

The Self-Destructive Hero Myth: Death Narrative and the Structure of Reincarnation in *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon*

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Abstract

In recent years, Chinese-language crime films have increasingly embraced hybrid genres, not only borrowing visual elements from film noir and action cinema, but also challenging conventional moral binaries through innovative narrative structures and complex characterizations. *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* (2023), a film that sparked significant discussion, tells a mythic story of “redemption through destruction” through a self-destructive antihero, Chen Guilin. Once a notorious fugitive, Chen embarks on a violent mission to eliminate three societal “evils” after discovering that he is not the most wanted criminal — only to ultimately realize that he himself is the third target.

This paper argues that the film does not merely subvert the traditional justice narrative but constructs a culturally resonant myth through its symbolic use of death and cyclical narrative structure. Through the lens of narrative theory, mythology, and religious-cultural discourse, the film’s treatment of death functions not only as an endpoint but as a ritualized process of purification, heavily influenced by Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation. The analysis focuses on how Chen’s path — marked by violence, hallucinations, and eventual self-sacrifice — transforms him from a criminal into a mythic figure representing social catharsis and existential rebirth.

By examining this “self-destructive hero myth,” the study reveals how contemporary Chinese-language cinema reimagines heroism in a context of moral ambiguity, institutional failure, and spiritual longing. The paper concludes by reflecting on how death, in such narratives, becomes the only meaningful gesture in a disenchanted world — a culturally coded form of redemption.

Keywords: Chinese-language cinema, antihero, death narrative, reincarnation, mythology, redemption, *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon*

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese-language crime films have demonstrated increasingly complex genre hybridity. Visually, they draw upon stylistic devices from film noir and action cinema; narratively and thematically, they seek to transcend binary moral structures of good versus evil. *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* (2023), a film that has generated extensive discussion, tells a contemporary myth of a ‘villain’s redemption’ through a highly stylized narrative and symbolic imagery. The film’s protagonist, Chen Guilin, a wanted murderer, embarks on a journey to eliminate three ‘evils’ after discovering he is not the third most-wanted criminal. Ultimately, he chooses to end his own life, completing a narrative of reversal and self-redemption. Chen defies the traditional dichotomy of hero and villain, instead emerging as a self-destructive antihero.

This study does not primarily focus on the film’s subversion of justice-oriented narratives, but rather on how it constructs a culturally mythic hero through its death-centered narrative and reincarnation-like structure. In the film, death is not simply the conclusion of events but a central structural motif: from the opening declaration that

Chen is a 'man condemned to die,' to recurring hallucinations, dreams, and ritualistic killings, death takes on layered symbolic meaning. The film's cyclical structure evokes Buddhist notions of samsara and karma, aligning with East Asian spiritual conceptions of death and rebirth.

By engaging narrative theory, mythological structures, and religious-cultural frameworks, this paper analyzes how themes of destruction and regeneration operate within the film's architecture. It argues that *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* reconstructs a uniquely Eastern heroic myth in a contemporary context. Moreover, it raises the question: when sacrifice becomes the only path to self-realization, are we witnessing a new narrative trend of sanctifying death within the collective cultural unconscious?

2. The Path of Self-Destruction

Within the conventional framework of crime cinema, protagonists typically occupy distinct positions along a moral spectrum ranging from good to evil. However, in *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon*, Chen Guilin blurs this line. He is both a brutal murderer and a self-appointed executor of justice; while his crimes are unforgivable, his final act of self-sacrifice is imbued with symbolic grandeur. This paradox positions Chen as a textbook 'self-destructive antihero,' gradually transformed into a mythic figure within the Chinese-speaking cinematic context.

