

# ***Research on the Symbolic Expression of Film Visual Art Directed by Chinese Director Zhang Yimou***

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**Abstract:** As the leader of the fifth generation of directors in China, Zhang Yimou leads Chinese films to the world in the new era. He is an outstanding representative of Asian films and a world-renowned film master. This paper takes visual art as the tool and mainly studies the symbolic expression of Zhang Yimou's film. The research allow readers to access the Chinese classic film symbol and Zhang Yimou's personal characteristic film symbol by analogy Zhang's several films. Through the online research on Douban and Zhihu, the author made a brief appreciation of the visual language features of Zhang Yimou's two films *To Live* and *Red Sorghum* with the highest score and voice. The author makes some discussions on the composition characteristics, techniques and creation style of Zhang Yimou's films. On the one hand, the author believes that Zhang Yimou and his films are deeply influenced by the structure of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Zhang's film not only display grand Chinese aesthetics in the structure of the picture, but also intersperse many unique Chinese meanings in the film. From the creative technique, Zhang is good at using scenes to foil atmosphere and allude to the characters' fate. On the other hand, Zhang Yimou's typical male chauvinist creation style is reflected in many aspects of his film, such as female stereotypes, improper male gaze.

**Keywords:** visual art, symbolic expression, color, composition

## **1. Introduction**

Zhang Yimou (1950), Chinese motion picture director, Honorary Doctor of Boston University and Yale University, was known for his highly visual historical dramas. Zhang made his directorial debut with *Red Sorghum* (1987). The film praised the national spirit of the Chinese nation. The film is a perfect fusion of narration and lyricism, realism and impressionism, which displayed the unique charm of the film language. *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear Award for Best Picture at the 38th Berlin International Film Festival in 1988, which was the first time that China won the highest award at the three major international film festivals in the world. From then on, he began to fulfill his trilogy of film creation, from photographer to actor, and finally to director career. Later, Zhang won the award

for best director at the Cannes Film Festival for his third film, *Ju Dou* (1989), which was also the first Chinese film to receive an Nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the 63rd American Academy Awards.

In 1992, he directed the film *Autumn Chrysanthemum Fight a Lawsuit*. The film changed Zhang Yimou's previous style and adopted a documentary style. A large number of semi-documentary techniques of non-professional actors were used, which truly reflected the face of contemporary rural China. The film won the Golden Lion Award for Best Picture, the Best Actress Award (Gong Li) at the 49th Venice International Film Festival, the Best Picture Award at the 13th Golden Rooster Award for Chinese Film, and the Excellent Film Award and Honorary Award of the Radio, Film and Television Department in 1993.

In 1994, he directed the film *To Live*, which took the Chinese civil war and the political movements since the founding of the People's Republic of China as the classics, and the hero's rich life as the latitude, reflecting the fate of a generation of Chinese people, and was praised by some audiences and film critics as Zhang Yimou's best work. The film won the Jury Award of the 47th Cannes International Film Festival in France, the Best Actor Award (Ge You), the Humanity Award, the Best Foreign Language Film Award of the National Film Critics Association and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association in 1994, the Best Foreign Language Film Award of the British Film Academy Award, and the Best Foreign Language Film Nomination of the Golden Globe Award of American Film and Television. In the same year, he supervised the production of the film *The Great Conqueror's Concubine*. In 2008, he served as the chief director of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympic Games, and won the 2008 World Chinese Awards and the top ten moving Chinese people hosted by CCTV. In 2015, Zhang shot the Hollywood film *The Great Wall*, which became a film totally shot in China and distributed to the world. At the 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games in Beijing, Zhang continued to serve as the chief director of the opening and closing ceremonies.

In the early stage, he was famous for directing literary and artistic films, and later for transforming commercial films. As one of the representatives of the fifth generation of directors in China, Zhang's films occupy an important position in the history of Chinese films. He shot a wide range of subjects, including history, humanities, rural, urban, love, martial arts and war. He focus on transmitting national culture, social thinking and film innovation. And the powerful composition and abundant colors in his films are the keys to convey the film language. Zhang's films reflect all social strata, ranging from countrymen to the nobility. He is good at using full colors to capture the subtle changes in the minds of the characters, giving audiences strong visual and psychological impact.

