

Zhang Yimou's Film on Traditional Chinese Opera

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Abstract

The incorporation of Chinese operatic cultural elements characterizes the films of Zhang Yimou. His directorial works feature a variety of traditional Chinese operas, including Beijing opera, Henan opera, Nuoxi, shadow play, and Qin opera. Zhang integrates these elements into the film scores, transforming them into cinematic music. In his narratives, Zhang assigns roles of opera performers, intersperses opera performances, and incorporates operatic music segments. Additionally, operatic elements like water sleeves and theatrical masks are woven into the costumes and props. Zhang Yimou's films significantly enhance the Chineseness and local flavor of Chinese films, reinforce narrative strength, and amplify a distinctively Chinese aesthetic. The fusion of Zhang Yimou's films with Chinese operatic culture provides a novel pathway for integrating Chinese film with traditional culture.

Keywords: Zhang Yimou, Film, Opera, Culture.

Introduction

Chinese opera culture has a long and storied history. Originating from the folk songs and dances of the Qin and Han dynasties, it evolved through the song and dance dramas of the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, including military plays and mixed dramas, to the Kunqu and legendary dramas of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and

more recently to over 300 theatrical genres such as Beijing opera, Yue opera, and Huangmei opera. Chinese opera, rooted in and flourishing among the common people, epitomizes the folk culture of China and is characterized by distinct regional features.

Not only is Chinese opera rich in variety, but it has also developed unique performance techniques over its extensive history, creating a distinctive system that ranks among the world's major theatrical traditions.

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Figure1. China's First Film: Opera Film Dingjun Mountain Still

Source : <http://gd.sina.cn/city/2019-09-14/city-iicezzrq5822665.d.html?from=wap>

The influence of Chinese opera on Chinese films has a longstanding history. China's first film, "Dingjun Mountain," was an adaptation of the Beijing opera of the same name, recounting the tale of the ancient general Huang Zhong who slays Xiahou Yuan on Mount Dingjun during the Three Kingdoms period. In 1905, the Beijing opera "Dingjun Mountain" was made into a stage documentary of the same name. In 1930, China's first sound film "The Red Peony" incorporated segments from Beijing operas such as "Silang Visits His Mother" and "Spring in the Jade Hall." Since then, Chinese films has continually integrated elements of opera, with Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine," which tells the story of Beijing opera performers Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, becoming a classic in the annals of Chinese film history. Moreover, the integration of opera elements has led to the unique genre of opera film, marking China's contribution to global film types. The fusion of Chinese films and opera holds significant meaning both for the preservation of opera and the development of distinct schools of Chinese films.

Drawing upon Chinese opera elements is a hallmark of Zhang Yimou's films. Born in Shaanxi, China, and a graduate of the Cinematography Department at the Beijing Film Academy, Zhang is one of China's Fifth Generation filmmakers. He has directed numerous films, including "Red Sorghum," "Raise the Red Lantern," "Hero," "Ju Dou," and "The Story of Qiu Ju," among others. Zhang has received several prestigious awards, including the Golden Rooster Award in China, the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, and the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, making him one of the most influential directors in China. One of Zhang's distinctive traits is his incorporation and adaptation of traditional Chinese cultural elements into his films. His creative process involves drawing from classical Chinese painting, architecture, calligraphy, music, dance, and folklore, enriching his films with a wealth of traditional Chinese cultural elements. Among these, Zhang shows a particular preference for opera culture, skillfully integrating it into many of his films. This adoption of opera culture is a prominent feature of Zhang Yimou's cinematic style.

Therefore, this study primarily investigates the following questions: How does Zhang Yimou's filmmaking draw upon Chinese opera culture? Why does Zhang have such a strong preference for Chinese opera culture? What impact has the integration of opera culture had on Zhang Yimou's films?

Zhang Yimou's Films and Their Incorporation of Chinese Opera Culture

The Selection, Borrowing, and Integration of Opera Music in Zhang Yimou's Films

Director Zhang Yimou continuously experiments with incorporating opera music into his film scores, driven by the notion that "a 'rhythmic musical sensibility' is a crucial characteristic of opera art. films, too, is an art form with rhythm, primarily derived from editing and camera movement." (Rao Shuguang & Zhu Mengqiu, 2021) Chinese opera music inherently possesses a rhythmic and melodic quality. How does Zhang Yimou draw from Chinese opera music in his film-making?

