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The Imaginative Impulse: Philosophies of Film and Chinese Aesthetic Sensibilities

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Abstract: This article investigates the similarities between inherent Chinese aesthetic sensibilities and modern cinematic thought and introduces Chinese films' exploration of oriental film aesthetics during the "seventeen-year period" (1949–1966). It serves to remind us that in seeking to understand the developmental trajectory and driving forces behind Chinese film art, it is important to examine the changes in and contexts of modern Chinese modes of thought—especially artistic thought—so as to reveal the aesthetic sensibilities of modern Chinese films; the true nature of their artistic inheritance; and their foundation and potential for modern transformations. The article makes an original Chinese contribution to the creation of a new film aesthetics for future images in the era of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: real images displayed real, configuration of image, inter-borrowed time and space, oriental film aesthetics

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The introduction of film in the 1890s collided with and caused a huge shock to Chinese artistic thought and artistic receptivity. Other exotic artistic forms including the modern novel (chapter novel), modern play (drama and opera), modern painting (oil painting, woodcut, engraving and sculpture), modern music (western instrumental music and vocal music) and modern dance (ballet and contemporary dance) entered China contemporaneously with film. However, it was a film that quickly won the universal acknowledgement of Chinese people from all social strata and became the most influential medium for mass communication in modern China. The reason for this was that film had the advantage of being disseminated via image; there must also have been deeper psychological factors at work.

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1 Real Images Displayed Real and Audiovisual Expression

Chinese philosophies of the film were born of the impulse to express the modern imaginary. This impulse gradually took shape as the modern expression of the imaginary was understood and improved, and aligned with Chinese people's inclinations. Chinese artistic thought not only originated from the idea of "real images displayed real" (Ye 1992, 175) but also transcended concrete artistic media to reach a state of "the virtual and the real coexisting" and the realm of "synaesthesia" put forward by Qian Zhongshu—that is, the artistic effect caused by "transfer of the senses" (Qian 1979, 52), which is the unique meaning-describing (xieyi) aesthetics of Chinese art. From the Chinese perspective, not only do art forms such as poetry, calligraphy, painting, dance and music—that is, visual art, auditory art and linguistic art—integrate and connect with each other; the thinking behind the artistic creation and manner in which it is received both use one image to lend feeling to another. This means that the language used to create and to interpret the artistic works corresponds directly and does not require elaboration. The Chinese *Note on Poetry* (Shihua) and *Note on Ci Poetry* (Cihua) interpreted classical poetry in this way. The most famous example is *Poetry Criticism with 24 Poems* (Ershisi shi pin) by Sikong Tu in the Tang dynasty, who used over 10 images to appreciate and explain "chen zhuo"—the calm and steady style of poetry: "In a desolate room on a green mountain and against a setting sun and fresh air, one takes off the kerchief and wanders alone, hearing song of birds. Although no letters come from distant friends, it is comforting that the one I miss is not far from here. Sea breeze blows azure clouds and bright moonlight shrouds sandbars. If these images could be written into verses, the inspiration of poets would be like rivers flowing ever onward." In the *Selection of Tang Poetry* (Tangshi biecai), the Qing dynasty author Shen Deqian commented on Du Fu's seven-character poems: "Du Fu's seven-character poems are like the Jianzhang Palace with thousands of households in the Han dynasty; like the Battle of Julu where the warlords only looked on, moved on their knees and were afraid of making eye contact; like the ocean on which wind churns waves and sands dance like a monster, collecting the smart and stupid things. His poems are distinguished from others in the glorious age of the Tang dynasty and he is hailed as a master of poetry." The artistic philosophy of "real image displayed real" is the basic form of audiovisual language as film affects the senses through image, picture, colour and sound, and other organic compositions. For this reason, Chinese artistic thought and its reception and ways of interpreting art have much in common with the philosophy of film.

