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Warm Snow and Setting Sun A Comparison of Male Images in Chinese and British Working-class Images

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Abstract:

This paper explores the similar predicaments and spiritual qualities of working-class men in China and England during periods of economic transition and social transformation by comparing their representations in cinema from Northeast China and Northern England. Despite the distinct geographical and cultural backgrounds of the Chinese and English working classes, their cinematic male images both emerge as "stragglers" of epochal upheaval: experiencing the collapse of their economic foundation, the dissolution of traditional masculinity, and the erosion of familial authority. The difference lies in the emphasis: British films focus more on individual resistance and conflicts over gender roles, while Chinese films highlight self-discipline under collective memory and national narratives. Beneath these differences, both employ the form of "tragicomedy," using humor to counterpoint underlying tragedy, thereby revealing the universal plight of the working class amidst the tides of globalization and marketization. This prompts reflection on human resilience in turbulent times.

Keywords: Masculinity; Working-Class Cinema; Comparative Study

Introduction

To gain an advantage in World War II, the British governments of Chamberlain and Churchill strengthened state control over the national economy. Steered by the ideas of Labour Minister Aneurin Bevan and Bank of England director John Maynard Keynes, post-war Britain continued this wartime economic trajectory, gradually constructing a "leviathan" of state ownership—marked by the NHS for public healthcare, state-owned factories as the core of industry, and a national welfare system safeguarding worker and vulnerable group rights. However, the outbreak of the "Oil Crisis" rendered this cumbersome economic system unsustainable. Consequently, during the sweeping liberalization reforms spearheaded by Margaret Thatcher, the previous state-dominated economic structure was dismantled. Many formerly privileged British industrial workers plummeted overnight, becoming "relics" of a bygone

era, apprehensive in the face of the new situation. They confronted both the decline of worker status under neoliberalism and the disempowerment of traditional masculinity amid trends of female liberation. This paper employs a broad definition of the "Thatcher period," encompassing not only Thatcher's premiership but also the subsequent period when her economic and political policies took effect.

Northeast China (Dongbei) served as the industrial core of New China for a long period after its founding, holding significant political and economic importance as a concrete geographical representation shaping the young, robust, and strong national image. Prolonged socialist industrialization, socialist education, and the unique geographical environment of the Northeast forged a distinctive working class. Their crucial role in national economic production afforded them favorable living conditions, fostering the emergence of localized working-class communities and culture. Amid the personnel shifts triggered by the structural crisis of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, the economic foundation of the Northeast working class collapsed abruptly. Simultaneously, the disintegration of worker communities exiled them to a wilderness alienated from the post-industrial society.

While research on male images in British and Chinese working-class cinema has advanced theoretical understanding within their respective fields, comparative studies of these two groups facing remarkably similar predicaments remain scarce. This article aims to collate cinematic representations of the working class in Northeast China and Northern England, summarize the male images of both nations' working classes presented on screen, and analyze them using textual and historical analysis from comparative film studies. It seeks to demonstrate the shared spiritual qualities of these two working classes despite their vastly different geographical, cultural, and social contexts, offering a retrospective reflection on the similar epochal turbulence they experienced.

Literature Review

Within research on male images in British working-class cinema, Chinese scholar Ju Wei (2015) provides a relatively comprehensive analysis of male figures in post-WWII British cinema. She specifically categorizes male images in Thatcher-era British working-class cinema into "post-industrial men" and "post-patriarchal men," outlining the construction framework of masculinity during this period.[] In studies of masculinity in The Full Monty, Australian scholar Kellie Farrell (2003) offers a thorough gender-theory analysis of the masculine crisis conveyed in the film, revealing how it resonates with the contemporary crisis of masculinity and British national/imperial identity.[]

Chinese working-class cinema gradually faded from public view as the Reform and Opening-Up policy unfolded, with narratives centered on revolutionary ideals and class struggle giving way to the "New Northeastern Cinema" (新东北电影). This genre, rooted in the black soil and steel of the Northeast, draws material from the historical trauma inflicted upon the traditional working class by neoliberal global expansion. In recent years, it has attracted considerable scholarly attention regarding its narrative structure, character portrayal, and the underlying reflections on the era conveyed through audiovisual language. Domestic scholar Su Yefei (2021) analyzes the aesthetic practices of the "New Northeastern Cinema," explaining the aesthetic mechanisms of this genre as a cohesive category. []Domestic scholar Liu Yan (2013, 2018, 2019, 2022), working in the fields of "New Northeastern Literature" and "New Northeastern Cinema," conducts textual analysis using representative works of the "Northeast Trio" (Shuang Xuetao, Ban Yu, Zheng Zhi) and the Northeastern film The Piano in a Factory (钢的琴). Her research excavates the deep-seated meanings embedded within such cultural works.[]