Firstly, Zhang Yimou selects opera music for his film soundtracks. In his film "The Story of Qiu Ju," the background score features the "Wanwan Qiang" from Shaanxi, a local opera style named for its use of small copper bowls as percussion instruments. "Wanwan Qiang" has been recognized as part of China's first batch of intangible cultural heritage. The film opens with "Wanwan Qiang" as its background music. Composer Zhao Jiping comments on his choice, "Why did I choose 'Wanwan Qiang' over 'Qin Qiang'? Both are in the plucked style, but 'Wanwan Qiang' is softer, less rigid than 'Qin Qiang', and more casual in form. 'Wanwan Qiang' is melodiously intricate and elegantly poignant, emitting a rich earthy fragrance, fitting the film's casual style perfectly. Considering the film's montage technique, the lyrical charm and singing characteristics of 'Wanwan Qiang' closely align with the theme and everyday life portrayed in the film, avoiding an artificial feel and thus achieving a perfect harmony between form and content. If it were 'White Deer Plain', 'Qin Qiang' would be appropriate, as it suits themes that are grand and serious." (Zheng Ningli, 2008) Overall, the "Wanwan Qiang" score aligns well with the film's regional and rustic character, also complementing Qiu Ju's gentle yet stubborn nature. The choice of operatic voice is crucial in matching the film's style, theme, and the life it portrays, ensuring that the music harmonizes seamlessly with the visuals. In "The Story of Qiu Ju," the "Wanwan Qiang" highlights the film's regional characteristics and embodies Qiu Ju's resolute and persistent character. Zhang Yimou selects operatic voices for his soundtracks to accentuate the film's local flavor and lyrical quality.

Moreover, Zhang Yimou chooses traditional opera percussion instruments for his scores, particularly in scenes depicting martial arts, which predominantly feature percussive music. Instruments like clappers, drums, and large gongs are used in the martial segments, while instruments like the Jinghu, Erhu, Yueqin, and Sanxian are employed in the literary segments. Zhang Yimou also incorporates Beijing Opera gongs and drums as introductory music. Film instrumentation must serve the narrative needs. Opera typically opens with percussive music, setting the stage for a dramatic act. According to Chen Yang, "The perception of gongs and drums is largely associated with the vibrant atmosphere created on the opera stage. Each set of gong and drum music conveys distinct visual and rhythmic ideas, aiding actors in their performance tempo and character portrayal." (Zhang Yang, 2021) The opening gong and drum segment in Beijing Opera, also known as 'making a noisy entrance,' sets the stage for the audience, suggesting a major performance is about to commence. For example, "Raise the Red Lantern" starts with the 'hurried wind' rhythm from Beijing Opera's martial segment, setting a fast-paced, atmospheric tone. During the transition scenes in "Raise the Red Lantern," the music for the bridal procession is introduced, showcasing a Chinese-style celebration with suonas and drums, while Songlian's contrarian path and gradual distancing from the bridal music underscore her estrangement or rebellion against feudal norms. The joy of the bridal procession contrasts sharply with Songlian's loneliness. The percussive opening immerses the audience in an operatic performance context, hinting at a distinctly Chinese drama about to unfold. Additionally, each lighting or extinguishing scene in the film uses Beijing Opera's martial percussive music, harmonizing the film's rhythm and ambiance.

Secondly, Zhang Yimou's films incorporate elements such as operatic monologues and chants. Traditional Chinese opera consists of singing, speaking, acting, and fighting, with chanting and monologue as integral components. In "Hero," during the chess house duel, the fight between Nameless and Sky is accompanied by Jingyun dagu drumbeats to enhance the momentum and rhythm, creating a tense atmosphere. This fight scene blends sounds of the zither, drums, water drops, and swordplay with inserted Beijing Opera chants. The chants, characterized by their rhythmic fluctuations and clarity, are highly expressive. By utilizing operatic monologue in the film, the duel is instantly elevated to the theatrical combat of traditional opera,

creating an ethereal and surreal aesthetic. The Beijing Opera chants are not the actual voices of the characters on screen but resemble an internal monologue. They augment the stylized nature of the martial arts scenes, adding a lyrical and ethereal quality.

Furthermore, Zhang Yimou's film scores mix multiple elements of traditional Chinese operatic vocal styles, enriching the musical diversity of his films. While directing "Red Sorghum" (1987), Zhang Yimou and composer Zhao Jiping decided to incorporate elements of traditional opera into the musical score. Zhao Jiping, in his compositions for the film, assimilated these operatic elements, blending modern and traditional music. The film's scores mix operatic and folk music, making them accessible yet deeply rooted in local culture. In composing the theme song "Sister, March Boldly Forward," elements from Shandong's Liuxiang and Maoqiang styles, as well as Shaanxi's Qinqiang and Huaqiang styles, were integrated. The incorporation of various vocal styles lends a diverse sound to the film's music. The theme song adopts the singing style of "painted face" characters from Chinese opera, expressing masculinity and boldness. "The Song of the Wine God" combines melodies from Hunan flower drum opera with ethnic music, showcasing distinctive characteristics.



Figure2. The Traditional Chinese Musical Instruments Used for Rocking Bridal Sedan Chair

Source : Screenshot From Zhang Yimou's Film Red Sorghum

"The Palanquin Song" adapts from the Lu southwest folk songs "Carrying the Flower Palanquin" and "Searching in the Clouds," drawing on Shandong's distinctive wind and percussion music, which often features the suona and sheng. The film's score employs ethnic instruments like the suona and large drums to highlight the celebratory and bold spirit. Overall, "Red Sorghum" in its musical composition, assimilates different operatic styles, blending and innovating them to accentuate the music's regional and ethnic characteristics, enriching the film's auditory experience. Furthermore, Zhang Yimou emphasizes the fusion of opera with other art forms in the score, allowing the film music to integrate modernity with tradition. The score for "Man Jiang Hong" utilizes a combination of Henan opera and electronic music. Director Zhang Yimou experiments with blending electronic music with Henan opera, incorporating traditional Chinese instruments like the ban drum and small gong. This fusion not only reflects the local essence of Henan opera but also highlights its modernity, addressing the limitations of traditional opera in films and showcasing its contemporary relevance. This innovative fusion brings a rich array of sound types and forms to the film. By incorporating tradition into modern music and integrating modernity into traditional arts, Zhang Yimou's films exhibit a complex interplay of tradition and modernity.

