center on the notable work of Wang Xiaoshuai, *The Days*, to unveil the unique stylistic traits and artistic techniques employed in his creative endeavors. At the same time, this analysis will investigate Wang’s approaches to portraying the reality. Furthermore, it will delve into Wang’s exploration of the intricate interplay between individuals and society as depicted in his cinematic oeuvre. By

examining the themes and visual expressions present in Wang's realist works, this study aims to discern the reinvention of realism conventions in film by sixth-generation directors. It further intends to enhance comprehension of the trajectory of Chinese realist film within the film history of China and tease out the artistic treatment of Chinese filmmakers toward individuals' lives during the rapid societal transformations after the 1990s.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Realism and Neorealism**

### **2.1. The Concept of Neorealism**

Andre Bazin, a French film theorist, noted in 'De Sica: Metteur-en-scene that neorealism evolved from realism [2]. The concept of neorealism is also referred to as "Italian neorealism" because it originated in Italy after World War II, a period when Italy grappled not only with the war's economic aftermath but also its moral implications. This context led to a prevalence of Italian neorealism films centered around the working class and impoverished individuals.

To better distinguish neorealism from other styles, Bazin compared "Metteur-en-scene" and expressionism and provided a concise understanding of the neorealism shooting style, characterized by natural lighting and camera angles that refrain from overtly conveying the actors' emotions through the scenes [2].

Bazin's theory of realism focuses on the inherent attributes of film as a creative medium. He proposed the concept of "image preservation", suggesting that film can authentically capture reality by directly recording it. He devotes close attention to the faithful representations of reality in film, focusing on the roles of photography and optic language [2]. Most of Andre Bazin's views on realism which advocates for a minimalistic approach to maintain the authenticity of the original image, was pivotal to a crucial approach in the field of film studies [2]. Bazin's views on realism primarily revolve around film's capacity to capture and reproduce reality, underscoring the techniques and cinematic language employed to achieve this goal. Through the understanding of Andrew Bazin's theory, the defining characteristics of neorealism are as follows.

Neorealism aims to accurately depict social life. In film production, the sets, costuming, and character performances all aspire for realism so that the audience can perceive the authenticity of the characters' lives. [2] It placed a strong emphasis on the stories of ordinary individuals, concentrating on the daily lives and experiences of those who are economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized. By depicting scenarios from everyday life, the films present the challenges and precariousness faced by average individuals within the actual social framework.

The use of natural light and on-location filming is a distinct feature of neorealist cinema, intended to capture real-world settings. This approach to filmmaking enhances the film's realism and engages the audience on a deeper level. Through the narratives of working-class characters, neorealist films illustrate various dimensions of social issues and human nature. These movies often delve into topics such as poverty, helplessness, social inequity, and the human response to adversity.

To craft neorealism films, several critical considerations come into play, and casting is one of the issues to be solved. Casting involves the notion that 'upon the actor to be before expressing himself.' It implies that the actors do not need to be a professional; the selection is also based on whether they can act naturally in front of the camera; The lack of acting knowledge contrasts with the expressionism of traditional acting. Actual locations are pivotal, and utmost fidelity to real-world duration is crucial; the filmmaker is limited from adding or subtracting elements from the actual world [2].

## 2.2. Chinese Neorealism Film

Chinese neorealist films emerged during the period of China's reform and opening up in the 1990s, a time when significant social and economic transformations created favorable conditions for their growth. Against a backdrop of relaxed politics and reduced censorship, the directors, such as Cultural industry development, after reform and opening up, China prioritized cultural industry development as an economic growth sector [3]. Film, television, music, publishing, art, and other sectors are promoted by the government to boost cultural and creative enterprises. The reform and opening up have opened China to more foreign cultural products, including films, music, and literature. This has enriched Chinese culture and facilitated international cultural exchanges. Regarding cultural freedom, since the implementation of reform and opening up, Chinese society has steadily gained more leeway to express its thoughts and engage in art creation. While there are still limitations in sensitive areas, there has been an improvement in cultural freedom. Artists have attempted to depict real social life by portraying the characters and emotions of ordinary individuals.

Chinese neorealist films emphasize authenticity and a connection to reality. In terms of their visual poetics, these films always adopt a documentary approach to portray the living circumstances of the marginalized members of society. They concentrate on the hardships faced by everyday individuals, including family problems, difficulties in careers, and social injustice in general [4]. These films attempt to offer a representation of real life on screen, a stark departure from the idealized allure of the previous official propaganda films.

In terms of the features of Chinese neorealism films, they utilize simple filming techniques, such as long shots and natural light, striving to construct authentic settings and characters [5]. Moreover, these films frequently underscore the emotional responses of the characters, delving into their internal worlds and emotional journeys. Not only do Chinese neorealist films provide accurate portrayals of life at societal margins, but they also serve as metaphors and critiques of prevailing social issues [5]. The illustrates the inequality in society, the clash of human nature, and the helplessness of individuals when confronted with harsh realities. These evocative narratives and visuals prompt the audience to reflect on their realities.