Analysis of the "Unemployed Worker" Image in Northern English Cinema during the Thatcher Era

Upon entering 10 Downing Street in 1979, Thatcher implemented a series of political and economic measures aimed at controlling unemployment and alleviating the depression stemming from the "Winter of Discontent." Her political philosophy and economic policies emphasized liberalization (especially in finance), flexible labor markets, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and curbing trade union influence. Consequently, during her 11-year tenure, Britain's traditional industries suffered significant blows: factory closures, worker layoffs, and shifting subsidies... As the British working class declined, it provided a constant stream of material for British cinema in the 1990s. Given British cinema's long-standing realist tradition since the 20th century, filmmakers naturally turned their gaze towards this ongoing social upheaval, producing realist films like The Full Monty, Billy Elliot, and Brassed Off, which reflect the plight of the working class during the Thatcher era and its aftermath from various angles.

The "unemployed worker" image in these films is predominantly embodied by working-class men. These characters often struggle to survive in a post-industrial society,

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becoming societal "stragglers"—economically struggling to adapt to the new free-market conditions; spiritually disoriented, grappling with new ideological currents. Characters like Gaz and his group of strippers in The Full Monty, Tony and his father in Billy Elliot, among others, more or less epitomize the archetypal "unemployed worker."

In The Full Monty, the protagonist Gaz lives in Sheffield, a city once reliant on the steel industry. As the neoliberal wave surged in the late 20th century, its steel industry rapidly declined, transforming Sheffield into a quintessential "post-industrial" city—marked by derelict factories, unemployed workers, and bleak cityscapes. Workers struggled to transition to new industrial demands, and their quality of life plummeted. In the film, Gaz lives in hardship, resorting to various illegal activities to make ends meet. Unable to afford child support, he finds himself desperate and conceives the idea of earning money through striptease.

In Raining Stones (石　雨), Bob and Tommy live in a post-industrial town in Northern England. Both middle-aged and unemployed, their lives descend into hardship, forcing them to resort to petty theft to scrape by. Driven by the desire for his daughter to wear the same dress as other children at her communion, Bob embarks on various legal and illegal endeavors to earn the money.

In British working-class cinema, the issues explored are gendered. The problems faced by the male protagonists often center on declining economic status and the ensuing crisis of masculinity. Simultaneously, these male figures are frequently portrayed in a relatively negative light: economically disadvantaged, often unemployed, not averse to minor illegal activities to get by, and striving within the family to maintain paternal authority eroded by their economic fall. As the plot unfolds, the nobility and goodness within their spiritual world are gradually revealed, forming a complex and contradictory yet well-rounded character.

Analysis of the "Laid-off Worker" Image in Northeastern Chinese Cinema

In the 1990s, the massive impact of SOE (State-Owned Enterprise) restructuring profoundly affected Northeast China, known for its traditional industries. In response to widespread and persistent losses in SOEs, the central government implemented the "grasp the large, release the small" (抓大放小) reform. The layoff and reassignment of SOE workers was a crucial component of this reform. Over approximately a decade (1993-2004), around 30 million SOE workers were laid off, accounting for about 38% of the urban workforce at the time, directly impacting over one-fifth of Chinese families (Naughton, 2007; World Bank, 2007; Liang et al., 2018). [] This seismic shift deeply influenced the construction of collective memory in the Northeast region. It lingers like a specter in the "son's generation" narratives of the New Northeastern Cinema, giving rise to a body of films directly or indirectly reflecting this historical wave, such as Luck by a Hair (耳朵大有福) and The Piano in a Factory (钢的琴).

The "laid-off worker" image in these films bears similarities to the "unemployed worker" image in Thatcher-era Northern English cinema: both represent sacrificial figures struggling in a new era. However, compared to the "unemployed worker," the portrayal of the "laid-off worker" on screen more prominently displays self-delusion influenced by state discourse and self-discipline in the context of "family" sacrifice for the "nation," rendering the bitterness and helplessness of the "laid-off worker" with even greater poignancy.

The "laid-off worker" image in Northeastern cinema is relatively more diverse than its Northern English counterpart. Unlike British Northern worker films, where women are often depicted as gaining opportunities and elevated status from this transition, the "laid-off worker" group emphasizes a universality transcending gender. Contrasting with the British working-class film's typical presentation of the factory as a male space, images of female workers frequently appear in Northeastern working-class films, such as the female colleague Shuxian in The Piano in a Factory.