Zhang Yimou's Film and Its Borrowing and Application of Narrative Elements from Traditional Chinese Opera

In addition to incorporating traditional Chinese opera music, Zhang Yimou's films extensively borrow from the narrative elements of traditional opera. How does Zhang Yimou integrate these elements from Chinese opera into his filmmaking?

Firstly, Director Zhang Yimou sets his film characters as traditional opera artists, showcasing the stories of these performers. Throughout the history of Chinese opera, numerous artists have emerged, including the famed "The Big Four Dan actresses" and "New Four Dan actresses." In both common and famed Chinese opera performers are collectively referred to as "players." In the ancient Chinese professional hierarchy, these actors were classified within the "lowest ninth class," considered a lowly profession. This was particularly true for female performers, who occupied an even more degraded status. The stories of these opera artists are filled with various misfortunes and tragedies. Director Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine" portrays the lives of Beijing opera artists Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, creating a classic in the history of Chinese films. Zhang Yimou explores the identity of traditional opera artists in his films, narrating their tales of joy and sorrow. In Zhang's "Raise the Red Lantern," the character Third Mistress Meishan, who was once a celebrated actor, embodies the low status of performers. Marrying into the Chen family, Meishan transitions from a disregarded artist to a plaything of the family patriarch. The film reveals her attempts to resist, but she ultimately perishes due to an exposed affair, sacrificing her life. "Raise the Red Lantern" focuses on the tragic fate of these performers, exposing and criticizing the feudal ethical oppression and persecution of women inherent in Chinese culture. Moreover, Zhang's film "To Live" also casts the protagonist Fugui as a shadow puppeteer, intertwining his identity with that of a traditional performing artist. Fugui's story, a simple tale of a minor artist, is closely linked to his life experiences, lending a universal significance to his perceptions and experiences of life.

Secondly, Zhang Yimou incorporates traditional Chinese opera segments into his films. In "Raise the Red Lantern," for instance, opera singing segments from traditional dramas are integrated into the film. There are two scenarios in which opera singing segments are used. One involves the direct insertion of classic segments performed by professional opera singers. For example, the film "Man Jiang Hong" includes a Henan opera segment performed by Zhang Xiaoying, known as the "Female Clown of Central Plains." In terms of audio-visual design, these Henan opera segments serve as transitional music linking various scenes, creating an intertextual relationship between the opera lyrics and the film's storyline, thereby enriching the narrative's connotations. The other scenario involves opera segments performed by characters within the film. "Raise the Red Lantern" incorporates three opera singing segments performed by the character Third Mistress. The first occurs when Fourth Mistress Songlian is getting married, performed by Third Mistress. The second is Third Mistress Meishan's attempt to please the master with her rendition of "Su San Qi Jie," and the third is her singing in the courtyard. The first scene is sung by the Third Aunt to express the state of the newcomer laughing and the old man crying, setting the scene for the relationship between the wife and the concubine. When the Fourth Aunt Songlian is in conflict with the Master, the Master goes to the room of the Third Aunt. The Third Aunt sings "The Red Queen" and "Su San Qi Jie", and the Master shouts in approval. On the one hand, the singing here portrays the characters and reveals their psychology. On the other hand, the story of Su San being wronged is implied in the Third Aunt's singing of "Su San Qi Jie", which is also a metaphor for the end of the Third Aunt's Meishan. The selections from the repertoire here function as narrative metaphors. In terms of the relationship between sound and picture, the picture then shows the forlorn Fourth Aunt Songlian walking upstairs. The cheerfulness of the voice contrasts with the despondency in the picture. Here is a narrative of two parallel threads, a narrative that unfolds in contrast to the sound and the picture. This relationship between sound and picture enhances the narrative of the film.



