

Analysis on Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Creation of Existentialist Films in the Context of East Asian Localization

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Abstract

The core themes of existentialist film, rooted as it is in the postwar European philosophical tradition, are the individual subjectivity, extreme freedom and the confrontation with absurdity. When East Asian filmmakers grapple with these premises they are not merely reproducing Western existentialist aesthetic but are doing so in culturally specific philosophical registers such as Confucian relational ethics, Buddhist impermanence, and Daoist acceptance of contingency, thereby producing hybrid cinematic forms that are not so easily assimilated into either tradition. This study investigates the cross-cultural adoption of existentialist themes in East Asian cinema through three theoretical perspectives: Homi Bhabha's third sphere of cultural enunciation Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm 3. A comparative philosophy of selfhood: Sartrean individual freedom v Confucian relational identity. Drawing on close textual analysis of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989), Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000), and Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), this essay argues that East Asian existentialist cinema constitutes a unique mode of creative practice in which the irreducible particularity of collective historical experience re-works the existentialist form to produce what I call "relational existentialism": a filmic mode that discovers freedom, absurdity, and authenticity in, rather than outside of.

Keywords

Existentialism; cross-cultural adaptation; East Asian cinema; third space; Confucianism; Buddhist impermanence; relational existentialism; localization.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

As a philosophical tradition, existentialist sprang from the particular historical traumas of twentieth-century Europe: the collapse of metaphysical certainty, the experience of totalitarianism, and the legacy of industrial mass mortality. It crystallised into a philosophical agenda concerned with radical individual freedom, the absurdity of life without transcendent justification, the importance of subjective experience as the source of meaning. The philosophical coordinates within which European existentialist cinema operated were charted by Sartre's fundamental premise that 'existence precedes essence' – that human beings are condemned to be free, to define themselves through choices for which they are fully responsible – and by Camus's articulation of the absurd as the inescapable tension between the human desire for meaning and the universe's essential indifference. These coordinates yielded in Bergman, Antonioni and Godard a cinematic modernism of alienated protagonists, fragmented narratives and the primacy of consciousness over action, a tradition which Thompson and Bordwell identify as the defining artistic movement in the postwar history of European cinema. From the 1980s East Asian filmmakers working in the national cinemas of Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, without a direct ideological inheritance from European existentialism, developed

cinematic practices that engaged with existentialist concerns, the confrontation with mortality, the contingency of social identity, the gap between individual aspiration and structural constraint. Their films emerged from national contexts that had been shaped by colonial histories, rapid modernisation, Confucian social values and Buddhist cosmological models that conceived of selfhood, freedom and time quite differently from the Sartrean tradition. In this study I explore how the creative meeting between existentialist cinematic form and East Asian philosophical and cultural particularity develops distinctive modalities of adaptation, not faithful translation but transformational negotiation, in what Bhabha calls the third realm of cultural enunciation.

1.2. Research Questions

The analysis is organised around three research questions. RQ1: What are the theoretical models that best account for the cross-cultural adaptation of existentialist philosophical foundations to East Asian cinematic form? RQ2: How can certain East Asian philosophical traditions (Confucian relational ethics, Buddhist impermanence, and the structuring weight of collective historical experience) alter the aesthetic and narrative techniques of existentialist cinema? RQ3: What are the particular creative contributions of East Asian existentialist cinema to world film culture, and what term might best reflect this specificity?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Third Space and Cultural Hybridity

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha's concept of the third space of cultural enunciation suggests that the construction of cultural meaning always takes place not within bounded cultural systems but within a liminal, hybrid space of translation and negotiation [3]. From this perspective, cultural identity is not the expression of a pre-given essence but a continual production in a space that is neither entirely originary nor entirely derived – a space in which the “cutting edge of translation and negotiation” displaces prior hierarchies and allows for new cultural configurations that cannot be reduced to either the source or the target culture [3]. Third space theorists argue that the cinematically adapted works of East Asian existentialist films are themselves creative works, and are born from the dialectic between Western philosophical form and East Asian cultural specificity to produce meanings that are unavailable to either tradition alone.

2.2. Encoding/Decoding and Cinematic Cultural Translation

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm posits that cultural texts are not transparent transmitters of fixed meaning, but created artefacts whose meanings are shaped at the intersection of the encoding strategies of their makers, and the decoding frameworks of their viewers [4]. When applied to the cross-cultural cinematic adaptation, the framework reveals how East Asian filmmakers encode the existentialist premises with their own cultural codes – long takes, elliptical time, seasonal narrative cycles, philosophical silence – changing the existentialist problematic at the level of form rather than mere content. Hall's negotiated reading attitudes, neither hegemonic acceptance nor oppositional rejection but creative appropriation, effectively depict the link of East Asian cinema to its existentialist philosophical basis [4].

