

Examining *A Chinese Odyssey*: the divergence of intellectual trends between mainland China and Hong Kong in the 1990s

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Abstract. The divergence in intellectual currents between mainland China and Hong Kong is particularly noteworthy in works from the 1990s. During this period, Hong Kong's film industry produced numerous works rooted in traditional literature, most notably *A Chinese Odyssey*. Though sharing the '*Journey to the West*' moniker with China's classic Four Great Novels, this adaptation by Stephen Chow diverged significantly from both Wu Cheng'en's original text and Yang Jie's earlier television series. Instead, it drew upon the backdrop and character archetypes of *Journey to the West* to forge an entirely new narrative framework and storyline. This article selects *A Chinese Odyssey* as a case study, attempting through comparative cultural analysis to examine the divergent intellectual currents between mainland China and Hong Kong during the 1990s.

Keywords: Chinese-language cinema, Hong Kong cinema, intellectual trends, cultural studies, literature

1. Introduction

The literary golden age of the 1990s saw the development of countless enduring masterpieces in literature and film. In contrast to Yu Hua's novel *Living* and Peter Chan's film *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, which captured significant attention in 1990s society, there is a work that transitioned from initial indifference and obscurity at its release to its present acclaim as a celebrated masterpiece, extensively disseminated across media platforms and esteemed by audiences. The 1995 pre-Spring Festival release, the enduring and poignant romantic epic *A Chinese Odyssey*. While sharing the title '*Journey to the West*' with China's classic book, Liu Zhenwei's *A Chinese Odyssey* markedly departs from Wu Cheng'en's original work [1].

The Great Adventure of the West, authored by Liu Zhenwei, utilizes the setting and character characteristics of *Journey to the West* while creating a wholly own storyline. It narrates a poignant saga of love that transcends five centuries between its protagonists, providing a logical return to the central theme of the Western pilgrimage. This work critiques conventional concepts of loyalty and chivalry while reinterpreting the deep significance of the Tang Monk and his disciples' quest for scriptures from a humanistic viewpoint (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This analysis will investigate the shifts and disparities in contemporary ideological currents between mainland China and Hong Kong as depicted in a 1990s Hong Kong film, focusing on its underlying social perspectives, critical thinking, plot development, and the characters' fates and romantic trajectories.



Figure 1. Film poster for *A Chinese Odyssey Part One: The Moonlight Box*



Figure 2. Film poster for *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella*

2. 'The influence of Hong Kong's representation of love in cinema on the conservative ideals of mainland society in the 1990s

A Chinese Odyssey consists of two films: *A Chinese Odyssey: The Moonlight Box* and *A Chinese Odyssey: Cinderella*. The two films are linked via the enduring love relationships among Zhenzhu Bao, Fairy Zixia, Bai Jingjing, and Sun Wukong. By depicting several people's musings on and decisions about love, the directors somewhat mirrored Hong Kong society's strange, postmodernist interpretation of romance. Upon its first circulation and distribution on the mainland, society was still under considerable ideological and cultural influence. The majority of individuals' perspectives remained influenced by the 'traditional morality' established during the Cultural Revolution. In the 1990s, several youths, yearning for Chairman Mao, started to venerate the more uncomplicated and harmonious interpersonal connections emblematic of the 1950s and 1960s. Numerous contemplations on love that seemed ordinary in Hong Kong society were profoundly surprising to mainland society, which had only just transitioned from the Cultural Revolution and was maturing under the principles of reform and opening up [2].

From Hong Kong's viewpoint, the society saw rapid economic expansion and industrialization from the 1970s and 1980s until the 1990s. Traditional Chinese perspectives on love and values were rapidly transformed by the influence of industrial society. Free love supplanted parental authority and matchmaking, rendering romance independent of the capricious judgments of elders and more a matter of individual autonomy. Simultaneously, the Cheng-Zhu School of Neo-Confucianism, which had prevailed in the social mainstream since the Song Dynasty by emphasizing the Three Bonds and Five Constants while repressing desire, steadily declined throughout Hong Kong's industrialization.