Figure3. The Traditional Shadow Play in The Movie to Live

Source : Screenshots From Zhang Yimou's Film to Live

Additionally, Zhang Yimou's films often incorporate traditional Chinese opera performances within the cinematic narrative, a technique also known as a "play within a play" structure. Chinese films has absorbed distinctive elements of traditional opera, integrating opera performance sequences into film. A prime example of this can be seen in Zhang Yimou's film "To Live," which features extensive sequences of shadow play. The film begins with the character Fugui performing shadow play, using his mastery of this art form to display his entertainment-oriented lifestyle, revealing his early days as a wealthy and indulgent young man. This serves as a crucial element in character development and narrative progression. Fugui borrows a shadow play box from Long Er, which becomes his means of livelihood. Once a profligate young master, Fugui transforms into a shadow play artist, sustaining his life through his skills. He performs for the People's Liberation Army soldiers, during the Great Leap Forward for the masses, and is forced to burn his shadow player during the campaign to Destroy the Four Olds. The shadow play not only serves as a narrative thread, facilitating Fugui's transformation but also complements his story, depicting the destruction of Chinese folk art in the form of a play within a play, reflecting the theme that life is like a play, and a play mirrors life. Secondly, the metaphorical nature of shadow play is explored and used. In the film, it is told that Fugui is in the casino and finds that the shadow play singing is not good, so he himself goes to perform the shadow play. The images presented in the film are Fugui's self-congratulatory look and shadow play images when he performs shadow play. Fugui performs a shadow play show that has erotic connotations, "Me and Pan Lang have lingered long through the night, through the night, upon the ivory bed they roam at will." (from the film's lyrics) Fugui's shadow play shows Fugui's artistic talent, while at the same time using the ancient lyrics to express or metaphorically represent Fugui's life as a young man from a wealthy family who lives a life of prestige and power. shadow play here is both a form of folk entertainment and a means of presenting the characters' state of being and revealing their psychology. Therefore the choice of the opera performance clips should be combined with the characterisation and the performance of the characters in the film. When Fugui lost his family business and made a shadow theatre class, a clip of Fugui performing a shadow theatre show is also inserted. The selections here are no longer the vocal entertainment of the year but have the implication of a sad escape. "Wenzhong's heart is so tragically sad" (from the lyrics of the film) here Fugui is framed in the frame in the picture. This kind of misery is not only the misery of the characters in the play Fengshen Yanyi but also the misery of Fugui's heart at this time. When Fugui performs a shadow play for the People's Liberation Army, he chooses an excerpt from "The Enchantment of the Gods": "Guangchengzi summons the Heaven-Overturning Seal, whose activation causes excruciating pain. In haste, I replace the two generals and swiftly flee to Mount Huanghua." (from the lyrics of the film) The Guangchengzi here is a metaphor for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) defeats the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which flees, and Fugui changes bodies to become a member of the PLA. The shadow theatre story here has a strong correlation with the war of the time. During the Great Leap Forward period, Fugui performs the fierce fighting scenes in the shadow play theatre for the people. The fierce fighting here fits in with the Great Leap Forward movement which was in full swing at that time, and Fugui's passionate performance also fits in with the fervour of the people at that time, showing the passion and fervour of the Great Leap Forward movement in the form of shadow play theatre. Therefore, Zhang Yimou's film "Alive" adds shadow play on the basis of the original story, which mainly plays the following roles: to strengthen the narrative of the film, so that the shadow play and its performances become the narrative clues that run through the story; to strengthen the metaphorical nature of shadow play, so that the play and the reality form an intertextual, to show a kind of life into the play, the play is like the life of the theme, and to strengthen the narrative theme of the film.

The Use of Operatic Styling Elements in Zhang Yimou's Films

The costumes, makeup, and props in traditional Chinese opera are distinctly characteristic. Films that incorporate these operatic styling elements enhance their visual expressiveness. How does Zhang Yimou integrate these elements of costume, makeup, and props from traditional opera into his films?



Figure4.Opera Elements in The House of Flying Daggers

Source : Screenshots from Zhang Yimou's House of Flying Daggers

Firstly, Zhang Yimou's films draw extensively from the elements of Chinese operatic costumes. Beyond signifying identity, these costumes also carry aesthetic significance. The characteristics of Chinese operatic costumes generally adhere to the principles of operatic aesthetics, focusing on song-like qualities, lyricism, and expressiveness. In these costumes, the water sleeves are not merely an article of clothing but also a tool for performance, embodying the qualities of expressiveness and abstraction. In Zhang Yimou's film "House of Flying Daggers," the character Mei, played by Zhang Ziyi, performs with water sleeves that are creatively extended beyond their traditional use. This adaptation elongates the dance and the operatic water sleeves, allowing the long sleeves to strike the surrounding large drums like drumsticks. This fluid and graceful sleeve dance accentuates the character's skill in dancing with long sleeves, enhancing the film's thematic focus and emotional expression. Thus, the integration of operatic costume elements not only augments the functionality of the film's costumes but also their expressive and abstract qualities.



Figure5. Meishan's Room Decorated with Huge Facial Masks

Source : A Screenshot from Zhang Yimou's Film Raise the Red Lantern

Secondly, Zhang Yimou's films draw upon the traditional Chinese opera facial masks, a critical component of opera makeup artistry. These facial paintings, which originated as painted designs on the face, evolved from physical masks primarily used in ancient Chinese Nuo opera, where designs were painted directly onto the masks. In opera performances, both masks and facial paintings serve to signify a character's identity and personality through their visual design. In Zhang Yimou's film "Raise the Red Lantern," the room of the third mistress, Mei Shan, is adorned with these opera masks, signaling her past as an opera performer. Formerly a renowned Peking opera actress, the third mistress is now confined to a large estate, stripped of her former glory. Unlike typical opera masks, the film features exaggerated, distorted versions of these

masks, not only to define character identity but also to create a mysterious atmosphere and contribute to the film's eerie ambiance. Additionally, the opera masks in "Raise the Red Lantern" enhance the tragic mood of the film, where the third mistress is murdered for her affair. The masks in her room, combined with Peking opera music, create a spooky and terrifying atmosphere, reflecting the tragic fate of the third mistress Mei Shan.

