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Social Determinants of Health Inequalities – A Global Perspective Study

Goran Miladinov¹

¹ Center for Research and Policy Making, Skopje, Macedonia

Correspondence: Goran Miladinov, Center for Research and Policy Making, Skopje, Macedonia.

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Abstract

Health inequalities persist among all countries in the world. These health inequalities are usually explained by health behaviors and social conditions in which people work and live. This paper aims to investigate the relative contribution of the social determinants to health inequalities in low-income, middle-income and high-income countries. Data from these three groups of countries was obtained from the UN and World Bank platforms. The VARSEL combinatorial technique was used to measure health inequalities through its proxy variable life expectancy at birth and the contribution of social determinants across the three groups of countries. The magnitude of the impact of social determinants on health inequalities varied considerably between countries. While poverty issues and unemployment were found to contribute to the explanation of life expectancy inequalities in low-income countries, educational and unemployment determinants emerged as the leading causes of life expectancy inequalities across middle-income countries and immigration together with the working conditions were mostly contributing determinants for high-income countries. The observed effects of different social determinants on health inequalities across the world point out that tackling health inequality should be a task that goes beyond focusing on a single social determinant.

Keywords: health, health inequalities, social determinants, VARSEL combinatorial approach

1. Introduction

Long-lasting health inequalities present a challenge for researchers and policy agendas. The field of health inequalities looks at a wide range of social and health issues (Kelly-Irving et al., 2022). The observed disparities in a wide range of health measures, arising from social and economic characteristics, are therefore an obvious reminder of the unequal nature of the societies (Kelly-Irving et al., 2022); making the social justice debate a primary issue within public health (Holguín-Zuluaga, et al., 2022). Reducing health inequalities is also seen as a social justice

issue and a means of opening up other opportunities, especially for the most disadvantaged (Epstein et al., 2009). A lot of research is conducted and it is documented the various ways in which social, economic, political, and cultural circumstances influence health (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). Thus, the resulting evidence emphasized the need for political action and interventions around the world. Very often, public health researchers use social determinants of health to study numerous health-related inequalities (Gunamany, 2022). Different governments, with different capacities, enacted

policies and reforms to address health inequality and its social determinants. Despite substantial attention to socioeconomic health inequalities, striking health disparities still exist within and between nations today (Omotoso & Koch, 2018). It is considered that the action on the social determinants of health is imperative not only to improve health but such improvement point out that society has proceeded in a direction of satisfying human needs (Marmot, 2005).

Health inequalities can be defined as differences in health status between individuals or groups, as measured, for instance, by life expectancy, mortality or disease that result from avoidable social, economic and environmental differences (ICF, 2017). Therefore, health inequalities must be seen as patterns in health outcomes that emerge from other patterns of the human condition and lie within this social environment (Jayasinghe, 2015). Further, health inequalities are defined by Kondo (2022) as “gaps in health status between the groups, which are created by differences in the community or socioeconomic status”. Kondo (2022) points out that the social researchers in epidemiology put forward as hypothesis that societies with less inequality have relatively substantial levels of social cohesion compared to those with greater inequality and that people living in fairer societies with abundant social cohesion have better health status. The process of producing health inequalities is a complex pathway (Kondo, 2022) and it is affected firstly by the municipal/community settings. The municipal/community context includes urban and rural areas, population density, and the range of social cohesion or income inequalities. Thus, for those in unfavorable circumstances, external resources such as social support, which also affects health care, and the ability to survive, as an internal resource, become scanty. This situation can cause stress reactions, such as depression, and lead to unhealthy behavior and an unhealthy physical state or cognitive decline resulting from the biological effect of stress.

The main aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between social determinants of health inequality and health outcomes using the proxy indicator: life expectancy at birth. Therefore, the study is at the level of macro factors and does not allow the analysis of individual dynamics. Thus, this study provides a rigorous comparison of the predictive reliability of health inequalities with data for low-, middle-, and high-income countries. Hence, the research

study provides an opportunity to comparatively investigate the contribution of social determinants in explaining health inequalities around the world. This contributes to debates about health inequality and the variation of social determinants more generally across the globe. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a theoretical basis for the social determinants of health and health inequalities. In Section 3, the relevant literature is reviewed. In Section 4, the data and method used, as well as relevant measures of social determinants of health, are presented. While Section 5 offers a description of the results with some interpretive hints. Section 6 provides a discussion of the main findings. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. Theoretical Background

In the latest decades, social determinants of health received substantial attention as a core concept in the field of population and public health (Islam, 2019). The social determinants of health are defined as the conditions or circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age (Islam, 2019). These conditions are shaped by political, social, and economic factors. Accordingly, the main concept of social determinants of health refers to both the determinants of health and the determinants of health inequalities (Islam 2019). Social determinants of health are all those conditions, occurrences, characteristics or other known structures that directly or indirectly affect the life course, the health of individuals, inequalities and inequities in health (Holguín-Zuluaga, et al., 2022). More recent literature employs the term social determinants of health inequalities to be an indication of contexts, social structures, social norms, and their determinants (Jayasinghe, 2015). Widely speaking, social determinants of health contribute to understanding the causes of problems by recognizing them in the context of different political, social, economic, and cultural conditions. Social determinants are considered key drivers of health (Flavel et al. 2022). Social determinants of health inequalities have context, structural mechanisms and socio-economic positions of individuals (Jayasinghe, 2015). Context includes social systems (education system, labor market), culture (racism and social classes) and political systems (state structure, redistributive policies). Context should be seen as a dynamic concept, with a historical past, present and future pathway. Structural mechanisms are rooted in the institutions and processes in the

context that generate stratifications in society according to socioeconomic position, income or wealth, educational attainment and access, occupation, gender, race/ethnicity, and other dimensions. Accordingly, context, structural components and the resulting socio-economic position of individuals are specified as social determinants of health inequalities (ICF, 2017). In the following, some of the mainstream theories relevant to the study of social determinants of health and health inequalities are briefly explained.

The basic idea of the *political economy of health* is that a “society’s separation of health and diseases—including its social inequalities in health—is produced by the structure, the values and priorities of its political and economic systems” (Gunamany, 2022, p. 205). According to this theory, health, race, gender, and class stratification are directly impacted by the structures of society. This means that the existing political and economic systems, priorities, policies and programs should be engaged for the analysis of the change in population distribution and health inequalities and diseases. This theory points out that the political and economic systems control the functioning of within and across regions and countries, as well as the institutions and individuals who are in charge of them.

The *eco-social theory of disease distribution* attempts to explain the distribution of disease including nearly all aspects of the disease by asserting that people manifest, biologically, their lived experience in a society and environmental context, thus creating population patterns of health and disease (Gunamany, 2022). This theory also posits that the epidemiological profiles of societies are shaped by the ways of living planned by their current and changing social arrangements of power, property, and the production and reproduction of both social and biological life, which includes humans, other species, and the biophysical world in which we live.

An *economic model* based on the relationship between income and health was developed, where the effect on the health of a given change in income (or percentage change in income) may not be the same for all social groups. This model generally shows the conditions under which policies directed at improving health behavior, proportional income growth, or income redistribution can affect population health and

income-related inequalities in health (Epstein et al., 2009). This model also provides a conceptual framework underpinning some empirical studies looking at income-related inequalities in health. Thus, for each individual in a population, (eq.1), health H_j is influenced by the income I_j and by other factors E_j (Epstein et al., 2009).

$$H_j = (I_j, E_j) \quad j = \text{members of the population A, B.} \quad (1)$$

Thus, these other factors can be intermediate determinants of health, for instance, showing lifestyle. Person A may respond to changes in income with healthy lifestyle changes, while person B may adopt some elements of a less healthy lifestyle given the same change in income. Of course, lifestyle is not the only intermediate determinant of health, other factors may be work situations, housing, social networks and social support, access to education and leisure activities, etc., which are more or less influenced by income. This economic model does not include factors such as genetics that impact health but are not related to income. Furthermore, *Microeconomic theory* (Epstein et al., 2009) argues that personal decisions about health behavior may lead to inadequate levels of prevention, from a societal perspective, if, among other reasons: there is inadequate information for citizens; there are external factors (e.g. passive smoking, alcohol abuse linked to crime); there are artificially low prices for unhealthy products or individuals are liable to irrational behavior or poor self-control. From an economic perspective, policies that limit personal autonomy need to weigh these welfare losses against public health and other interests.

3. Literature Review

From the perspective of social determinants of health, inequalities in money, power and resources are dominant contributors to inequalities in health, disease as well as mortality (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). Some of the social determinants of health that are of great importance and influential in the literature are education, housing and/or environment, income and distribution of income, stress, early life, social exclusion, work, unemployment, social support, addiction, food and transportation (Islam, 2019). More recently in the literature, health systems, gender, sexual orientation, social safety net, culture or social norms, social capital, immigration, family and religion have also been identified as social determinants (Islam, 2019). As

stated by Chelak & Chakole (2023) examples of social determinants of health include occupation, job status, job security, income level, educational opportunities, job and workplace protection, inequality between men and women, and segregation based on ethnicity and race.

Research studies that provide causal confirmations based on systematic reviews of mostly observational studies (Kelly-Irving et al., 2022) are widely cited and contribute diverse evidence on causal relationships between socioeconomic factors and health outcomes. Since 2012–2014, improvements in life expectancy in many high-income countries, including England (previously known as an international leader in efforts to lessen health inequalities), have stopped, as a result of slow-moving improvements in the most disadvantaged groups (Kelly-Irving et al., 2022). The debate that social inequalities in health are not smaller in countries with more advanced welfare states (e.g. Scandinavian ones) originates from a 1997 paper that concluded that, despite strong commitments to egalitarian welfare policies, the Nordic countries had greater socioeconomic inequalities in health than other Western European countries (Kelly-Irving et al., 2022). One of the main issues in the reduction of the Nordic welfare model was the exclusion of new population groups — especially immigrants — from full welfare state support (Kelly-Irving et al., 2022). Migrants usually were entitled to benefits of a lower value compared to the social security benefits available to full citizens. This premise is important because, in studies of health inequalities, migrants are those usually situated in the lowest occupational and income groups. A recent review of the literature on migrant health and mortality found the opposite, interpreting this phenomenon of the ‘healthy immigrant effect’ in mortality as a result of the combination of the acculturation of host society beliefs, attitudes and behaviors with time spent in the host country (Ichou & Wallace, 2019). Studies established that a healthy immigrant effect operated in Canada as well; in general, immigrants are healthier than Canadian-born persons, but this effect tends to lessen over time (Gee et al., 2004).

Thus, given that life expectancy variation is a form of health inequality, many studies have shown that lower socioeconomic groups have the shortest life expectancy and the highest variation in age of death and that groups with longer life

expectancy have the lowest life expectancy inequality (Gómez-Ugarte & García-Guerrero, 2023; Flavel et al., 2022; Quenel-Vallée & Jenkins, 2010; Balaj et al., 2017). Manual workers in the United States have been found to report poorer health than non-manual workers and their health declines faster. It was also found that, among British male civil servants aged 40 to 64, age-standardized mortality in the lowest classes (clerical and manual) was three times higher than in the highest class (administrative), (Quenel-Vallée & Jenkins, 2010). However, unemployment is emerging as a major cause of health disparities and rates of health deterioration, particularly mental health (e.g. Epstein et al., 2009). These authors show that workers who became unemployed were 2.9% less likely to report good health than the same workers who remained employed. It has also been found that the effects of employment change (e.g. privatization) are experienced differently by employees in different occupational categories and that the workplace may be an important setting in which to address health inequalities (Epstein et al., 2009). Europeans’ unmet needs due to treatment costs are also over eight times more prevalent among people in the lowest income group than among people in the highest income group (ICF, 2017). Thus, the data showed that unmet health needs among unemployed EU citizens were consistently higher than unmet needs among employed EU citizens for the period 2008-2014.

In a sample of selected European countries, Pacáková & Jindrová (2019) used the following social determinants of health: poverty rate (relative threshold), living in working households, disposable income (US dollar at PPP rates); and unemployment rate (% of the labor force aged 15+). The results of the literature review revealed that participation in or exclusion from the labor market has an important impact on life chances, risks of poverty and well-being that can affect or determine people’s health throughout life (ICF, 2017). The results of the literature review also indicated that low-paid and temporary employment was less likely to be accompanied by employment benefits, for instance, health insurance (ICF, 2017). In such a situation, it may require them to pay in advance for health services where employment-related insurance is required or universal health care is not offered. Income is specifically associated with different health outcomes in different

populations and surroundings. Income buys access to health care; buys food, housing and other necessities. Nevertheless, whether the relationship is causal and/or mutual, substantial evidence indicates that income predicts health and well-being (Brady et al., 2023). It is commonly accepted that societies with unequal income distribution have poorer health outcomes (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). Therefore, reducing the income inequality of disadvantaged people can improve the health of poor individuals, help reduce health inequalities and increase the average health of the population. Nevertheless, a significant body of literature criticizes studies that report a link between income inequality and health since they are unsuccessful in controlling for factors associated with the income distribution and health status (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). Thus, according to Marmot (2005), income provides an insufficient explanation for differences in mortality between countries or between subgroups within countries. Therefore, according to him, it is widely known that among high-income countries there is little association between gross national product (GNP) per capita and life expectancy.

4. Measures, Data, and Methods

Measuring and monitoring health inequality is vital to achieving health equity — a central devotion of the World Health Organization (WHO) and a major goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (WHO, 2024; UN, 2024; Schlotheuber & Hosseinpour, 2022). Core health indicators represent a set of standard health indicators that are prioritized for global and national health monitoring (Schlotheuber & Hosseinpour, 2022), for example; health facilities density; access to medicines, under-five mortality rate; and life expectancy. Each indicator has a defined unit of measurement (such as number, rate, proportion or percentage) and an optimal level to be achieved or maintained through public health actions (Schlotheuber & Hosseinpour, 2022). The optimal level is clearly defined for the favorable indicators, that is, the goal is to achieve the maximum level, such as the highest possible life expectancy; while for adverse indicators, and the goal is to obtain a minimum level, such as a zero under-five mortality rate.

The packet of parameters in health outcomes may include life expectancy at birth, child vaccination rate at 5 years, infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rates, and the rate of malnutrition among children (Jayasinghe, 2015). All

socioeconomic determinants combined or independently, affect the health status of the population evidenced by indicators of total mortality or life expectancy (Prędkiewicz et al., 2022). Therefore, population health can be assessed by measuring average mortality levels. For this reason, life expectancy is one of the most commonly used indicators (Gómez-Ugarte & García-Guerrero, 2023). Life expectancy inequality has received the most attention of all inequalities (Permanyer et al., 2023; Gómez-Ugarte & García-Guerrero, 2023). Longevity is a crude but very useful and easy-to-measure health outcome that is collected regularly around the world. While life expectancy has long attracted considerable attention in demography and other social sciences, there has recently been a surge of interest in looking beyond means and studying the levels, trends, and determinants of life expectancy inequality (Permanyer et al., 2023).

Data were gathered from the UN World Population Prospects database (<https://population.un.org/wpp>), (UN, 2022) and from World Bank's development indicators platform (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator>), (World Bank, 2024), which represents the major collection of international statistics on global development. Therefore, the net migration rate data and life expectancy at birth data were retrieved from the UN source above, and the source for all other variables data is the World Bank. The data were analyzed for low-income (LICs), middle-income (MICs) and high-income countries (HICs) in the world. Figure 1 presents the trend of life expectancy at birth in LICs, MICs, and HICs during 1995-2021. Based on the literature review, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What is the relationship between social determinants and health inequalities? Which indicators of the social determinants affect health inequalities more profoundly?
- 2) What is the strength of this relationship around the world? Do the social determinants stimulate health positively or negatively?

The above questions have been verified by estimating VARSEL data models. Further, the list of explanatory variables considered for this study is the following: unemployment rate (% of labor force aged 15+); GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US\$); net migration rate per 1 000 populations; vulnerable employment as % of

total employment, poverty headcount ratio at \$2.15 a day (2017 PPP) (% of population)¹, and School enrollment, secondary (gross), gender parity index (GPI).

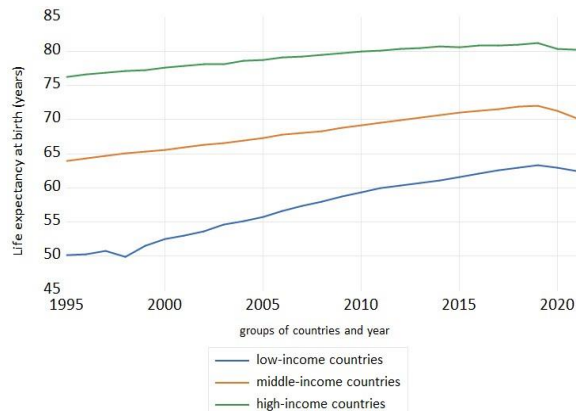


Figure 1. Life expectancy at birth in LICs, MICs, and HICs-1995-2021

Source: Author's design.