Conversely, mainland culture at that period had its dominant perspectives on marriage and romance molded by the interplay of traditional and contemporary beliefs, culminating in the phenomenon of 'marriage without love.' From the standpoint of traditional values, China's perspectives on marriage and love, influenced by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, prioritized 'upholding heavenly rules and suppressing human appetites,' ethically denouncing free love. Thus, in antiquity, love was deemed unconventional, requiring both men and women to liberate themselves from the constraints of family and society. Despite the People's Republic of China implementing a marriage legislation influenced by Western countries, which established monogamy and free love as its principles, the mainland society generally retained traditional values owing to inadequate urbanization and industrialization. The agrarian populace comprised the majority, and these folks mostly subscribed to conventional perspectives on matrimony and romance. The notion of free love often existed just in name [2]. In conclusion, mainland China's perspectives on marriage and romance remained significantly conservative throughout the 1990s.

The film presents a profound romantic story. By illustrating the complex but doomed romance between Zhenzhu Bao and Bai Jingjing, the author aligns with the dominant perspectives of mainland families and individuals of that period about matrimonial alliances and romantic relationships. Parents, as the heads of homes, assumed a predominant role in their children's marriages, prioritizing the notion of 'marrying within one's social class.' Couples may not meet before marriage, only seeing each other's faces when entering the wedding chamber, with love progressively developed via shared everyday experiences. The series *Chinese Literary Intellectuals' Spiritual History* discusses in 'The Clash of Passion and Reason' the 'eruption of emotional

intelligence': "The locus of affection is distinctly with our generation." Honoring one's nature signifies sophistication, although it is limited by the aristocratic class, leading to insular attachments that diverge from universal human emotions, at times bordering on the eccentric and pretentious [3]. Late Ming intellectuals, often engrossed in the vibrant streets and trivial matters, developed a deep fatigue towards secular existence. Consequently, their emotions often entangled with society feelings and had a propensity for universalization. However, the author asserts that all human emotions basically emerge from the relationship between man and woman. Many families still maintained feudal concepts, arranging marriages based on social suitability rather than emotional passion. Romantic partners often lacked the autonomy to seek their desired affection, instead acquiescing to parental expectations. This mirrors the separation of Bai Jingjing and Zun Zhenbao at the end of their narrative, quietly reflecting the despair and resentment experienced by individuals in mainland China at that period, who were unable to freely seek spiritual fulfillment and love. This is fundamentally connected to the historical development of mainland civilization and the early phases of self-awareness. The romantic narrative of Zhenzhu Bao and Bai Jingjing develops as a touching, reciprocal tale of redemption. One may presume this novel is characterized by sorrow and remorse; nonetheless, revisiting certain passages uncovers its very charming attributes. Zhenzhu Bao's attempts to modify his look and characteristics to conform to Bai Jingjing's idealized vision of a man infuse the relationship with a bittersweet humor. This portion has extensive speech and physical contact between the two, filled with humorous banter and playful taunting. The intertwining of this entertaining love narrative provides listeners with a varied, sensuous experience, illustrating that passionate love can be both comical and clever. This sharply contrasts with the more 'serious' and 'traditional' inclinations of mainland Chinese films from the 1990s (Figure 3), which sometimes approached character interactions in a hazy, oblique, and confusing fashion [4].

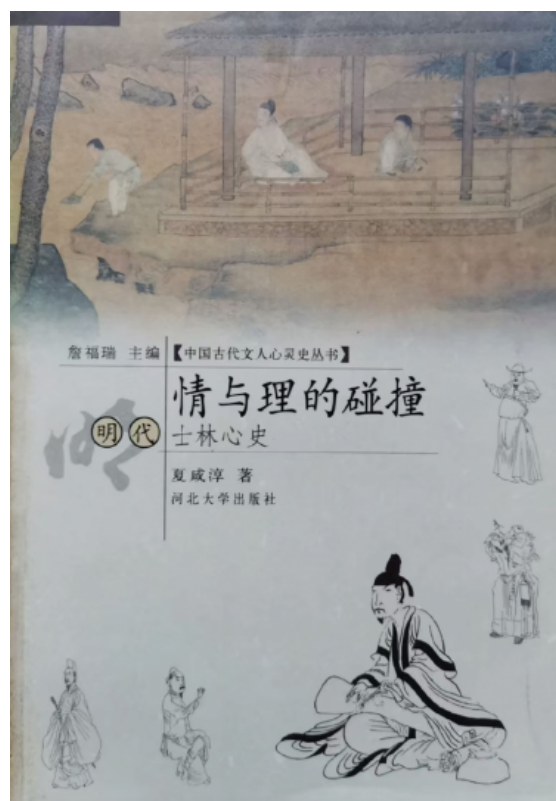


Figure 3. Cover of the book 'The conflict between sentiment and rationality'

