

## ***Mono no aware* in Japan's *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and a Homogenous Aesthetic in China's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000)**

Unique cultures and social understandings are conventionally embodied in films of varying nations and regions, where political ideals are commented on. In Asian film, similarities in aesthetics between bordering nations - such as Japan and China - can be attributed to similar historical movements and homogeneous religious significances. "Aesthetics is that branch of philosophy defining beauty and the beautiful, how it can be recognised, ascertained, judged." (Richie, 2007, p. 15) The Japanese notion of *mono no aware* - an acute sensitivity to the ephemerality of human life - pervades Japanese films and anime, and, although with no direct translation, carries over into Chinese culture and film unconsciously through mutual cultures incorporating Buddhism and Confucianism. Directed by Isao Takahata, *Grave of the Fireflies* (1998) permeates a feeling of *mono no aware* consistently across a narrative revolved around the devastation of the World War II bombings on Japan. Similarly, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) also presents moments of *mono no aware* as Buddhist and Confucian practices, in reflection of Japan's Shintō, propel the narrative and aesthetic quality of the film. The Japanese and Chinese cinemas imprint *mono no aware*, either consciously or unconsciously, into their films as the finite status of life is understood.

In "[a culture] which displays a highly developed aesthetic consciousness," it is understandable why Japanese cinema aims to present a 'stillness' in its films in reflection of the religious values of the nation and the collective culture of *mono no aware*. (Freiberg, 2000, p.178) Freda Freiberg states on *mono no aware* that: "This aesthetic is marked by a creative use of silences and voids (*mu*), and a predominant mood of *mono no aware* (literally, the pathos of things) based on a sorrowing awareness of the transience and mutability of all living things (*mojo*)." (2000, p.179) Whilst some confuse *mono no aware* with a nihilistic perspective, the aesthetic carries a softness as one recognises the present as the most important when feeling *mono no aware*. It can be perfectly described in relation to contemporary Japan's traditional love of the Sakura - cherry blossom - as they are revered whilst falling within a week of appearing. The melancholic feeling of *mono no aware* felt in the viewer relates to the understanding and appreciation of their transience. Japanese cinema saturates its films with *mono no aware* as it is a dominant part of their culture - easily recognisable in *Grave of the Fireflies*.

"*Mono no aware*, epistemologically speaking, is perceived through the senses, but by using *shiru*, "to know", the rational understanding of sensory *aware* has been added... *mono no aware* as containing a broad and profoundly human feeling." (Kazumitsu, 1962, p.558) This "profoundly human feeling" correlates with the breadth of humanity's empathy and benevolence in Buddhist and Confucian teachings. "Buddhism was introduced into China from India. The reason for its wide acceptance in China is the concept of rebirth and the reinforcement of Taoism and Confucianism." (Le, 2002, p.5) China's historical religions have been heavily influenced by many

parts of Asia as their culture and ideologies are influenced by other nations. The base principles of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism are the driving force behind Chinese wuxia films - of which mirror Japanese Buddhism and Shintō. *Mono no aware* is evident in cinemas international to Japan, including China, as religion has reflected a sense of the impermanence of life in Japanese and Chinese cultures - palpable in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