Furthermore, Zhang Yimou's film "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" also incorporates Nuo opera masks. In the Nuo opera scene depicted in the film, the performer Li Jiamin wears a mask to portray the character Guan Yun Chang, dramatizing the story of "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles." These masks are more than mere props; they also suggest the notion of a façade, under which one's true self lies. In "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles," the Nuo opera masks act as a metaphor for the barriers in communication and understanding between people. The ancient Nuo opera masks imply the spiritual life of the Chinese people, values, symbolising the spirit of Chinese culture.

In his films, Zhang Yimou does not integrate the entirety of traditional opera culture; rather, he adopts a fragmented approach, extracting or drawing inspiration from individual elements to incorporate them into his cinematic works, where they become integral components. As some scholars have noted, "In contemporary film and television, elements of traditional opera are presented to the audience in a fragmented collage, predicated on the structure of the complete opera. Through a meticulous selection process guided by contemporary aesthetic principles, filmmakers creatively assemble these opera fragments following the logic of the visual medium. Amidst the complexity, they carefully sculpt the ideal audio-visual landscape that they have long aspired to create." (Wu Cuijuan, 2016) This approach not only preserves the ontological essence of the film but also enriches it by drawing from other art forms, bridging tradition and modernity.

The Influence of Chinese Opera Culture in Zhang Yimou's Films

How have adopted and ut operatic elements influenced Zhang Yimou's films? Adopting and utilizing This impact is primarily reflected in the following aspects:

Enhancement of Local and Chinese Characteristics in Zhang Yimou's Films

The integration of Chinese opera, including specific operatic forms and singing segments into Zhang Yimou's films, primarily affects the films' local characters. China boasts over 300 opera genres, each originating from different regions and possessing distinct local traits. These diverse opera forms provide a rich resource for Zhang Yimou's cinematic creations. Each genre has unique vocal characteristics closely linked to its regional origins. In his films, Zhang has utilized various regional operas such as Liutone, Maotone, and Qinqiang in "ilizingRed Sorghum"; Beijing Opera in "Raise the Red Lantern"; Shaanxi shadow play in "To Live"; Shaanxi Wanwan tone in "The Story of Qiu Ju"; Nuo opera in "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles"; and Henan Opera in "Full Circle".

For instance, the Wanwan tone in "The Story of Qiu Ju" originates from local Shaanxi opera, depicting narratives set in rural and small-town Shaanxi. The introduction of the Wanwan tone immediately immerses the audience in the local setting. Nuo opera, used in "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles", is one of China's oldest forms of opera, originating from mask plays developed in Southern China. Known as "Ghost Play," it is one of the oldest forms of dance used to appease gods and expel plagues, with origins tracing back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties' exorcism rituals. Nuo opera, influenced by folk songs and dramas, gradually evolved into a performance to fulfill vows to gods. It is widely prevalent in Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces. Nuo opera mainly employs masks as its primary visual element, with some content derived from classics like "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" and "Journey to the West." Elements like the suona and drums, as well as Qinqiang, are prominent in the local operas of Shandong and Shaanxi, as depicted in "Red Sorghum." The film's setting in Gaomi, Northeast Shandong, incorporates Shandong's Maotone and Liutone, along with Shaanxi's Qinqiang, all adding vivid local color. This integration of local opera tones brings a distinctive local flavor to Zhang Yimou's films.

Moreover, Zhang's films exemplify a popularized form of locality. The integration of Chinese opera not only endows the films with a distinct regional character but also gradually removes the barriers to communication imposed by dialects and musical tones in traditional opera. The films achieve this by diminishing dialectal elements within the vocal tones, enhancing their popularity and thereby strengthening the cultural transmission of Chinese films. In "Full Circle", director Zhang Yimou wanted to blend opera with rock music, while composer Han Hong suggested combining opera with electronic music. This approach ensures the film's music maintains its ethnic and entertaining qualities while also enhancing its popularity.

Local characteristics also embody Chinese characteristics. Chinese opera has developed a unique performance system with a variety of genres, showcasing a distinct Chinese identity. The local is also the Chinese. The incorporation of local opera tones in Zhang Yimou's films not only impacts the films' Chinese and national identity but also highlights the diversity of Chinese films. Originating in the West, film has a strong Western imprint in both content and form. By infusing opera culture, Zhang Yimou's films draw from Chinese cultural traditions, gradually integrating Western film media with Chinese elements, thus elevating the Chinese and national identity of the films and fostering the development of a distinct Chinese cinema school. Famous opera historian Xu Muyun once described Chinese opera as "the crystallized spirit of the nation, refined through a thousand hammers and a hundred forgings." Xu Muyun, 2001. Films like "To Live," "Raise the Red Lantern," and "Full Circle" feature distinctly Chinese operas, rightfully representing Chinese elements. The regional diversity of Chinese opera genres precisely reflects the diversity of Chinese films, showcasing its rich and colorful Chinese identity.