The recent boom in available data, combined with increased computing power, has led to increased acceptance of methods that allow the data itself to suggest the most appropriate combination of regressors to be used in estimation. Therefore, rather than specifying a specific model, these methods allow the researcher to provide a set of candidate variables for the model. VARSEL, i.e. Variable selection, or feature selection, is an important module of modern data analysis. Variable selection methods are implemented as a pre-estimation step before standard least squares regression is performed (IHS, 2022). Before estimation, a dependent variable must be specified along with a list of always included variables and a list of selection variables, from which the selection algorithm will choose the most appropriate one. After the variable selection process, the results of the final regression, i.e. the regression of the always included and selected variables on the dependent variable, will be reported. The *p*-values reported in the final regression output and all subsequent testing procedures do not take into account the regressions that were performed during the selection process.

There are several different methods of variable selection: Uni-directional, Stepwise, Swapwise, Combinatorial, Auto-Search/GETS and Lasso

Selection. In our study, the combinatorial method was used. For a given number of added variables, the combinatorial method evaluates each possible combination of added variables and chooses the combination that leads to the largest R-squared in a regression using the added and always included variables as regressors (IHS, 2022). This method is more in-depth than the other methods, as the other methods do not compare every possible combination of variables and require additional computation. With a large number of potential added variables, the Combinatorial Approach can take a very long time to complete.

5. Results

This Section presents the estimated VARSEL models on life expectancy in LICs, MICs and HICs, separately. The analysis follows the models estimated with the combinatorial selection method with six added social variables to perform the combination that leads to the largest R-squared on the impact of life expectancy in an OLS regression. Three models contain yearly data between 1995 and 2021 on the life expectancy for LICs, MICs, and HICs, along with annual data for the six key social variables in the pre-estimation for the same groups of countries. As a result of the lack of data for the low-income countries, for this group of countries the period was little narrowed, i.e. 1995-2018. As a dependent proxy variable for health inequalities, the life expectancy at birth is used. There are a total of six search regressors: unemployment rate (UNEMPL); GNI per capita (GNI); net migration rate (NMR); vulnerable employment (VULNEREMPL); poverty ratio (POVERTY); and gender parity index (GPI). The three models also have an always-included constant. Table 1-3 presents the results of the combinatorial algorithm linking the percentage change in life expectancy to a range of search variables. The estimated coefficients and associated summary statistics of the combinatorial estimation together with the details of the selection process are shown in Table 1-3 separately for LICs, MICs, and HICs. The number of added variables was set to two variables; therefore, the combinatorial method selected the combination of two regressors that leads to the largest increase in R-squared in a regression for each group of the

¹ Due to the absence of the data for this indicator only for the middle-income countries during 1997-2001, an estimation of the value of this indicator for this period was made by the author.

countries. The statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Some of the variables were logarithmically transformed to achieve a normal distribution. Thus, the OLS assumptions of normality, autocorrelation and homoscedasticity were confirmed with the Jarque-Bera test and Breusch-Godfrey Serial Correlation LM test, as well as, with the Breusch-Pagan-Godfrey Heteroskedasticity test, respectively. A possible multicollinearity was examined with the VIF (variance inflation factor), which was less than the recommended threshold of 5, implying the absence of even modest collinearity.

The unemployment effect appears to have a significant impact on the changing rate of life expectancy, with a positive impact in the LICs model and with negative impact in the MICs model. Additionally, percentage changes in life expectancy are negatively linked with the rise of poverty in LICs and positively with the gender parity index in the MICs model. Therefore, for the

group of LICs, poverty and unemployment were the most influential social determinants, i.e. predictors of life expectancy by contributing 97% explanatory power to the model (Table 1). The lag effect of the gender parity index as an educational variable is very effective in increasing life expectancy in MICs and together with the negative impact of unemployment accounting for 98% of the variability in life expectancy in the MICs model (Table 2). Additionally, it was found a positive influence of the net migration rate on the life expectancy in HICs. Further, it also revealed an inverse relationship between changes in life expectancy and vulnerable employment for the HICs. Thus, in the HICs model, net migration rate and vulnerable employment were the two significant predictors and explained 92 % of the variability of life expectancy (Table 3). Interestingly, the application of the combinatorial method showed that GNI per capita has no significant impact on changes in life expectancy in any of the groups of countries.

Table 1. Combinatorial estimation results on life expectancy in LICs (low-income countries):

Dependent variable: log (Life expectancy at birth)				
Method: Variable selection				
Sample: 1995-2018				
Included observations: 24				
Number of always included regressors: 1				
Number of search regressors: 6				
Selection method: Combinatorial				
Stopping criterion: Number of search regressors: 2				
Low-income countries model				
Variable	Coefficient	Std.Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	5.6404	0.1798	31.375	0.0000
Log(Poverty ratio)	-0.5243	0.0209	-25.057	0.0000
Log(Unemployment)	0.2943	0.0944	3.1166	0.0052
Summary statistics				
R-squared	0.9696	Mean dependent var	4.0332	
Adjusted R-squared	0.9668	S.D.dependent var	0.0777	
S.E.of regression	0.0142	Akaike info criterion	-5.5585	
Sum squared resid	0.0042	Schwarz criterion	-5.4112	
Log likelihood	69.702	Hannan-Quinn criter	-5.5194	
F-statistic	335.47	Durbin-Watson stat	0.9868	
Prob(F-statistic)	0.0000			
Selection summary				

Number of selected regressors: 2
Number of combinations compared: 15

Note: *p*-values and subsequent tests do not account for variable selection. Source: Author's calculations.

Table 2. Combinatorial estimation results on life expectancy in MICs (middle-income countries)

Dependent variable: log (Life expectancy at birth)				
Method: Variable selection				
Sample: 1995-2021				
Included observations: 27				
Number of always included regressors: 1				
Number of search regressors: 6				
Selection method: Combinatorial				
Stopping criterion: Number of search regressors: 2				
Middle-income countries model				
Variable	Coefficient	Std.Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	4.3765	0.0206	212.74	0.0000
Log(Gender parity index(-2))	0.6336	0.0202	31.301	0.0000
Unemployment(-1)	-0.0193	0.0033	-5.7924	0.0000
Summary statistics				
R-squared	0.9784	Mean dependent var	4.2229	
Adjusted R-squared	0.9766	S.D.dependent var	0.0378	
S.E.of regression	0.0058	Akaike info criterion	-7.3602	
Sum squared resid	0.0008	Schwarz criterion	-7.2162	
Log likelihood	102.36	Hannan-Quinn criter.	-7.3174	
F-statistic	542.76	Durbin-Watson stat	1.1924	
Prob(F-statistic)	0.0000			
Selection summary				
Number of selected regressors: 2				
Number of combinations compared: 15				

Note: *p*-values and subsequent tests do not account for variable selection. Source: Author's calculations.

Table 3. Combinatorial estimation results on life expectancy in HICs (high- income countries)

Dependent variable: log (Life expectancy at birth)				
Method: Variable selection				
Sample: 1995-2021				
Included observations: 27				
Number of always included regressors: 1				
Number of search regressors: 6				
Selection method: Combinatorial				
Stopping criterion: Number of search regressors: 2				

High-income countries model				
Variable	Coefficient	Std.Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	4.7326	0.0211	224.21	0.0000
Log(Net migration rate)	0.0095	0.0028	3.3535	0.0026
Log(Vulnerable employment(-1))	-0.1570	0.0090	-17.491	0.0000
Summary statistics				
R-squared	0.9276	Mean dependent var	4.3713	
Adjusted R-squared	0.9215	S.D.dependent var	0.0193	
S.E.of regression	0.0054	Akaike info criterion	-7.4940	
Sum squared resid	0.0007	Schwarzc criterion	-7.3500	
Log likelihood	104.17	Hannan-Quinn criter.	-7.4512	
F-statistic	153.64	Durbin-Watson stat	1.3888	
Prob(F-statistic)	0.0000			
Selection summary				
Number of selected regressors: 2				
Number of combinations compared: 15				

Note: *p*-values and subsequent tests do not account for variable selection. Source: Author's calculations.

6. Discussion

In this research study, regression models prior based on the combinatorial variable selection method determined the contribution of various social determinants on the health inequalities whereby life expectancy at birth was used as a proxy-dependent variable. The relationship between the proxy variable of population health, i.e. life expectancy and well-studied social determinants of health such as income, poverty, unemployment, education, employment and immigration are analyzed at the country income level. Each of the three groups of countries in the study was based on the income level according to the group categorization of the World Bank: low-income (LICs), middle-income (MICs) and high-income countries (HICs). According to most recent World Bank thresholds, countries are grouped by GNI per capita as: low-income if $GNI/capita \leq USD1025$, middle-income if $GNI/capita$ is between $USD1026$ – $USD12375$, and as high-income if $GNI/capita \geq USD12376$ (World Bank, 2024). The results of this study are consistent with studies that used similar predictor variables and showed a strong relationship between social determinants and health outcomes (Islam, 2019; Epstein et al., 2009; Pacáková & Jindrová, 2019).

Moreover, the results showed a different relationship between social determinants and

health at different country income levels. Specifically, it was found that the relationship of life expectancy with immigration and working conditions (e.g. vulnerable employment) is significantly stronger in the HICs. Thus, our HICs findings are in coalition with a UK study that found an association between the degree of employment, which also affects salary, and the prevalence of a range of health outcomes (ICF, 2017). Supporting our findings from HICs is also another study that found that people in insecure employment were more likely to report poor mental health (ICF, 2017). In addition, poor mental health was also significantly higher among workers with low educational attainment, low-skilled workers, those who were previously unemployed, and immigrant workers. Our findings are in line also with the previous work of Assari (2018) suggesting that life expectancy gains depend on employment status. Regarding the positive relationship found between life expectancy and immigration in HICs, it is important to emphasize that the 'healthy immigrant effect' in mortality has been also documented for foreign-born Hispanics (including Mexicans) in the United States (Garcia et al., 2017); North Africans in France (Ichou & Wallace, 2019); Canadian immigrants in Canada (Gee et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the relationship of life expectancy

with poverty and unemployment was significantly stronger in LICs and MICs. The poverty headcount ratio defined as the percent of the population living on less than US\$2.15 per day (2017 PPP) was also used in this study. Poverty was the strongest contributor to life expectancy in the LICs. Our research results confirm the other studies' findings that poverty and unemployment are negatively related to population health (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). The unemployment rate is a crucial indicator of the economy's ability to generate jobs for the workforce and to some extent reflects the socio-economic situation of a country, although a low unemployment rate can hide significant poverty (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). It is well known that poverty is bad for health and it is not difficult to understand how poverty in the form of dirty water and poor nutrition coupled with lack of quality medical care, could account for the shortened lives of people in LICs (Marmot, 2005).

This study also found an unexpected sign of the unemployment coefficient, i.e. positive relationship with life expectancy in LICs. The unemployment rate was a significant adverse predictor of life expectancy in MICs. As indicated in the literature, unemployment, especially long-term, has an effect on health status through reduced income, loss of occupational status, and reduced social interaction (Prędkiewicz et al., 2022). From the research results, unemployment does not negatively affect the population health in LICs. However, the explanation for this finding is that the unemployed can refrain from smoking, maintain a normal body weight, be more physically active and follow a better diet (Kontodimopoulos, 2022), all of which have a positive effect on health. Another explanation for the positive relationship found between unemployment and life expectancy in LICs may be the view of Kontodimopoulos (2022) that a low unemployment rate may hide significant poverty. Since the unemployment rate in LICs for the entire period from 1995-2021 is between 4-6%, very stable and lower than unemployment in MICs and HICs, in that case, there is no reason not to believe in the standpoint of Kontodimopoulos. Unemployment levels are more likely to affect those in a lower socio-economic position who face poverty and social exclusion as a result of lower levels of household income (ICF, 2017). In addition, long-term unemployment and inactivity are associated with a range of poor health outcomes, such as

premature aging, poor mental health, negative health behaviors and low levels of self-rated health (ICF, 2017). In the case of MICs, the lag in the relationship indicates that unemployment from an earlier period has a substantial adverse impact on population health than the current situation.

Educational attainment was operationalized by the secondary (gross) school enrollment, gender parity index variable. Thus, it was found that educational attainment is important in recognizing a person's longevity prospects, and in this study, it emerged as a very strong social determinant of population health for the MICs. The explanation may be that in high-income countries most people finish primary and secondary school anyway, because of better living conditions, and health is unlikely to be affected. On the other hand, in low-income countries, it can be attributed to many people not being able to achieve educational attainment. Various studies have investigated trends in the relationship between educational attainment and mortality, all concluding that educational differences in mortality and life expectancy widen over the years (Luy et al., 2019; Hummer & Hernandez, 2013; Kaplan et al., 2014).

Gross domestic product (GDP) and gross national income (GNI) are two standard indices used to measure the economic scorecard of a country. One major difference between them is that GDP is the value produced within the borders of a country, while GNP is the value produced by all citizens (Kontodimopoulos, 2022). In our study, GNI/capita was chosen to reflect the national income of each country group. Some studies in rich countries have also shown no relationship between average income and measures of population health (Marmot, 2005). The findings of this study are also a bit surprising as income is not one of the important social determinants of population health neither for any group of countries.

7. Conclusion

This research study can be seen as a contribution at the global level to understanding how social determinants can affect population health. Indeed, our hope is to contribute to this discussion in the literature by providing the newest findings. The connection between social determinants of health and health outcomes varied among the LICs, MICs, and HICs. Poverty had a strong negative relationship with health

outcomes in LICs, and educational attainment was a key determinant of population health in MICs. The working conditions proved to be a decisive social determinant of population health in HICs. Based on the evidence from this study and other similar studies globally, researchers and policymakers could implement policies to act on the social determinants of health inequalities and formulate actions to intervene to improve population health. Of course, many similar research studies show that these postulations are important and can help policymakers in different countries to distribute appropriate resources to different social groups. But, when focusing even more on the perspective of social determinants of health, the main objective of policy-makers should be to minimize the accumulation of social disadvantages to promote better and more equitable population health outcomes.

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The Narrative Structure, Urban Loneliness, and Identity Study of *Port of Call*: A Shift in the Type of New Hong Kong Mystery Films

Bolin Sun¹

¹ Department of Film and Image, Cheongju University, South Korea

Correspondence: Bolin Sun, Department of Film and Image, Cheongju University, South Korea.

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Abstract

This paper takes Weng Ziguang's work *Port of Call* as the research object, and comprehensively uses narrative and film sociology methods to systematically investigate the aesthetic and ideological connotations of the film in the aspects of "anti-suspense" and plate-based narrative, urban space representation and "loneliness" emotional generation, identity and social reflection, and genre film innovation. The article first defines the film's chapter-like structure and subjective viewpoint system based on "looking for plums, lonely people, stepping on blood, and a room with a view of the scenery", and points out that it shifts the audience's attention from "the case" to "human feelings" through the anti-suspense strategy of "removing the mystery" at the beginning. Then, from the perspective of film sociology, it reveals the survival dilemma, viewing system and power relationship of urban marginalized people, and discusses the shaping mechanism of "identity loneliness". In the genre research part, it is argued that *Port of Call* (《踏血寻梅》), *Night and Fog* (《天水围的雾与夜》) and *The Sparring Partner* (《正义回廊》) jointly promote the "New Hong Kong Strange Case Film" to complete the paradigm shift from sensory spectacle to humanistic reflection. Research shows that *Port of Call* connects individual ethics and social structure with cold realist brushstrokes, and achieves multiple breakthroughs in narrative, image and value in genre renewal.

Keywords: *Port of Call*, anti-suspense, urban loneliness, identity, strange case movies, viewing system

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Objectives

Port of Call (《踏雪寻梅》) begins with the dismemberment of a young girl and immediately reveals the "truth" of the incident, presenting both the details and the conclusion from the outset. Consequently, the audience's expectation of "Who is the culprit?" is transformed into the ethical inquiry, "Why did

this happen?" As the director notes, "The film is divided into four chapters... The audience already knows the truth from the beginning, so there is no need to create artificial suspense."¹ For this reason, the academic community defines this work as a model of "anti-suspense" narrative.

¹ Initium Media "Assigned Seats" Editorial Team. (2015). *Port of Call: Dismemberment and teenage prostitution, rooted in loneliness*. Initium Media.