*Grave of the Fireflies* depicts two siblings Seita and Setsuko in Kobe, Japan during the World War II bombings, and tells the story of their struggle to survive and eventual deaths. Explicitly evoking a sense of *mono no aware*, the graphic illustration of their mother after being gravely injured in a bombing allows the character Seita to, from the beginning of the film, understand the impermanence of life. "In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, awareness of the fundamental condition of existence is no cause for nihilistic despair, but rather a call to vital activity in the present moment and to gratitude for another moment's being granted to us." (Parkes, 2011) This call to vital activity is demonstrated by Seita as he departs his unhelpful aunt's with Setsuko and attempts to create a life for them in an old war shelter. As the silences - *mu* - of the film marry with the beauty of the landscapes, the character animation subtly changes as Setsuko's form almost unnoticeably becomes more malnourished and sickly as the film progresses. "In basic Zen texts one accepts and transcends the world." (Richie, 1974, p.52) The film permeates a mood of *mono no aware* as Seita accepts his sister's and mother's deaths, and eventually his own, before being reunited with Setsuko's spirit. The *mono no aware* burials and praying in *Grave of the Fireflies* reflect Buddhist and Shintō practices - analogous in Chinese films including *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a Chinese-Taiwanese-American-Hong Kong film that when deconstructed, evokes what the Japanese term *mono no aware* as religious parallels draw a connection to the impermanence and transience of life and beauty. "The arts in Japan have tended to be closely connected with Confucian practices of self-cultivation, as evidenced in the fact that they are often referred to as "ways [of living]": *chadō*, the way of tea (tea ceremony), *shōdō*, the way of writing (calligraphy) etc." (Parkes, 2011) Chinese Confucianism is thus connected to the arts of Japan, as well as the 'aesthetic art', and is linked to the mood of *mono no aware*. In the film, Li Mu Bai - wudang swordsman whose master was killed by female Jade fox - gives female warrior Yo Hu Lien his sword Green Destiny to transport to Sir Te in Beijing. Jen, who is to be married by arrangement, steals the sword under her governess' martial arts training - Jade Fox in disguise - and leaves her betrothed for a passionate affair with desert bandit Lo. The film concludes with the death of Li Mu Bai and Jade Fox, Green Desinty returned to Sir Te and Jen jumping off of Wudang mountain. The interconnectivity of the characters' relationships epitomises the Buddhist perspective that all forms of life are interconnected and as protagonists Li Mu Bai and Jen accept the impermanence and transience of their lives, a mood of *mono no aware* is moulded. Drawing a connection between Confucianism and *mono no aware*, the Confucian virtue or 'forgiving' is displayed in the film as Shu Lien wishes Jen a fulfilled life after Jen indirectly killed Li Mu Bai. The characters' ability to transcend emotion and understand life's ephemerality is transferred to the

viewers. The varying genres and directorial styles of the films also palpably also relate to *mono no aware* in both *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

*Grave of the Fireflies* is a war film with the political, cultural and social implications of World War II told through Japanese anime and revolving around children devastated by the war. "By viewing the world of war through the eyes of children (including adolescents), the Japanese popular culture is able to sustain its currently predominant vision of war. By focusing on people who cannot be considered combatants in any sense... The larger truth is maintained: war victimises children." (Drazen, 2003, p.204) Whilst the film explicitly pervades the detriments to children by warfare, it maintains a *mono no aware* mood throughout as the impermanence of human life and nature is centralised. In *Grave of the Fireflies*, the fireflies are symbolic of summer and the fixed nature of life and death. Whilst inducing a feeling of happiness and calmness in the viewers, a wave of *mono no aware* rushes over both characters and viewers as the fireflies die and their natural light is extinguished. As motifs of the war genre in Japanese cinema and anime, the firebombs are mirrored by the depiction of the fireflies - of which their transience is heightened. Synonymous to Japanese war films, Chinese wuxia films also pervade a mood of *mono no aware* as the link between religious knowledges and the finite nature of life and subjective beauty is presented.