In the romance with Fairy Zixia, despite facing adversity and challenges, they unwaveringly maintained their commitments to each other, providing mutual support through all circumstances. This illustrates that love is a reciprocal endeavor and a conscious decision, rather than a transient infatuation. To regain his abilities and liberate Zixia from the Bull Demon King, he donned the tightening headband and metamorphosed into Sun Wukong. In the film, Zhenzhu Bao articulated the following sentiment twice: 'Once, a genuine love was presented to me, yet I failed to appreciate it.' It was only upon its loss that I experienced profound sorrow. "There is no greater sorrow in this world than this..." These lines, imbued with remorse and anger, poignantly convey Zhenzhu Bao's internal struggle and anguish. They also reflect the numerous regrets that mark the conclusion of life's chapters—those exquisite, ephemeral moments that ultimately become transient occurrences in time. Upon reflecting on former joys, all appears to have become a relic of the past. This poignantly reflects the feelings of many: We neglect to appreciate individuals while they are still with us. Regret and helplessness are only felt once one is genuinely lost. This also reflects the concealed and conservative perspective on love exhibited by individuals in mainland society during that period. Ultimately, Fairy Zixia

sacrifices herself to protect Sun Wukong, who is overwhelmed, from a lethal strike. As she exhales her final breath, her words resonate: 'My true love is an unparalleled hero.' "One day, he will come to claim me upon a rainbow cloud..." I anticipated the beginning but not the conclusion," illustrates Zixia's inability to foresee the impending cost. Nevertheless, she harbored an ardent hope for her future love, indifferent to whether her beloved was the mortal, rugged Zhenzhuibao or the omnipotent, ethereal Sun Wukong. Ultimately, however, she could not prevent the tragedy of separation through death. In that moment, Zixia returned to her authentic self—perhaps this was the unavoidable destiny of mortal life. Ultimately, "I guessed the beginning, but not the end" encapsulates an inescapable helplessness—initially, a beautiful splendor; subsequently, a profound desolation. Is this desolate resignation not the very essence of worldly existence? Here, the film compellingly illustrates that "love is no longer a shameful topic or an immoral feeling, but a natural desire inherent to both humans and immortals." It not only warrants complete fulfillment but also merits celebration.

Traditional love in mainland China during the 1990s was simple and devoted, yet profoundly passionate and steadfast. Most people believed that words like 'love' should not be spoken lightly, for once uttered, they would bind one for life. Yet in my view, love need not necessarily lead to the altar, nor is marriage the grave of affection. For true lovers destined to be united, their hearts and intentions remain unburdened by such constraints. Yet in that era, many in mainland China clung to the rigid notion that love equated solely to marriage and childbearing – a perspective often espoused by those emotionally unprepared or insincere. Life is inherently fragile, and marriage inherently involves complexities. Yet these individuals could only mechanically 'dig' love's 'grave', maintaining a superficial 'shell' without ever finding true happiness. This film, however, portrays characters who guard their love and bonds, walk hand in hand, pursue each other wholeheartedly, and sustain their affection. The characters' yearning for love and their bold pursuit of it offer a form of redemption and solace for many who, in that era, were constrained by traditional ethics and family conventions within mainland society. This resonates profoundly with contemporary younger generations [5].

3. The anti-authoritarianism in *A Chinese Odyssey* illustrates ideological divergences between mainland China and Hong Kong

3.1. The film's unique 'nonsensical' characteristics illuminate Hong Kong society's tradition of defying authority

Although Hong Kong society in the 1990s seldom undertook rigorous analysis of social concerns, this did not signify total evasion. Attributing this occurrence only to the commercial supremacy of Hong Kong film is an oversimplification, since markets are also influenced by human considerations. This behavior is more accurately characterized as a conditioned response among Hong Kongers to escape reality. Gradually, producers seemed to assimilate this pattern, using indirect and oblique storytelling strategies. The progression of Hong Kong humor and its intricate relationship with social realities in the 1990s ultimately resulted in Stephen Chow's 'nonsensical' films, the apex of this genre.