Narratively, Chen's transformation can be interpreted as a distorted yet complete 'hero's journey.' According to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, a typical hero undergoes a cycle of departure, initiation, and return in the pursuit of personal growth and societal mission (Joseph Campbell, 2004). Chen's journey also unfolds in three stages: first, his 'departure' begins with a death sentence — upon learning he is on the most-wanted list and presumed dead, he begins his quest for the 'third evil'; second, his 'initiation' occurs through the elimination of three targets — a drug dealer, a cult leader, and eventually himself. During this phase, he enacts violence while confronting his past traumas and guilt; third, 'return' manifests as sacrifice — when he realizes that he himself is the final evil, he chooses death as both atonement and a symbolic act of justice.

In this process, destruction becomes the path to transcendence. Chen is not a repentant sinner; he neither seeks forgiveness nor undergoes institutional redemption. His transformation is enacted through extreme violence and martyrdom. This form of 'negative growth' highlights the fractured and unstable nature of the antihero and redefines heroism in contemporary Chinese cinema — not as an idealist upholding moral order, but as an existential figure who reaches truth through self-annihilation.

While Chen's mission appears righteous on the surface, his methods remain violently transgressive. He bypasses legal or institutional frameworks, acting on personal conviction. In this respect, he resonates with Western antiheroes such as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* or Batman in *The Dark Knight* — characters who operate in corrupt societies and resort to extreme measures to enact justice. However, unlike their Western counterparts, who often retain some degree of personal agency, Chen completes his arc through total self-destruction. He is no longer a sympathetic or admirable individual, but a symbolic executor of social purification.

This narrative of 'dying for justice' aligns with Confucian ideals of moral sacrifice and the valorization of death in Chinese tradition. The film's title and structure derive from a classical allegory — 'Zhou Chu Eliminates the Three Evils' — a tale of ethical transformation. By appropriating this cultural motif, the film frames Chen's violent acts as a modern fable, suggesting a possibility of moral transcendence through extreme action.

Thus, Chen Guilin is not only constructed as an antihero within the genre framework but also as a mythic figure within a broader cultural imagination. His death is not defeat, but elevation; his destruction is not an end, but the completion of narrative meaning and cultural identification.

3. Death as Narrative Structure

If Chen Guilin's trajectory forms a hero's journey of self-destruction, then death itself functions not as a conclusion, but as a structural engine and symbolic core. In *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon*, death is not merely an event but a pervasive presence, embedded in visual language, narrative pacing, and symbolic imagery. It compels the audience to contemplate the meaning of fate and mortality.

Death in the film is internalized and proactive. At the beginning, Chen learns in prison that he is listed as one of the top ten most-wanted criminals — and is rumored to be already dead. This positions him as a 'dead man walking' from the outset, lending his journey a fatalistic tone. Visually, the film reinforces this with dim lighting, slow-motion gazes, and emotionless scenes at the crematorium, metaphorically suggesting his spiritual death and framing the plot as a pre-death mental journey.

Death is fragmented and repetitive, appearing not just in the climax but throughout the narrative:

- Chen repeatedly faces mortal threats and inflicts death on others — from sniping traffickers to cremating corpses and destroying cult compounds.

- Hallucinations and dreams feature recurring death imagery, including his own bloodied body and accusing stares from the dead.

- His dialogue is saturated with suicidal intent: 'I was dead already.' 'Only the dead are clean.'

These repetitions make death a cyclical mediator, linking Chen's past sins, present actions, and future fate. It is not a singular end, but a process of purification.

The narrative structure of death takes on ritualistic and temporal characteristics. Each act of killing occurs in stylized settings, structured with solemn pacing and aesthetic framing:

- At the crematorium, Chen's methodical handling of bodies is accompanied by ethereal music, turning the scene into a death baptism.

- In the cult sequence, the sect's architecture mimics a death-worship system; Chen's massacre and detonation act as a form of 'heretical exorcism.'

- In the final sequence, Chen faces his enemies alone on the street, evoking the solemnity of ancient warriors facing execution.

The three elimination episodes function as narrative acts in a three-act structure, with each 'evil' representing a progressive layer of Chen's psyche. These are not merely murders of others — they represent symbolic purges of greed, delusion, and rage. The final target, himself, reveals the internalized nature of the death structure: external cleansing becomes self-eradication.