At the same time, the film makes extensive use of voyeuristic scenes while deliberately erasing the narrative subject within, thereby constructing a meta-level reflection on “observation outside the narrative” and on the cinematic system itself. The audience, positioned as “the voyeur,” is compelled to experience consciously both the act of gazing and the state of being surveilled within the urban environment.

Furthermore, the work focuses on the formation of “identity solitude.” Female migrants, lower-class laborers, and women within institutional structures all undergo a dual collapse of emotion and society, ¹revealing the existential condition of the “stranger” in the city and the predicaments of cultural identity.

From a thematic perspective, Hong Kong’s new crime and investigative films such as *Port of Call*, *Night and Fog*, and *The Sparring Partner* dismantle traditional linear narratives and suspend the “certainty of story and narration,” liberating their works from the confines of original case-based structures. Their fragmented and de-mystified narrative constructions prompt deep reflection on the question “Why did it occur?” while simultaneously evoking renewed humanistic concern born from the resurgence of “Hong Kong-ness” (港味).

This study raises the following three central questions:

- (1) How does the film, through its combination of “anti-suspense,” stratified structure, and limited perceptual perspective, progress from mere storytelling toward a deeper understanding of the human condition?
- (2) In what ways do urban space and the visual system generate and reinforce an individual’s identity solitude?
- (3) What significant role does this work play in both the innovation of Hong Kong crime-investigation narratives and the revival of “Hong Kong-ness”?

1.2 Review of Previous Studies and Literature

(1) Pathways in Film Sociology and Identity Recognition: A large body of prior research, approaching film as a “mirror of society” and from the perspective of identity, exposes the plight of lower social strata through stark

realism and foregrounds discussions of plural recognition of Hong Kong local culture, humanistic concern, and social reflection.

(2) Narrative Trajectories: Scholars generally recognize the film’s formal innovations in subjective viewpoint, temporal inversion, and chaptered (serial) structuring. They further argue that the film’s four chapters remain mutually independent within the narrative field while preserving a unity, thereby realizing a narrative sequencing that can be summarized as “opening suspense—retrospective clues—moral focus.”

(3) Audiovisual System and “Voyeurism Outside the Narrative”: Many studies interpret the film’s recurrent “subject-less” acts of voyeurism not as internal focalization on characters but as devices that reveal the institutionalization of observation itself. This apparatus prompts the spectator to become aware of the social environment in which the observed are placed.

(4) Urban Solitude and Socio-psychology: Prior research explicates the general meaning of “solitude” in terms of urban malaise, social structure, and individual psychological imbalance, situating figures such as Wang Jiamei (王佳梅), Ding Zicong (丁子聪), and Chong Sir (臧 Sir) within a category of “strangers” and interpreting their estrangement and crises of self-esteem.

(5) Genre Studies: Concerning the “new Hong Kong police-procedural” trend, scholarship emphasizes nonlinearity and anti-suspense, humanistic reflection, and the return of “Hong Kong-ness”. Studies commonly place *Night and Fog* and *The Sparring Partner* in parallel to outline the overall trajectory of this type of film.

In synthesis, prior research establishes the theoretical groundwork for the present study but exhibits the following limitations. First, narratology, sociology, and genre studies remain largely parallel, lacking an integrated, conclusive framework that traverses the “observation system — narrative mechanism — identity solitude” nexus. Second, there has been insufficient attention to the interplay between anti-suspense and voyeurism, and prior work has not adequately explained how these elements converge to produce meanings that extend beyond the event itself at moral and social levels.

1.3 Research Structure and Methodology

¹ Du Xiaojie. (2023). *The Sparring Partner and the Breaking Point of Hong Kong Genre Cinema*. Guangming Daily · Literary & Art Criticism.

This study establishes a four-dimensional analytical framework—narrative, space, identity, and genre—based on close textual reading of the film.

(1) Narrative Analysis: This section investigates how de-mystification promotes moral orientation through three dimensions: limited perceptual perspective, dual retrospection, and stratified structure.

(2) Film-Sociological Interpretation: Grounded in a triadic chain of individual-society-culture in identity recognition, this analysis explores a series of interrelated reactions within a high-speed consumer environment, including the weakening of communicative influence, the obstruction of cultural sedimentation, and the confusion of social recognition.

(3) Observation System: Through the concept of “observation outside the narrative,” this section analyzes how non-subjective voyeurism exposes the relationship between image and power.

(4) Genre Comparison: By juxtaposing *Night and Fog* and *The Sparring Partner*, the study demonstrates that fragmentation, non-linearity, and humanistic reflection represent both a universal trend and a renewed return to “Hong Kong-ness.”

2. Narrative Strategies: Anti-Suspense, Serial Structure, and Subjective Perspective

2.1 The Narrative Orientation of “Anti-Suspense”: From “Who Killed” to “Why It Happened”

Unlike traditional horror or suspense films, which build tension through delay and gradual revelation, *Port of Call* discloses the background, process, and conclusion of the case from the very beginning. This immediate revelation releases the audience from the constraints of “investigative logic” and redirects their focus toward exploring the causes underlying both the characters’ psychology and the structural conditions of the event.

This anti-suspense technique becomes explicit at the level of dialogue. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Inspector Chong (臧警官) “reveals the entire story,” shifting attention—through the director’s moral and social lens—from the event itself to themes of affection, empathy, and society. In this research context, the film explicitly states at the outset that “the perpetrator has been identified and the truth is already known,” thereby refusing to construct the pursuit of motive as the central

axis of the narrative. Instead, it guides the viewer toward deeper contemplation and ethical reflection.¹

“Anti-suspense” in this context does not signify mere deviation from convention but rather a goal-oriented redefinition of narrative purpose. First, it redirects the driving force of “information distribution” from the propulsion of plot toward moral orientation, centering the narrative on the process of how the characters arrived at that point. Second, through a structure of knowing the result — retracing the cause, it breaks through the conventional equation of “revelation of fact = closure of narrative,” thereby opening interpretive space for considerations of identity, emotion, and social construction. From a reception-aesthetic perspective, the resolution of suspense does not weaken tension; rather, it transforms the external enigma into an internal predicament, making the “unbearable psychological burden” itself the source of continuous tension.

It is noteworthy, however, that the film does not entirely abandon the formal heritage of the thriller. Textual analysis reveals that while *Port of Call* discards the suspense-driven structure of traditional horror and thriller genres, it nevertheless preserves many of their audiovisual devices. In particular, its frequent use of voyeuristic techniques stands out. Thus, the film’s “anti-suspense” can be understood as a shift in narrative gravity—a movement that expands the horizon of the work’s value while maintaining its generic aesthetics.

2.2 Serial-Episodic Structure: The Logical and Emotional Interlinking of Four Units

The overall structure of the film follows a serial-episodic (章回体, zhanghuiti) form, composed of four chapters: “Seeking Plum Blossoms” (寻梅), “The Lonely Ones” (孤独的人), “Treading on Blood” (踏血), and “A Room with a View” (看得见风景的房间). Each chapter is autonomous yet intricately interconnected, forming a tightly woven logical chain across the dimensions of theme, character, and plot.

“Seeking Plum Blossoms” traces Inspector Chong’s investigation, interlacing testimonies and memories to uncover the “true cause” behind the event. “The Lonely Ones” juxtaposes the three protagonists, revealing the

¹ Kim Young Nam (김영남). (2018). Decentralized narrative and film aesthetics (탈중심적 서사와 영화 미학). *Film studies* (영화연구), 24(3), 45-67.

multilayered manifestations of “identity solitude.” “Treading on Blood” recounts the incident from Ding Zicong’s (丁子聰) memories, emphasizing the causal link between his actions and the evolution of his character. Finally, “A Room with a View” depicts Inspector Chong’s decoding of a “dialogic code,” elevating mutual understanding and misunderstanding among characters into a plane of moral reflection.

This episodic narrative achieves at least three key transformations:

(1) Reconstruction of the Cause-Effect Chain (“Result-Cause” Reversal): The film transforms the conventional logic of “discovering the truth” into one of process restoration. As this study points out, through the structural design of “presentation of outcome → retrospection → reenactment of process,” the film organically fuses the independence and intertextuality of each chapter, thereby avoiding the single linear progression typical of detective films while maintaining the aesthetic motivation of “inquiry.”

(2) Layering of Subjectivity: The four chapters mediate the themes of search, solitude, cruelty, and understanding, generating a viewing experience that deepens progressively from the psychological to the social level.

(3) Optimization of Visual Rhythm: Through free transitions among stages of testimony, recollection, and investigation, the film sustains a balance between informational revelation and emotional propulsion by cycling through fragmentation, retrospection, and reenactment. This process of “fragmentation and reassembly” symbolically parallels the film’s core metaphors of fragmented identity and fragmented life.

In conclusion, the new Hong Kong police-procedural films dismantle linear storytelling in favor of fragmented presentation. Among them, *Port of Call* stands as a representative example of this four-part structural form.

2.3 Subjective Perspective and Temporal Leap: Inquiry, Retrospection, and the “Dislocated Present Tense”

From the perspective of cinematography, the film adopts a subject-centered narrative viewpoint (restricted field of vision) centered on Inspector Chong. From the outset, the narrative openly reveals both the victim’s death and the perpetrator’s identity, then immediately

transitions into Chong’s perspective, clearly confining all clues and developments within the spatial and temporal boundaries of his investigative path. Within this restricted vision, the subjective memories of multiple characters are inserted, forming a cyclical pattern of “personal memory-investigation.”¹

Furthermore, the interplay between Chong’s limited cognition and others’ recollections constructs a dual perspective that sustains the narrative’s focus while generating tension through polysemy and irony among the various narrative subjects.

In terms of plot structure, the film employs the technique of retrograde narration (倒行逆施)—presenting the outcome of the case first and subsequently tracing back to uncover the true cause. Throughout the processes of inquiry and retrospection, the constant intersection and inversion of time and space give rise to a dislocated order between narrative time and cognitive time. Despite being drawn through these temporal and spatial distortions, the audience follows the trajectory of Chong’s perception, progressing from the unknown toward understanding, from superficial awareness toward depth. In this process, suspense shifts from “what has already happened” to a series of moral and existential questions: “Why did it happen?” and “How do humans come to understand one another?”

The film’s point-of-view design is intricately intertwined with its use of voyeuristic framing. According to the present analysis, many of the “peeping shots” deliberately lack an identifiable internal subject, thereby evoking the atmosphere of surveillance or eavesdropping. For instance, in the opening sequence, the “mirror-peeping” into Wong Ka-mei’s private space, along with axis-crossing effects, confuses both the camera’s spatial position and its narrative intent, leading the viewer to recognize themselves as situated within the apparatus of spectatorship. Similar shots recur in various spatial arrangements—inside the police station, along corridors, behind windows, railings, or between foreground and background planes.

However, this perspective does not belong to any specific character within the diegesis; rather, it originates outside the narrative, constituting a form of “detached voyeurism.” The traditional

¹ Loftus, E. F. (1997). Creating false memories. *Scientific American*, 277(3), 70-75.

cinematic pleasure derived from voyeuristic looking is thereby fractured. This technique deepens the dialectic of “observer and observed” and intertwines narrative strategy with visual ethics.¹ Consequently, the spectator’s own gaze becomes implicated in a critique of the institution of looking, wherein the question of “how it is told” is inseparable from “what is told.”

2.4 Narrative Rhetoric and Stylistic Elements: From “Spectacle of the Plot” to “Intensity of Thought”

In terms of visual and auditory design, the film retains certain expressive devices characteristic of the horror genre—such as depictions of violence and crime reenactments—but their spectacular quality recedes to a secondary role, serving instead to support character construction and ideational expression. From a cultural-sociological perspective, whereas earlier “crime case” films sustained their narratives through an “intensity of sensation,” *Port of Call* deliberately restrains itself with a literary-aesthetic discipline, transforming the “miracle of storytelling” into the power of reflection. In doing so, it establishes an aesthetic paradigm for the “return of Hong Kong-ness” within Hong Kong crime cinema.

From the standpoint of narrative rhetoric, the film’s greatest significance lies in its substitution of “delay in narrative exposition” with “delay in comprehension.” Although the audience already knows who committed the act and what happened, the film persistently reconstructs why it happened through a mosaic of divergent testimonies and fragmented memories. Two forms of disjunction—between knowledge and understanding, and between narrative and perception—generate interpretive tension, compelling the viewer to recognize the complexity of reality within the limitations of narrative representation. This is, in essence, the film’s anthropological orientation: a turn from mere storytelling toward the investigation of human understanding itself.

3. Visual Mechanism and Spatial Construction: Voyeurism, Confinement, and the Dilemma of Identity Isolation

This chapter moves beyond mere textual analysis to examine how *Port of Call* transforms its “anti-suspense” narrative strategy into a

powerful instrument of social critique and emotional empathy through its distinctive visual mechanisms and spatial composition. The film does not simply depict loneliness as a theme; rather, through a meticulously designed apparatus of spectatorship and a spatial rhetoric of confinement, it enables the audience to viscerally experience the states of surveillance, imprisonment, and alienation that the characters endure.

This chapter analyzes how “subjectless voyeurism” constructs a Foucauldian network of power and gaze, and how urban space evolves from a narrative backdrop into an oppressive modern prison. It further elucidates how this integrated visual-spatial system fuses with the narrative strategy to materialize and deepen the experience of identity isolation. Through this analysis, the chapter proposes an integrated framework of “observation system—narrative mechanism—perception of solitude,” illuminating the film’s synthesis of aesthetics, ethics, and social consciousness.

3.1 “Subjectless Voyeurism”: The Gaze of Power, Ethical Reflection, and the Removal of Pleasure

As noted in Chapter 2, the film frequently employs scenes of “voyeurism,” yet the crucial point lies in its intentional exclusion of an internal narrative subject, thereby constructing an “extradiegetic observation.” This *subjectless voyeuristic camera* forms the visual foundation of the film, and its mechanisms and effects can be analyzed on three interrelated levels.²

First, on the technical level, the film constructs an ambiguous and subjectless perspective through the strategic use of foreground elements such as door cracks, window frames, mirrors, and railings. For instance, in the narrow room where Wang Jiamei first settles in Hong Kong, the camera repeatedly captures fragments of her daily life through slivers of light and mirror reflections. This vision belongs neither to an omniscient narrator nor to Wang Jiamei’s own consciousness; rather, it evokes the hidden, ubiquitous voyeurism of an unseen Other. Similarly, in the scenes where Ding Zichong is interrogated, multiple interviews unfold within the same frame, yet the camera observes from a slightly elevated and distant position, simulating the detached gaze of a third-party observer. Such a perspective weakens the

¹ Hwang Mi Yo Jo (황미요조). (2019). *Pleasure and Anxiety of Watching Movies*. (영화보기의 즐거움과 불안) Zoom (퍼즘) ZOOM IN.

² Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin Books.

traditional identification between the audience and the detective's authority commonly found in police films.

Second, on the philosophical and sociological level¹, this subjectless voyeurism forms an intertextual dialogue with Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticism. Both Wang Jiamei and Ding Zichong, belonging to the lower social strata, are not only victims of economic precarity but also perpetually surveilled subjects within an anonymous network of observation. They inhabit an invisible panoptic structure, uncertain of when or whether they are being watched, yet compelled to act as if always under surveillance. Their solitude becomes a loneliness under all eyes—a state of objectification and reification in which no one can truly understand or empathize with them. Through this visual mechanism, the film translates abstract social oppression and psychological alienation into a tangible, experiential form of cinematic perception.

Third, on the level of audience reception, this strategy provokes both de-sensualization and ethical reflection. Traditional crime and suspense films typically offer scopophilic pleasure by inviting identification with either the detective (the possessor of truth) or the criminal (the possessor of power). *Port of Call* dismantles both pleasures: its anti-suspense narrative dissolves the detective's mastery, while subjectless voyeurism erases the criminal's allure. The viewer is thus suspended in an unstable position, unable to fully identify with any side, becoming aware that their own act of watching is itself an act of voyeurism. This self-awareness breaks the fourth wall, transforming cinematic pleasure into moral and ethical introspection.

3.2 *The Urban Space as a Modern Prison: Confinement, Alienation, and the Unattainable "View"*

In *Port of Call*, space is far from a neutral backdrop. The film constructs interior settings as cold, chaotic, and privacy-deprived prisons that mirror emotional and social confinement. Wang Jiamei's apartment—cramped and cluttered with belongings—is a quintessential migrant space symbolizing both material and spiritual poverty. Her bedroom, ostensibly the most private realm, is repeatedly intruded upon by subjectless voyeuristic shots, revealing the absence of any

true personal boundary. Ding Zichong's truck and dilapidated apartment also manifest loneliness and alienation; the spaces themselves become both the foundation of his actions and the externalization of his inner desolation. Similarly, Inspector Chong's office and home are portrayed not as warm or authoritative havens but as sterile, disordered environments, suggesting that even the supposed guardian of social order is ensnared within existential chaos. Altogether, these confined interiors serve as prisons of both body and mind, the tangible embodiment of identity solitude.