In The Piano in a Factory, the protagonist Chen Guilin, laid off from his job, makes a living by forming a band to perform at weddings and funerals. His wife, Xiao Ju, leaves him for a wealthy businessman and files for custody of their daughter. The court leans towards Xiao Ju based on "who can provide better educational conditions (a piano)." To keep his daughter, Chen Guilin embarks on the quest to build a piano. He mobilizes his laid-off former co-workers, utilizing materials and skills from a derelict steel factory, and handcrafts a piano in a dilapidated workshop. The piano is ultimately completed, but the daughter still chooses to leave with her mother.

In Luck by a Hair, the protagonist Wang Kangmei is a retired railway worker. His family is broken, and his wife suffers from a serious illness. Faced with the heavy pressures of life, he consistently uses clumsy humor and self-consolation to dispel bitterness, claiming his large ears are a sign of "good fortune" (有福). Repeated failures in finding work lead to a worsening of his living conditions. Finally, pushing his wife in a wheelchair while running wildly down an empty street, crying and shouting "We have good fortune!" (咱有福), Wang Kangmei launches his most tragic and heroic act of resistance

against fate through this "escape."

The male image in Chinese working-class cinema overlaps considerably with that in British working-class cinema. However, the issues explored differ. In New Northeastern Cinema, self-discipline under national narratives occupies a more significant part. Within the stories, both groups struggle to survive the impact of epochal tides, exhibiting resilience, optimism, and humor, embodying the tenacity of life. Yet, by the story's end, they often fail to truly reverse their predicament, becoming either lost souls or prisoners of their time.

Breakthrough in Crisis

In both Chinese and English working-class cinema, protagonists in crisis often resort to various means to attempt to change or resist their circumstances. However, these Quixotic struggles usually culminate in futile tragic endings, adding a touch of twilight pathos to the characters.

In Billy Elliot, Billy's defiance of his father's will to pursue ballet provokes strong opposition. This paternal resistance stems partly from protecting paternal authority within the family and partly reflects the father's interaction with the seismic shift in socio-cultural norms: ballet, traditionally perceived as a feminine art and pastime, challenges the father's understanding. The potential disruption to the continuity of masculinity also contributes to the erosion of the paternal role. Tony, as another worker in the family, persists in daily participation in miners' strikes, attempting alongside his comrades to fight for their rights through collective action against government economic policies. At the film's conclusion, news of Billy's acceptance into the Royal Ballet School arrives almost simultaneously with the announcement that the mine will reopen, signaling the utter failure of the union's struggle against the government. The miners' numb expressions upon realizing their powerlessness against the tide of history write the tragic finale for their fate in the film. By portraying a struggling family's division and eventual reconciliation over "ballet"—a symbol marked by distinct femininity and bourgeois connotations—the film reveals the resistance and decline of the British working class under neoliberal logic. Simultaneously, as Stuart Hall (1988) argued, following the symbolic "emasculation" inflicted upon the masculine image of the British nation-state by the 1956 Suez Crisis, the country faced a top-to-bottom crisis of national "masculinity." Consequently, working-class men developed a panic over the loss of masculinity. [] Billy Elliot's Billy family illustrates the progressive transformation of traditional working-class men from panic and anger to reconciliation and tolerance in the face of new ideological currents.

In The Full Monty, the group of unemployed men led by Gaz generally suffer disdain within their families, facing dual collapses in economic and domestic life. Unemployment strips Gaz and others not only of economic status but also social and familial standing. In their desperation, inspired by a male striptease performance at a club, Gaz decides to emulate them to gain wealth and respect. The active choice to perform male striptease as an income source symbolizes the "unemployed workers," led by Gaz, compromising with and accommodating the new era's value system. Perhaps the moment Gaz witnesses a woman urinating standing up in the club—formerly a working men's club—he dissociates from his "old self" as an industrial-era male worker. However, at the film's end, Gaz and his friends bask only in fleeting glory; their fundamental status as economic "cast-offs" of the era remains unchanged for the foreseeable future.

In the Chinese Northeastern working-class film The Piano in a Factory, the protagonist's breakthrough is endowed by the author with symbolic meaning far exceeding the act itself. The film's title, The Piano in a Factory, serves as an apt metaphor, a symbolic representation (Liu F. & Kang J., 2011)[]. As the new value system encroaches upon the life order of "laid-off workers" led by Chen Guilin, the absurd solo act of handcrafting a piano becomes their symbolic resistance—a creative act of self-salvation performed through the labor forms of a bygone era within a society whose economic structure and symbolic systems have been completely overturned. When Chen Guilin attempts to retain his daughter by acquiring a piano, he seeks to assert himself as a man and a father, yet simultaneously submits to the new symbolic order. He fantasizes about exchanging an object for his paternal status, but in this world dominated by exchange value, he can never attain the Name-of-the-Father (Liu Y., 2013)[]. As the biological father, Chen Guilin can only watch the new era and its rules take his daughter away after his spectacular ritualistic resistance.