2 Image and Camera Language

The similarity between philosophies of film and inherent Chinese artistic thought is firstly manifested in the mode of artistic expression of "uniting form and meaning, using the real to signal the virtual." The basic element of both camera language and Chinese art that we must clearly recognize is "image" instead of just "form." Through shooting and picture composition, the film uses intuitional images to convey meaning. This is in order to stimulate the audience's thinking in terms of images and capture both the superficial existence and deeper connotations of the image. The form of reproduction is equal to the object of reproduction, which is consistent with the artistic essence of Chinese poetry, calligraphy, painting, dance and music and represents the close relationship between the "hard" verisimilitude of exterior audiovisual information and the "soft" verisimilitude of real appreciation and representation of artistic spirit. The basic artistic philosophy of the Chinese transcends logic and attaches importance to intuitional experience. Thus, this kind of artistic sensibility excludes all intermediaries such as conceptual systems and abstract thought and directly engages in the aesthetic appreciation of objects. When studying the academic masterpiece *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* (Guanzhui bian) by Qian Zhongshu, some scholars have pointed out: "when referring to *Principles of The Book of Changes* (Zhouyi zhengyi), Qian Zhongshu proposed that image in *The Book of Changes* (Yi) could be divided into real image and virtual image … The form follows the image; the image approaches the meaning and the transition occurs when image changes" (Zang 1992, 38). The change of image mentioned above is in accordance with the method of artistic expression known as "the virtual and the real coexisting," that is a key to understanding Chinese art. The concepts of "implication," "image," "spirit" and "natural sentiment" in Chinese art all belong to this mode of artistic expression that grasps the transcendental relationship between image and form. Chinese artistic works transform the virtual to the real and use the real to signal the virtual. This creates a spiritual space with aesthetic appeal and leaves a much more profound space for the artistic imagination. The painter Da Chongguang of the Qing dynasty summarized his experience when dealing with the spatial problems in Chinese plastic art:

> The rare and ethereal realm can only be achieved when the tangible scenery is removed. The wonderful atmosphere cannot be drawn but can only be felt after the actual scenery is hidden. If the layout of a painting is inappropriate, the space with scenery will cause redundancy. Only when the real and the virtual coexist with each other can the space without scenery create the most wonderful realm (Da 1982).

His words identify the essence of the problem: Chinese plastic art emphasizes the connections between the real and the virtual, that is to focus on "the vividness of image" and "the vigorousness of lines in paintings" (Xie 1959). Chinese poetry likewise emphasizes the "context of the poem" and that the "poem should go beyond the superficial to let readers understand the underlying connotations behind it and make people focus on the implications instead of poem itself." Therefore, "the context of poetry cannot be conveyed through the normal voice. Only after the poetic treatment by poets can readers feel it and pay no attention to the language itself when appreciating the poems" (Ye 1992, 156). This profound artistic logic is similar to the artistic philosophy of "real images displayed real" and can be encountered in the artistic sensibility of modern films. In modern film, narration and expression both give rise to artistic effect through audiovisual language affecting the intuitional senses of the audience. In fact, the audiovisual language is by nature a kind of "image" rather than just "form." Therefore, it does not need the help of intermediaries such as concepts and words, but can nevertheless lead to the aesthetic tendency towards "using the real to signal the virtual." Certainly, with the influence of modern science and technology, the "hard" verisimilitude of the film image became more distinctive and exquisite. This is in fact different from Chinese artistic thought, which focuses on the resemblance of spirit rather than that of form. Thus, in the encounter with modern film, Chinese people adjusted their previous artistic sensibilities and made great strides with the help of modern science and technology.