Visually, the film reinforces the aesthetics of death with cold color tones, slow and long takes, and sudden bursts of violence. Death is not just the endpoint of the plot but is stretched, emphasized, and scrutinized as an experiential process.

For the audience, this results in a unique viewing experience. Instead of wondering how the protagonist might survive, they are drawn into the question of how he will die, and what that death signifies. This approach resembles Gilles Deleuze's theory of the 'time-image' (David Bordwell, 1985), where narrative emphasis shifts from action to temporal introspection. Though framed as a genre film, *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* transcends conventional pacing to enter a meditative, philosophical dimension.

In sum, the death narrative in the film is not a dramatic outcome but a deeply embedded structural device. Through repetition and symbolic intensification, death becomes both a thematic centerpiece and a ritual mechanism, anchoring the film's cyclical logic and mythic architecture. Chen's death is not narrative closure, but the fulfillment of symbolic meaning — his personal judgment and a metaphorical return to order.

4. Reincarnation and Temporal Philosophy

Compared to the linear narratives common in Western crime films, *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* employs a highly cyclical structure steeped in fatalism. This not only reflects the protagonist's mental trajectory but also draws from Buddhist notions of karma and samsara. The result is a mythic rhythm where individual death becomes a prerequisite for spiritual rebirth.

The film's structure mirrors the Buddhist concept of the 'three karmic actions'—body, speech, and mind. The three 'evils' eliminated by Chen symbolize progressive layers of purification:

- The drug dealer represents worldly greed (tanha).
- The cult leader signifies delusion and spiritual manipulation (moha).
- Chen himself embodies anger and karmic consequence (dvesha).

This triadic progression aligns with the Buddhist 'three poisons' — greed, hatred, and delusion — suggesting that Chen's mission is not merely external, but an internal ritual of self-stripping. His final act is not about eliminating an external threat, but confronting and annihilating his inner self.

Temporally, the film embraces a non-linear structure. Events are often fragmented or recursive:

- Frequent insertions of dreams and hallucinations blur the line between reality and illusion.
- Chen repeatedly engages in similar actions — burning bodies, cleaning blood, staring at himself in the mirror.
- The film's opening and closing scenes mirror each other: Chen sits in silence, once in a prison cell and once in the street awaiting death.

This repetition creates a sense of fatal recurrence. Chen appears trapped in a karmic loop, doomed to reenact variations of the same outcome. His actions do not suggest progress, but rotation — an endless cycle broken only through death.

Such a temporal philosophy is deeply embedded in East Asian thought, where samsara and cyclical causality

govern human destiny. In this view, liberation is achieved not through triumph but through renunciation. Chen's final choice to die signifies an escape from the karmic wheel, a moment of cessation that echoes Buddhist ideals of nirvana. Unlike Western heroes who achieve transcendence through conquest, Chen attains it through obliteration.

The film's visual motifs reinforce this cyclical structure: enclosed spaces (prisons, cult bunkers), mirrored surfaces (bathroom mirrors, car windows), and circular compositions (crematory ovens, round tables, spiraling camera movements) create a claustrophobic and recursive mise-en-scène. This aesthetic suggests not only spatial confinement but also spiritual entrapment.

Functionally, this structure guides the viewer's emotional transition — from shock and judgment to empathy and reflection. We do not simply witness a criminal's end, but a mythic cycle of fall and self-redemption. Chen's failure is monumental, but also sacralized. It is not just the fall of a man, but a ritual of meaning.

This narrative logic is not unique in Chinese cinema. Films like *Yi Yi* (2000) explore cyclical life experiences; *Infernal Affairs* (2002) uses hellish rebirth as a metaphor for justice and sin; *Mad Detective* (2007) depicts recursive violence and psychological fragmentation. What makes *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* distinct is the integration of this structure with Buddhist allegory and genre violence, producing a mythic system that is both spiritual and cinematic.