The external urban landscape of Hong Kong is likewise presented as an alienating, unreachable environment. Streets, overpasses, and neon lights do not celebrate urban vitality; instead, they are rendered through cold hues of blue, green, and gray, wide apertures that blur the background, and compositions that minimize human figures. This creates a sharp psychological distance between person and environment. When Wang Jiamei walks through the streets, she seems estranged from the city's bustle—her isolation underscores a dissonance between physical proximity and emotional detachment, capturing the profound alienation of urban existence.

The film's fourth chapter title, "A Room with a View," borrows E.M. Forster's metaphor but deploys it ironically. In Forster's novel, the "view" signified a broader and more beautiful possibility of life. In *Port of Call*, however, the room's view is blocked by window frames, glass reflections, and city streets, symbolizing a constricted field of vision. The title thus becomes an emblem of unfulfilled desire—for emotional connection, social recognition, and existential meaning. The "room with a view" where Ding Zichong ultimately resides becomes the site of both violence and death, embodying the culmination of despair within an illusory openness.

3.3 *The Triangular Conspiracy of Visual System, Narrative Strategy, and Identity Perception*

The visual-spatial mechanisms analyzed in this chapter and the narrative strategies discussed in Chapter 2 are not separate but rather interlocking systems that collaboratively construct the film's semantic network of identity solitude.

First, the fusion of anti-suspense narrative and subjectless voyeuristic vision fundamentally

¹ Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), pp. 6-18.

shifts the audience's attention. Narratively, by revealing the outcome at the outset, the film erases the detective's pleasure of discovery—"Who is the culprit?" Visually, it eliminates the safe perspective of observation, stripping away the perverse thrill of "How was it done?" Consequently, the viewer's focus moves from the crime itself to the socio-psychological soil of tragedy.

Second, the four-chapter structure aligns precisely with spatial segmentation. Each part—"Seeking Plum Blossoms", "The Lonely Ones", "Treading on Blood", and "A Room with a View"—corresponds to a distinct spatial zone: the investigative sites (police station, streets), the protagonists' isolated dwellings, the crime scene, and the symbolic space of reflection. These spatial anchors serve as both narrative and emotional mediators, deepening the film's coherence between story and affect.

In conclusion, *Port of Call* embeds social critique and psychological introspection within a meticulously designed visual-spatial system. Through this interplay, the audience viscerally experiences the modern prison of contemporary life—a domain built from anonymous surveillance, sterile architecture, and emotional estrangement.

4. Genre Comparison: The Return of "Hong Kong-ness" and the Question of Identity Solitude

Building upon the detailed analyses of the previous chapters, this section situates *Port of Call* within the broader evolutionary context of the "New Hong Kong Crime Film" and compares it with Ann Hui's *Night and Fog* (2009) and Jack Ng's *The Sparring Partner* (2022). The goals of this comparative inquiry are threefold.

First, to demonstrate that the narrative and visual strategies of *Port of Call* are not isolated cases but part of a shared and deliberate movement of genre innovation.

Second, to analyze how, within this shared generic framework, each film asserts its unique authorial vision and deepens the exploration of identity solitude.

Third, to elucidate how this wave of innovation symbolizes a return and sublimation of the aesthetics of "Hong Kong-ness"—a transformation from superficial regional spectacle to a profound spiritual chronicle of Hong Kong identity, ultimately expanding this

local experience into a universal human resonance.

4.1 Common Features of the New Hong Kong Crime Film: From Spectacle to Human Inquiry, From Closure to Open Narrative

Through comparative study, we can extract the shared generic and aesthetic principles among these three films and thus define what the "newness" in the New Hong Kong Crime Film truly signifies.

All three works reject the linear causality and resolution-centered detective narrative of traditional Hong Kong crime films (e.g., *Dr. Lamb*, *Three Against the World*). Instead, they employ fragmented narratives, multiple perspectives, and anti-linear structures.

Night and Fog reconstructs the tragic disintegration of a family through the perspectives of police officers, social workers, neighbors, and relatives, arranging these viewpoints like puzzle pieces that inherently question the very existence of absolute truth.

The Sparring Partner destabilizes narrative objectivity through intercut flashbacks offered by defendants, witnesses, lawyers, and jurors, each recounting a subjective "truth." The result is a fractured, polyphonic storytelling that overturns the possibility of a singular, objective account.

Similarly, *Port of Call* employs a chapter-based structure and multi-perspective flashbacks (from Inspector Chong, Wang Jiamei, and Ding Zichong) to emphasize the relativity of truth and the limits of perception.

In all three films, the purpose of narrative is not to deliver conclusive answers but to provide an open, reflective arena for contemplation. The directors shift focus away from violence, sensation, or technical spectacle toward social, existential, and moral inquiry.

Night and Fog addresses the economic exploitation, gender discrimination, cultural gap, and institutional indifference experienced by new immigrant families in Hong Kong, expanding the source of tragedy to systemic social structures.

The Sparring Partner dissects the flaws of Hong Kong's legal system, media manipulation, familial dysfunction, and moral ambiguity, achieving a philosophical depth that transcends the genre's conventions.

Port of Call, in turn, faces the existential solitude, identity crisis, and emotional disconnection of young people within the globalized urban landscape.

In all cases, “crime” serves as a precise instrument of dissection—a scalpel used to expose the inner workings of Hong Kong society. Ultimately, the focal point of each film is not the act of crime itself but the human condition and the struggle for survival within an alienated world.

From an audiovisual standpoint, the three films also share a consistent aesthetic orientation. Through handheld cinematography, natural lighting, deliberate long takes, and minimal use of dramatic music, they achieve a texture that is tense, restrained, and unembellished. This realism harmonizes with the sobriety of their themes and distances them from the sensationalism and hyperbole characteristic of traditional genre cinema.

4.2 The Uniqueness of *Port of Call*: An Ontological and Philosophical Turn Toward Inner Inquiry

Within the shared framework of genre innovation, *Port of Call* distinguishes itself from its contemporaries through a deeply introspective, ontological orientation that reveals both a unique authorial vision and a distinctly philosophical temperament.

Where *Night and Fog* directs its attention toward external, concrete, and social conflicts—domestic violence, immigration policy, and community governance—*Port of Call*, despite its clear social background of new immigrant struggles and lower-class precarity, ultimately turns inward. Its narrative momentum and emotional culmination stem not from the external circumstances of crime but from an introspective investigation of psychology, emotion, and existential thought.

The film transforms the urban solitude of Hong Kong into a universal condition of modernity, echoing Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “liquid loneliness” from *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Like Bauman’s liquid society, where stable social bonds dissolve into fluid, transient connections, *Port of Call* portrays individuals adrift in a cityscape of impermanence and alienation. Its characters—Inspector Chong, Wang Jiamei, and Ding Zichong—do not merely experience isolation as a social symptom; they embody existential solitude as a philosophical state, suspended between visibility and erasure,

intimacy and distance, moral empathy and ethical fatigue. Through this inward gaze, *Port of Call* shifts the axis of the crime genre from the pursuit of external truth to a meditation on being itself—on how one perceives, remembers, and endures in a fragmented world.¹

The question “Why did this happen?” in *Port of Call* extends far beyond social policy critique, unfolding into a profound reflection on human communication failure, emotional deprivation, the disjunction between body and mind, and the metaphysical void of existence. Ding Zichong’s stark confession—“I hate people”—and his distorted attempt to “save” Wang Jiamei elevate the narrative motivation to a metaphysical inquiry, transcending the bounds of social or psychological explanation. Unlike *The Sparring Partner*, which situates its narrative in the public arena of the courtroom, engaging in a Rashomon-like contest of knowledge, logic, and moral reasoning, *Port of Call* retreats into the private and emotional interior. Its strength lies not in debate but in atmosphere—through an intense orchestration of visual and auditory language, the film envelops the audience within the characters’ subjective worlds. The experience privileges empathy over analysis, demanding that viewers not merely understand solitude but viscerally inhabit it. In this sense, *Port of Call* stands at the farthest and most introspective extreme of the new Hong Kong crime film lineage: pessimistic, meditative, and ontologically weighted. The solitude it explores is not a social condition but an existential predicament—Heideggerian “thrownness” into an indifferent world, and Sartrean hell, where “the Other” becomes both mirror and torment. Through this radical inward turn, the film transforms crime into a philosophical lament for being, where loneliness itself becomes the final, inescapable truth.

4.3 The Return and Sublimation of “Hong Kong-ness”: From Local Spectacle to a Record of the City’s Spirit

“Hong Kong-ness” is a complex and fluid notion. Traditionally, it evokes the brisk rhythm of city life, the humor of the working class, exaggerated dramatic conflicts, and high entertainment value. Yet *Port of Call* and its kindred works inherit the early Hong Kong New Wave’s concern for the lives of ordinary people and its sharp social realism, deepening

¹ Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press.

and reinventing Hong Kong-ness in a reflective and mature form. The camera focuses on the city's shadowed corners and the voiceless individuals within them, preserving the resilient, rough-edged vitality that defines the Hong Kong spirit. This shift marks an evolution—from external spectacles of social confrontation (organized crime, police-versus-gangster showdowns, folk hero legends) toward internal and restrained explorations of psychological reality and the depths of human emotion.

In this transformation, Hong Kong-ness is no longer confined to neon lights, cha chaan teng cafés, or Cantonese slang. It manifests as an acute sensitivity to urban loneliness and identity anxiety born of Hong Kong's socioeconomic structure, cultural hybridity, and historical turbulence. The result is not mere regionalism, but a spiritual Hong Kong-ness—a nuanced record of the city's collective psyche, elevating the local into a spirit of place.

4.4 From Hong Kong Crime to the Universal Problem of Existential Solitude

Through its triangulated analysis of narrative strategy, visual mechanism, and genre comparison, this study demonstrates how *Port of Call* redefines moral focus through its anti-suspense narrative, constructs a critical viewing apparatus through its voyeuristic system, materializes the modern prison through spatial composition, and sublimates the aesthetics of Hong Kong-ness through genre innovation. Ultimately, the film transcends the regional boundaries of the Hong Kong crime genre to expand the exploration of identity and solitude into a universal human inquiry. It is not merely a meditation on the tragedy of a Hong Kong girl, but a profound question about modern existence: how can individuals, adrift in urbanization, global consumerism, and fractured social systems, build genuine connections—with others, with society, and with themselves?

The film's greatness lies not only in articulating this dilemma with philosophical depth but also in enabling the audience to experience loneliness directly and uneasily through its integrated and original aesthetic form. *Port of Call* thus achieves the ultimate leap—from social observation to philosophical contemplation—offering a conclusive answer to the three central questions posed in this study. In doing so, it establishes a

milestone in Sinophone crime cinema, uniting humanistic insight with aesthetic mastery.

5. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of *Port of Call*, focusing on its narrative strategy, visual mechanisms, spatial construction, and the problematization of “identity-based solitude” that arises through their interplay. Furthermore, by comparing it with *Night and Fog* (2009) and *The Sparring Partner* (2022), the research aimed to situate *Port of Call* within the evolving context of the “New Hong Kong Crime Film” genre, elucidating its aesthetic innovations, cultural implications, and the renewed significance of Hong Kong-ness.

The findings demonstrate that *Port of Call* decisively departs from the conventional frameworks of Hong Kong crime cinema, achieving profound humanistic reflection through genre innovation. Its significance can be summarized as follows:

First, through its anti-suspense narrative strategy, the film shifts the audience's attention from the “mystery of crime” to its causes and contexts, and ultimately toward a philosophical inquiry into the conditions of human existence. By revealing the outcome of the case at the outset, the film renders the question of “who” meaningless and refocuses the narrative around “why”—a question that drives moral, social, and existential investigation. This transformation signifies not merely a change in storytelling technique, but a radical epistemological shift in the genre's cognitive horizon.

Second, the use of distinctive visual mechanisms—particularly the “subjectless gaze”—and the concrete representation of the “carceral urban space” enable the film to sensorially and critically embody abstract relations of social power, alienation, and solitude. The camera's anonymous perspective visualizes the Foucauldian apparatus of surveillance, confronting viewers with the dilemma of observer and observed, thereby transforming the structure of cinematic pleasure into a site of ethical reflection. At the same time, the claustrophobic interiors and estranged exteriors function as the material condensation of identity-based solitude, providing a compressed visual metaphor for the characters' inner desolation.

Third, comparative analysis reveals that while *Port of Call* shares the innovative tendencies of

the New Hong Kong Crime Film—fragmented narration, multiple perspectives, and a pursuit of humanistic depth—it distinguishes itself through its introspective focus on existential solitude. Whereas *Night and Fog* emphasizes social critique, and *The Sparring Partner* engages epistemological questions of truth and judgment, *Port of Call* probes the ontological loneliness and communicative impossibility of human existence, pushing the genre toward an unprecedented philosophical depth.

Fourth, these aesthetic and thematic innovations ultimately culminate in a renewed and sublimated interpretation of “Hong Kong-ness.” The film inherits the realist spirit and social attentiveness of Hong Kong cinema’s earlier eras, yet transcends mere localism or entertainment value. It elevates Hong Kong-ness into a psychocultural chronicle of identity solitude—a reflection of globally shared emotional conditions emerging within capitalist modernity and urban alienation. “港味” is thus reborn not as a surface marker of local flavor, but as an aesthetic sensibility attuned to both the specificity and universality of the Hong Kong experience within the globalized zeitgeist.

In conclusion, *Port of Call* borrows the structural shell of the Hong Kong crime genre, yet revolutionizes its interior through an anti-suspense narrative, a subjectless gaze, a carceral spatial aesthetic, and a philosophy of existential solitude. The film compels its audience—through the tragedy of a single girl—to confront the impossibility of connection and the crisis of identity that haunt contemporary life. Moreover, this act of confrontation, far from remaining passive observation, opens a path toward ethical praxis and social reflection.

It is hoped that this study has illuminated the landmark significance of *Port of Call* within Sinophone crime cinema and contributed to recognizing the film’s humanistic depth and aesthetic achievement as a vital milestone in the cultural history of Hong Kong film.

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Causes and Countermeasures of Demonization of Teachers' Media Image

Xinpeng Hu¹, Yuandong Shang¹, Yilin Yang¹ & Lulu Nie¹

¹ School of Education Science, Mudanjiang Normal University, Heilongjiang, China

Correspondence: Xinpeng Hu, School of Education Science, Mudanjiang Normal University, Heilongjiang, China.

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Abstract

In today's media-dominated era, any individual's words or actions can be amplified and rapidly spread, potentially causing negative impacts. In recent years, the demonization of teachers in media coverage has become increasingly prominent. This phenomenon not only affects teachers' mental health and teaching motivation but also creates obstacles to effective instruction. Drawing from the Bellamy's Law framework, this paper analyzes the root causes of this issue through three dimensions: problematic teachers as the source, media amplification, and societal stereotypes. It proposes practical strategies to improve teachers' media image.

Keywords: teacher, media image, demonization

1. Introduction

Throughout history, teaching has been a sacred profession. From the ancient saying "those who teach impart knowledge and resolve doubts" to the modern adage "a nation's rise depends on its teachers," we can see the vital role educators play in personal development and national progress. However, recent years have seen a surge in negative media portrayals of teachers. These reports have significantly diminished public trust in educators, leading to a growing trend of "demonization" — a distorted perception that exaggerates issues beyond their actual severity, creating unnecessary psychological burdens despite the reality being easily addressed (Shu Ailing, 2011). Media outlets often sensationalize these stories to boost traffic, distorting facts and amplifying narratives

that severely damage the teaching profession's reputation. While educating students is teachers' fundamental duty, the widespread demonization of educators has eroded public and student confidence in the profession. Research indicates that reduced teacher credibility negatively impacts academic performance (Li Chunying, Lu Peijie & Shang Yuandong, 2020). Such biased reporting not only affects educators' mental well-being and hinders professional development, but also risks diminishing media credibility by targeting individual cases of unethical conduct to gain attention. According to the broken windows theory, failing to address this media demonization will lead to more similar negative incidents. This study aims to analyze the root causes of media's distorted portrayal of teachers and propose countermeasures.