3 Configuration of Image and Montage

The similarity between the imaginative expression of inherent Chinese artistic thought and the imaginative thought of film art is also reflected in the feature of "configured image and interconnected thinking." Both the Chinese artistic sensibility and imaginative thought of film art are non-linear and dynamic. Chinese artistic thought usually uses a single image or a combination of images to convey a richer quality than the superimposition of two images. The visualization of Chinese ancestors can be understood from the composition of Chinese characters: for example, the Chinese character 田(*Tian*, field) resembles fields shot from a high-angle. Inspired by one of the six types of Chinese character formation—"comprehension (huiyi)," Sergei M. Eisenstein reveals the core of film thought—montage. He points out:

> The most interesting is about the second method of Chinese character formation —"comprehension" … The combination of two describable objects can create an indescribable meaning that cannot be expressed in pictures.
>
> For example, the forms of 水(*shui*, water) and 眼(*yan*, eye) constitute the character 泪(*lei*, tear)
>
> 耳(*er*, ear) and 门(*men*, door) are 闻(*wen*, hear)
>
> 犬(*quan*, dog) and 口(*kou*, mouth) are 吠(*fei*, bark)
>
> 口(*kou*, mouth) and 鸟(*niao*, bird) are 鸣(*ming*, tweet)
>
> 刀(*dao*, blade) and 心(*xin*, heart) are 忍(*ren*, endure)
>
> Is this not similar to montage?
>
> Certainly, this is consistent with the film technique of arranging pictures of monosemantic and neutral meaning into a meaningful array (Eisenstein 1999, 451).

In the earliest Chinese poetry collection, *Book of Poetry* (Shijing), the three principles of "exposition (fu), comparison (bi) and association (xing)" constitute part of the six methods of expression in Chinese poetry and demonstrate the fundamental artistic inclinations of the Chinese people. Among them, the association is the core of Chinese poetic thought. Jiaoran in the Tang dynasty said in *Manners of Poetry* (Shishi), "For numerous objects in nature including fowl, fish, vert, human and all creatures, those having similar meaning are associated with each other." Research finds that association is born of primitive image and is related to Chinese ancestors' orientation towards totems. "It underwent two developmental phases—referring to the individual and specific primitive images as well as the general and standardized artistic forms" (Zhao 1987, 5). Therefore, the objects of the association are both conceived independently and also have deep inner connections. As for the association in poetry, Zhu Xi explains in *Study of the Book of Poetry* (Shiji zhuan), "Association means to first describe others before chanting one object." In *Manners of Poetry*, Jiaoran also says, "comparison is to compare image; association is to associate meaning. Association refers to the meaning of the image." These two authoritative interpretations of association in poetry prove that it is the continuation of the "comprehension" principle evident in the formation of Chinese characters. For example, in *Book of Songs · Songs Collected South of the Capital, Modern Shaanxi and Henan · Cooing and Wooing* (Guofeng·zhounan·guanju):

> By riverside a pair
>
> of turtledoves are cooing;

There is a maiden fair

whom a young man is wooing. (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

The poet uses the lively combination of beautiful water birds and young fair maidens that are two independent images contrasting but connecting with each other to convey his deep affection for the young fair maidens.

After the Han and Tang dynasties, Chinese poetry further creatively employed the unique feature of Chinese characters, "comprehending meaning through form and uniting sound and image," and obeyed certain rules so as to present Chinese artistic thought effectively and perfectly. Chinese poetry and opera take full advantage of the audiovisual effects and the rather flexible ideographic space of Chinese language and characters. Through the juxtaposition of independent images, the images are associated with some context. The imaginary space created by poets facilitates the interaction between the image and readers' artistic thought, thus producing a fresh artistic experience. For example, *Mooring by Maple Bright at Night* (Fengqiao yebo) by Zhangji:

At moonset cry the crows, streaking the frosty sky;

Dimly lit fishing boats'neath maples sadly lie.

Beyond the city wall, from Temple of Cold Hill.