"Tragicomedy" – Finding Humor Amidst Hardship

The origin of tragicomedy as a dramatic form traces back to ancient Greece. Through the contradiction and reconciliation of emotions, it reveals the complexity of life and the multifaceted nature of humanity. In the ancient Greek play Amphitryon, Plautus coined the term somewhat playfully in the prologue. The character Mercury argues it's improper for a comedy to include both kings/gods and their servants, claiming the play would be best termed a "tragicomoedia."

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In both Chinese and English working-class cinema, tragicomedy serves as a widely employed expressive form, providing powerful support for the dramatic presentation. The inherent tragic nature of the historical backgrounds depicted offers an excellent entry point for such cinematic creation. Representative films from both countries within this theme, such as the British The Full Monty and the Chinese The Piano in a Factory, adeptly portray the optimism and resilience displayed by the working class facing the "winter" of their specific historical moments. However, the silent reality behind the silver screen is the powerlessness and helplessness of that generation confronting radical social change. This contrast profoundly enriches the male images within working-class cinema.

In The Full Monty, the unemployed workers led by Gaz undoubtedly gain self-respect and understanding through their resistance by the film's end, presenting a heartwarming, happy conclusion. The narrative process is saturated with humor, utilizing hilarious scenes to satirize the state of male life during Britain's economic downturn and the contrast between contemporary British men and women (Chen, 2019)[]. In reality, the unemployed workers neither changed nor could change the root cause of their tragedy—Britain's economic restructuring compelled by global pressures. At the film's conclusion, Gaz's striptease performance wins the approval of his ex-wife and child, and through this final show, he earns substantial income to pay child support. Yet, this dramatic ending somewhat obscures the audience's consideration of the longer-term future for workers like Gaz—those represented by "Gaz" are ultimately a minority. Many more working-class men lost control over their destinies in the roaring currents of the era, becoming mere notes in the score of a historical tragedy. Understanding this layer, all the comedic treatments in the film's plot become ballast weighing down the profound melancholy reflection prompted after the seemingly upbeat finale.

In The Piano in a Factory, this sense of powerlessness and futility is presented more starkly and incisively. Faced with the challenge from his wife, who had readily adapted to the market economy and achieved upward mobility, Chen Guilin chooses to build a piano to win back his daughter's affection. At the film's outset, the dramatic scene where the worker band led by Chen Guilin switches from playing "Troika" (三 套 车) to "Step by Step Ascending" (步步高) at a funeral is darkly humorous. On a deeper level, the workers are playing their own elegy (Liu Y., 2013).[] As the credits roll over this fixed backdrop, accompanied by the cheerful funeral tune, this worker-themed film becomes an allegory for the filmmakers' own fate.

The dual identity of the protagonist Chen Guilin as both father and worker parallels that of Gaz in The Full Monty. Despite differing historical contexts, they share a relational similarity: as fathers, their families are torn asunder; as workers, their collectives are abandoned and dissolved. Both films abstract the accumulative expropriation at the national level into familial ethical dilemmas, unfolding macro-level questions of national direction through micro-level family dynamics. This provides an entry point for the filmmakers to convey reflections on the era via family transformations in the film's closing moments and offers the audience an interface to understand the characters. As working-class tragicomedies, both films utilize comedic expression and plot devices to convey a certain poignant pity and philosophical reflection from beyond their time. Through the form of tragicomedy, they illuminate the resilience and fleeting brilliance of those abandoned in the howling winds of history, while simultaneously highlighting their ultimate powerlessness and silence.

Conclusion

The cinematic male images of the Chinese and English working classes resemble giant rocks on different shores, eroded by the tides of time yet bearing similar textures and scars. Despite the vast differences in geography, culture, and social systems between the two nations, their working-class men on screen cast similar shadows: the collapse of masculinity, economic decline, and familial discord. As the train of the era steams into the distance, those relics of the industrial age are left only with confusion over their identity and uncertainty about the path ahead. This resonance across geographical boundaries also reveals the inherent power contained within Chinese and English working-class cinema. As reflective "whistleblowers" of their advancing times, they offer valuable reference material for future generations.

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