2. The Transformation of Teachers' Media Image to "Demonization"

Due to the discrepancy between the traditional "sacred" image of teachers and their actual circumstances, the public experiences a significant psychological gap, demanding almost harsh standards from teachers, which imposes a heavy moral burden on them. The flaws in teachers' own conduct are infinitely magnified, leading to the labeling of them as "demonized." Throughout history, teachers have been portrayed as "supreme sages and mentors." In primitive societies, teachers were described as "among the many evils of humanity, there are sages who establish and then teach them the way of mutual growth, becoming their rulers and teachers." Later, during the Western Zhou Dynasty, the system of "learning in government institutions, with officials and teachers combined" was implemented, elevating teachers to a highly prestigious social status and placing them in a dominant position within society. Confucianism later posited that "heaven protects the people, making them rulers and teachers." In modern society, teachers are hailed as gardeners and red candles. Notable figures like Zhang Lili, the most beautiful teacher featured in the program "Touching China," and Zhang Guimei, the role model for dedicating herself to impoverished mountainous areas, exemplify this ideal. Social media has sparked a wave of admiration and deification of teachers, gradually embedding in people's minds the image of teachers as selfless devotees who sacrifice personal interests. However, behind this public sentiment lies a hidden reality of "over-praising," where teachers' human nature is quietly stripped away. Teachers are also ordinary individuals with emotions, families, and personal lives. In the context of a market economy, they must also hustle for survival, inevitably perceived as secularized by the public—a portrayal that conflicts with the sacred image of teachers. Coupled with recent media reports of violent teaching, sexual abuse, and bribery incidents involving teachers, they have suddenly become the focus of public scrutiny. First, the stark contrast with traditional sage-teacher ideals creates a psychological divide in public perception, fueling intense criticism of educators. Second, driven by profit motives, some media outlets fabricate or distort facts to generate buzz, leaving teachers in an extremely

awkward position. Finally, influenced by the halo effect, some students vent their negative feelings toward specific teachers online, recklessly criticizing and defaming the entire teaching profession. This has led to the emergence of a demonized image of teachers.

3. The Phenomenon of "Demonization" of Teachers' Media Image and Its Influence

First, the demonization of teachers' media image restricts their professional autonomy, diminishes their sense of professional identity, and undermines their teaching motivation. This negative portrayal predominantly depicts educators as corporal punishment enforcers, money-grabbing profiteers, or sexual predators. The former are seen as verbally abusing or physically assaulting students due to improper teaching methods; the latter as accepting bribes or charging exorbitant fees for unethical tutoring, while the latter are portrayed as sexually harassing or assaulting students. However, some of these depictions are fabricated or exaggerated, with certain media outlets maliciously distorting, fabricating, or amplifying such narratives. Teachers, hailed as "engineers of human souls" and the most sacred profession under the sun, face significant constraints when their image is demonized. They hesitate to innovate in teaching, avoid being the first to break new ground, refrain from criticizing students for fear of being caught with corporal punishment "slips of the tongue," and avoid interacting with students of the opposite sex to prevent being labeled as sexual predators. These anxieties lead to stagnant teaching practices, fostering a "Buddhist-style" teaching mentality characterized by apathy, lack of initiative, and neglect. In severe cases, this results in professional anxiety, skepticism toward the teaching profession, weakened recognition of its nobility and sanctity (Ban Jianwu, 2007), diminished teaching motivation, and ultimately career exit tendencies. As the renowned futurist Alvin Toffler described in *The Third Wave*: "Mass media acts like an information bomb, rapidly transforming how each of us perceives and acts, and fundamentally altering our psychology" (Cui Qi'en & Zhang Xiaoxia, 2010).

Secondly, the excessive negative portrayal of teachers in media can create unfavorable impressions among inexperienced students, undermining their credibility and hindering effective teaching. As stated in *The Analects*: "A

teacher's integrity sets the standard—when they are upright, students follow without commands; when they are not, commands go unheeded." This reveals how distorted teacher images obstruct educational practices. Students, as the primary demographic of internet users, rely heavily on online media for information. When confronted with media's exaggerated and distorted depictions of teachers, they tend to equate these portrayals with the teacher profession as a whole, mistaking isolated incidents for systemic issues. They unconsciously align these demonized characteristics with their own teachers, gradually eroding their trust in educators. This not only weakens teachers' role as role models but also negatively impacts students' academic performance (Li Chunying, Lu Peijie & Shang Yuandong, 2020).

Ultimately, the media's excessive vilification of teachers' public image negatively impacts parents' attitudes toward educators, creating barriers to effective home-school collaboration. The media's persistent exposure of misconduct within the teaching profession has amplified public scrutiny, leading to widespread condemnation of educators' ethical lapses and declining professional credibility. When children face criticism from teachers, parents often overinterpret these incidents, mistakenly believing excessive discipline harms children's mental health. This pattern of scapegoating parents while ignoring their own parenting challenges creates communication barriers. Furthermore, teachers' authority diminishes in parents' eyes. While parents previously actively engaged teachers to address academic issues, they now tend to avoid communication. The media's demonization of teachers has exacerbated this perception, with parents mistakenly viewing teachers' homework supervision as effortless and irresponsible, ultimately eroding public trust in the teaching profession.

4. Reflection on the Reasons for the "Demonization" of Teachers' Media Image

This paper primarily examines the reasons behind the "demonization" of teachers' media image through the Bellamy model (also known as the S-M-C-R model). The Bellamy model illustrates that the communication process consists of four components: information source, information, channel, and receiver, with the final communication effect determined by their

collective interaction. This reveals that the "demonized" image of teachers in online media is jointly constructed by teachers with misconduct records, online media platforms, and the general public as information receivers.

4.1 Teachers with Misconduct Become the Source of Media Demonization of Teachers' Image

"Education is the foundation of a century-long plan." As educators who play a vital role in the education sector, teachers should clarify their professional positioning, take teaching and nurturing students as their guiding goal, and uphold the ethical standards of "being a teacher through knowledge and a role model through integrity." However, in reality, some teachers prioritize personal gain and hedonism, tainted by the stench of money and extravagant lifestyles, tarnishing the professional image of the teaching community. Firstly, this manifests as academic dishonesty—some fabricate false student grades for awards and honors, while others engage in academic fraud for promotions. Secondly, it shows through greed for wealth, accepting bribes through student seating arrangements and tutoring arrangements to amass illicit gains. These unethical teachers have become parasites and dregs within the profession, providing material for the demonization of teachers' media image and serving as the root cause of such vilification.

4.2 Online Media Acts as a Catalyst for the Demonization of Teachers' Media Image

4.2.1 Distorting and Exaggerating Facts for Their Own Interests

Media exposure indeed facilitates oversight of educators, but such supervision must remain grounded in reality without exaggeration. The current "demonization" of teachers' media image largely stems from media-driven profit motives. This mirrors how entertainment industries amplify sensationalism for attention, often compromising content authenticity. Such demonization leads to herd mentality—people parrot unverified claims, offering self-satisfied critiques without verifying facts, unaware that such rhetoric backfires. If online violence exists, its root lies in media outlets distorting facts to protect corporate interests. Such profit-driven reporting perpetuates public misunderstanding about teachers' image. As the proverb goes, "A kind word can warm the coldest winter." As the backbone of national supervision, media should prioritize factual accuracy over personal gain,

guiding public judgment with credible content.

4.2.2 Seize the Curiosity of the Information Receiver

In today's society, people are constantly juggling daily routines and overwhelmed by trivial matters, having lost interest in conventional online news and even developed a kind of digital immunity. They now gravitate toward sensational stories that defy logic—like teachers being portrayed as moral failures or demonized figures. Seizing this curiosity, some online media outlets sensationalize educators by using shockingly vivid terms like “beastly teachers” or “devilish educators” in headlines to boost clickbait. As these clickbait articles skyrocket in popularity, the demonized image of teachers has expanded from isolated cases to become a generalized perception of the entire teaching profession, further cementing the toxic narrative surrounding educators.

4.2.3 The Diversification of Media Forms Leads to Uneven Quality of Communication Content

With the continuous development of Internet technology, the media environment has undergone rapid changes. Self-media software has emerged in an endless stream, and the quality of reporting content is uneven, which is mainly reflected in two aspects:

First, the control of authoritative and mainstream media over the public opinion environment has gradually weakened. In the era of monolithic media forms, the government could control the pace and influence of news reporting, establishing a positive image of teachers for the public and spreading positive energy. However, with the development of internet technology, media forms have become increasingly diverse. Self-media platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou have flourished, allowing everyone to express their opinions and works. This inevitably leads to uneven quality of content, where individuals vent their dissatisfaction and hatred towards teachers in the media environment, recklessly defaming and vilifying them. Over time, a large amount of negative information will challenge the control and influence of authoritative media, making demonization a label for the entire teaching profession.

Second, the content presentation in mass media has shifted from factual and positive to entertainment-oriented and personalized approaches. As netizens increasingly crave

entertaining and personalized information, their reporting standards no longer prioritize truthfulness or ethics to satisfy the public's “gossip” and “snooping” mentality. Instead, they measure success by audience numbers, views, and click-through rates. The refined or vulgar aspects of teachers' images have become irrelevant. From an entertainment-driven and personalized perspective, negative portrayals of teachers are exaggerated, exhibiting “hyper-realistic” characteristics. The demonization of teachers' images is gradually becoming more prominent.

4.3 The Public's “Demonization” of Teachers' Media Image

4.3.1 The Effect of Halo

The halo effect refers to the phenomenon in social cognition where people's judgments are primarily based on personal preferences, which can obscure other qualities of the object of cognition (Shang Yuandong, Mao Xin & Wang Xue, 2019). Parents in China all have the mentality of “hoping their sons will become dragons and their daughters become phoenixes,” placing great emphasis on the upbringing of their offspring and investing a high proportion of their time and resources in their education, such as giving gifts to teachers for favors or enrolling children in remedial classes. However, sometimes the effort does not yield proportional returns, as parents' substantial educational investments fail to translate into their children's outstanding academic performance (Duan Chaoxia & Wang Jianjun, 2013). In such cases, some parents do not look for reasons within themselves or their students but instead blame teachers, accusing them of accepting gifts without doing favors or casually handling remedial classes. This amplifies the negative impression of teachers to the entire teaching profession, allowing parents to vent and comment on the media's “demonization” of teachers, thereby accelerating the stereotyping of teachers in the media.

4.3.2 The “Kidnapping” of the Moral High Ground

Moral coercion refers to individuals imposing their views on others, even demanding that others refrain from actions that displease them, thereby constraining others with their own objectives. While morality serves as a value standard to regulate personal conduct, excessive moral constraints can deviate from the original

intent, transforming morality into a weapon of intimidation. Teachers have long been perceived as “saints” in public perception, but the declining image of educators has made many resistant to this perception, leading to widespread criticism of teachers’ misconduct through freedom of speech. Teachers are ordinary individuals with their own lives, joys, and sorrows. Criticizing the entire teaching profession based solely on the tarnished image of individual educators is like “missing the forest for the trees.” Imposing nearly draconian standards on teachers in every aspect constitutes moral coercion, which has accelerated the demonization of teachers’ media image.

4.3.3 Backlash

The reverse effect phenomenon occurs when individuals, influenced by pre-existing beliefs or mental frameworks, develop opposing psychological tendencies toward information. In China’s context, mainstream media’s persistent portrayal of teachers as positive and sacred figures has led to viewer fatigue among netizens, fueling intense expectations for demonized images and negative life events involving educators. This psychological dynamic not only drives malicious media to fabricate and distort teachers’ negative portrayals, but also amplifies the circulation of such narratives, thereby expanding the influence of these demonized depictions.

5. Countermeasures to Improve the Media Image of Teachers as Demons

5.1 Teachers Should Strengthen Their Professional Ethics, Set an Example, and Constantly Improve Themselves

As the saying goes, “No wind, no waves.” The moral lapses of certain teachers have become the primary catalyst for the demonization of educators’ public image in media, providing abundant negative material for online platforms and creating opportunities to disparage and smear teachers’ reputations. To address this root cause, teachers must first strengthen their professional ethics. While professional knowledge demonstrates a teacher’s competence, ethical development determines their moral stature. The purpose of ethical cultivation is to establish professional standards that align teachers’ words and actions with moral norms. In today’s media-dominated era, even minor inappropriate remarks by teachers are amplified and sensationalized by the media,

often resulting in unbearable negative portrayals or even demonization. Therefore, teachers must prioritize moral self-discipline and take responsibility for their conduct. Secondly, teachers should cultivate exemplary awareness. They are not only role models for students but also societal benchmarks. They need to adapt their roles across different environments and groups—demonstrating educational excellence and behavioral standards in schools while courageously fulfilling social responsibilities and obligations in society. Finally, while improving personal conduct, teachers should also enhance their media literacy. By studying media operation theories like the American Experience School’s approach, they can psychologically avoid being negatively affected by media portrayals and better navigate potential pitfalls in their professional conduct.

5.2 Improve the Media Environment and Guide the Correct Public Opinion

As the main platform to report the image of teachers, the media plays a role of carrying forward and bridging the past and the future. It not only carries forward the real situation of teachers, but also presents it to the public through the report. Its importance is self-evident. Therefore, the improvement of the media environment is an important measure to change the demonized image of teachers.

5.2.1 Journalists Should Improve Their Professional Quality and Stick to Their Original Purpose

Journalists are the “conscience of society,” which places high demands on their professional conduct. To strengthen their career development, two key aspects require attention. First, professional competence: Media practitioners must ensure factual accuracy in reporting, avoid ambiguity, and demonstrate discernment in handling educational news—making sound judgments and steering clear of fact-based propaganda or misleading content. Second, ethical standards: Authenticity remains the cornerstone of journalism. Journalists must abstain from personal bias in reporting (Sun Yushuang & Sun Yao, 2011), refrain from creating sensationalized narratives to attract attention, and faithfully portray educators’ professional image without generalizations or partial portrayals. Insufficient professional competence often leads to distorted perceptions of teachers’ moral standing.

Therefore, enhancing journalists' ethical standards serves as a crucial measure to counteract the demonization of educators in media narratives.

5.2.2 Adhere to the Bottom Line of Morality and Do a Good Job in Public Opinion Supervision

The advancement of internet technology has empowered every citizen to voice their opinions freely. When news reports carry ideological bias, public sentiment becomes easily manipulated. News platforms must verify information authenticity before pursuing traffic, as public opinion supervision shouldn't trivialize citizens but should uphold ethical standards. It's unacceptable to sensationalize teachers by mixing them with vulgar language for clickbait profits, which distorts their image and creates psychological stereotypes that shape public attitudes toward educators. Furthermore, establishing dedicated oversight committees should review articles' authenticity, objectivity, and linguistic accuracy before publication, preventing misinformation through proactive prevention and firmly rejecting false reporting.

5.3 The Public Should Overcome Negative Psychological Effects and View Teachers Rationally

For the general public, first, we must resist blindly endorsing online media's portrayal of teachers as negative figures, which fuels their tendency to smear educators. When addressing reports about individual misconduct cases, we should avoid a "one-size-fits-all" approach that unfairly targets the entire teaching profession. Instead, we need to strengthen our moral judgment, uphold proper values, and learn to rationally evaluate the demonized images of teachers presented in media reports. Second, we must overcome harmful psychological effects. Firstly, we should counteract the halo effect by not judging others based on personal preferences. Don't condemn teachers to "death" over minor misconduct while overlooking their commendable qualities. Secondly, avoid moral coercion by treating teachers as ordinary individuals. Teachers are not perfect beings; they too make mistakes and have flaws. We should lower our almost excessive demands and adopt a more tolerant attitude. Thirdly, we must overcome the backlash effect. Rather than browsing or liking malicious reports about teachers out of fatigue with positive portrayals, we should cultivate a sense of responsibility to prevent creating unnecessary negative

impressions about educators.

5.4 Government Departments Should Fully Establish a Public Opinion Mechanism to Purify the Media Discourse Space

In today's era of relatively free speech, controlling public opinion orientation has become crucial. Therefore, based on socialist core values, government departments should fully leverage their regulatory functions, establish public opinion mechanisms, improve laws and regulations, and provide robust institutional safeguards to protect teachers' image and eliminate online stigma (Hong Jiazhen, 2018). First, they should closely monitor media trends and actively guide public discourse to counteract the negative impacts of demonization of teachers' media image. Second, while ensuring freedom of speech, they must prohibit the reckless dissemination of harmful content, prevent rumor-mongering, and penalize users violating regulations. Finally, media outlets should be instructed to expose misconduct for spreading positive social energy rather than chasing traffic or profit. They must not fabricate or distort teachers' images, and should create a clear media discourse space to restore teachers' authentic image. Only through legal governance and the use of legal means to restore public opinion order can we promote positive social energy and rebuild teachers' image.