Bells break the ship-borne roamer's dream and midnight still. (Translated by Xu Yuanchong)

In this poem, there are images such as the moon, rural bridge, temple, passenger boat and travellers. Their combination sometimes resembles an independent empty shot, and others, the motion of a dynamic shot. The display of images in the poetry resembles a full shot, close-up or long shot. The setting moon, maples beside a river, cry of crows and bells convey the traveller's long and deep loneliness and gloom by providing artistic time and space constituted by colour and sound. The experience of this kind of artistic creation and appreciation is like experiencing holographic sound and image as well as the feel of a moving shot, which creates the artistic effect of montage. Published in Issue 1 of the journal *Chinese Film* in 1957, Li Yuhua's article *Notebook of Poetry and Cinema* attracted great attention from film circles. This article directly contrasted Chinese poetry with the montage technique in the film; the author even separated the first four verses of the work of Wei Yingwu, Tang dynasty poet, *On Setting Out on the Yangtze; For Secretary Yuan* (Chufa Yangzi ji yuanda jiaoshu) and transformed it into a montage.

Verse	Number of shot	Shot	Content	Sound effect
Sadly, I left my dear, beloved friend; Slowly I drifted into mist and fog—no end—	1	wide shot	In the mist over the Yangtze River, a boat with a canopy goes against the current, gradually entering the evening glow above the river.	
To Luoyang where my family is and dwells;	2	full shot	On the boat, the poet Wei Yingwu sits, immersed in the deep sorrow of having farewelled a friend.	
While trees in Guangling echoed curfew bells.	3	close shot	Wei Yingwu sits on the boat with a blank look. All of a sudden, the sound of bells from afar reaches his ears and the poet turns his face slightly towards the river bank.	bell
	4	full shot	The camera keeps pace with the boat and shoots the riverbank, trees that are special to Guangling, and the bells sound in the distance.	bell
	5	close shot	The poet turns his face back, listens to the bells and is in deep thought.	bell
	6	wide shot	The boat disappears into the distant mist.	bell

Certainly, in terms of the integration of sound and image, camera movement, mise-en-scene and scene editing, the introduction of the film provided more possible ways of expression for a more intuitional, more complex, and richer artistic form. This was a transformation from one artistic medium to another. The transformation of inherent Chinese artistic sensibilities into modern cinematic thought required a qualitative leap.

4 Inter-borrowed Time and Space and Camera Movement

The artistic thinking of "inter-borrowed time and space and mutable perspective" also demonstrates the similarity between inherent Chinese artistic thought and the imaginative thought of cinematic art. The film is mainly presented through the expression of space; a sense of time is shown through the spatial context. This is partly consistent with Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting. For example, the

spatial integrity of a long shot and the montage resembles the ways in which Chinese painting is viewed; shot types and camera positions resemble the cavalier perspective of Chinese painting; the film image resembles the common pursuit of Chinese poetry, calligraphy and painting for atmosphere, tone and rhyme. Viewing the long scroll painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (Qingming shanghe tu) is like watching a smooth long shot panning from right to left of an aerial photograph of daily life in urban areas during the Song dynasty. As Zong Baihua has said, "the perspective of Chinese painting is to capture the spirit of the universe; observe the whole dynamic of nature from a bird's eye view. Its spatial viewpoint changes with time. Through thorough observation, it integrates different layers and perspectives and creates an ethereal and poetic atmosphere" (Zong 1981a, 111). Guo Xi in the Song dynasty advanced the theory of "three methods to express the distant" in *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* (Linquan gaozhi), which described the unique conception of time and space in Chinese painting:

> There are "three methods to express the distant" when painting mountains: viewing from bottom to top is the lofty distance; from back to front is the deep distance; from near to far is the level distance. The scenery of the lofty distance is bright; the scenery of the deep distance is obscure; the scenery of the level distance is both bright and obscure. The strength of the lofty distance is towering; the meaning of the deep distance is superimposed and the atmosphere of the level distance is ethereal.