Stephen Chow's *A Chinese Odyssey*, acclaimed as the archetypal 'nonsensical' picture, serves as a postmodernist piece that undermines traditional authority. Initially a regional expression from Foshan in Guangdong, 'nonsense' denoted aimless meandering, absence of focus, and a rough, arbitrary nature. Director Andrew Lau imbued this film's surreal satire and self-deprecation with a unique humorous style. The words and conduct inside this farce convey significant societal critique. Underneath the characters' repartee and sarcastic veneer lies a direct engagement with reality. This predominantly manifests as 'absurd character representations' and 'absurd linguistic styles.' The author asserts that the character of Supreme Treasure is the definitive representation of 'absurdity' in the film. His words and deeds are inconsistent with his standing, making this very poignant classic conversation seem ludicrous when said by him. This apparently incongruous and discordant combination produces a powerful comedic impact. 'Nonsense humor' is evident in the interpersonal connections of the film, serving as a structural underpinning that supports the story while undermining conventional dynamics. This enables each character to display deeper, more complex emotional strain within these altered connections. This deviates from the classic *Journey to the West*, whereby Sun Wukong, as the sworn brother of the Bull Demon King, maintains only a brother-in-law connection with Princess Iron Fan and is entirely unfamiliar with Fairy Zixia [6].

In *A Chinese Odyssey*, heavenly entities and terrestrial devils are intertwined in complex relationships of animosity, love, and resentment. In this context, definitive concepts of good and wrong disintegrate. Moreover, the significant master-disciple relationship between Tang Sanzang and Sun Wukong—characterized by reciprocal assistance in their pursuit of holy scriptures—is undermined. Tang Sanzang sacrifices his life to redeem Sun Wukong from his malevolent behavior. These subversions of classic relationships and personalities create totally new dynamics. Furthermore, the ludicrous and whimsical manipulation of the characters' dialogue and actions infuses the picture with enchanting whimsy. This is the quintessence of 'nonsense' insanity. Upon retrieving the Moonlight Treasure Box, dumped by Fairy Zixia, Tang Sanzang exclaims, "The Moonlight Treasure Box is a valuable artifact!" Disposing of it carelessly is detrimental to the environment. What if it impacts a child? Even if it does not impact a youngster, colliding it with flowers and plants is also detrimental. These phrases accurately encapsulate Tang Sanzang's incessant demeanor. Likewise, his phrases such as "... 'Sister Guanyin' and 'My jet lag's all out of whack—I've just woken up in

India' are profoundly humorous, rendering audiences both entertained and perplexed [7]. Zhenzhu Bao's expression, 'I'm blown over by you', is spoken with such resignation that it conveys less genuine appreciation and more a contemporary language intrusion. This collage of linguistic hybrids undermines traditional authority in speech, imbuing it with playful wit and absurdity to produce entirely ludicrous comedic consequences. In comparison to the classic *Journey to the West*, the characters' ludicrous exaggeration is profoundly amusing.

The absurd presentation of the crew behind *A Chinese Odyssey* is said to reflect the anti-authoritarian mentality of Hong Kong society. The filmmaker undermined traditional culture via humorous reinterpretation and postmodern collage. In *A Chinese Odyssey*, the traditional text lacks center, organization, and depth. The film's distinctly modernized language integrates with innovative elements, presenting a striking contrast to the rather conventional linguistic tone of the film, the traditional cinematic style common in mainland China, and traditional culture overall.

3.2. Cinema mirrors the diversity of Hong Kong's social ideologies

The chaotic and unclear character of the 'nonsensical' tactics used in these films accurately reflects the plurality of societal viewpoints in Hong Kong, where dominant ideologies vary significantly. The humor and wit inherent in these films, coupled with their examination of love endeavors and human experiences, also embody bizarre postmodernist ideals. In the 1990s, under British colonial governance and shaped by Western ideas and socio-political changes, Hong Kong's social culture and philosophy grew more diversified. This era cultivated unique social experiences and cultural traits. At that time, Hong Kong society had a nebulous comprehension of traditional Chinese socio-political principles, often obfuscating facts and distorting public perception. This was partially attributable to the condition of cultural resource dissemination at that period, the rapid advancement of cultural media, and the complex interaction between culture and society. During the 1990s, Hong Kong operated inside an information-saturated commercial environment that constrained the examination of conventional ideas. The estranged link with mainland culture and the disjointed, fragmentary character of individual experiences hindered the formation of a comprehensive cognitive framework, resulting in a societal condition akin to schizophrenia. Realist methodologies were insufficient for accurately representing this social state. Thus, certain Hong Kong films from this period used postmodernism to express and analyze the socio-cultural environment of Hong Kong, significantly influencing public attitudes. This specific Hong Kong film, grounded in its locale, synthesizes and converges postmodern themes. It accurately represents the novel concepts and culture that surfaced in 1990s Hong Kong due to Western intellectual influences, emphasizing its postmodernist nature with innovations and continuations of conventional comic cinema characteristics. At this point, Hong Kong society was experiencing the formation and maturity of its nascent bourgeoisie [8].

