

Sadness and Healing: A Study on the Cultural Psychology and Audience Reception of the “BE Aesthetic” in East Asian Romance Films

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Abstract

This study examines the aesthetic phenomenon of the “Bad Ending” (BE) in East Asian romance cinema. Departing from Hollywood’s conventional “happy-ending” paradigm, East Asian BE romances elicit powerful emotional resonance and aesthetic pleasure by thematizing regret, loss, and sacrifice. Adopting a cross-cultural perspective, the research integrates Western tragic aesthetics with East Asian cultural-psychological traditions—mono no aware and yūgen in Japan, han in Korea, and Confucian collectivism in China. Through close textual analyses of representative films (*Christmas in August* [1998], *The Classic* [2003], *Love Letter* [1995], *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World* [2004], *Hello, Zhihua* [2019], *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* [1996]), this study elucidates how BE aesthetics materialize via narrative strategies of time and memory, illness and death, and resistance to social structures and fate. Incorporating audience-reception theory, it further explains why contemporary youth discover “healing” within “sorrow,” arguing that BE delivers cathartic purification, safe experiential extremity through aesthetic distance, realistic identification with imperfection, and collective consolation via the culture of Yi Nan Ping (意难平). It concludes that the East Asian BE-aesthetic romance film synthesizes traditional cultural psychology with contemporary audience sensibilities, reflecting not only an aesthetic trend but also the distinctive emotional logic of modern East Asian societies.

Keywords: BE aesthetics, romance film, East Asian culture, mono no aware, emotional healing, tragic aesthetics

1. Introduction

Romance cinema is one of the most influential and popular film genres worldwide, and its narrative models and paradigms of closure have long attracted broad academic attention. Since the twentieth century, the Western—particularly Hollywood—film industry has established a relatively fixed model of romantic narrative.

Most films conclude with a “happy ending,” satisfying audiences’ emotional expectations while conveying the values of optimism and individualism.

However, in the twenty-first century, within the cultural contexts of China, Japan, and Korea, a romantic film aesthetic characterized by the “Bad Ending” (BE) has gradually emerged and

gained wide recognition. This phenomenon is evident not only in box-office performance and market success but also in audience affective responses. Many young viewers, when confronted with “unfinished love,” do not feel rejection; rather, they actively seek the emotional experience of sorrow, perceiving it as an aesthetic enjoyment of “Yi Nan Ping” (意难平). Through this tendency, the BE aesthetic in East Asian romance films has become an important lens for understanding not only narrative structures but also the emotional psychology and cultural consumption patterns of contemporary audiences.

Academic discussions of tragic aesthetics have a long intellectual history. In *Poetics*, Aristotle proposed the concept of catharsis, emphasizing psychological purification through the experience of tragedy, while Hegel viewed tragic conflict as revealing the grandeur and spiritual dignity of the human being. Meanwhile, East Asian cultural concepts such as Mono no Aware (物哀), Yūgen (幽玄), and Han (恨) have long shaped unique perceptions of impermanence, sacrifice, and destiny. In the current era of deep integration between visual media and new digital platforms, the BE aesthetic has evolved beyond a mere cinematic phenomenon to become part of audiences’ everyday affective consumption practices¹.

Accordingly, this study seeks to systematically analyze, within a cross-cultural comparative framework, the cultural-psychological roots, textual narrative strategies, and audience reception mechanisms of the BE aesthetic as manifested in East Asian romance films. By organizing the logic of interaction between traditional culture and contemporary viewing practices, this research aims to elucidate the deeper mechanism of “how sorrow becomes healing,” thereby providing a new scholarly perspective for understanding the emotional structure of modern East Asian sensibility.

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

In the current era of globalization and media convergence, romance cinema remains one of the most popular and commercially powerful

genres within popular culture, and its narrative models and aesthetic styles continue to evolve dynamically. Historically, Western—particularly Hollywood—romance films have adopted the “happy-ending” paradigm as their dominant structural model, following the narrative logic of “lovers united at last” (有情人终成眷属), thereby fulfilling audiences’ emotional expectations. This paradigm not only reinforces the causal association between love and happiness, but also reflects the individualistic and optimistic tendencies characteristic of Western cultural psychology.