The cavalier perspective does not emphasize the clear or scientific nature of a painting but rather highlights its artistic features. It rearranges three-dimensional space into two-dimensional spatial units for viewers who seem to be lifted above the scenery and can see both near and far space clearly. The cavalier perspective emphasizes that with spatial change in the viewpoints of creators and viewers, the wonderful effects of "mountain shape changing from different distances" and "every side of mountain shown from different perspectives" are achieved. The change of perspective causes the image in the picture to be shaped by time, thus resembling the internal montage of a moving long shot in the film. The painters are evoking the lived experience of immersed viewers rather than recording a landscape. This feature of Chinese artistic thought is, in Zong Baihua's words, "integrating time and space" (Zong 1981b, 95), and is regarded as "flowing beauty" by Zhu Guangqian (Zhu 1982, 131).

Nevertheless, we should emphasize that movement is the essence of the film. This essence is comprised two aspects. Firstly, it is embodied in the main artistic object of a film. Mesguich, the cinematographer for Lumière, said "all moving objects should be shot on film. The lens is open to the whole world" (Kracauer 1982, 38). Secondly, in terms of the cinematic art itself, movement is shown through

dynamic images instead of stimulating the imagination. Furthermore, all moving images constitute a part of the whole dynamic structure; the broad implications in modern film can be perfectly completed by the dynamic linking of moving images. In the 1930s, the Chinese film theorist Liu Na'ou realized that the core of the "beauty of film" is "the organic intersection of film's dynamic and incessant flow of images as well as its sound effects" (Liu 1933). By nature, Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting belong to a kind of art that "turns the static into the dynamic" (Zhu 1982, 137). Only through freezing and setting objects in the natural world can viewers engage in still and silent appreciation, giving rise to a moving experience. Therefore, it should be noted that there are qualitative differences between film and the Chinese arts of poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese artistic thought has been in a constant process of change and development. The experienced Chinese director Zhang Junxiang once praised the Chinese Ming Qing novel *All Men Are Brothers* (Shuihu zhuan) for its sense between the lines of a moving camera and commented that reading the novel was like reading a film script. In Issue 1 of the journal *Chinese Film* in 1956, Zhang Junxiang's article *About the Special Expression Methods of Film* cited excerpts from the famous Chinese classic *All Men Are Brothers*, namely Chapter 38 (*The Black Whirlwind Fights with White Stripe in the Waves*) and Chapter 40 (*The Heroes from the Robbers' Lair Make a Rescue from the Execution Grounds*) to show that "some Chinese classical literature with clear cadence could be translated to the silver screen without much effort." He explained:

> Obviously, in the first scene, the camera moves with Li Kui walking slowly to the bank of the river, and gradually focuses on the fishing boats floating side by side. In the foreground, a man naps on the boat; in the distance, people bathe in the river against the background of a red setting sun. Then the camera returns to a close shot of Li Kui calling a fishmonger. The second scene uses a series of alternating close and wide shots. Because the texts of the novel clearly express the cadence of actions, any director would be smart enough to follow the rhythm of the text when adapting it to film.

Similarly, the famous Hong Kong director Li Hanxiang directly adapted the chapter *Wu Sung Kills the Great Tiger of Ching Yang Ridge* into film script as follows:

> Wu Sung walks for a while; the alcohol makes him agitated. He holds a staff in one hand and unbuttons his shirt with his other hand (a wide and a mid shot of Wu Sung opening his shirt).
>
> He staggers and walks towards the woods (a very wide shot of Wu Sung gradually approaching)
>
> Look (a close shot of Wu Sung)

a large bare green stone (a close shot of Wu Sung looking at the stone and a mid shot of the appearance of stone).

He puts the staff aside and rolls over (a close shot and a wide shot).

He is going to sleep but sees (a close shot of Wu Sung)

a furious wind blowing (a shot of Wu Sung's view, birds flying from the low bushes).

The gust fades, the sound of (a close shot of Wu Sung looking back)

a tree falling down and a large tiger with white forehead appears (a wide shot and a close shot).

Wu Sung sees it and lets out a scream (a close shot of Wu Sung rolling over).

Jumping from the green stone, Wu Sung takes his staff and ducks beside the stone (a wide shot).