The eclectic 'nonsensical' cinematic style is fundamentally connected to the socioeconomic milieu of 1990s Hong Kong. From a macro viewpoint, Hong Kong society exhibited a more extensive heritage of Chinese culture, along with heightened tolerance and acceptance relative to mainland China throughout that period.

4. Critical insights uncovered through the film's narrative progression

A Chinese Odyssey has a non-linear narrative structure. The depiction of characters' contemplations on and quests for humanity and love parallels the characterization present in several art-house and action-adventure films from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. These grassroots realism works jointly embody a critical viewpoint on modern social tendencies and humanism. Examples include films like *Made in Hong Kong* (Figure 4), *Live Express* (Figure 5), and *The War of the Roses*, which illustrate social and cultural viewpoints via the experiences of regular individuals. The attitudes and thoughts of characters confronting various challenges in family, love, life, and society exemplify their unwavering rebelliousness and cynical traits. This reflects the characters' quest for love and defiance against destiny in *A Chinese Odyssey*.



Figure 4. Film *Made in Hong Kong* (Baidu entry, 2015)



Figure 5. Film *Live Express* (Baidu Baiken, 2015)

The film's storyline develops over many timelines. Five centuries later, Sun Wukong, resurrected as a human, ascends to the position of bandit leader under Mount Wuyue. He engages in a stormy and complex relationship with Bai Jingjing, but their reciprocal rescues culminate in a heartbreaking separation as they go back five hundred years. Simultaneously, the character Zhenzhu Bao, fixated on rescuing his beloved Bai Jingjing, unwittingly develops a romantic bond with the Fairy Zixia. Despite his original objective to rescue Bai Jingjing, he inadvertently develops feelings for Zixia. The author does not see this as a narrative inconsistency. Upon examining the narrative's origins, it becomes evident that Bai Jingjing has a profound karmic bond with Zhenzhu Bao from five centuries ago. Zhu Zhenbao had a significant obligation of gratitude towards Bai Jingjing, and his activities were an effort to atone for previous transgressions [9]. His relationship with Bai Jingjing was characterized by significant duty, while his friendship with Fairy Zixia was marked by genuine mutual devotion. Love is not limited to certain persons; its manifestations might be diverse.

Undoubtedly, the concept that 'love requires no justification' united these two individuals. Fairy Zixia, resolute in her quest for her fated partner, challenged the universe with unwavering determination. Upon realizing that Zhenzhu Bao was her genuine love, she became completely committed to him, without remorse or grievance. This reflects genuine romantic partners who dedicate themselves selflessly to one other. Henceforth, even heavenly being endowed with limitless abilities will risk everything for love. This sharply contrasts with the conventional Chinese depiction of immortals as remote and disengaged from worldly matters. Secondly, the author explores the essence of love, going beyond superficial romantic joy to highlight the sacrifices and commitment each character does to achieve love or fulfill their beloved's fate. The play diverges from the traditional happy conclusion of lovers reuniting, highlighting that the quest for genuine love demands the relinquishment of power, fame, wealth, and prestige; nonetheless, even with such sacrifices, everlasting union with one's beloved remains unclear. This highlights the deep rarity and value of love. The authors' depiction of love illustrates Hong Kong society's deep comprehension of this theme. Mainland society concurrently remained restricted by conventional Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, which limited passionate discourse on love. Romantic relationships were often constrained by familial obligations and reproduction, reflecting a less sophisticated comprehension of love's complexity than that seen in Hong Kong culture.