In contrast, as the twenty-first century unfolds, an aesthetic tendency centered on the “Bad Ending” (BE) has gradually emerged in the cinematic contexts of East Asia. Representative examples include the Korean films *Christmas in August* and *The Classic*; the Japanese films *Love Letter* and *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World*; and the Chinese films *Hello* and *Zhihua*. All of these works employ “emotional incompleteness” and “unfulfilled closure” as their narrative resolutions, presenting endings that foreground absence, loss, or deferred affection². Such films have achieved both commercial success and critical acclaim, generating particularly strong emotional resonance among younger audiences.

This phenomenon raises a significant scholarly question worthy of in-depth exploration:

Why is a conclusion of “sorrow” not regarded by contemporary East Asian audiences as a passive or pessimistic narrative choice, but rather as an aesthetic ideal actively pursued and appreciated? How do viewers derive psychological healing from the absence or loss represented on screen?

This inquiry extends beyond the aesthetic structure of cinematic narrative³; it also involves the deep cultural-psychological and socio-affective mechanisms that shape emotional expression and audience reception within East

¹ Heo, J. [허재희]. (2022). A Comparative Analysis of Film Script Translation and Subtitle Translation: Focusing on *Notting Hill*, *Love Actually*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Master’s thesis, Chungbuk National University, Chungcheongbuk-do, Korea, pp. 56–60. [영화 대본 번역과 자막번역 비교 분석: <노팅힐>, <러브 액츄얼리>, <악마는 프라다를 입는다>를 중심으로].

² Lee, S. [이석종]. (2010). A Comparative Study of the Film Music in Three Adaptations of Love Affair (1939, 1957, 1994) [시나리오 ‘Love Affair’로 제작한 세 영화 (Love Affair(1939), An Affair to Remember(1957), Love Affair(1994)]. Master’s thesis, Kyung Hee University, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, pp. 63–66. [의 중요한 장면에 대한 영화음악 비교분석 연구].

³ Kwak, H. [곽한정]. (2014). A Study on the Speech Act Analysis and Application of Film Dialogues [영화대사의 화행분석과 활용방안 연구]. Doctoral dissertation, Korea University Graduate School, Seoul, Korea, pp. 31–33.

Asian societies.

1.2 Literature Review

With regard to the theoretical origins of tragic aesthetics, Western scholarship possesses a long and well-established tradition of debate. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, proposed the theory of catharsis, emphasizing that audiences experience psychological purification and emotional release through feelings of fear and pity when watching tragedy¹. Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, identified the essence of tragedy as the irreconcilability of conflicting values, asserting that through the intensification of contradiction, the grandeur and dignity of the human spirit are revealed. These classical theories provided the philosophical foundation for subsequent studies of tragedy.

At the level of film studies, Western scholars such as Linda Williams have noted, in discussions of body genres, the close relationship between emotional experience and corporeal response in cinematic spectatorship. Thomas Schatz, in *Hollywood Genres*, analyzed the narrative structures of genre films and emphasized that the inevitability of closure functions as a key mechanism sustaining the operation of cinematic genres. Such research has supplied important theoretical tools for understanding the aesthetics of closure in romance films.

In contrast, East Asian scholarship tends to emphasize the influence of indigenous cultural contexts when exploring tragic aesthetics. Japanese scholars, beginning from traditional aesthetic concepts such as *Mono no Aware* (物哀) and *Yūgen* (幽玄), argue that sensitivity to transient beauty and the realization of impermanence (*mujō*) constitute essential sources of Japanese tragic aesthetics. Korean scholars often take the historical collective emotion of *Han* (恨) as a starting point, interpreting the atmosphere of sorrow and sacrifice that permeates Korean literature and cinema. In China, in recent years, researchers have begun to focus on the cultural phenomenon of “*Yi Nan Ping*” (意难平) in romance films, interpreting it as a reflection of contemporary youth’s psychological tension between existential insecurity and emotional

dependence².

Overall, existing scholarship has provided a solid theoretical foundation for the study of tragic aesthetics; however, there remains a lack of systematic analysis regarding the specific manifestation of the “BE aesthetic” in East Asian romance cinema. In particular, the question of how cultural emotions such as *Mono no Aware* and *Han* are interwoven with modern audience reception mechanisms continues to require in-depth academic investigation³.

1.3 Research Significance and Methodology

The significance of this study is manifested primarily in two dimensions.

First, at the theoretical level, this research seeks to integrate Western theories of tragic aesthetics with East Asian cultural traditions, thereby enriching the theoretical framework of romance film studies from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. By bringing concepts such as “catharsis”, “*Mono no Aware*” (物哀), and “*Han*” (恨) into dialogue, the study explores how distinct cultural psychologies of East and West intersect within the same aesthetic phenomenon⁴.