## 2. Literature Review

Whenever people mention Zhang Yimou, everyone knows that he is a director because he has made many impressive films by using different kinds of skills. According to Shen Xinzhi's study, through "folk things" and "daily things," Zhang Yimou also created a dense and complex picture system in his war films, like the *Flowers of war*, *Sniper* and the *Red sorghum*. The picture serves as both a catalyst for the plot and a crucial component of image rhetoric as a "meaningful shape." In order to achieve the communication between the film and the audience's senses, various visuals serve as "relics" of history or "microphones" of emotion. They depict the blood and tears of the Chinese people invaded by foreign adversaries as well as the unending national spirit [1]. Wang Liling also found the cultural strength to persist from generation to generation lies in folk customs. Because collective consciousness and unconsciousness are at the foundation of all folk practices, the psychological set created by this accumulation can, given the right circumstances, transit through time and space and be preferred and recognized by people of all ages. Ritual are as a "prayer activity and sacred means" [2]. Wang Yue also proved that ritual as a kind of "prayer activity and sacred means" [3].

The aim of director Zhang Yimou's films is always cultural reflection and humanistic care, and because he is used to including subliminal references to traditional culture, his films consistently have a strong feeling of history and life. Zhang Yongmei discovered and established that *Raise The Red Lantern* is the director's attempt to emphasize the awareness and respect for one's own value by stating the importance of one's own personal existence [4]. Lu Jiacheng also has similar research to confirm this point, Another point is that the purpose of the characters' attire in the film is to dress them up so that the identification of their roles may be positioned. Zhang Yimou is quite fussy about the color of the characters' attire in the films he directs. Early works by Zhang Yimou featured a lot of marriage-related situations. Zhang Yimou always went with bright red for her bridal sedan chair, cover, and wedding dress [5].

The language of the film also includes color. Color has been Zhang Yimou's trademark since it always elevates his films. His films consistently give the audience an overly saturated impression of color. A very powerful visual art effect is produced when colors are matched with related emotional traits, according to various subject content. In The Mengxue's study, the visual component that gives the film its intuitive, vibrant, and energetic quality is its image language. Color is one of the most significant components of the picture, which is made up of many other elements. Color is thus an element of the visual language of the film. It can not only depict a realistic visual scene and form the character's appearance, but it can also convey a variety of themes, allow characters to express their emotions, and make the viewer feel those same emotions. Moreover, contrasting hues might help the story develop and the film's narrative impact [6]. Spiritual significance associated with color has a strong psychological influence on humans. These factors always affect us unknowingly, and they will implicitly manage our emotions. Many scholars find different people interpret the same color in different ways. However, due to their various social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, persons of different ages, genders, and jobs will have distinct associations with the same color. When color is coupled with the functions of contemporary society, color can seem to have a more pronounced modern value. Color may be seen as a contemporary value. Some colors with special emotional power will gain popularity when they combine the traits of the era with the understanding, ideals, interests, and desires of the general populace [7].

In addition, according to Zhang Jiarui, Cai Lin's discovery, the word "sound effect" describes additional noises that are added to a scene to enhance its realism, mood, and information [8]. Not only their research, Lu Xiaoyu also added the use of multi-channel systems and digital sound effects also reflects how popular film aesthetics are constantly evolving, as well as how increasingly strict standards for the richness, fullness, and layering of film and sound are driving the development of digital sound effects in film production and creating a multi-level, multi-functional, and pluralistic field of film sound art performance [9]. The usage of music in films is very important. The soundtrack of the film has the power to capture viewers' flimsy emotions and rapid emotional shifts, stimulating their aural senses while also delivering a quick shock and impact. Shi Bei discovered Director Zhang Yimou recognized the value of music and consciously used a range of shifting musical styles to heighten the film's shock value as well as its appeal from a cultural perspective. Chinese traditional music is effectively incorporated into Zhang Yimou's films, which not only helps expand the popularity of the genre but also leaves viewers feeling incredibly moved [10].

Although there are many scholars studying this field, few scholars and articles have studied Zhang Yimou's understanding of film. This research is very important. More people knew Zhang Yimou and learn from Zhang Yimou, which will certainly help the development of Chinese films. The colorful color in Zhang Yimou's films is one of the important factors for his film success, and the skillful use of color is also the uniqueness of his films. This study explore the relationship between these factors and film vision through Zhang Yimou's analysis of color sound effects and shooting skills.