The three moles assigned to Zhenzhu Bao in the narrative's complex intricacies have substantial importance. These align with the Buddhist trinity of sufferings: encountering people one abhors, separation from cherished individuals, and the thwarting of unmet aspirations. They represent the collective suffering of all sentient creatures, acting as a perpetual reminder to Zhenzhu Bao that only by acknowledging this may he pursue the holy writings. This foreshadows the ensuing plot development where 'Zhenzhu Bao dons the golden headband to embody Sun Wukong, devoid of earthly desires and emotions'—establishing the premise that the pursuit of the scriptures necessitates unwavering dedication, transcending self and worldly concerns, untainted by earthly distractions; The recurring theme of 'Sun Wukong confronting Guanyin' is reiterated when Zhenzhu Bao journeys

back five hundred years to observe Tang Sanzang and Sun Wukong. Once Zhenzhu Bao adorns the golden ring, where does the Sun Wukong of five centuries ago disappear to? This same plot technique appears twice, resulting in very different consequences. In *A Chinese Odyssey: The Moonlight Box*, the malevolent Sun Wukong is confined inside Guanyin's Jade Vase, while Tang Sanzang sacrifices his life to ensure the rebirth of Zhenzhu Bao five centuries later. In *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella*, at the time Tang Sanzang selflessly sacrifices himself, Zhenzhu Bao used the Moonlight Treasure Box to transport him away. In this timeline, Sun Wukong has been executed by Guanyin, therefore elucidating the riddle. In the ultimate time shift, the whole universe, along with the individuals' fates and identities, experiences profound modifications. In this conclusive timeline, Tang Sanzang is succinct, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing coexist harmoniously, Bai Jingjing and Chun San Niang become the cherished companions of the Second-in-Command of the Zhuangyuan Gang, while the erstwhile Zhenzhu Bao and Zixia Fairy are reincarnated as the Sunset Warrior and the Nameless Heroine. The film's plot is intricately interwoven with the fundamental reality that 'all things emerge and diminish, all relationships coalesce and dissipate.' In a great twist at the finish, the author switches emphasis, creating an ending that redeems the unfulfilled destiny and loves across several eras. Ultimately, via the characters' trans-temporal love entanglements, they achieve enlightenment, recognizing the ideal where 'all gains are as wanted, all encounters are as sought.' Ultimately, Sun Wukong inhabits the form of the Sunset Warrior, simultaneously kissing Zixia and proclaiming, 'I love you.' Sun Wukong could not endure the sight of the lady he loved in distress, and Fairy Zixia's most profound desire is ultimately realized. This indirectly fulfills her emotional transcendence, ending her terrestrial romantic entanglement.

The topics emphasized in 1990s Hong Kong film were inherently connected to the period, mirroring the societal realities of that time in Hong Kong. They mostly reacted to developing ideological trends and provided objective criticisms of culture [7]. In *A Chinese Odyssey*, the characters' destinies reflected the obsolescence of ideas and practices common in modern mainland China. In the 1990s, mainland culture adhered to conventional ethics and conservative ideologies, leading individuals to refrain from publicly challenging cultural norms and necessitating compromise. This film emphasizes defiance against and criticism of social injustice and societal limitations [10]. Through the depiction of the romantic dilemmas and remorse among Zhenzhu Bao, Bai Jingjing, and Zixia Xianzi, it critiques the stark reality of societal situations and destiny, while abstaining from deriding love itself. It also discloses the karmic roots of terrestrial connections.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, by modifying and secularizing the archetypal figures from *Journey to the West*, *A Chinese Odyssey* constructs a realm imbued with a carnivalesque essence. Its orthodoxy, authority, and seriousness are dismantled, replaced by a crude and vulgar sensibility. The film employs a comic, absurdist style in its narrative, interlaced with a love tale that traverses several eras and locations. Although ostensibly using conversation among diverse humorous characters to advance the narrative, it fundamentally conveys significant themes: examining the intricacies of human nature, questioning societal constructs, praising the multiplicity of love, and illustrating the characters' developmental arcs. These criticisms and insights arise from the love entanglements, fickle fates, and challenges faced by people over different times. The film critiques several aspects of society and the harshness of destiny without ridiculing love itself. The 'nonsensical' method seems architecturally disorganized, disordered, and rudimentary on the surface, but it accurately encapsulates the postmodernist aesthetic of this new period. Utilizing oblique humor and self-deprecation, it skillfully amalgamates dramatic and utopian components, creating an expansive and elevated narrative structure that deconstructs history and authority. It signifies a reaction to emerging intellectual trends and an impartial evaluation of culture. While preserving the conventional cinematic framework of dramatic narrative progression, it illustrates the emergence and ascendance of new ideological tendencies. These arise from the many viewpoints and interpretations influenced by the chaotic reality of social views and circumstances in daily life, reflecting the collective voice of the populace and societal change.

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