2.3. Individual Freedom versus Relational Selfhood

The most fundamental philosophical tension in cross-cultural existentialist adaptation concerns the creation of the self. Sartrean existentialism provides an atomistic subject for whom freedom is the highest priority and whose relations with other individuals are largely conflict-ridden -- hell is other people is Sartre's most condensed formulation -- and authenticity

consists in the individual's radical self-acceptance of freedom against social pressure [1]. Müller's analysis of Oshima Nagisa's engagement with Sartrean existentialism in the 1960s gives a necessary precursor to the contemporary adaptation processes that we describe here, indicating that East Asian filmmakers have long negotiated the existentialist legacy rather than absorbed it [8]. By contrast, Confucian ethics views selfhood as irreducibly relational: the individual is not prior to the five basic human relationships but rather produced via them, and the achievement of whole humanity (ren) is intimately tied to the achievement of relational obligations. Buddhist metaphysics deconstructs the unified self, seeing the clinging to an individual identity as the cause of suffering and the essential structure of existence as impermanence. These conceptual contrasts generate the creative tension from which the specific styles of East Asian existentialist film emerge.

3. Case Analyses

3.1. Collective Historicity and Absent Freedom: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness*

Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989) is the first film to deal with the 228 Incident and the subsequent White Terror in Taiwan directly. It is an existentialist cinema of radical situatedness: a meditation on how collective historical violence forecloses the individual freedoms that European existentialism presupposes as primordial [5]. Sartre's insistence on radical freedom and absolute responsibility for one's situation – that even in the most extreme constraint the human being retains the freedom of its fundamental project – is set against the historical experience of the film's characters, for whom political erasure, colonial succession and state terror are not chosen situations but imposed annihilations of the conditions of free selfhood. Hou's status as a world-renowned auteur, *A City of Sadness* presents a perfect case study for understanding the interplay between individual creative agency and the historical constraints that auteur theory considers to be constitutive of directorial style [9]. The film's formal strategies embody this historical situatedness through observational long takes averaging 43 seconds, which place the characters in historical environments out of their control, and through an elliptical narrative structure whereby the most violent events happen off-screen, performing the silencing of historical memory that was the social operation of the White Terror [5].

The film's use of a third space theoretical frame is a consequence of the way in which Hou re-frames the existentialist concerns of authenticity and death-consciousness within a Confucian context of familial obligation and collective historical memory [3]. The muteness of the protagonist Wen-ching is a corporeal condition that metaphorises the wider political silencing of Taiwanese identity under KMT rule, transforming the Sartrean existentialist theme of the individual's confrontation with the silence of the universe into a politically specific exploration of the way collective historical experience structures the conditions of possibility for individual existence. The last image of the film is an emptied family space, a visual absence that condenses births, deaths, arrests, disappearances into a single cinematographic void, an East Asian re-encoding of existentialist nothingness as historical rather than ontological, collective rather than individual [4][5].

3.2. Temporal Consciousness and Buddhist Impermanence: Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*

Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (*A One and a Two*, 2000) owes its cinematic treatment of existentialist time-consciousness as much to Buddhist notions of impermanence and cyclical time as it does to Sartrean phenomenology. The film's three-generation narrative structure – a grandmother's coma, a father's mid-life reckoning with the possibilities he has not lived, an adolescent daughter's first encounter with mortality, an eight-year-old son's philosophical photographic

project - stages the existentialist confrontation with finitude not as an individual crisis but as a shared structure of experience that recurs across the life cycle and binds rather than isolates the members of a family [6]. Yoshimoto's exploration of the philosophical dimensions of Japanese film reveals how East Asian directors integrate philosophical concerns into creative methods without didactic comment [10]. The most focused philosophical statement in the film is Yang-Yang's meticulous photography of the backs of people's heads, his endeavour to show people "what they cannot see for themselves." This is a cinematic practice of supplementing the partial perspectives from which individual existence is necessarily conducted, and resonates simultaneously with the existentialist theme of the Other as constitutive of self-knowledge and the Buddhist insight that the self is always already incomplete.