## 2.3. Wang Xiaoshuai and His Filmography

Wang Xiaoshuai is a prominent representative of Chinese neorealism directors, whose cinematic approach places a particular focus on realism which capture the unrevealed social issues. His film career began in the 1990s, a period of profound social change and transformation in Chinese society. During this time, Chinese society transitioned from Chinese planned economy to a market economic system, and the economic, cultural, and social structures underwent tremendous changes. In light of this historical context, Wang Xiaoshuai's early film works revealed his acute attention to and unique understanding of social transformations.

In 1995, he directed his first film, *Yellow Earth*, which brought him immediate fame among Chinese filmmakers and widespread recognition in the world. The film is set in the countryside, focuses on an ordinary peasant family, and recounts tales of their hard life, hardships, and struggles. In this work, Wang Xiaoshuai vividly depicts the real scene of rural society and the difficulties confronted by the underprivileged. The film not only reflects the social changes brought about by the reform and opening, but also conveys profoundly the aspects of destitution, life challenges, and human nature.

*Yellow Earth* shatters the fiction and drama that may have existed in previous films, replacing them with a manner of expression that is closer to reality. With his neo-realist approach, Wang Xiaoshuai presents a realistic and straightforward image to the audience, allowing them to gain a deeper comprehension of the reality of Chinese rural society and the living conditions of its people.

The films of Wang Xiaoshuai are firmly rooted in genuine social observations, as he strives to use the camera to capture people's living conditions and challenges [6]. In many cases, he chose to film stories centered around characters from the working class and the margin of the society and narrate them with realist plots and situations to illustrate the diversity and complexity of society.

By offering detailed emotional portrayals, Wang grants his characters profound depth and a multifaceted nature, delving into the intricacies of their emotional realms. His characters often grapple with internal turmoil and emotional discord. In terms of Wang's thematic choices, he consistently addresses social issues such as the urban-rural divide, social stratification, interpersonal relationships, and familial challenges [7]. Through these characters and narratives, he examines how the social transformation exerts influence over the lives of individuals.

In his films, Wang pays close attention to the details of the material world, exploring the profound implications carried by seemingly ordinary things. These details not only enrich the narrative but also reveal the characters' sentiments and thoughts.

Despite Wang's films striving for depicting the real historical condition of Chinese society, he still employs symbols and metaphors in his works to infuse artistic depth and introduce narratives with multiple layers of meaning. Mental and emotional states of his characters also serves as a crucial component of Wang's neorealist works. Characters within Wang Xiaoshuai's films frequently undergo internal growth and transformation. They confront challenges, alternatives, and dilemmas, showcasing the complexity and multifaceted nature of the human experience.

### 3. Art of the Real: A Critical Analysis of *The Days*

*The Days* is a film released in 2004, reputed as one of Wang Xiaoshuai's represented works. The story is set in the rural hinterland of northwest China. Through the life experiences of the film's protagonist, Dongchun, the film depicts the impact of social changes on the lives of ordinary people and the personal hardships people encounter when confronted against the backdrop a progressive national reform.

The story happened in the 1990s, against the backdrop of a period of social and economic transition in rural China. The young woman Dongchun resides in the countryside and her husband worked in the city. Therefore, she had to stay in the countryside to take care of their two children when he was out for work. By focusing on the particulars of her life during the winter and spring, the film provides the audience with a sense of the isolation, hardwork, and economic pressure she encounters as a rural resident in China.

The film's primary focus shifted towards Dongchun's emotional life as the story progressed. It depicted a family crisis- a broken relationship between she and husband because of an unexpected affair in the city. Her husband's betrayal represented the fragile aspect of rural-to-urban workers. Counter to the vision of a socialist utopia, Wang's narrative of rural workers showcased a individual-centered desire and the unavoidable price they have to pay in the nationwide reform. This eventually led Dongchun to marry another man who was difficult to get along with. Despite her earnest efforts to provide for her family, she could not ignore the changing dynamics in her husband's heart and the mounting pressure from her children. As a result, she began to experience a sense of helplessness and despondency.

The film also invites discussions on particular societal issues such as rural labour migration and the position of women in rural area, tackling the problems of contemporary urban expansion and collapse of moral values as an consequence of social acceleration. Dongchun's husband departs the house to seek employment, a common occurrence in rural China. This trend contributes to the breakdown of rural families and increases the pressure on the remaining women. The film depicts the genuine challenges encountered by this rural society through the lens of the winter and spring seasons.

At the most dramatic moment in the film, Dongchun's mother-in-law died, and she was also compelled to face the fact that her husband was having an affair. She felt irritated, impotent, and even entertained suicidal thoughts. Despite this, Dongchun and her spouse reached an unspoken agreement during a heated argument on a rainy evening. Dongchun displayed some degree of tolerance and forgiveness while in her husband's bosom, despite the fact that this unspoken agreement did not resolve the issue.