### 3. Methodology

In order to explore the visual language characteristics of Director Zhang Yimou in the film, the author of this article adopted an online research method. Following the principle of the film's popularity, the researchers studied the evaluation of Director Zhang Yimou on the Internet in the past three years, mainly focusing on the following two works. Director Zhang Yimou's highest-rated film on Douban (Chinese books, films, reading social software), *To Live*. This work, adapted from Yu Hua's novel "*To Live*", has become the best work shot by "Laomouzi" (the nickname for Director Zhang Yimou) in the hearts of many netizens. Under the research of the researchers, the following have been summarized: First, through the performance of the theme of "alive" in the film, the occupation of the character of wealth in the novel has been changed from a farmer to a hawker. There are countless helpless actions in the film and television market, so the sense of confrontation between people and nature in the film has been weakened, and there is no particularly strong impact on the senses. Second, in that special period, only wealth was highlighted but hunger was not expressed in the picture. It is clear to anyone who has read the original novel, or the tattered steel plate in the film has a foreshadowing effect, but researchers have always believed that the expression of "hunger" is indispensable. Third, the opposite of living is death. At the end of the novel, there are very few people alive. Even if they are alive, they are still alive. When studying the film that many people are left in the end. The most vocal on Douban and Zhihu (China's Online Q&A community software) is the film directed by Zhang Yimou that won the 38th Berlin International Film Festival Golden Bear Award for best film, the 8th Chinese Film Golden Rooster Award for Best feature film and the 11th Popular Film Hundred Flowers Award for Best feature Film, *Red Sorghum*. The researchers called the creative lineup of this film the "best lineup". As the early works of Director Zhang Yimou, it can be seen that he doesn't care much about the story of the film and pays more attention to its avant-garde nature. First of all, in *Red Sorghum*, Director Zhang Yimou implements the naturalism he has always adhered to and uses rich lens language and photography to make up for the thinness of the story. The picture of the sorghum field in the film, using strong colors and iconic shots of direct sunlight, is similar to the footage of the rape of the bamboo forest in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. Second, the film has shaped the epitome of a large number of ordinary Chinese people, praising the simple human nature and the vitality that grows like weeds.

### 4. Results

In the history of Chinese cinema, the films directed by Zhang Yimou have often been praised for the color symbolic expression. In the author's research, the composition is also worth delving into. Starting from the first film directed by Zhang Yimou, the neat and symmetrical composition runs through.

In Zhang Yimou's films, there are often scenes of location snow shooting. He always insisted that "we can't shoot until the real snow". There are many unforgettable classic snow scenes under his direction, which greatly improved the visual aesthetics of the films. And the snow often has different layers of signifier and signified, which makes symbolic expression to extreme. Such as white of snow refers to the purity of human nature. It can reflect the heart, the purity of the heart and the whiteness of snow complement each other. This type of symbolic expression often has a complementary and contrasting effect.

The style of Zhang Yimou's films had strong humanistic concern. In his films, whether it was a leading role or a small role, no matter what class and status he was, Zhang Yimou could deeply sympathize with the role to explore the role's psychology, and showed the audience the realistic significance of each role with a unique visual scene. The author have to mention the composition of the coffin form used by Director Zhang Yimou in many of works. In one shot, the coffin looks like a

coffin as a whole. This kind of symbolic expression is especially used in the film *Raise The Red Lantern*, which is intended to highlight that the people living in this building have a bumpy fate and an unfortunate life.

But in the latest film, the author comes to a less positive view. In the film *Full River Red*, national shame and family hatred are based on the humiliation of women, using sound symbol expression to highlight the so-called masculinity. Although this film has made many innovations and changes in genre fusion, Director Zhang Yimou also uses his masterful grand narrative of the history of his country to reiterate the decadent gender concept engraved in his veins over and over again.

## 5. Discussion

Traditional Chinese aesthetics and aesthetics are mainly based on symmetrical beauty and neat beauty. From ancient times to the present, the texture and appearance of architecture, embroidery, pottery, etc. have appeared in front of the world with a symmetrical appearance, and Director Zhang Yimou is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese aesthetics. As a member, this characteristic is vividly presented in the films. The extensive use of red in *The Big Red Lantern Hanging High* created an aesthetic feast for the audience. The use of this large area of red can be said to be unreasonable in the traditional sense, but under the requirements of the plot, it is reasonable. The red here represents desire, murder, jealousy, mystery, and summarizes the human sins of the characters in the films. In a picture in the films, with a symmetrical door and a stone lion, the heroine walks in the middle wearing a red cheongsam, as if walking into a red, bloody nightmare. This kind of picture-in-picture, scene-in-scene composition shows the classic aesthetic structure with Chinese characteristics. As a man from the Loess Plateau, Director Zhang Yimou is very perceptive and expressive about the Chinese characteristic beauty of the traditional loess.