Second, at the practical level, the study of the “BE aesthetic” contributes not only to understanding the emotional structure and cultural consumption psychology of contemporary East Asian youth, but also to revealing how individuals in modern society achieve psychological healing and emotional regulation through mediated experiences of sorrow⁵.

In terms of methodology, this research adopts a threefold approach:

- 1) Textual Analysis: Representative films—such as *Christmas in August*, *Love*

² An Yikang, (2025). The literary *Mono-ai* tradition and flow represented by *The Tale of Genji*. *Masterpieces Review*, (26), 146-148. DOI: 10.20273/j.cnki.mzxs.2025.26.010.

³ Chae, S. [채송아]. (2024). A Comparative Analysis of the “East Asian Cultural City” Projects in China, Japan, and Korea. [한중일 ‘동아시아문화도시’ 비교 분석] Master’s thesis, Yeungnam University Graduate School, Gyeongsangbuk-do, Korea, pp. 13-15.

⁴ Kwak, H. [곽한정]. (2014). A Study on the Speech Act Analysis and Application of Film Dialogues [영화 대사의 화행분석과 활용방안 연구]. Doctoral dissertation, Korea University Graduate School, Seoul, Korea, pp. 31-33.

⁵ Son, W. [손월]. (2024). A Study on Female Characters in Tsui Hark’s *The Lovers* (1995). [서극 영화 <양축>(1995)에 나타난 여성 캐릭터에 관한 연구]. Master’s thesis, Kookmin University Graduate School, Seoul, Korea, pp. 41-46.

¹ Tang Danli. (2025). The Beauty of Mourning: Reflections on Life in *Autumn in the Old Capital*. *How to Write Good Compositions*, (26), 1.

Letter, and *Hello, Zhihua*—are selected for close reading to analyze their narrative strategies and aesthetic characteristics.

- 2) Cultural Studies Perspective: The study combines East Asian traditional aesthetics with socio-cultural psychology to trace the cultural roots of tragic aesthetics.
- 3) Audience Research: Drawing upon primary sources such as film reviews, “bullet comments” (danmu), and social media discussions, the study examines contemporary audience reception and emotional responses.

2. Definition of the “BE Aesthetic” and Its East Asian Cultural-Psychological Roots

2.1 Definition and Core Features of the “BE Aesthetic”

In the context of film and television narratives, the term “BE” originally derives from “Bad Ending,” denoting a conclusion in which the protagonists’ love does not culminate in fulfillment or union. However, as this term has been increasingly adopted within the viewing contexts of East Asian romance cinema, its connotation has evolved far beyond the literal sense of “an unsatisfactory ending.”

As defined in this study, the “BE Aesthetic” does not merely refer to the narrative arrangement of an unhappy conclusion; rather, it represents an emotional aesthetic centered on regret, loss, and sacrifice. Its core lies in the formation of an unfinished emotional tension, which compels the audience to remain immersed in reflection and lingering sentiment long after the film has ended.

Specifically, the BE aesthetic embodies the following key characteristics:

First, emotional restraint. Unlike the explicit and exuberant emotional expressions typical of Hollywood cinema, East Asian BE romance films often convey affection through subtlety and implication. Deep emotional bonds between characters are articulated through glances, gestures, and unspoken words, allowing silence and restraint to carry profound affective weight.

Second, openness of closure. BE narratives often avoid definitive resolution, leaving intentional gaps and ambiguities that invite the viewer’s imagination. This aesthetic of open-endedness enables emotional reverberation to continue beyond the film’s diegesis, allowing audiences to dwell in a state of “productive uncertainty” and

prolonged affective resonance¹.

Third, persistence of memory. Even when films conclude with tragedy or separation, material tokens—such as keepsakes, recurring scenes, or musical motifs—transform love into “eternity within memory.” Through this mechanism, the experience of love transcends the temporal boundary of the narrative and attains a form of spiritual perpetuity.

Fourth, lyrical density. Although the plot may unfold toward tragedy, BE films are characterized by poetic imagery, lyrical rhythm, and aesthetic refinement in cinematography and music. Consequently, viewers experience aesthetic pleasure within sorrow, finding beauty embedded in emotional pain.