The entirety of the film illustrates the difficulties in life, emotional conflicts, and inner transformations of ordinary people during social change through the use of gorgeous paintings of winter and spring scenes [8]. Rather than relying heavily on excessively theatrical techniques, the film is dominated by genuine settings and emotions.

The film exemplifies the central concerns of Chinese neorealism through its in-depth examination of individual life. The film profoundly reflects the impact of social changes on individuals and the influence of social changes on individuals. The following are some of the fundamental elements of Chinese neorealism that may be found in this film after a thorough analysis. In this portrayal of reality, the film unfolds in the rural regions of China's far northwest. It authentically captures the lives of ordinary people through a variety of vivid scenarios and situations, staying true to the principles of Chinese realism, which emphasize portraying the world as it truly exists.

The use of authentic resources is a key element in this film's storytelling. It chronicles the life journey of a woman living in the countryside, adhering to the neorealist philosophy that focuses on the destinies of everyday individuals. Through the experiences of its protagonist, Dongchun, the film demonstrates the difficulties ordinary people confront as a result of social change. These challenges are the result of social change. In the midst of economic and social development, her situation is emblematic of what many people in rural areas go through. The film touched upon the social concerns by Dongchun's story, exploring in depth a variety of social issues, including the position of women in rural society, the unpredictability of life, and the significance of the family in providing emotional and financial support.

Expression of genuine emotions: The film's attention to detail in depicting Dongchun's interior turmoil and the ways in which his emotions change when he is faced with obstacles allows it to do so exceptionally well. This genuine expression of emotion makes it much easier for the audience to reflect on the reality they are facing with.

#### **4. Re-identify Neo-realism in Chinese Film Landscape: Root Seeking, Urbanization, and Self-alienation**

In the sphere of Chinese cinema, neorealism can be re-identified through its reflections on themes that resonate with the country's unique historical and sociocultural context. Root-seeking, urban trauma, and self-alienation are crucial components of neorealism in Chinese cinema, particularly in the context of modernization and social transformation.

Neorealism in Chinese cinema frequently examines the process of locating cultural and personal origins against the backdrop of accelerated modernization [9]. As China undergoes profound changes in its economic and social structures, many individuals find themselves estranged from neorealist films that focus on characters attempting to reconcile the past with the present and the struggle to find belonging and identity in a shifting environment.

Urbanization and the subsequent cultural shock are prevalent themes in Chinese Neorealist films. As rural populations migrated to urban centres in quest of improved opportunities, they encountered a milieu resembling neorealism. difference.

China's rapid modernization and industrialization has caused many people to feel alienated and disengaged rapidly. As characters transform and become estranged from traditional values and statements, neorealism becomes entangled in their interior conflicts. These films illustrate the

psychological impact of modernization on the individual psyche by examining the conflict between personal aspirations and societal expectations.

Neorealism in Chinese cinema reflects the complex dynamics of a society undergoing radical change [10]. The emergence of root-seeking, urban shock, and self-alienation as themes reflects the multifaceted challenges and experiences encountered by individuals during the modernization process. Focusing on personal narratives within these broader sociocultural shifts, Chinese New Reality cinema explores the human condition in a world that is swiftly transforming.

## 5. Conclusion

As discussed in this article, realism has a significant impact on the aesthetics of Chinese cinema. This article discusses human nature's challenges, ordinary experience, and China's massive socio-political changes at the end of the 20th century.

Neorealist films from China covers a wide range of subjects, and pay a close attention to those marginalized underclass people who have been ignored by national publicity. These films depict social injustice, human struggle, and impotence in difficult conditions. The grassroots perspective challenges the previous grand narrative of economic reform and urbanization.

By critically analyzing Wang Xiaoshuai's masterpiece, *The Days*, this article researches on Wang Xiaoshuai's Chinese artistic endeavors in neorealism and investigates his particular thematic choice and cinematography in his neorealist works. It figures out that Wang tends to portray reality through personal struggle, the incompatibility between rural and urban area, and family and social issues. The film uses documentary-style shooting, natural light, and real circumstances to provide realism, while non-professional actors play the characters. The experiences of persons affected by social change are eloquently shown in films.

Chinese film depicts the complicated dynamics of a rapidly changing society realistically. Chinese neorealist films explore modernization's challenges through root-seeking, metropolitan shock, and self-alienation. Personal narratives in these videos depict the human condition in a changing environment. The analysis of themes and visual manifestations in Wang Xiaoshuai's realist works reveals the sixth generation of filmmakers who reinterpret realism in film. It also seeks to understand Chinese realism films and filmmakers' depictions of individual lives in the fast-changing social arena in the 1990s.

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