Enhancing the Chinese Aesthetic in Zhang Yimou's Films

Chinese opera is a unique form of dramatic art that embodies distinct Chinese aesthetic characteristics. Zhang Yimou's films draw extensively from Chinese opera, reinforcing the Chinese aesthetic in his cinematography, and contributing to the creation of films with vibrant atmospheres and profound thematic depths. His adept integration of operatic cultural elements enriches his films with intriguing and endless charm and depth.

Firstly, Zhang Yimou enhances the Chinese ambiance in his films. While Western films often use lighting and music to create an atmosphere, Zhang is particularly skilled in utilizing elements of Chinese opera to enrich the film's ambiance and aesthetic appeal. For instance, in "Raise the Red Lantern," Chinese opera heightens the film's eerie atmosphere. The haunting melodies echo through the courtyard, fading layer by layer, and coupled with Zhang's use of light and color, they immerse the audience in a terrifying, claustrophobic space filled with a bizarre and eerie presence. In "To Live," shadow play is used, characteristic of the robust and melancholic styles of China's Northwest, which are bold and poignant. The film's score features traditional Chinese operas like Henan opera and Qinqiang, played with instruments such as the Banhu, whose sounds are musical and mournfully intricate, thereby enhancing the tragic atmosphere.

Secondly, Zhang Yimou's films reflect the aesthetic of Chinese interest and charm. In Chinese culture, there is an emphasis on metaphors and enhancing interest, which originates from traditional aesthetics. The operatic elements in Chinese literature often evoke a deep interest or curiosity. Chinese opera, with its variety of genres and vocal styles, produces a rich tapestry of sounds that captivate the audience; often, a film by Zhang starts with an opera sound, sparking curiosity or igniting passion at the beginning of a section or chapter. In "Full River Red," the use of drums and gongs intensifies the atmosphere, such as when Sun Jun kills Wang Tongling, accelerating the film's rhythm. As scenes shift in "Full River Red," characters hurriedly move through corridors to the fusion of Henan opera and rock music. The opera, with its high-pitched and sharp tones and brisk rhythms, embodies a bold spirit. The lyrics are derived from Chinese opera stories like Yang's Brigade and Judge Bao, which deal with themes of loyalty and patriotism. The opening percussion and the rhythmic Henan opera stimulate the audience's mood, sparking their enthusiasm and leading to further associations, making the film tense, rhythmically vibrant, and richly textured.

Lastly, this helps to cultivate a Chinese-style aesthetic of artistic conception in his films. Artistic conception, a category of classical Chinese aesthetics, also appears in Chinese literature, painting, music, and calligraphy. The artistic conception in opera is not only created through the script and dance but also through the performance space of the opera itself. "Represented by traditional Chinese art, opera excels in blending reality with abstraction, combining detailed and expressive styles, where image, setting, essence, and reality coexist," (Zhou Minjia, 2022). Although films are realistic, they can also be interpretative. By incorporating elements like operatic monologues, music, and performances into films, Zhang makes his realistic films interpretative, enriching their artistic conception. In "Hero," the scene where Nameless and Sky duel in the chess courtyard emphasizes intention over form, incorporating sounds of the guqin, dripping water, and clashing swords, along with Peking opera chants, expanding the film's sonic space and seemingly transporting the audience to an operatic stage, enhancing the spatial imagination of the film. The addition of Peking opera chants further highlights the interpretative nature of the martial arts scenes. Furthermore, the duel between Nameless and Sky, played by martial arts stars Jet Li and Donnie Yen, who possess real martial arts skills, allows for more realistic filming. However, their fight in "Hero" is not realistic but interpretative. The introduction of Peking opera chants seems to shift their duel to an operatic setting, creating a classic scene that blends reality and abstraction, and is endlessly enchanting. Moreover, "Hero" transforms the martial arts into a storm of violence; the slow yet relentless duel between Flying Snow and Moon in the woods, with falling leaves turning into a shower of blood, creates an artistic conception typical of Chinese opera, where reality and abstraction merge beautifully.

Enhancing the Diversity of Zhang Yimou's Film Narratives through the Use of Traditional Opera

Traditional opera narrative possesses its own unique characteristics and narrative features. By incorporating elements from traditional opera, what impact does this have on Zhang Yimou's films?