In this sense, the “BE Aesthetic” should not be understood simply as a “bad ending,” but rather as an aesthetic mode imbued with cultural significance and emotional profundity, systematically articulated across the landscape of East Asian romance cinema.

2.2 Cultural Root 1: Japan’s Mono no Aware and Yūgen Aesthetics

In Japanese culture, the concepts of “Mono no Aware” (物哀) and “Yūgen” (幽玄) represent the two most essential traditional aesthetic categories for understanding the BE aesthetic.

“Mono no Aware” emphasizes a sensitivity to the transience of existence and the ephemeral beauty of the moment. The scattering of cherry blossoms, snow-covered streets, or fleeting traces of time each embody an awareness of life’s impermanence and the poignancy of beauty that fades.

In romance films, this sensibility manifests as an aesthetic representation of lost love. For instance, in Shunji Iwai’s *Love Letter* (1995), the heroine engages in a “dialogue” with the memory of her deceased lover through a series of letters. The snow-laden landscapes accentuate the fragility and futility of love, leading the audience not merely to feel sadness, but to experience sorrow as something worthy because it arises from beauty itself.

Meanwhile, “Yūgen” denotes a deep, ineffable, and allusive form of beauty—one that transcends verbal expression. Within romantic

¹ Wang Shiyu. (2025). Indistinguishable Between Insects and Humans, Entangled in Joy and Sorrow: The Tragic Implications of the “Happy Ending” in *The Cricket*. *Chinese Language World*, 32(03), 86-90.

narratives, it often emerges through ambiguity, suggestion, and the unpredictable nature of fate and emotion. Rather than articulating emotional suffering directly, the film aestheticizes it through silence, spatial gaps, and natural imagery, thus elevating tragedy into a contemplative experience. For example, in *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World* (2004), the male protagonist's helplessness in the face of his lover's terminal illness is not dramatized explicitly. Instead, the film conveys his sense of fatalism through repeated scenes of emptiness, rain, and landscape, creating a quiet yet profound resonance.

In conclusion, "Mono no Aware" and "Yūgen" together provide the aesthetic-philosophical foundation for the BE aesthetic in Japanese cinema. Within this framework, sorrow is not regarded as a negative emotion, but as a transformative recognition—a means of sublimating life's impermanence and affirming the preciousness of love through the beauty of transience¹.

2.3 Cultural Root 2: The Korean Emotion of Han (恨)

Unlike Japan's aestheticization of sorrow, the BE aesthetic in Korean cinema is deeply associated with the collective emotion of Han (恨). Han is a uniquely Korean cultural sentiment—an accumulated collective psyche shaped through the nation's long history of colonial occupation, war, division, and poverty. It embodies a complex emotional mixture of oppression, resentment, sorrow, endurance, and suppressed desire.

In Korean romance films, Han is often expressed as a struggle between personal emotion and external forces such as fate or social constraint. For example, in *Christmas in August* (1998), the male protagonist must relinquish his love due to terminal illness; in *The Classic* (2003), lovers are forced apart by familial and historical circumstances. In these narratives, tragedy is not the product of personal weakness or choice but rather the consequence of intertwined social structures, historical contexts, and fatal inevitability. Such a sense of helplessness and endurance aligns closely with the cultural logic of Han.

¹ Ha, Y. [하예]. (2018). A Study on the Expression of "Mono no Aware" in Animation [애니메이션에 구현된 '모노아와레(物の哀れ)'의 표현연구]. Doctoral dissertation, Hanseo University Graduate School, Chungcheongnam-do, Korea, pp. 53–55.

Audiences, while watching these films, tend to connect the onscreen tragedy to their own lived realities, thereby generating a shared emotional resonance that transcends individual experience. Consequently, the BE aesthetic in Korean romance cinema is not merely a narrative of individual misfortune but a representation of collective historical memory and social emotion. It transforms personal love stories into expressions of national sentiment, embedding private sorrow within a broader cultural and historical consciousness.

2.4 Cultural Root 3: Confucian Collectivism and Self-Sacrifice

Within the Chinese cultural context, the BE aesthetic is closely linked to the Confucian value system, which emphasizes that the collective takes precedence over the individual. Confucian ethics have long structured the moral and social order of East Asian societies, where family, responsibility, and social harmony are often regarded as superior to personal emotions or individual desires².