Li Hanxiang exclaims, "if this excerpt were going to be adapted into a film script, hasn't the author already laid all the shots out?" (Li 2016, 814–886). Apparently, Lin Zifeng also adapted Shen Congwen's novel *Border Town* (Biancheng) directly into an influential film. Through the above evidence, it can be seen that the element of movement gradually penetrated Chinese artistic sensibilities before the introduction of film and Chinese artists have tried to express their perception of movement in ways that transcend the limitations of words. The film became a new artistic medium by which they could fully release and channel their artistic sentiment.

5 The Legacy of the May Fourth Movement and Oriental Film Aesthetics During the Seventeen-Year Period

Ninety years ago, the May Fourth Movement had an unprecedented impact on Chinese intellectuals, who were caught in the twofold dilemma of the new cultural trend of "learning western styles," and the national crisis. However, in this maelstrom, most of the Chinese intellectuals—who were well versed in both eastern and western knowledge and were resolved to create change—did not lose their faith in the splendid civilization that the Chinese nation had accumulated over thousands of years. They believed that cultural diversity was the healthiest state for the global cultural ecology, and pursued the way ahead for Chinese

civilization in the face of the complex cultural crisis. With an open posture, they quietly laid new foundations for the revitalization of Chinese civilization and its cultural strength in a number of areas, including opera, film, and new artistic fields. This decision on the direction of Chinese society, culture, and civilization constituted the legacy left by the May Fourth Movement and was reflected in the way in which art—including film—was realized.

Chinese film historians refer to Chinese film from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949–1966 as the "seventeen-year period of the film." During this period, the strong impulse of the new generation of film artists who had constructed and contributed to the founding of New China was to highlight nationalistic artistic themes. At that time, Mao Dun and Xia Yan, leaders in literary and artistic circles, respectively, put forward the slogan of "creating new films in national forms." Other film artists pondered over and summed up the spiritual legacy of the May Fourth Movement, and earnestly discussed different perspectives on the artistic aesthetics of the oriental film. The theoretical fruits of Han Shangyi, Xu Suling and Xu Changlin were particularly outstanding.

In 1959, Han Shangyi, an experienced film artist from Shanghai Film Studio, wrote the article *Benefits of Learning from Traditional Chinese Paintings*, which pushed the exploration of oriental film aesthetics into a new theoretical stage (Han 1959). The article first quoted Xia Yan's words: "it is beneficial for cinematographers and artists to study traditional Chinese painting when they are creating new films in national forms," thus showing Han Shangyi's stance on theory. In his article, Han Shangyi analyzed classical paintings such as *Fishing Alone over the River* (Hanjiang dudiao tu) and *Walking with the Song* (Tage tu) by Ma Yuan in the Song dynasty, *Horses in Suburb in Autumn* (Qiujiao yinma tu) by Zhao Mengfu in the Yuan dynasty, and *Illustration of The Romance of The West Chamber* (Xixiangji chatu) by Chen Hongshou in the Ming dynasty to show the shared artistic sensibility behind Chinese conceptions of artistic production and cinematic styles: for example, the relations between "spirit" in painting and atmosphere in the film; "emptiness" in painting and the disposal of light and shadow in the film; painting strategies and film picture composition as well as the artistic concepts of "meaning, theory, function and interest." At the end of the article, Han pointed out:

> Traditional Chinese painting displays clear themes, compact images, harmonious composition, elegant style and vivid atmosphere. It captures the key point and gives it prominence. It values a high degree of artistic generalization instead of laboured carving and over-embellishment. Infinite meaning lies in just a few succinct and intense strokes, reaching the realm of "meaning following the brush." Even a leaf has its own place. The sparse space is not dull and the full space is not chaotic. Its high standard is praised the world over. So, Chinese film artists, photographers and directors should discuss and study it.

In this article, Han Shangyi touched on the core propositions of oriental film aesthetics such as meaning-describing and suppositive features.