Firstly, it enriches the narrative themes and constructs multiple narrative threads in his movies. In Zhang Yimou's film "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles," the title is derived from a story about Guan Yun Chang from the classic Chinese novel "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," which depicts Guan Yun Chang riding alone on horseback for thousands of miles in search of his brothers to reunite with them. Additionally, "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" is also a Nuoxi play, known as one of the most quintessentially Chinese and iconic dramas within this genre. The theme of the story is loyalty. The film uses the Nuoxi play "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" as its title, imbuing it with profound symbolic meaning. The term "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" not only refers to the Nuoxi play but also represents the journey undertaken by Mr. Takata to understand his son, crossing countries and miles to find a Nuoxi artist. Thus, the film unfolds a dual narrative mode. On one hand, Li Jiamin performs the Nuoxi play "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles," and on the other hand, in reality, the father played by Ken Takakura, driven by his son's wishes and his desire to understand his son, travels thousands of miles to China in search of the Nuoxi play "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles," hoping to connect with his son. This dual narrative line forms a layered narrative structure. Thematically, the "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" from the Three Kingdoms story represents loyalty in Chinese culture, while in the film, it signifies both a commitment to loyalty and the modern quest for trust and communication. The movie, based on a Nuoxi play, thus offers a richer storyline and deeper thematic content.

Secondly, Zhang Yimou's films benefit from the incorporation of traditional Chinese opera, which enhances the narrative focus and adjusts the pacing of the film's storytelling. In "Full River Red," the background music is arranged by Han Hong and performed by Zhang Xiaoying, a famous Henan opera singer. Why choose Henan opera? As a local theatrical genre from Henan, China, Henan opera is characterized by its high-pitched vocals, and its repertoire largely portrays themes of national loyalty and family honor. The selection of Henan opera aligns well with the themes of "Full River Red," offering a strong thematic fit. Furthermore, the hero of "Full River Red," Yue Fei, is also from Henan, which adds depth and relevance to the film's themes. The Henan opera pieces used in the film, such as "Mu Guiying Takes Command," "The Capture of Chenzhou," "The Case of Beauty Zhang," and "Judge Bao Investigates Yin Mountain," primarily depict stories of defending the nation and dispensing justice. These narratives echo the overarching theme of "Full River Red." When Yaoqin appears, the Henan opera lyrics are from "Mu Guiying Takes Command," which tells the story of Mu Guiying, a loyal Chinese heroine. The opera

lyrics hint at Yaoqin's identity as a heroine similar to Mu Guiying. During Yaoqin's trial, the selected Henan opera is from "The Case of Beauty Zhang," which recounts the story of Judge Bao's fair judgment in the case of Chen Shimei during the Song Dynasty. The use of these opera elements serves to deepen the thematic elements, suggest character identities, and foreshadow the conclusion.

Zhang Yimou's choice of traditional Chinese opera not only deepens narrative themes but also helps regulate the pacing of the film. The pacing of storytelling is a crucial aspect of film creation. Adjusting the film's narrative pace to achieve smooth transitions is a key consideration in filmmaking. In the production of "Full River Red," Zhang Yimou noted that after the courtyard was built, he felt its diversity and the long corridors provided a rhythm of movement and stillness. Among the local theatrical genres in China, Henan opera features a rapid pace with its impassioned and vigorous tones, which fits the grandeur depicted in "Full River Red." The operas "Mu Guiying Takes Command" and "The Case of Beauty Zhang" both tell stories of national defense and justice, aligning perfectly with the narrative theme of "Full River Red." The use of Henan opera excerpts in "Full River Red" helps regulate the film's pace, making it more lively and combining motion and stillness, thereby evoking a sense of movement and passion. Thus, Zhang Yimou's integration of Chinese opera elements not only regulates the rhythm of the film but also shapes a distinctly Chinese cinematic rhythm.

Additionally, the use of narrative lyrics enhances the metaphoric quality of Zhang Yimou's films. The extensive and exquisite lyrics in Chinese opera serve as a narrative tool, embodying the characteristic prominence of singing in Chinese opera storytelling. The narrative through lyrics is a traditional narrative technique in ancient Chinese opera. Zhang Yimou's films incorporate numerous opera segments. For instance, in "Raise the Red Lantern," during the scene where Third Mistress Meishan is hanged in the attic and Songlian creates a "haunted" atmosphere in her room, the lyrics played are: "Raised tenderly by my parents from childhood, I was wed to Wang Chang at the tender age of fifteen. You were engrossed in poetry and books and never gave a thought to my feelings. Am I to be like this down, blown about by the wind at whim? Human hearts are as unpredictable as the weather, and in darkness, why need the light of the sun or moon? Through cunning schemes and poisonous plots, you've lost all conscience, and your letter of divorce is as cruel as a slaughterhouse. Place your hand upon your chest and think, even the heartless villain Wang Kui is better than you." These lyrics come from the classical Chinese opera "The Imperial Stele" and tell the story of Wang Youdao divorcing his wife, who accuses her husband in the song. The film uses these lyrics to narrate an ancient Chinese story. This accusation in the film and the story of Third Mistress Meishan form an intertextual relationship. Third Mistress Meishan's tragic death results from her affair with Mr. Gao being exposed. This accusation also seems to sympathize with the tragic fate of Third Mistress Meishan, condemning the murderous feudal system. Through these lyrics, the film laments Meishan's fate, the misfortunes of life, and critiques the feudal moral code. Zhang Yimou's films adopt the narrative style of Chinese opera lyrics, subtly and implicitly conveying attitudes and emotions through sung narratives, while enhancing the intertextuality and metaphoric quality through audio-visual synchronization in film storytelling, embodying the nuanced and metaphoric narrative style characteristic of Chinese storytelling.