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a Chinese-international martial arts film that is constructed on conventions of its wuxia genre - evoking a sense of the Japanese *mono no aware* throughout the film. On the famous Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu and *mono no aware*, noted film analyst Donald Richie states: "Inextricable from Buddhist precepts, it puts the world at a distance and leaves the spectator uninvolved; a mere recorder of impressions which he may register but which do not personally involve him." (Richie, 1959, p.19) Chinese cinema expertly produces many wuxia films that evoke a sense of *mono no aware* as viewers are uninvolved in the action of the film, aligning with Richie's viewpoint, and demonstrates a Buddhist ideology: "Buddhism's concept of the one-ness of all things and the aesthetic philosophy of *mono no aware*." (McDonald, 2004, p.2) As the driving force behind many, if not all, wuxia films, Buddhism, its philosophies and other Asian religions spearhead the narrative and actions of the warriors in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Throughout the film, in comparison to the harsh swiftness of swordplay, the importance of simplistic actions such as calligraphy, tea and meditating is emphasised - paralleling with religious undertakings in Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as drawing a subtle connection with Japanese Shintō. The synonymous finesse and delicacy of calligraphy and swordsmanship is depicted and affirms the *mono no aware* - as both are situated as equal. The fighting scenes in the wuxia film are, more importantly than presenting a realistic fighting style, dance-like and purposeful for aesthetic quality and beauty - juxtaposing with the harshness of battle to create a sense of *mono no aware*.

*Grave of the Fireflies* begins and concludes with the same scene - Seita dying from malnourishment and reuniting with Setsuko's spirit. "The philosophy of acceptance... is so deeply felt and has antecedents both in the Buddhist religion and in Japanese aesthetics." (Richie, 1974, p.51) In the film, Seita clearly accepts death, including his mother's, sister's and his own. The closed-narrative formalises the sense of *mono no aware* and Seita draws connection to Shintō and Buddhism through the burial of the fireflies and Setsuko. All aspects of the opening/closing scene permeate a sense of *mono no aware* for the characters and viewers alike. With a soft musical score, the harsh juxtaposition of Seita's deceased, lifeless body to his lively, golden spirit alongside his sister's imprints a mood of *mono no aware* as the transience of life is directly presented - through a beautiful aesthetic. In reference to the bittersweet narrative, fireflies float around the reunited siblings and heighten the mood of *mono no aware*. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Li Mu Bai's death in the cavern also demonstrates a *mono no aware* consciousness.

At the climax of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Li Mu Bai meditates to preserve his life after being wounded by Jade Fox's poisonous darts. Donald Richie also states, "It is an attribute of the good Buddhist who looks at the world from a distance and is uninvolved. The Japanese call this quality, which is essentially the traditional Japanese aesthetic spirit, *mono no aware*." (Richie, 1959, p.24) Li Mu Bai epitomises this 'distance' beautifully as he no longer permits self-control over his own life - he allows Jen to be in control of rushing to gather the antidote. Whilst Jen hurriedly attempts to gather it, Li Mu Bai prepares for death. As he meditates, Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien admit their feelings for each other before he dies. Their confession of love and their release upon his death emits a mood of *mono no aware* for the characters as they are warriors - satisfied with the impermanence of life and the transience of intimate love through Buddhist and Confucian teachings. In the scene, the dim lighting heightens the *mono no aware* as a bittersweet feeling is felt by viewers upon Li Mu Bai's death.

*Mono no aware* is a Japanese term for an aesthetic mood and understanding of the impermanence of life and the mutability of living things. Its reflections in Japan's *Grave of the Fireflies* is attributed to its culture's appreciation of life's ephemerality and transience in religions - including Buddhism, Shintō and Confucianism. China's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* homogeneously evokes a sense of *mono no aware* as parallels in Chinese Buddhism and philosophy to Japanese propel the wuxia film.

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In Freda Freiberg's chapter 'Japanese Cinema', she astutely defines the Japanese term *mono no aware* whilst situating its place in Japanese films. The chapter is informative and corroborates other sources' delineations of what *mono no aware* represents. Freiberg offers an acute investigation into *mono no aware* in Japanese films through an analyst's lens.

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In Rosie McDonald's paper *Studio Ghibli Feature Films and Japanese Artistic Tradition*, McDonald forms an understanding of correlations between multiple Studio Ghibli films and discusses how *mono no aware* is prevalent across the studio's anime films. This paper allows a deeper understanding of the motivations behind *mono no aware* in Studio Ghibli films and, in particular, *Grave of the Fireflies*.

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