Thus, the reincarnation motif in the film is not merely stylistic. It is a narrative philosophy — time does not progress but returns; salvation is not a reward, but a rupture. Through recursive structure and spiritual symbolism, Chen's death becomes a mythic center of meaning beyond the individual.

5. Reconstructing Heroic Myth in Contemporary Context

After enacting a cycle of destruction, death, and reincarnation, *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* constructs a new heroic myth rooted in rebellion and religious allegory. Unlike traditional saviors, this hero does not restore order through moral righteousness, but through symbolic annihilation.

Chen Guilin becomes a hero not because he performs legally sanctioned acts, but because his violence and self-sacrifice fulfill an unmet societal desire for retribution. His actions expose a growing cultural disillusionment: when institutions fail to administer justice, individual violence assumes moral legitimacy. Chen's death is not merely personal — it is theatrical, cathartic, and sacrificial. In this way, he functions as a scapegoat and purifier, rather than a conventional hero.

This form of heroic narrative reverses Joseph Campbell's classical model, where the hero triumphs and returns. Instead, Chen disappears in death, leaving only silence and ambiguity. His arc centers not on changing the world, but on embracing destiny. He is a failure, but a sacred one; not a rebuilder, but a final judge of a collapsing order.

Socio-culturally, this heroic mode resonates with a post-pandemic, economically strained, and morally fragmented society. As trust in legal, religious, and political systems erodes, audiences seek narratives of decisive, purifying action. Chen's violence and demise satisfy a latent yearning for total reckoning. His death is not tragedy — it is resolution.

This myth is marked by a fusion of religious and secular themes. The film is saturated with spiritual imagery — cremation, confession, sacrificial action — yet grounded in political and social critique. Chen is neither noble-born nor spiritually enlightened; his sanctity emerges through death-as-performance. Similar antiheroes appear in other contemporary Chinese films — Lau Kin-Ming in *Infernal Affairs*, Sean Lau in *Cold War*, and Zhang Chongbang in *Raging Fire* — all achieve moral elevation through sacrifice.

Yet these myths do not offer hope. They are solemn rituals of conclusion, not visions of renewal. Chen's death is a symbolic indictment of society, a terminal gesture that reclaims personal meaning while condemning systemic decay. This reflects a broader narrative trend: in an age devoid of faith and legitimacy, only death carries sufficient ethical weight to bear the burden of collective redemption.

6. Conclusion

The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon combines genre hybridity, stylized violence, and profound cultural symbolism to create a crime film that functions simultaneously as aesthetic spectacle and mythic allegory. Centered on the concept of a self-destructive hero, the film constructs its narrative around death and reincarnation to reimagine a new kind of antihero in Chinese-language cinema. Chen Guilin is not a figure of redemption through repentance or institutional forgiveness; rather, his mythic function is fulfilled through personal annihilation.

Structurally, the film's non-linear, recursive narrative positions death as a core organizing principle rather than a dramatic endpoint. Its cyclical logic evokes the Buddhist worldview of samsara and karmic consequence, imbuing the film with philosophical depth beyond its genre trappings.

Culturally, the film's self-sacrificial antihero responds to a broader social context marked by disorder,

disillusionment, and institutional failure. In the face of moral collapse, audiences are drawn to figures who can impose clarity through finality — even if that finality is death. Chen's sacrifice satisfies a collective longing for purification, justice, and meaning in a disenchanted world.

Therefore, *The Pig, the Snake and the Pigeon* is more than a genre film — it is a visual myth rooted in contemporary cultural anxiety. Through its deployment of death and spiritual return, the film narrates a layered parable of crime, justice, guilt, and redemption. Future research may compare this work with similar antihero narratives in Chinese cinema — such as *Infernal Affairs*, *Raging Fire*, and *Let the Bullets Fly* — to further articulate the shared mythic motifs and ethical imaginations that underlie these contemporary parables of destruction and transcendence.

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