In romantic narratives, it is common for characters to sacrifice personal love in order to fulfill familial duties or social responsibilities. For example, in *Hello, Zihua* (2019), emotional confessions are continually restrained within the framework of family obligations, preventing the story from reaching a romantic resolution. Similarly, in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996), the protagonists endure years of separation and misunderstanding due to social instability and economic hardship. In these narratives, the BE ending does not function merely as a tragedy but rather as a form of "sublime sorrow" that accords with traditional Confucian ethics, making it emotionally acceptable and aesthetically moving to the audience.

The notion of "forsaking personal love for the greater moral good" thus reflects not only the enduring influence of Confucian collectivism but also the latent emotional framework of contemporary East Asian societies. Viewers tend to perceive such sacrifice as an act of moral nobility, through which sorrow acquires meaning, and emotional suffering transforms into a sense of spiritual healing.

3. Textual Analysis: The Screen Realization and Narrative Strategies of the BE Aesthetic

² Yang Yan. (2024). A Textual Interpretation of *The Old Man and the Sea* from the Perspective of Tragic Aesthetics. *Masterpieces Review*, (36), 156–158.

In East Asian romance cinema, the BE aesthetic does not remain an abstract cultural concept but is vividly embodied through concrete cinematic texts. This chapter analyzes how the BE aesthetic manifests on screen through narrative and visual strategies, focusing on three major dimensions: time and memory, illness and death, and the struggle between social structure and fate.

By examining representative works such as *Christmas in August* (1998), *Love Letter* (1995), *The Classic* (2003), and *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996), this chapter elucidates how these films articulate the aesthetic logic of loss, impermanence, and emotional sublimation. In doing so, it demonstrates that BE aesthetics operate as both a narrative framework and a psychological mechanism, shaping the viewer's emotional engagement and cultural identification.

As Kim Seung-yeon notes, East Asian visual culture reflects an interwoven aesthetic consciousness among China, Japan, and Korea, grounded in shared notions of restraint, melancholy, and harmony between emotion and ethics¹. The BE aesthetic, therefore, can be understood as the cinematic embodiment of this transnational aesthetic spirit—an artistic mode that transforms sorrow into beauty and resignation into transcendence.

3.1 Time and Memory: The Dislocation of Eternity

In East Asian BE romance films, time and memory frequently serve as crucial narrative devices that construct emotional tension and aesthetic depth. Through the use of letters, nostalgic objects, and nonlinear temporal structures, these films create a disjunction between the "past" and the "present," thereby transforming love into an existence that transcends reality and granting it eternal life within the framework of remembrance.

The Japanese film *Love Letter* (1995) is a quintessential example of this narrative strategy. After the death of her fiancé, the protagonist Itsuki Fujii begins an exchange of letters with another woman who shares the same name as her deceased lover. Through this correspondence, she gradually uncovers

fragments of her lover's past, forming a dialogue that transcends the boundary between life and death². The recurring imagery of falling snow not only heightens the atmosphere of sorrow but also symbolizes the purity and irreversibility of memory. Rather than merely evoking grief, the film allows the audience to experience a delayed form of healing through the cyclical return of recollection.

Similarly, the Taiwanese series and film adaptation *Someday or One Day* (2019–2022) employs a time-travel narrative in which characters traverse between past and future, generating sustained emotional tension rooted in the impossibility of togetherness. Here, the "BE" is not an absolute ending but an illusion of potential reunion across temporal dimensions. The audience repeatedly experiences love and loss within dislocated timelines, transforming sorrow into profound emotional immersion.

Thus, the narrative strategy of time and memory enables the BE aesthetic to transcend the limits of linear storytelling, rendering love as an eternal and immovable experience suspended within the human heart.

3.2 Illness and Death: Predestined Tragedy and Emotional Catharsis

Illness and death serve as central narrative devices in the BE aesthetic, providing an irreversible tragic conclusion that defines the emotional structure of these films. By situating love within the framework of limited life, the narrative removes the interference of mundane, secular concerns, thereby sublimating love into a purified, spiritual existence.

The Korean film *Christmas in August* (1998) exemplifies this process of emotional purification through its terminal-illness narrative. The male protagonist, fully aware of his impending death, shares a brief yet tender relationship with the female lead. Instead of employing dramatic conflict, the film conveys the characters' sincerity through subtle depictions of everyday life and restrained gestures, highlighting the quiet dignity of their

¹ Han, C. [한준희]. (2022). A Study on the Fantasy Aesthetics of Makoto Shinkai's Animation [신카이 마코토 애니메이션의 판타지 미학 연구]. Master's thesis, Kyonggi University Graduate School, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, pp. 13–16.