Xu Suling published the article *On Some Issues in Chinese Opera Films* in Issue 2 of the journal *Chinese Film* in 1956. He put forward the concept of "meaning-describing action" and contended that previously, action in the film was imitative, but that oriental film should change this most important expressive element of film from "imitative action" to "meaning-describing action." Meaning-describing action is "based on movement in real life. After extracting, enriching and changing, the actions of characters are more rhythmic to show the wishes and intentions of characters and express their feelings. This kind of action is full of fantasy and poetic meaning." At the same time, the settings of the film should break the limitation of reality and emphasize the stylization or beauty, so as to "achieve aesthetic harmony" between the characters and their environment in film. The theoretical contribution of Xu Suling was to reveal the features of oriental film aesthetics and carve out a path for the development of meaning-describing aesthetics of oriental modern film aside from the narrow mindset of the documentary aesthetics of contemporary European film.

In 1961, Han Shangyi and Xu Sulin—who both advanced meaning-describing aesthetics—cooperated again and published the article *Chinese Operatic Art Film: Crystallization of Two Different Art Forms* (Han and Xu 1961) that further improved their theory of meaning-describing aesthetics. This article has been of great importance to oriental film aesthetics. In it, Han Shangyi and Xu Suling articulated three principles of the meaning-describing aesthetics:

Firstly, it is supposed to creatively utilize the artistic language of the film instead of taking it as a simple recording tool.

Secondly, the form of expression in the film is to try not to imitate nature but to distinguish art from nature.

Thirdly, its methods of artistic expression can go beyond the limitations of time and space; nor should the style of the film be confined by describing reality or meaning.

Thus, the oriental film aesthetics is totally different from the Western documentary aesthetics. Its artistic bones came from the extensive knowledge and profound scholarship, classical artistic thought and creative concepts of the Chinese people, which were first clearly sketched out in the theory of Han Shangyi and Xu Sulin.

Besides this, they also engaged in the theoretical exploration of the specific stylistic features of meaning-describing aesthetics. For example, the strategy of "artistic deduction" to create the "atmosphere between similarity and discrepancy" through simple images; employing unnatural ornamental light and sound effects to achieve simplicity, clarity, and elegance of image; using symbolic

illusion or metaphorical material and empty shots to enhance the dramatic atmosphere and strengthen the psychological reaction of characters. They especially emphasized the ornamental elements of Chinese art and believed that these represent the meaning-describing nature of oriental art. The fictitiousness in form is actually authenticity in art and creates uniquely beautiful harmony and integration in style, avoiding burdensome form. This is indeed one of the important features of oriental film aesthetics—the hypothetical proposition of art. Han Shangyi and Xu Suling's article was innovative, and the rich results of their research sketched a basic outline of the theoretical system of meaning-describing aesthetics of oriental film art and played an important role in the history of Chinese film theory.

In 1962, Issues 1, 2, 4 and 5 of *Film Art* published Xu Changlin's monograph, *Learning from the Traditional Literature: Notes About the Style Problems of Film*. This monograph was full of modern flavour and the author was the director of *Suspect from Husband* (Shengui yiyun, 1948) and *Football Fans* (Qiumi, 1962). The publication of this monograph was unprecedented for a magazine on film theory in the "seventeen-year period". It was reprinted in Issues 10 and 11 of *Xinhua Monthly* in 1962, which caused a great sensation in literary and artistic circles. This monograph has been regarded as a theoretical work that was the culmination of oriental film aesthetics in the "seventeen-year period".

Xu Changlin's monograph followed the theoretical direction of Han Shangyi and Xu Sulin and used a wide cultural perspective to show that the oriental film aesthetics had much richer and more profound artistic resources than that of Western films. With a meticulous style of writing, this monograph analyzed the artistic features of classical novels, classical literary theories, local operas, folk storytelling, and singing arts and explained their close connection with film art at the level of artistic thought. For example, "the most common feature of folk storytelling, singing art and film is that they are all of a mass character and are one-take arts. The performance of storytelling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect is relatively free; it changes irregularly. Sometimes it is bustling like a pack of horses running together and others, it is quiet like people walking in an empty valley. It has as vast a playing field as film" (Xu 1984, 2).