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

Heng Zhang¹

¹ Cheongju University, South Korea

Correspondence: Heng Zhang, Cheongju University, South Korea.

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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. [이석중]. (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 장면들에 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 [영화대사의 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 <양측>(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.

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, Zhihua* (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

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

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. [한춘휘]. (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

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*.

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.

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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What Is Peace and Where Does It Begin

B. Suresh Lal¹

¹ Professor of Economics, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India

Correspondence: B. Suresh Lal, Professor of Economics, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana, India.

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Abstract

Peace is defined as a state of harmony that requires both the absence of conflict and the presence of justice, equity, and dignity. Peacebuilding, a term often used in the context of conflict resolution and international relations, involves establishing social, political, and economic conditions for sustained peace. It encompasses elements such as governance, economic equity, and social reconciliation. Peacebuilding is a continuous societal process that starts at home, where ethical values, communication, and emotional understanding are nurtured. Factors influencing peace at home include emotional stability, effective communication, and fairness, while challenges arise from stress, economic pressures, and social inequalities. Strengthening peace at home involves promoting understanding, gender equality, peace education, and addressing systemic issues such as poverty and discrimination. Ultimately, peace originates from homes, with families fostering values that contribute to broader societal and world peace.

Keywords: peace, building, home, society, world

1. Introduction

According to Galtung (1969), peace is a condition of harmony characterised by the absence of conflict, violence, and terror as well as the existence of justice, equity, and human dignity. It is not simply the lack of conflict that is referred to as “negative peace.” The existence of societal structures and institutions that promote fairness and collaboration is also referred to as “positive peace.”

Peace should be viewed as both a state and a process. Only when people and cultures are free from oppression, fear, and desire can there be true peace. It encompasses social justice, equality, and respect for human rights (Galtung,

1969).

In other words, peace entails.

- 1) Being peaceful and emotionally balanced is a sign of inner serenity.
- 2) Good relations inside and between communities are a sign of social peace.
- 3) World peace entails cooperation with other nations and the absence of war.

Justice, governance, and equality coexist in the Nordic nations, which are frequently cited as models of successful peace societies (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). According to basic psychology, a person who respects and loves family members can also respect and love others

outside the family in society. Therefore, home is a fundamental root of peace, and the mother, often the primary caregiver and emotional anchor in many families, plays a vital role in creating and promoting peace. Keeping these things in view, the following objectives were formulated to study peace beginnings.

2. Objectives and Methods

- 1) To understand the concept of peace and how to build peace.
- 2) To study factors responsible for creating peace at home and abroad.
- 3) To examine factors to overcome the challenges of peacebuilding.

This study explores various concepts and terms closely related to the study piece, beginning at home. I have gone through secondary sources of information and personal experiences, which have been combined to frame the methodology.

3. Results and Discussion

This secondary information-based study focused on how peace begins in the home. What are the factors that influence the creation of peace at home? What does building peace mean? Essential components of peacebuilding: factors that promote peace; building peace is difficult; it begins at home; and strengthening peacebuilding at home.

Where does the tranquillity start?

“Peace begins at home” emphasises the family’s role as the smallest social unit from which world and societal peace originates. Values such as respect, empathy, tolerance, and nonviolence are initially instilled at home (UNESCO, 1999). According to Gandhi, true peace begins with individuals and then extends to the rest of the community via their families. Therefore, fostering domestic harmony is not just a

personal endeavour but a crucial contribution to building a stable, cohesive community.

Home Is Where Peace Begins

In the family setting, where ethical values, interpersonal connections, and communication are nurtured, the process of promoting peace begins. The family, as the primary institution of socialisation, provides a warm and secure environment where children absorb behaviours and conventions that shape their attitudes toward others (Lederach, 1997).

a. Learning about emotions: People who live in a peaceful environment feel safer and are better able to comprehend the emotions of others. Children learn to comprehend and manage their emotions calmly when they experience emotional stability and affection (Fromm, 1955).

b. Effective Communication: Trust is developed and misconceptions are reduced when family members communicate openly. Talking things out rather than fighting teaches children how to handle conflict without losing their cool (Harris & Morrison, 2003).

c. Sending Value: Moral and ethical values such as honesty, patience, forgiveness, and compassion are taught in homes and are essential for fostering interpersonal relationships (UNESCO, 1999).

d. Fairness and Inclusion: Things are fair and courteous when men and women have equal rights and share domestic duties. According to UNICEF (2017), this type of inclusion reduces stress and discrimination.

e. How to Act Peacefully: Children pick up skills by imitating the actions of others. Children raised by parents who exhibit compassion, kindness, and nonviolence are more likely to behave similarly in public (Lederach, 1997).

Table 1. The First Steps in Creating Peace at Home

Category	Factors	Clarification
Emotional	Compassion, love, and faith	Give people a sense of emotional stability and belonging (Fromm, 1955).
Social	Talk, equality, and taking part	Foster comprehension and collaboration among members (UNESCO, 1999).
Economic	Stability in finances and shared resources	Lessens stress and conflict about survival (WHO, 2020).
Cultural	Values of morality, faith, and tradition	Strengthens identity, cohesion, and appreciation for diversity (UNESCO, 2016).

Educational	Awareness, literacy, and emotional intelligence	Encourages tolerance and logical conflict resolution (Harris & Morrison, 2003).
Psychological	Mental health and self-control	Stops people from getting angry and having emotional breakdowns (UNICEF, 2017).

A variety of emotional, social, economic, and cultural elements influence how individuals engage with one another daily, and peace begins at home.

Therefore, the foundation of peacebuilding lies in the moral and emotional fortitude of families, which is supported by economic stability and education.

What does “building peace” mean?

The long-term process of establishing the social, political, and economic circumstances necessary for peace to last is known as peacebuilding (United Nations, 1992). It focuses on repairing relationships, institutions, and societies rather than merely ending the war.

According to Lederach (1997), peacebuilding is a comprehensive strategy that involves settling disputes, establishing harmony, and transforming society. It entails creating structures that promote justice and inclusivity while preventing future violence.

Essential Components of Peacebuilding:

- 1) Establishing sound governance, the rule of law, and voting rights are all components of political rebuilding.
- 2) Reducing poverty and ensuring equitable access to resources are two aspects of economic development.
- 3) Social reconciliation is the process of healing scars and building mutual trust between various groups.
- 4) Reforming the security sector includes disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of fighters.
- 5) Teaching and awareness-building: advocating for human rights, tolerance, and peace education.
- 6) The goal of peacebuilding is to transform violent civilisations into peaceful ones (Lederach, 1997; Jeong, 2010).

Table 2. Things that Promote Peace

Category	Key Factors	Description
Political	Rule of law, good government, and democracy, with everyone having a say.	Establishes confidence in institutions and deters the misuse of authority (Boutros-Ghali, 1996).
Economic	Jobs, fair distribution of wealth, and lowering poverty.	Tackles the root causes of conflict and helps maintain stability (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).
Social	Learning, fairness, and social inclusion.	Encourages comprehension, compassion, and harmonious coexistence (Jeong, 2010).
Cultural	Respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue.	Fosters tolerance and diminishes prejudice (UNESCO, 2016).
Psychological	Healing trauma, granting forgiveness, and fostering empathy.	Strengthens trust and relationships between people (Lederach, 1997).
Environmental	Sharing resources and keeping the environment in balance.	Lessens disputes regarding land, water, and climate effects (UNDP, 2020).

Several political, economic, social, and cultural elements interact to create the circumstances for lasting peace, and peacebuilding depends on these interactions.

Because it included political, social, and

psychological healing, the Truth and Healing Commission (TRC) was an effective tool for fostering peace in South Africa after apartheid (Jeong, 2010).

Building peace is difficult, and it begins at

home.

Stress, violence, and emotional detachment can result from a variety of internal and external issues that disturb the tranquillity of the household.

a. Emotional and mental stress: Excessive levels of stress, rage, and ego conflicts can undermine trust and lead to issues within the family (WHO, 2020).

b. Economic Pressures: Unemployment, poverty, and unstable finances often lead to anxiety and conflict, which lowers the standard of family relationships (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

c. Gender-Based Discrimination and Social Inequality: According to UNICEF (2017), patriarchal views, domestic abuse, and the unfair treatment of women and children are significant barriers to household harmony.

d. Technological Isolation: People who spend too much time on social media and other devices are less likely to interact with one another in person, which has led to communication breakdown and emotional estrangement (UNESCO, 2016).

e. Cultural Decay: Generations find it more challenging to get along and respect one another when shared customs and moral guidance are lost (Harris & Morrison, 2003). Although peacebuilding is crucial, numerous issues can prevent society from achieving long-term peace.

f. Political Barriers: People are less inclined to trust government institutions when there is corruption, bad administration, and a lack of transparency (Boutros-Ghali, 1996). Anger and social unrest are caused when minority or marginalised groups are excluded (Paris, 2004).

g. Economic inequality: According to Collier and Hoeffler (2004), issues like high unemployment, poverty, and an unequal allocation of resources can fuel further conflict.

h. Social Fragmentation: Disparities in culture, religion, and ethnicity make mistrust between groups worse (Jeong, 2010). A lack of peace education perpetuates stereotypes and hatred.

i. External interference: According to Paris (2004), fragile peace processes are often undermined by foreign involvement, the arms trade, and geopolitical rivalry.

j. Environmental Stress: Competition for natural resources and climate change are contributing factors to violent conflict (UNDP, 2020).

How to Strengthen Peacebuilding at Home

The following techniques can help families create and maintain a quiet home:

Get everyone to listen to and understand one another to promote open conversation (Lederach, 1997). Teach children to be emotionally intelligent by fostering problem-solving, patience, and empathy (Harris & Morrison, 2003). To ensure your financial stability, you should jointly prepare and share financial duties (WHO, 2020).

Promote gender equality by treating all family members equally in their roles (UNICEF, 2017).

Incorporate Peace Education: Every day, teach your family morality and peace (UNESCO, 2016). Preserve Work-Life Balance: To improve emotional bonds, spend time together (Fromm, 1955).

The following elements need to be considered to overcome the challenges of peacebuilding. To prevent people from being excluded, promote inclusive governance by ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to vote and by fortifying democratic institutions (Boutros-Ghali, 1996). Invest in Peace Education: In schools and community initiatives, teach children about peace and conflict resolution techniques (UNESCO, 2016). Address Economic Inequality: To reduce conflict brought on by poverty, provide jobs, social safety nets, and equitable resource allocation (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). Encourage Dialogue and Reconciliation: Encourage forgiveness, truth-telling, and community-based reconciliation (Lederach, 1997). Encourage gender equality by empowering women to take an active role in peace processes; studies have shown that peace accords involving women have a longer lifespan (UNDP, 2020). Environmental Cooperation: Encourage initiatives for collaborative resource management and climate change adaptation to prevent environmental disputes (UNDP, 2020).

4. In Conclusion

“Peace begins at home” is a social truth, not only a catchphrase. Values like empathy, tolerance, and collaboration are developed in homes, where peace begins. Respectful and understanding families contribute to peace both domestically and internationally. As the sage Thich Nhat Hanh once observed, “There is no way to peace; peace itself is the way.”

Peace is the presence of justice, equality, and understanding in addition to the absence of

conflict. Addressing the underlying causes of violence and providing communities with the resources they require to resolve conflicts amicably are essential to fostering peace. Peace becomes self-sustaining when communities invest in effective governance, education, and a welcoming environment for all. According to Galtung (1969), peacebuilding transforms social structures from “violence and exploitation” to “cooperation and equity.”

“There is no way to peace; peace itself is the way.” Mahatma Gandhi.

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The Impact of Social and Emotional Learning on Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems

Yingying Chen¹ & Qinghua Chen¹

¹ Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong 524048, China

Correspondence: Yingying Chen, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong 524048, China.

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Abstract

Emotional and behavioral problems significantly impact children's mental health development. The application of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in intervening in children's emotional and behavioral problems is receiving increasing attention. This study conducted an 8-session SEL intervention over 4 weeks (twice weekly) with three children exhibiting emotional and behavioral problems. The Rutter Child Behavior Scale (Parent Version) and the Social Responsiveness Scale were used to measure the intervention's effectiveness on children's emotional and behavioral problems. Analysis results indicated that the overall intervention effect was not significant, but it had a certain degree of improving effect on children's emotional and behavioral problems, such as reduced aggressive behavior and enhanced emotion regulation ability.

Keywords: social and emotional learning, emotional and behavioral problems, children

1. Introduction

The "China Youth Development Report" shows that among children and adolescents under 17 in China, about 30 million are troubled by various emotional disorders and behavioral problems (Xue Junlei et al., 2023). The detection rate of children's emotional and behavioral problems is relatively high, and issues in this area urgently need attention. Current intervention research on emotional and behavioral problems mainly focuses on cognitive-behavioral therapy, humanistic therapy, and family systems therapy (Yu Qian, 2021). There is relatively little research on interventions combining internal factors (such as self-cognition, temperament characteristics, etc.) and external factors (such as

parenting, peer interaction, etc.), requiring further exploration. Social and Emotional Learning promotes the improvement of children's social skills and emotion management abilities through five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, thereby reducing the incidence of children's emotional and behavioral problems. However, there is currently limited domestic research on SEL interventions for children's emotional and behavioral problems, and the specific impact mechanisms are not yet clear. Therefore, this study conducts an SEL intervention with children to explore the impact of SEL on children's emotional and behavioral problems, enriching research in this field.

Current research on influencing factors of emotional and behavioral problems mostly focuses on family and school aspects (Yu Qian, 2021), such as training parents to alleviate children's emotional and behavioral problems (Feng Zhe et al., 2018), and school-wide positive behavior support reducing children's emotional and behavioral problems (Feng Yonghui et al., 2024). Although some studies explore the combined influence of individual temperament and family parenting on children's emotional and behavioral problems (You Wenjing, 2020), related research is scarce, with insufficient discussion on interventions targeting children's internal factors. Existing research on interventions for emotional and behavioral problems mainly focuses on family interventions, kindergarten interventions, etc. (Ma Tianyu, 2020), primarily concerned with the indirect influence of parents, teachers, and peers on children's emotional and behavioral problems. While intervention methods like cognitive-behavioral therapy, narrative therapy, and sandplay therapy focus on the direct impact of changes in internal factors such as enhancing personal cognition and constructing identity on children's emotional and behavioral problems, there is less research on comprehensive interventions. SEL can influence children's emotional and behavioral problems through the combined effect of internal and external factors like self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship skills.

Current international research hotspots on SEL focus on its impact on individual abilities, behavior, emotions, etc. Domestic research on SEL mainly concentrates on areas like school bullying, academic achievement, and teaching reform, placing greater emphasis on the role of the collective environment (Sun Xiaojuan, 2023; He Zhenyi & Liu Yanling, 2024). There is relatively little discussion on the impact of SEL on personal emotional behavior, and the main research subjects are concentrated among young children and special groups.

Although numerous international studies explore the mechanisms of SEL's impact on emotional and behavioral problems, such as the mediating role of psychological resilience (Colomeischi Aurora Adina et al., 2022), domestic research on SEL and children's emotional and behavioral problems is limited and not thoroughly discussed.

Some research found that combining SEL with

mindfulness enhances SEL effectiveness (Barbara A, 2016). Mindfulness deepens the five core SEL competencies by enhancing attention, self-regulation, and empathy. Case studies focus on exploring multiple influencing factors on a case; using case studies can better explore the influencing factors of SEL on emotional and behavioral problems.

In summary, based on previous research, this study will use a case study approach, combined with mindfulness intervention, to deeply explore the impact of SEL on children's emotional and behavioral problems. This helps children cultivate a positive mindset and improve behavioral problems, and also enriches research on the impact of SEL on children's emotional and behavioral problems.

2. Research Methods

Research shows that aggressive behavior, social problems, and academic procrastination are relatively prominent manifestations among current children's emotional and behavioral problems (Dong Peipei, 2021; Li Wenjing et al., 2025; Peng Yuan et al., 2022). Therefore, this study selected children with social problems, aggressive behavior, and other emotional and behavioral problems as research subjects.

The main experimenter in this study was an undergraduate psychology student with some understanding and training in SEL and mindfulness.