² Song Xiaohui. (2024). Cultural Differences Between the East and the West Reflected in the Tragic Endings of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Butterfly Lovers*. *Sanjiaozhou*, (22), 81-83.

affection¹. Viewers experience the infinite value of love within finite time, finding sublimity in the serenity of inevitable loss.

Similarly, the Japanese film *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World* (2004) centers its narrative around the heroine's fatal illness. As she succumbs to leukemia, the male protagonist recalls their love years later. The film intricately weaves rain-soaked runs, cassette recordings, and the imagery of a deserted schoolyard to intertwine love and death. Audiences simultaneously feel compassion for the characters' doomed fate and admiration for the purity of their love, which achieves a kind of transcendence through death. In this sense, love that "solidifies through death" elevates the BE ending to a heightened aesthetic intensity.

Thus, by employing illness and death as narrative mechanisms, romantic films transcend the utilitarian constraints of everyday reality, elevating emotion into an absolute value. This not only deepens the viewer's emotional resonance but also transforms sorrow into a form of transcendent healing.

3.3 The Struggle Against Social Structure and Fate

Beyond the dimensions of time and death, East Asian BE romance films often construct their tragic endings through the external forces of social structure and fate. In such narratives, love does not collapse due to the characters' lack of resolve but is instead thwarted by uncontrollable factors—historical conditions, social institutions, class differences, or systemic constraints. These tragedies transcend mere sentimental sympathy, serving as reflections of deeper sociocultural structures.

The Korean film *The Classic* (2003) intricately intertwines personal emotion with historical circumstance, depicting parallel love stories across two generations. The lovers of the 1970s are ultimately separated due to family opposition and the turbulence of their era, while the modern protagonist rediscovers this long-lost romance through old letters. The film's BE ending thus symbolizes not simply personal regret, but the repressive weight of history and society. Viewers resonate not only with the characters' emotional loss but also with the

impermanence of the times.

Similarly, the Chinese film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) situates its narrative within the context of migration and social transformation. The protagonists' love is repeatedly disrupted by shifts in social status, geography, and economic change. The BE ending evokes both melancholy and recognition, compelling the audience to confront the burden of fate and the fragility of love. As Lee Yoo-jung observes, such cinematic portrayals reveal how audience reception in China and Korea often reflects shared emotional responses to broader social realities².

Thus, the struggle against social structure and fate extends the BE aesthetic beyond the domain of personal romance, transforming it into an allegory of culture and modernity. Viewers not only empathize with the characters' tragedies but also project their own social experiences onto the screen, achieving a deeper level of emotional identification and self-reflection through the cinematic experience.

4. Audience Reception: Why Does "Sorrow" Become "Healing"?

While Chapters 2 and 3 primarily focused on the cultural origins and textual manifestations of the BE aesthetic, this chapter shifts its analytical perspective to the audience dimension. It explores a crucial question: Why do contemporary East Asian youth experience psychological "healing" through cinematic narratives of "sorrow"?

This phenomenon suggests that the BE aesthetic is not merely a narrative convention or stylistic choice, but rather a complex cultural and psychological construct—a synthesis of emotional mechanisms, collective identity, and the dynamics of modern cultural consumption. The audience's engagement with "sad" narratives reflects not only aesthetic appreciation but also an active process of emotional regulation and meaning-making within the social realities of contemporary East Asian life.

4.1 The Modern Interpretation of "Catharsis"

Originating from classical theories of tragedy, Aristotle's concept of "catharsis" has long been

¹ Kim, S. [김승연]. (2024). A Study on the Identity of Korean Floral Art Through East Asian Aesthetic Consciousness. [한·중·일 미의식을 통해서 본 한국화예의 정체성에 관한 연구] Master's thesis, Dankook University Graduate School of Culture and Arts, Gyeonggi-do, Korea, pp. 34–40.

² Park, S. [박성연]. (2021). A Study on "Audience-ness" in Modern Theater from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics. [수용미학적 관점으로 본 현대 연극의 '관객성' 연구] Doctoral dissertation, Sejong University Graduate School, Seoul, Korea, pp. 25–29.

regarded as a fundamental framework for understanding the aesthetics of tragedy. According to Aristotle, audiences experience “fear and pity” while watching a tragic performance and achieve spiritual purification through the emotional release that follows. When applied to the context of contemporary East Asian romance films, the intense sorrow evoked by a BE (Bad Ending) narrative functions as a catalyst for emotional discharge.