In Chinese opera, lyrics not only narrate stories but also reveal film themes. Zhang Yimou's films often use lyrics to subtly convey characters' psychological states. The operatic elements in his films serve as tools to shape characters' personalities, reveal their inner feelings, express their inner voices, and disclose their fates. Just as speech reflects thoughts, opera serves as a tool to express characters' innermost feelings, conveying emotions or unspoken words through opera lyrics. Zhang Yimou frequently uses opera to express characters' inner voices. In "Raise the Red Lantern," on Songlian's wedding night, the film features a Peking opera chant in the Xipi Liu Shui style, a mix of spoken and sung performance typical of Peking opera. The chant's subdued and implicit tone, akin to a soliloquy, mirrors Fourth Mistress Songlian's inner state at that moment and hints at her impending tragedy. When Fourth Mistress Songlian marries, Third Mistress Meishan sings "Hong Niang" (Si Ping tune) to express her loneliness: "Originally of noble birth and refined grace, it's most pitiful that behind closed doors, I secretly shed tears of blood. I long for our meeting time and again from dusk till dawn, enduring the agony of a lovesick heart that neglects sleep and food. It is not out of my desire that I send messages and letters; for true lovers who become united, even the immortals

can evoke no envy." Third Mistress Meishan uses the operatic lyrics to subtly express her dissatisfaction and the feelings of others when the new wife is favored. The contrast between the laughter of the newcomer and the crying of the old forms a sharp contrast, hinting at the endless jealousy and strife among the wives and concubines in the Chen household. Here, the lyrics serve both as a narration of a Chinese opera story and as an expression of Meishan's inner psychology, conveying Third Mistress Meishan's grievances and melancholy.

Zhang Yimou's films not only use opera lyrics to reveal the psychology of characters but also employ metaphors to presage their fates and hint at the story's trajectory and conclusion. In "Raise the Red Lantern," the opera lyrics are largely metaphorical. For instance, when Mr. Gao plays the Beijing opera "Yu Bei Ting" in the third concubine Meishan's room, the lyrics "trouble sprout" coincide with the scene where the fourth concubine, Songlian, witnesses the clandestine affair between Meishan and Mr. Gao. The lyrics sing, "Upon reading the farewell letter, my heart twisted as if cut by a knife, all because of that one night destined for my return home. Caught mid-journey by a sudden storm, I sought refuge from the rain under a pavilion, unwittingly sowing the seeds of disaster. There, a young man appeared; we sat in silence through the night, each lost in our own thoughts. I preserved my chastity, clear and untainted, for the sake of my child and my honor. Oh mother, who could have foreseen his suspicions rising like a tempest!" The past glory contrasted sharply with the present squalor. The phrase "trouble sprout" in the opera aptly symbolizes the relationship between Meishan and Mr. Gao. The story of "Yu Bei Ting," which revolves around the illicit affair of Meng Yuehua and Liu Shengchun, metaphorically foreshadows the misfortune and eventual demise of the third concubine, Meishan. The master has Meishan perform "Su San Qi Jie." This famous Beijing opera piece tells the story of the prostitute Su San, who is framed and forced to confess under duress. The narrative of "Su San Qi Jie" metaphorically signifies the fate of Meishan. The film strategically plants foreshadowing through opera lyrics, subtly guiding the narrative development from the details.

In summary, Zhang Yimou's films integrate and draw upon traditional opera, enhancing the Sinicization of narrative themes, diversification of narrative pacing, and metaphorical depth in his storytelling, all of which prominently feature Chinese characteristics. These elements further elevate the Chineseness of Zhang Yimou's films.

Conclusion

Zhang Yimou often incorporates elements of opera culture in his film production. Zhang Yimou integrates his films with opera by incorporating Chinese opera cultural symbols, integrating opera music and singing in the soundtracks, inserting opera performance clips into the films, and telling the stories of opera performers in the films. The elements of opera in Zhang Yimou's films play different roles such as enriching the film music, revealing the story of the film, revealing the theme of the film narrative, shaping the film characters, revealing the psychology of the characters, creating the mood of the film, hinting at the ending of the story, and enhancing the rhythm of the narrative. Zhang Yimou's integration of cultural elements of opera in his film production is based on the film as the main body, and he chooses different voices, types, and repertoires according to the needs of film expression, and borrows, integrates, and transforms the cultural elements of opera. Zhang Yimou's integration of Chinese opera culture in his film production reflects Zhang Yimou's identification with Chinese cultural tradition. By incorporating Chinese opera culture into his films, Zhang Yimou spreads and inherits Chinese opera culture on the one hand, and further enhances the ethnicity, narrativity, and aesthetics of Chinese films on the other. The integration of Chinese opera culture in Zhang Yimou's films gives us the revelation that, starting from the needs of film production, the perfect and deep integration of film and opera helps to improve the quality of Chinese films and contributes to the cultural identity and cultural output of Chinese films.

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