2.1 Case Information

Case A: Male, 9 years old, not an only child, has an older brother. Parents are separated, lives with father. According to parent interview, Case A has a good temper and is relatively obedient, but relies heavily on parents in daily life. Often procrastinates on tasks like homework, eating, bathing, requiring repeated reminders from parents (e.g., meal times up to two hours, homework time up to three hours). Relatively introverted in interactions with others, quite compliant with friends, rarely objects to friends' opinions. Usually apologizes first after arguments with friends. Seldom expresses inner thoughts and feelings, sensitive to others' opinions, unwilling to talk about family situation.

Case B: Male, 10 years old, not an only child, has an older brother. Parents have a harmonious marriage, lives mainly with mother and brother. According to parent interview, Case B is

outgoing and interacts well with classmates and friends, but gets angry easily. When encountering disagreements or dislikes something, tends to react angrily, choosing silent treatment or ignoring. Behaves assertively, sometimes gets desired outcomes by acting cute or throwing tantrums.

Case C: Male, 11 years old, not an only child, has an older sister. Parents have a harmonious marriage, lives mainly with father and grandmother. According to parent interview, Case C is enthusiastic and extroverted but easily irritated. Often loses temper or shouts over a single word. Prone to physical conflicts with classmates. At school, gets reported to parents by teacher at least 1-2 times per week for reasons like “talking back to teacher, fighting, violating rules.” Was suspended for one week last semester due to these issues, following coordination between parent and teacher. Parents use criticism for education, resorting to corporal punishment in very rare cases.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Child Behavior Scale

The Rutter Child Behavior Scale (Parent Version) was used to measure children’s behavioral problems. The scale was completed by the primary caregiver. It classifies behavioral problems into “A behavior” (antisocial behavior) and “N behavior” (neurotic behavior), consisting of 31 items. “A behavior” includes items 11, 21, 25, 26, 29. “N behavior” includes items 2, 7, 14, 17, 23, 31. The scale uses a 3-point scoring method (1: Never; 2: Occasional; 3: At least once a week). Scores are assigned 0-2 based on the rater’s choice. A total score ≥ 13 indicates behavioral problems. If the “A behavior” total score is greater than the “N behavior” total score, it is classified as “A behavior”; conversely as “N behavior”; if equal, as “M behavior” (mixed behavior).

2.2.2 Social Responsiveness Scale

The Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) by Constantino and Gruber was used to measure children’s social interaction problems. The scale was completed by the primary caregiver. It

includes five dimensions: Social Awareness, Social Cognition, Social Communication, Social Motivation, and Autistic Mannerisms, totaling 65 items. Items 3, 7, 11, 12, 15, 17, 21, 22, 26, 32, 38, 40, 43, 45, 48, 52, 55 are reverse-scored. The scale uses a 4-point scoring method (1: Not true; 2: Sometimes true; 3: Often true; 4: Almost always true). Scores are assigned 0-3 based on the rater’s choice. Higher scores indicate more severe social impairment; lower scores indicate better social ability. Total score < 60 is normal, 60-75 mild abnormality, 76-90 moderate abnormality, ≥ 91 severe abnormality.

2.2.3 Self-Compiled Interview Questionnaire

A self-compiled interview outline was used to interview caregivers and cases separately before and after the intervention. Open-ended questions were used to understand the cases’ feelings and changes. The interview focused on the scenarios, manifestations, and coping strategies regarding the cases’ emotional and behavioral problems, such as “Have you noticed any emotional or behavioral problems in your child?”, “When do you feel happiest/angriest/saddest?”, “How do you usually respond when your child exhibits emotional or behavioral problems? What are the outcomes?”, “How did you feel after this session?”. The detailed interview outline is provided in the appendix.

2.3 Research Procedure

A case study approach was adopted, conducting an 8-session SEL intervention over 4 weeks, each session lasting 20 minutes. Caregivers were interviewed before and after the intervention, completed the Child Behavior Scale and Social Responsiveness Scale via Wenjuanxing (an online survey platform), and the cases were interviewed after each session.

2.3.1 Intervention Program Design

The content was developed with reference to Mao Yaqing’s “Social Emotional Learning Guide Manual” combined with mindfulness, and adjusted appropriately based on the specific situation. The main content of each session is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Content of the Social Emotional Learning Curriculum

SEL Competency	Core Session	Course Theme	Course Objective	Main Content	Course
Self-Awareness	Session	Understanding the Gain	a preliminary	Introduction to SEL;	

Self-Management	1	Course, Awareness of Breath	understanding of Social Emotional Learning; practice awareness of breathing.	Mindful Breathing
	Session 2	Staying Present, Awareness of Self	Enhance body awareness; cultivate the ability to focus on the present moment.	Body Scan; Mindful eating: one small bite at a time
	Session 3	Identifying Emotions, Emotional Awareness	Learn to identify basic emotions; recognize how different emotions affect the body.	Watching a clip from Inside Out ; Noticing Emotions: Sitting Like a Little Frog
	Session 4	Managing Emotions, Self-Management	Master techniques for managing emotions; improve self-regulation skills.	Foot Meditation: Feeling My Feet; Three-Step Breathing Space
	Session 5	Perspective-Taking, Enhancing Empathy	Cultivate empathy; improve the ability to understand others.	The Concept of Empathy; Role-play: I Offer You Water
		Session 6	Listening Attentively, Respecting Others	Game: Raise Your Hand When You Hear the Sound
		Session 7	Effective Communication, Resolving Conflict	Recalling past conflicts; Explaining communication methods
	Session 8	Looking Ahead, Making Plans	Set positive goals; enhance self-efficacy.	Drawing a Wish Tree; Course Summary

3. Results

3.1 Overall Status of Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems

There were no significant differences in the scores of the three cases before and after the intervention. However, scores on the total Child

Behavior Scale, N behavior, total Social Responsiveness Scale, Social Cognition, Social Communication, Social Motivation, and Autistic Mannerisms dimensions decreased to varying degrees. The overall scores of the cases are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Scores on Various Scales and Dimensions (M ± SD)

Project	Pretest	Posttest
Child Behavior Scale	11.67±12.42	9.00±4.36
A Behavior	3.00±3.46	3.33±2.31
N Behavior	0.67±1.15	0.33±0.58
Social Responsiveness Scale	56.67±24.58	50.67±10.21
Social Awareness	8.00±1.73	8.00±1.00
Social Cognition	10.33±4.93	10.00±5.29
Social Communication	18.33±10.11	15.67±3.51

Social Motivation	11.33±2.89	9.33±2.31
Autistic Mannerisms dimensions	8.67±6.43	7.67±4.04

3.2 Individual Conditions of Children's Emotional and Behavioral Problems

3.2.1 Scale Score Conditions

Among the three cases, the scores of Case A and Case B on both the Child Behavior Scale and the Social Responsiveness Scale did not reach the criteria for problematic behavior. Case C had higher scores, with 26 points on the Child Behavior Scale (A behavior score: 7, N behavior

score: 4) and 85 points on the Social Responsiveness Scale. Based on these results, Case C exhibited "A behavior" (antisocial behavior) and moderate social impairment. After the intervention, scores on some dimensions increased for Case A and Case B, while scores across all dimensions decreased for Case C. The changes in scores for each case across dimensions are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Changes in Case Scores Before and After Intervention

	Case A		Case B		Case C	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Child Behavior Scale	4	6	5	7	26	14
A Behavior	1	2	1	2	7	6
N Behavior	0	0	0	1	2	0
Social Responsiveness Scale	41	39	44	55	85	58
Social Awareness	7	8	7	9	10	7
Social Cognition	8	4	7	14	16	12
Social Communication	12	12	13	16	30	19
Social Motivation	8	8	13	12	13	8
Autistic Mannerisms dimensions	6	7	4	4	16	12

3.2.2 Observation and Interview Results on Emotional and Behavioral Problems

3.2.2.1 Analysis of Case A

After the intervention, Case A showed increased initiative in social interactions. The frequency of communication between Case A and parents/friends increased. In daily communication, Case A more actively expressed personal thoughts and inner feelings, unlike before the intervention when unwilling to express. When feeling uncomfortable, Case A tried to express these feelings rather than choosing to endure them.

In the later stages of the intervention, when Case B disagreed with his choices, Case A was able to think independently, clearly express his views, and stick to his decisions, rather than blindly following others' opinions or enduring discomfort.

However, after the intervention, Case A's

procrastination behavior did not improve. When completing homework, meals, and other daily tasks, he still required a long time to finish, with low task execution efficiency, showing no significant improvement compared to the pre-intervention state.

3.2.2.2 Analysis of Case B

After the intervention, Case B's emotion regulation ability improved. When facing disagreements with others, Case B responded more reasonably, instead of getting angry or refusing outright as before. He was able to express his views and opinions and communicate friendly with others.

In peer interactions, Case B still showed a strong tendency to dominate. During interactions with peers, he often insisted on his own ideas and opinions, being unwilling to listen to others' suggestions. However, Case B displayed a more friendly attitude in peer interactions, such as

actively asking Case A if he needed help.

3.2.2.3 Analysis of Case C

After the intervention, Case C showed positive changes in several aspects, detailed as follows:

(1) Reduction in Aggressive Behavior

The frequency of destructive behavior and physical conflicts when conflicts with others occurred significantly decreased. According to parent feedback after the intervention, common aggressive behaviors like “throwing things” and “swearing” noticeably reduced. At school, the frequency of complaints from teachers and classmates significantly decreased, with fights and rule violations notably reduced. For example, after being scolded by a classmate, Case C no longer retaliated verbally or physically but chose to report the situation to the teacher, resolving conflicts through reasonable channels.

(2) Enhanced Emotion Regulation Ability

When emotionally aroused, Case C could use self-regulation strategies like deep breathing to calm down before expressing his thoughts or needs, rather than directly losing his temper and shouting, letting emotions 失控 (lose control). For instance, when urged by a parent to tidy up, Case C would first state what he was currently doing and the time needed to complete it, before going to tidy up.

4. Discussion

4.1 Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Case A

In this study, Case A's procrastination behavior did not improve, contrary to Li Ziwei's (2021) findings. This might be related to the curriculum design focusing more on emotion management and lacking specific content targeting procrastination. Additionally, procrastination behavior is also related to parent-child attachment; poor parent-child attachment can exacerbate children's academic procrastination (Lu Xingxing, 2020; Peng Yuan et al., 2022). Case A's parents are separated, and his father is relatively strict, which might affect the development of his parent-child attachment, thereby influencing his procrastination behavior.

Case A's expression frequency increased, daring to express his feelings and insisting on his own ideas. This might be related to SEL improving his social skills (Vassilopoulos et al., 2018). Learning content about conflict resolution in the curriculum might enable the case to handle

potential conflicts arising from expressing his own ideas, thus willing to express himself actively and insist on his views. Moreover, SEL emphasizes teaching emotion management skills. Du Fangfang and Li Meng's (2019) research found that emotion management skills can help children display appropriate social skills, increase their ability to gain friends and social support, making them more likely to use social problem-solving skills in challenging situations with peers.

4.2 Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Case B

Case B's unwillingness to communicate with others in peer interactions did not improve. Interpersonal skills are key to the development of peer interaction ability (Zhang Yingru, 2020). However, the curriculum focused on resolving interpersonal conflicts but lacked more comprehensive interpersonal skills training, thus failing to improve Case B's peer interaction ability, leaving the problems in peer interactions unaddressed.

Case B's prosocial behavior increased, actively asking others if they needed help. This is consistent with Marcin Sklad et al.'s (2012) research findings. Some research suggests that SEL enhances interpersonal skills, and appropriate expression methods help children establish harmonious interpersonal relationships and cultivate prosocial behavior (Zhang Yujun, 2024). Li Wenping et al.'s (2019) research found that positive emotions mediate the relationship between social support and prosocial behavior. During the intervention, a good intervention atmosphere was established, Case B felt more social support, enhancing positive emotional experiences, thereby promoting the occurrence of prosocial behavior in Case B.

4.3 Emotional and Behavioral Problems of Case C

After the intervention, Case C's aggressive behavior significantly decreased, consistent with previous research findings (Gao Zhuqing, 2016; Portnow S, 2018; Kozina Ana, 2021). This might be related to the empathy-related content in the curriculum enhancing Case C's empathetic ability, promoting prosocial behavior, and reducing aggressive behavior (Carmen Carpio de los Pinos et al., 2020). Huang Anqi et al.'s (2020) research found that SEL can strengthen students' ability to understand others, training to evoke emotional resonance and generate awareness of prosocial interaction. This aligns with the significant decrease in Case C's SRS

score (from 85 to 58).

Case C's scores decreased significantly on the Social Communication (from 30 to 19) and Social Motivation (from 13 to 8) dimensions, indicating Case C is more proactive in social engagement rather than avoiding it. This might be related to SEL's ability to improve social withdrawal and social anxiety in students (Sousa V et al., 2023). Case C's emotion regulation ability improved. These changes might be related to SEL introducing emotion regulation techniques, cultivating positive thinking, thereby reducing negative emotional experiences, improving psychological resilience, and enabling better coping with academic life and peer interactions (Wei Jin, 2013). Some research believes that SEL helps children better understand the nature and complexity of social interactions, allowing them to make correct attributions when interactions fail, thus facing interpersonal relationships and managing their own emotions with a more positive mindset (Qiu Hongyan, 2021).

Compared to Case A and Case B, the intervention effect was more pronounced for Case C. This might be because when the intervention ended for Case A and Case B, it was the week before the new semester started. The cases faced pressure from the upcoming school start, increasing anxiety, irritability, and other emotions, making the intervention effects less obvious. Furthermore, research (Lin Xiuling, 2022) indicates that parent-related factors like parent-child relationship and family atmosphere influence elementary school students' SEL. After the intervention, Case C's parents began using encouragement, calmly talking with Case C to understand his needs and wishes, improving the parent-child relationship, thereby making the intervention effect more significant. Additionally, besides his father, Case C's main caregiver is his grandmother. A good co-parenting relationship between grandparents and parents can reduce the occurrence of children's emotional and behavioral problems (Xia Shuang, 2024).

4.4 Limitations and Future Directions

First, in case selection, all selected cases were male, which is not conducive to exploring the differential impact of SEL on children of different genders. Observation of case problem behaviors was not sufficiently scientific and standardized.

Second, some curriculum content was relatively

dull, making it difficult for children to maintain focus; furthermore, some material selection did not adapt to the children's level of comprehension, making it hard for children to understand the content. The curriculum content lacked specificity and was not targeted enough for some of the cases' emotional and behavioral problems.

Finally, in future research, case selection should balance gender to explore the differential impact of SEL across genders. Curriculum design should better align with children's physiological and cognitive development, incorporate a certain degree of interest, and have an appropriate session duration. Content should be designed to target children's specific emotional and behavioral problems. Emotional and behavioral problem observation records should be used before and after the intervention for more scientific and intuitive comparison of changes in case emotional and behavioral problems.

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A Symphony of Black Comedy and Political Satire: On the Absurd Narrative and Power Deconstruction in Byun Sung-hyun's Film *Good News*

Yilun Xu¹

¹ Cheongju University, South Korea

Correspondence: Yilun Xu, Cheongju University, South Korea.

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Abstract

Released in 2025, the South Korean film *Good News* is director Byun Sung-hyun's latest political satire and dark comedy. Based on the 1970 Japan Airlines Flight 351 hijacking, the film uses absurdist narrative techniques and a multi-layered satirical structure to sharply critique bureaucracy, international politics, and individual identity. This paper analyzes the dialectical relationship between the film's historical prototype and its artistic fiction, examining how it deconstructs power discourse through dark comedy and constructs a postmodern allegory about truth, power, and identity through a unique visual language and metaphorical system. The study finds that *Good News* not only continues the consistent social critique of South Korean cinema but also reaches new heights in genre fusion and narrative innovation, revealing the essential absurdity of political discourse and historical narrative through its "absurdist realism."

Keywords: *Good News*, Byun Sung-hyun, black comedy, political satire, power deconstruction, absurdism

1. Introduction

"Sometimes the truth lies, and sometimes lies reveal the truth" — this line from the film *Good News* aptly encapsulates the core concept of the work. As the fourth collaboration between director Byun Sung-hyun and actor Sol Kyung-gu, this film, released globally on Netflix in 2025, has garnered widespread attention in the international film industry for its unique historical perspective and sharp political satire. Set in the 1970s, the film tells the story of a farcical rescue operation orchestrated by South Korean intelligence after a Japanese passenger plane is hijacked by the communist organization

"Red Army Faction" and en route to Pyongyang. However, this seemingly crisis response gradually evolves into a comprehensive satire of bureaucratic systems, international politics, and media manipulation.