In modern society, the younger generation often faces accumulated emotional tension stemming from the pressures of academic performance, employment, and romantic relationships. Within this context, the sorrow presented in BE films provides a safe emotional outlet. In the darkness of the cinema—or within private viewing spaces—viewers are able to weep freely, releasing emotions that are otherwise difficult to articulate in daily life. Many have remarked, after watching films such as *Christmas in August* (1998) or *Crying Out Love in the Center of the World* (2004), that “I cried uncontrollably, yet strangely felt comforted afterward.” This experience represents the modern psychological reconfiguration of catharsis.

Thus, the sorrow embedded in the BE aesthetic does not alienate viewers but rather offers a therapeutic channel for emotional healing. Through this cathartic release, audiences are able to reconcile with their emotions and subsequently face reality with a renewed sense of emotional clarity and positivity.

4.2 Emotional Substitution and Aesthetic Distance

Another crucial psychological mechanism underlying the BE aesthetic lies in “emotional substitution” and “aesthetic distance.” In reality, love is often constrained by pragmatism, responsibility, and social norms. However, BE films construct a “pure emotional space”—a realm detached from utilitarian concerns—where audiences can project their own suppressed emotions onto the characters on screen and experience a form of “what-if love.” Even when the story ends in tragedy, this act of projection itself fulfills the viewer’s latent longing for genuine emotional connection.

At the same time, the sorrow in BE films maintains a degree of aesthetic distance due to its artistic and fictional nature. Viewers are aware that the tragedy unfolding before them is not their own lived reality. This awareness allows them to experience extreme emotions

within a “safe” environment. Such “controlled sorrow” enables audiences to weep without sustaining real psychological harm, instead deriving a sense of compensatory pleasure through the vicarious experience of loss.

In other words, the BE aesthetic offers audiences a form of emotional consumption that allows them to “experience sorrow without being consumed by it.” This mechanism of substitution—anchored in aesthetic distance—constitutes the psychological foundation of the paradoxical process through which sorrow becomes healing¹.

4.3 Resonance and Identification: A Response to Modern Loneliness

The acceleration and atomization of contemporary society have led individuals to experience loneliness and a pervasive sense of helplessness as universal emotional conditions. Among all human emotions, love remains the most powerful and direct form of affective engagement, and thus it has become a primary outlet for the emotional dependency of younger generations. Yet, love in reality is inherently imperfect, marked by misunderstandings, separations, and loss. BE films resonate deeply with audiences precisely because they embody this imperfection, mirroring the fragmented emotional experiences of modern life².

For example, in *Hello, Zhihua* (2019), the characters’ confessions and missed encounters evoke in viewers the unspoken emotions and regrets of their own lives, creating profound emotional immersion. Unlike the fairy-tale closure of “the prince and princess lived happily ever after,” BE romance films possess a heightened sense of realism and authenticity, which in turn deepens audience identification and empathy³.

Thus, the BE aesthetic extends beyond the mere fulfillment of aesthetic desire—it functions as a response to modern loneliness and existential anxiety. By mediating sorrow, these films enable a reconnection between the self and others through shared emotional experience. In this

¹ Yan Xudong. (2008). Sorrow and Reason: An Analysis of Themes in Joseph Brodsky’s Poetry. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, (06), 137-138+172.

² Daniel Boscaljon. (2025). Healing Estranged Sorrows Through Narrative, Imaginal, and Mythic Amplification. *Psychology International*, 7(2).

³ Regina E. Fabry. (2025). The Epistemic Status of Literary Memoirs in Philosophical Grief Research. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (prepublish).

sense, BE cinema transforms sorrow into a bridge of resonance, offering viewers not escapism, but communion and understanding within the shared fragility of human emotion.

4.4 Communal Sharing and the Cultural Formation of "Yi Nan Ping" (意难平)

In the new media environment, audience reception no longer remains confined to theaters or screens; rather, it expands into social networks and virtual communities. The term "Yi Nan Ping" (意难平)—literally meaning "emotional unrest" or "a lingering sense of unfulfillment"—has gradually developed into a distinct cultural phenomenon. Viewers gather on platforms such as Weibo Super Topics, Douban communities, and Bilibili comment sections, where they share their viewing experiences and collectively express their lingering sorrow and regret toward the BE endings.