This monograph was like an encyclopedia that comprehensively displayed the specific path of the transformation of Chinese local art forms into abundant artistic resources for Chinese film. For example, in a chapter on film scripts, Xu Changlin introduced strategies of storytelling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect such as "one picking the whole" (using one item to carry the whole structure and give it a head and a tail) and "pack the herb" (in which the organization of the plot is like packaging and decocting herbs). Xu further explained the relationship between these strategies and "determining the main part" in the film; he referred to "a

series of coherent actions and ups and downs among them" (Xu 1984, 15) in the work of the *Zaju* (a unique dramatic genre of the Yuan dynasty) *Rescued by a Coquette* (Jiufengchen), and the work of storytelling and commentary in Yangzhou dialect in *Chapters about Wu Sung in All Men are Brothers* (Wushihui). He analyzed their relation to the strategy of "reducing the main threads" in the film; he analyzed the skill of "starting like the head of phoenix and ending like the tail of leopard" in Chinese operatic art and explained its relation to the methods of beginning and ending in the film; in addition, he described the relation between the film narration and opera elements such as the character description, the cause of story, highlight of opera, performance methods (self-introduction, interior monologue, soliloquy, explanation, commentary, and narratage) as well as the relation between film narration and elements of operatic language such as inherent qualities, literary grace, types of characters, characters' inner thoughts, going off the topic, suspense, witty language, breaking the rules and obeying the rules.

The contribution of Xu Changlin's theory was to show forth the rich artistic foundations and inexhaustible artistic resources of oriental film aesthetics. If Chinese film art can consciously follow the creative trajectory of oriental film aesthetics, it will play a unique role on the global film stage. The success of action films by Hong Kong and Taiwanese directors such as Hu Jinquan, Wu Yuseng, and Ang Lee is an example. In the 1970s, after long-term research, Xu Changlin along with his colleagues at Fengxian Film School, Li Changgong and Wu Tianyou, published the long article *Film Montage and the Exposition, Comparison and Association of Poetry—Thoughts when Reciting Poetry and Watching Film* (Xu, Li, and Wu 1981). This further compared the aforementioned three creative principles of Chinese poetry with cinematic artistic sensibilities from the perspective of aesthetics and continued to explore new resources for oriental film aesthetics. This article compared the "exposition, comparison and association" of poetry with narration, metaphor and symbolization in film montage. It also referred to the employment of methods of expression in modern films such as empty shot, and "scene language, dreamworld, flash, flashback and stream of consciousness" in Chinese poetry and film. The authors expressed that the article aimed to "discern commonalities between the methods of exposition, comparison and association in Chinese poetry, and certain principles of film montage," and to provide new theoretical perspectives for the establishment of oriental film aesthetics.

6 Cultural Legacy and Future Images

The Chinese encounter with the modern image has, on the one hand, reactivated elements of Chinese artistic philosophy and culture that are valuable but have

been shielded by the modern lifestyle and its ideologies; on the other hand, traditional Chinese artistic thought has undergone qualitative change and transitioned to an open and dynamic artistic sensibility and modern modes of perception. It can be said that the invention and introduction of the film lead modern Chinese people to find an optimal creative state for the regeneration and progress of their own artistic thought and the most effective style for the holistic expression of modern Chinese wisdom. The artistic impulse of modern Chinese filmmakers is rooted first and foremost in their desire for the modern expression of the imaginary. In the process of understanding the developmental trajectory and internal driving force of Chinese film art, we should first examine changes in modern Chinese modes of thought—especially artistic thought. From there we can reveal the aesthetic sensibilities and artistic accumulation of modern Chinese film as well as the foundation and areas for potential development in its modern transformation, and make a uniquely Chinese contribution to the establishment of new film aesthetics for future images in the age of artificial intelligence.

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