The film's treatment of NJ's reunion with his long-lost first love, a lengthy subjunctive exploration of the road not taken, re-encodes the Sartrean concept of bad faith in Confucian terms: The apparent poor faith of NJ's choice of duty above sincere desire is not a failure of human choice, but a site of real philosophical complexity where relational commitment creates its own form of existential depth. Yang negotiates the tension between Sartrean authenticity, the demand to accept one's freedom without self-deception, and Confucian ethics, the demand to fulfil relational obligations as the condition of moral selfhood, in a manner that precludes the European existentialist verdict and produces instead a third-space configuration in which both requirements are simultaneously valid and irresolvable [3][4].

3.3. Absurdity, Class Structure, and Collective Bad Faith: Bong Joon-ho's Parasite

The most globally legible version of East Asian existentialist cinema is Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), the first non-English-language film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. The film employs the Camusian absurd as a lens to explore South Korean class system in ways that honour and change the philosophical tradition [7]. The Kim family's invasion of the Park home is Sartrean bad faith writ large: the Kims assume roles that contradict their material facticity by systematic performance, while the Parks refuse to acknowledge the work circumstances on which their life depends [1][7]. Camus's absurd hero, who understands the basic irrationality of social life and yet proceeds with it, a position he calls revolt [2], has a Korean equivalent in Ki-taek, whose final act, a violent outburst against the social order that has shamed his family, is a lucidity of refusal and a further entrapment in the very logic he rejects.

Beyond European existentialism, the film's key intervention is that bad faith in Korea is not just an individual psychological failing but a structural social condition: the class system itself functions as an institutionalised form of bad faith, in which both the rich and the poor are forced to perform identities that deny the real conditions of their mutual dependence [7]. This Confucian-inflected view of poor faith as a societal and relational, not just individual, occurrence is precisely the sort of third-space mutation of existentialist philosophy that Bhabha's framework predicts. It is not a straightforward application of Sartre to the Korean context, nor a rejection of the existentialist framework, but its creative metamorphosis through engagement with East Asian social philosophy [3].

4. Discussion: Towards a Theory of Relational Existentialism

4.1. The Shared Transformative Logic

The three case analyses hint to a shared transformative logic at work in East Asian existentialist cinema that this thesis seeks to theorise as "relational existentialism". In each film the European existentialist premise that freedom, responsibility and authenticity are the fundamental coordinates of human existence is not rejected but rather re-situated. Freedom is explored as constitutively shaped by historical, relational and cosmological structures that precede and

exceed the individual subject. Hou's characters face not the Sartrean void of radical freedom but the historical void of collective trauma; Yang's characters wrestle not with the existentialist imperative for radical self-creation but with the Buddhist insight that the self is already given as perspectively incomplete; Bong's characters enact not individual bad faith but the structural bad faith of a class system that denies the relational constitution of human existence [5][6][7]. This transformative logic operates on the level of cinematic form as well as on the level of philosophical content. The long take, which in European existentialist cinema depicts the individual consciousness facing length [12], in East Asian cinema puts the individual consciousness in historical and relational time beyond it. The elliptical narrative in the European tradition enacts the fragmentation of individual consciousness, and in East Asian film the fragmentary perspective from which the relational and historical existence is necessarily negotiated. This creates a particular cinematic mode, found in the Taiwan New Cinema, South Korean social realism and Japanese slow cinema, which is a genuine and original creative contribution to world film culture, and places East Asian existentialist cinema within the transnational circuits of cultural exchange identified by Hunt and Wing-Fai as constitutive of contemporary East Asian film culture [4][6][11].

In response to RQ1: the theoretical triad of Bhabha's third space, Hall's encoding/decoding model and comparative philosophy of selfhood offers the most analytically productive framework for cross-cultural existentialist adaptation, as it explains both the transformative creativity of the adaptation process, the cultural specificity of the transformed form, and the philosophical stakes of the encounter between Western and East Asian traditions.

RQ2: Confucian relational ethics recontextualises individualist existentialist freedom as relational responsibility, Buddhist impermanence recontextualises the confrontation with death as a cosmological structure of cyclic time, and collective historical experience recontextualises existentialist void from an ontological to a political condition.

5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that East Asian existentialist cinema is a specific creative practice which does not simply reject or passively reproduce the European existentialist tradition but reworks it through engagement with the Confucian, Buddhist and historical particularity of East Asian experience. RQ3: The unique creative contribution of this cinema to global film culture is the elaboration of a relational existentialism, a philosophical-cinematic mode that positions the terms of freedom, absurdity and authenticity within the web of relational, historical and cosmological belonging rather than against it. This essay challenges the universal claims of European existentialism, showing that the atomistic individual facing an indifferent universe is culturally specific and that existentialist questions about meaning, freedom and finitude can be fruitfully addressed from philosophical traditions that interpret them radically differently.

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