Good News continues director Byun Sung-hyun's consistent style of genre fusion and keen insight into power relations—from the complex male emotions in *The Merciless* to the political games in *King Maker*, and then to the violent aesthetics in *Killing Bok-soon*, his works have always explored authorialism within the framework of commercial genres. This time, however, he chose a subject based on a real historical event—the

“Yodo hijacking incident”—but did not adhere to historical restoration. Instead, he used this as an opportunity to construct a metaphorical world that is both absurd and real, reflecting the political absurdity that still profoundly influences contemporary society half a century later.

This article aims to analyze from multiple dimensions how *Good News* achieves a sharp critique of social power structures through its dark comedy narrative strategy, visual language, and character development. The film is not only a recreation of a historical hijacking incident, but also a metaphorical interpretation of contemporary global political dilemmas—in that seemingly distant event of the 1970s, we can see a microcosm of today’s international relations, bureaucratic failures, and media manipulation.

2. The Dialectic Between Historical Truth and Artistic Fiction

The film *Good News* draws its inspiration from the Japan Airlines Flight 351 hijacking incident (also known as the “Yodo hijacking”) that occurred on March 31, 1970. This event shocked Japanese society at the time and had a profound impact on Japan-South Korea relations. Historically, nine members of the Japanese Communist League’s “Red Army Faction,”

armed with samurai swords and homemade bombs, took control of a Boeing 727 flying from Tokyo to Fukuoka, taking 129 people hostage. The hijackers initially demanded to fly to Cuba, but due to logistical problems, they changed their destination to Pyongyang, North Korea. During this process, South Korean authorities attempted to disguise Seoul’s Gimpo Airport as a North Korean airport to deceive the hijackers—a highly dramatic historical detail that became the main source of inspiration for the film’s absurd narrative.

However, director Byun Sung-hyun did not attempt to create a strictly historical reenactment, but rather explicitly stated that his intention was to reflect “those absurd things that still resonate in the world today, spanning decades.” To this end, the film employs extensive artistic fiction and exaggeration on a historical framework, most notably the creation of the mysterious character “Mr. A” (played by Sol Kyung-gu)—a nameless, unofficial secret coordinator who manipulates the entire operation from behind the scenes like a shadow. This entirely fictional character becomes the core vehicle for the film’s exploration of the nature of power and identity politics.

Table 1. Comparison of Key Elements in Historical Events and Artistic Fiction

Historical elements	Artistic fictional elements	Artistic Function
Japan Airlines Flight 351 hijacking incident	The hijacking incident in the film	Provides a narrative foundation and a sense of realism
South Korea disguises Gimpo Airport as Pyongyang Airport	The exaggerated depiction of the “secondary hijacking” plan	To enhance the absurdity of the situation
The hijackers demanded to see a photo of Kim Il-sung.	Various verification scenes in the film	Increase dramatic tension
Real-world “double hijacking” operators	Lieutenant Xu Gaoming’s role	Provide audience identification perspective
Japanese Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Transport and Tourism exchanges hostages.	Diplomatic solutions in the film	Showing the complexity of international politics
No corresponding historical figure	“Character A”	Exploring issues of power and identity

The film’s creativity also lies in its reimagining of the historical outcome. In real history, the hijackers ultimately released all the passengers in exchange for a volunteer hostage—Shinjiro Yamamura, then Japan’s Parliamentary

Vice-Minister of Transport—and the entire incident was resolved without any casualties. However, the film constructs an allegory within this historical framework about identity swapping, power struggles, and historical

nihilism—especially at the film’s ending, where “A” acquires the new identity of “Cui Gaoming,” while Xu Gaoming, who originally expected a promotion, becomes the forgotten “A,” completing a thorough deconstruction of the historical narrative.

This dialectical relationship between historical truth and artistic fiction elevates *Good News* beyond the realm of a simple historical drama, placing it within the postmodern narrative domain that reflects on the act of writing history itself. The film seems to suggest that the boundary between history and fiction is inherently blurred, just as the moon has a visible front and an invisible back, yet both together constitute the complete reality of the moon.

3. Black Comedy as a Weapon of Criticism

The most prominent auteur mark of *Good News* lies in its narrative strategy of pushing black comedy to its extreme. This comedy is not a lighthearted entertainment, but a sharp weapon for deconstructing power and criticizing the system. The humor in the film does not come from isolated jokes, but rather from the enormous gap between the extremely dire situation (a plane full of hostages) and the authorities’ absurd, selfish, and chaotic response. This absurd realism places the film in the tradition of Korean satirical films such as *Parasite* and *Barking Dogs Never Bite*, while simultaneously forging a unique artistic path.

3.1 The Absurd Presentation of Bureaucracy

The film’s satire of the bureaucratic system is comprehensive, encompassing everything from the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency to the intelligence agencies of the United States and Japan. In the emergency situation of a hijacking crisis, the friction, chaos, and even contradictory strategies between various agencies further complicate the already dangerous rescue mission. The concept of Lieutenant Seo Go-myung, played by Hong Kyung, “hijacking the plane a second time from the ground” is itself a powerful metaphor for bureaucratic control—in the process of attempting to resolve the crisis, the control exerted by the authorities on the hostages is no less restrictive and dangerous than that of the hijackers themselves.

A highly representative scene in the film depicts South Korean intelligence officials arguing endlessly about trivial procedural issues in a lavishly decorated conference room, utterly helpless in the face of the actual crisis. This

portrayal of “inefficient meetings” vividly reveals the fundamental failure of the bureaucratic system—not the incompetence of individual officials, but the disconnect between the formalism of the entire system and its substantive objectives. Even more interestingly, South Korean President Park Chung-hee is absent throughout the film, only to be represented by his wife (in a special cameo role by Jeon Do-yeon), who mentions that the president is “not feeling well,” when in reality it’s just a hangover. This setup pushes the irony to its extreme—the highest decision-makers are absent for ridiculous reasons during a national crisis, suggesting the hollowing out of the core of national power.

3.2 Multi-Layered Ironic Structure

The satirical structure of *Good News* comprises three layers: first, a direct critique of the South Korean bureaucratic system; second, a satire of international political maneuvering; and finally, a revelation of the universal human desire for power. The film “equally kills the whole world,” sparing no one, not even Japan, North Korea, or the United States. This indiscriminate satirical strategy allows the film to transcend the narrow perspective of nationalism and gain a global critical vision.

Of particular note is the film’s portrayal of media manipulation. In a key scene, “A” barges into the newsroom, threatening the bureau chief to report according to his wishes, or he’ll “label” someone. The camera then uses a picture-in-picture effect to show how news can be manipulated—simply adding “suspected” can easily create fake news and guide public opinion. When “A” stares directly at the camera with a villainous smile, this breaking of the “fourth wall” creates a distance that both strengthens the audience’s critical distance and metaphorically suggests the pervasiveness of media manipulation in the post-truth era — “public opinion always works, in any era.”

3.3 Comedy as a Critical Distance

Director Byun Sung-hyun deliberately maintains a critical aesthetic distance through various narrative and visual strategies, preventing the audience from becoming completely emotionally involved and allowing them space for rational reflection. Whether it’s the absurd scenes that imitate American Westerns (the shadow of a plane flies by, instantly determining the winner, and the loser being shot and falling

to the ground), or the characters' sudden self-referential remarks in front of the camera, the audience is constantly reminded that this is not just a story about a hijacking, but a distorted yet truthful mirror reflecting the absurdity of society.

This use of dark comedy distinguishes *Good News* from simple disaster films or historical dramas. The film doesn't aim to immerse the audience through tension, but rather to use laughter and absurdity to prompt reflection on the political realities behind the laughter. As director Byun Sung-hyun stated, his goal was to reflect "those absurdities that still resonate in today's world after decades," and dark comedy is precisely the most appropriate art form to capture this "absurdity."

4. Narrative Metaphors of Power Structures and Individual Identity

Beneath its surface narrative of a hijacking, *Good News* subtly explores the complexities of power structures and individual identity. Through three main characters—the mysterious "A," elite Lieutenant Seo Go-myung, and Intelligence Chief Park Sang-hyun—the film constructs a miniature power ecosystem, revealing the mechanisms of power operation and the alienation of individuals within it through their interactions.

4.1 The Triangular Relationship in Power Structures

In the character system constructed in the film, the three protagonists represent different types of power: "A" represents invisible shadow power. Although he has no formal position, he has a special ability to solve thorny problems and is the real behind-the-scenes manipulator who influences the course of events; Minister Park Sang-hyun represents institutional power. He is at the top of the bureaucratic system and cares more about political interests and departmental struggles than human safety; Lieutenant Seo Go-myung represents professional rational power. As an elite air force officer, he believes in technology, rationality, and professional ethics and is one of the few people in the system who truly tries to solve problems.

This power imbalance is not only reflected in the roles but also reinforced through visual language. In the crucial scene between "A" and the minister, the director deliberately sets the scene in a dimly lit, narrow spiral staircase, with

the characters positioned in a staggered fashion—the minister stands high above, while "A" is several steps below, visually representing their power relationship. Even more extreme is a "crotch shot"—when the minister leans down and pinches "A's" face, the camera shoots from between the minister's legs, capturing "A's" humiliated expression. This composition is highly insulting, vividly illustrating "A's" lowly position within the power structure. The gossip Xu Gaoming overhears in the restroom—saying that "A" is a North Korean defector, nameless and without status, merely a dog for the CIA doing various tasks, summoned and dismissed at will—is confirmed through this visual metaphor.

4.2 Identity Mobility and Deconstruction

The film's most ingenious design lies in its exploration of the fluidity of identity. At the end, Xu Gaoming, who had hoped to gain promotion by successfully resolving the crisis, is completely forgotten, relegated to the background as an obscure "A." Meanwhile, the nameless and identityless "A" acquires the new identity of "Cui Gaoming," transforming from a shadow into an entity. This exchange and interchange of identities constitutes a political allegory about identity.

The character "A" is a paradoxical figure in himself—he possesses the ability to influence significant events, yet lacks official status; he is needed by power, yet despised by it; he resolves crises, but receives no public recognition. When the scene of him staring at a stray dog appears, the audience can feel one of the few moments of misery and chill in this comedy. This is a vivid embodiment of Foucault's concept of the "nameless"—those marginalized individuals excluded from formal power structures, yet used as tools by power.

4.3 Individual Nihilism in History

Through the experience of Xu Gaoming's father—who lost both legs in the Korean War but received only a watch as a "vain honor"—the film extends the questioning of the value of the individual in history. The father's story foreshadows the son's fate: in grand historical narratives, the sacrifices and contributions of individuals are often simplified and forgotten, ultimately leaving only symbolic compensation and substantial neglect.

Table 2. Analysis of the Role Functions of the Three Main Characters

Role	Types of rights	Identity characteristics	Final fate	Symbolic meaning
A / Cui Gaoming	Shadow Rights	The ability to solve problems despite being nameless	Gain a name but lose the essence	Necessary Other in the Power System
Xu Gaoming	Professional power	Has a name, rank, and professional skills	Becoming an anonymous existence	Idealists within the system
Park Sang-hyun	Institutional power	High-ranking official, political animal	Maintain position and power	The self-continuation of the bureaucratic system

This skepticism towards historical narrative reaches its climax at the film's end: a bird's-eye view overlooks Xu Gaoming, who stands alone on the empty land, the camera zooming out until he becomes as small as an ant, and finally the moon appears. This visual metaphor strongly suggests that in the grand historical perspective, individuals are merely insignificant existences; their pain, contributions, and losses will ultimately be forgotten, while only the moon, which shines on both truth and lies, remains eternally.

5. Visual Language and Metaphorical Systems

The artistic achievement of *Good News* is not only reflected in its narrative content, but also in its innovative visual language and multi-layered metaphorical system. Director Byun Sung-hyun constructs a film text that is both entertaining and profoundly allegorical through his unique camera aesthetics, use of color, and imagery.

5.1 The Power of Cinematic Language in Narrative

The film boasts a bold and expressive visual style, most notably its unconventional camera work. In segments depicting media manipulation, the director employs a "picture-in-picture" composition, allowing the audience to simultaneously see the news report and the behind-the-scenes manipulation of that report. This self-referential visual design not only satirizes the artificial manipulation of news but also hints at the blurring of the lines between reality and fiction in postmodern society.

What's even more groundbreaking is the moment "A" looks directly at the camera—through another layer of lens, he reveals a smile like that of a villain. This double breaking of the "fourth wall" design creates a

unique sense of irony and unease. When the on-air red light comes on, "A" is still teaching people how to graft montage segments of two news stories, creating a visual sense of novelty while revealing the mechanism of public opinion manipulation: "Existing facts, a little creativity, and the desire to believe—these three factors, when properly combined, can work."

The film also visualizes power relations through camera composition. In addition to the staircase scene and the "crotch shot" mentioned earlier, another noteworthy design is the spatial arrangement of the three main characters in the command center—Minister Park is often positioned in the center of the frame at a high position, "A" wanders in the shadows on the edges, while Seo Go-myung is often placed in the foreground but in a lower position. This spatial positioning corresponds to their different positions in the power structure, forming a visual political map.

5.2 The Image of the Moon: The Metaphorical Core of Truth

If the film has a central, unifying image, it is undoubtedly the moon. The moon, as a metaphor for "two sides of the same coin," runs throughout the film and echoes the recurring quote: "The truth is sometimes on the dark side of the moon, but that doesn't mean the other side is false. — Truman Shetty." This seemingly profound quote is ultimately revealed to be a fiction—Truman Shetty himself is just "A," an existence without a definite identity.

The metaphor of the moon in the film contains at least three layers of meaning: First, it represents the integrity of truth—the front and back together constitute the whole of the moon, just as truth needs different perspectives to be

fully grasped; second, it symbolizes the dialectical relationship between the visible and the invisible—we can only see one side of the moon, but that doesn't mean the other side doesn't exist; finally, it metaphorically represents the selectivity of historical narratives—just as we always focus on historical heroes and celebrities while ignoring those nameless individuals who actually drive history behind the scenes.

The film's ending—a bird's-eye view from the moon's perspective—elevates this imagery to a philosophical level: from the moon's perspective, human activity on Earth appears insignificant and meaningless; all power games, identity anxieties, and historical contributions ultimately dissolve into eternal silence. This contrast between the cosmic perspective and the individual predicament elevates the film beyond specific political satire, achieving a universal reflection on the human condition.

5.3 Visual Reconstruction of the Atmosphere of the Era

Despite being an allegorical work whose themes transcend a specific era, *Good News* is uncompromising in its visual reconstruction of the 1970s atmosphere. The production team built meticulous sets in Gunsan City, and even imported a real Boeing 727 from the United States to cut and reassemble for the in-flight scenes to ensure authenticity. This attention to material details provides a solid foundation of reality for the film's absurd narrative.

At the same time, the film is not bound by historical accuracy, but rather creates a visual style that is both retro and surreal through color, costumes, and art design. The saturated colors and meticulously designed camera compositions fill every frame with carefully calculated visual information, serving both the narrative and thematic expression. This balance between historical accuracy and artistic exaggeration is a key manifestation of director Byun Sung-hyun's auteur style.

6. Conclusion

As Byun Sung-hyun's latest work in his auteur series, *Good News* represents another achievement of the Korean film industry in terms of genre fusion and social critique. Through a narrative strategy of black comedy, a multi-layered satirical structure, and rich visual metaphors, the film successfully transforms a historical hijacking incident into a sharp critique of power structures, bureaucratic systems, and

identity politics.

The film's most outstanding value lies in its absurdist realism aesthetic practice—it does not pursue pure historical truth, but rather captures those “absurdities that still resonate in today's world after decades” through creative interpretation of historical events. From this artistic perspective, the hijacking is no longer just a strange event from the Cold War era, but becomes a microcosm for examining contemporary global political dilemmas—in which issues such as bureaucratic failure, international political maneuvering, media manipulation, and individual alienation are not fundamentally different from those of half a century ago.

More importantly, through the identity swap between “A” and Xu Gaoming, and the continuous presentation of the moon imagery, the film ultimately transcends the level of specific political criticism and enters into philosophical reflections on historical writing and individual value. When Xu Gaoming—a character who originally hoped to gain recognition in history—is ultimately forgotten and stands alone on the empty land under the moonlight, the film reveals a cruel yet true insight: history often remembers constructed narratives rather than genuine contributions; but as “A” tells Gaoming: “The moon is the moon. It doesn't hang there because you call it the moon, nor does it have meaning because someone recognizes it. What you do is meaningful enough in itself.”

Good News is therefore not only an entertainment product that provides laughter and food for thought, but also a magic mirror reflecting the absurdity of society, and an allegory about the vanity of power. It reminds us that between appearance and truth, front and back, fame and anonymity, there is not opposition, but rather a whole like the moon—only by accepting this complexity can we get closer to that elusive “truth”.

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