This communal sharing amplifies the audience's emotional experience, transforming individual sadness into a collective emotional ritual. Through shared crying, collective reminiscence, and secondary creations—such as fan edits, remixed videos, or fan fiction—viewers experience communal healing within online communities. Sorrow thus ceases to be an isolated emotion and instead becomes a co-constructed cultural memory¹.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the BE aesthetic today transcends its function as a mere cinematic narrative form, evolving into a sociocultural practice in which audiences actively participate in emotional meaning-making². Through online interaction, audiences transform their personal "Yi Nan Ping"—their unresolved feelings—into a shared experience of healing. In doing so, digital communities become new emotional spaces where sorrow is not simply endured but collectively reinterpreted, ritualized, and redeemed.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the phenomenon of the "BE aesthetic" in East Asian melodrama films, aiming to uncover its cultural-psychological origins, narrative characteristics, and audience reception mechanisms. In contrast to the Western, particularly Hollywood, paradigm of the "happy ending," the BE aesthetic reveals a set of distinctively East Asian emotional values and cultural logics.

From a cultural-psychological perspective, the BE aesthetic is not an accidental trend but a manifestation of deeply rooted aesthetic sensibilities and emotional structures within East Asian cultural traditions. The Japanese notions of mono no aware (物の哀れ) and yūgen (幽玄) emphasize the beauty of transience and the poignancy of fleeting moments; the Korean concept of han (恨) embodies historical suffering, endurance, and collective sorrow; and the Confucian values of collectivism and moral responsibility in China transform tragic love into a form of "sublime sorrow." These cultural psychologies have cultivated an aesthetic disposition that appreciates the beauty of imperfection and the meaning of emotional restraint.

From a narrative perspective, the BE aesthetic is realized on screen through a variety of representational strategies. The dislocation of time and memory transforms love into an experience of eternity that transcends reality; the narratives of illness and death purify emotion by separating it from worldly conditions; and the struggle against social structures and fate expands personal love into a historical and social allegory. Through these strategies, BE films generate lyrical intensity and lingering resonance, providing audiences with a unique aesthetic experience rooted in both sorrow and beauty.

From the audience reception perspective, the reason contemporary East Asian youth find "healing" in "sorrow" lies in the BE aesthetic's role as a mechanism of emotional regulation and psychological compensation. Viewers experience cathartic purification, engage in safe sorrow through aesthetic distance, and find emotional identification in narratives of imperfect love. Moreover, the rise of "Yi Nan Ping" (意难平) culture on social media transforms individual sadness into a form of collective healing ritual, demonstrating that BE aesthetics has evolved beyond film form into a broader emotional practice within modern East Asian society.

¹ Gabriele von Bassermann Jordan. (2025). "Wenn dunkel mir ist der Sinn / Den Kunst und Sinnen hat Schmerzen / Gekostet von Anbeginn" ("When Dark Are My Mind and Heart/Which Paid from the Beginning / In Grief for Thought and Art"): Hölderlin in the "Hölderlin Tower"—Contemporary and Modern Diagnoses of His Illness, and Literary (Self-)Therapy. *Humanities*, 14(5).

² Dureti (Mimi) Tadesse. (2025). Healing Through Words: Dureti (Mimi) Tadesse's Story Captivates the World. *M2 Presswire*.

In sum, the BE aesthetic in East Asian melodrama represents the convergence of traditional cultural psychology and contemporary emotional needs. The aesthetics of sorrow is not simply an art of tragedy but a process of emotional purification and self-healing, through which viewers gain an inner strength to endure reality. The popularity of BE aesthetics reflects the distinctive emotional structure and cultural desires through which modern East Asian societies interpret love, life, and existence.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations. First, the range of selected texts was limited, and thus could not encompass the full diversity of BE representations. Second, the audience analysis relied primarily on online reviews and commentaries, lacking empirical methods such as surveys or interviews. Future research should conduct quantitative analyses of audience differences based on gender, age, and social class, and extend the discussion to include dramas, web-based content, and short-form media for comparative analysis of BE aesthetics across formats.

Ultimately, the BE aesthetic of East Asia is both an artistic form and a cultural-psychological structure. Through the experience of sorrow on screen, audiences achieve both emotional purification and self-reconciliation. Hence, BE aesthetics serves as a key to understanding the affective structure of East Asian modernity, revealing how sorrow, love, and beauty intertwine in the region's cultural imagination.

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