Zhang Yimou often uses the magnificent snowscape to set off the smallness of the characters. And to convey the spirit of unyielding fighting against the fate of the era. Such as the snow scene in *Cliff Walkers* (2021) is another distinguished works of Zhang Yimou. Every battle between life and death is carried out in the snow. The static and peaceful snow as the background forms a strong contrast with the intense psychological war between the characters. Snow can make people calm as well as stimulated. Zhang Yimou put the characters' chasing and hiding, probing and seducing opponents on the vast snow. The agents' fierce and tenacious struggle is powerful, but against the background of the endless snow, the personal strength turns to be ethereal. The story began and ended in the snow. The vast snowfield is like an endless puzzle. One struggle is over, and another is beginning.

In the film *The Flowers of War*, the prostitutes at the bottom of the family set themselves to die in order to save students and priests. Such prostitutes had been different from the poetry *Mooring the Qinhuai River* by Du Mu. This is one of the reveal of Zhang Yimou's film humanistic care. He will go deep into the complex human nature of each role and explore its social contradictions behind. Let the character become multi-dimensional rather than just good or evil.

As a Northwest man, Director Zhang Yimou has always continued the image of a big man in his heart, and his macho mentality is often reflected in films. In an episode of *Full River Red*, when the situation in Yue Fei's camp was discovered, Zhang Da, played by actor Shen Teng, shouted when his lover Yao Qin was insulted and violated by the soldiers: "Kill it, don't ruin her! "If you taste this sentence carefully, you have to associate it with the meaning of Cheng Zhuli's chastity admonition, which means "Starvation is a small matter, and disjointed matters are a big one." Qin the plot of Sun Jun, the deputy commander-in-chief of the pro-barracks, severely tortured Zhang Da and Yaoqin to extract confessions, they were also tortured. For Zhang Da, it was choking on water and scraping off the sashimi of "serving the country with loyalty" behind his back with a knife. Instead, Yao Qin let his soldiers coax her up and humiliate her chastity like a hungry tiger pouncing on food. From Zhang Da's perspective, Yao Qin was desperate and panicked, providing an excellent perspective for the

male audience in the theater. Yao Qin was attached with chastity flaws because of her Wuji status, and successfully allowed the men who humiliated or humiliated her to have the mentality that they would not be morally condemned. Later, the plot was reversed. Sun Jun told Zhang Da that everything was played, and Sun Jun was once again given a moral exemption. This clever narrative technique added a positive image aura to the male characters in the film. However, regardless of whether the plot of "rape" in the film is true or not, the sensory stimulation of insulting women has long been completed, forming an important symbol in Director Zhang Yimou's film to attract the audience. There are many ways to highlight masculinity. The form based on women's pain may be popular for a while, and there will be many suitors, but the shame of the country has never been a reason to consume women. With another narrative approach, the audience of the film may be wider.

## 6. Conclusion

Through an analysis of Zhang Yimou's color sound effects and distinctive shooting techniques, this study examines the relationship between these elements and cinematic vision. Zhang Yimou is one of the representatives of the "fifth generation directors". His films have had a significant impact on Chinese film history. His films incorporate national culture, societal philosophy, a search for cultural roots, and innovative filmmaking. Starting from the cultural Beijing of the large age, reflecting on traditional culture, and showing us the progression from humanistic care to realism with the shift in film technology, he can powerfully and precisely, timely and ahead of time, touch the hearts of the Chinese people. In *Sniper*, Zhang Yimou used ice and snow to shape the final image. The details between the characters become more obvious and strong via the snow, and everything is clearly enhanced in the white tone. Snow and death are closely related in *Sniper*. There must be snow around every dead body. Finally, as the movie goes on, snow gradually covers the body and transforms it into each fighter's tomb. Ice and snow surround the new life, heightening the harshness and cruelty of the conflict. In this sniper-focused campaign, outside factors everywhere limit our actions and fashions and have an impact on character development. At present, many male directors represented by Zhang Yimou are more affected and edified by the patriarchal consciousness, and often unconsciously go back to the control of the patriarchal consciousness. The portrayal of female images and psychology is not critical enough and cannot escape the rescue mentality and ideal vision of men. On the screen of the film, the narration is basically about the masculine virtues of men being superior to women, heroes saving the beauty and so on. In most cases, the female characters only serve as a foil for men. Women are always rejected, imprisoned, named, exiled, saved and deprived of the right to speak.

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