

INTERPRETATION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN ZHANG YIMOU'S FILM SHADOW (2018)

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Abstract: *This article examines the transmission and use of traditional Chinese cultural symbols through the lens of Zhang Yimou's 2018 film Shadow. This article discusses the meanings and characteristics of traditional Chinese cultural symbols, evaluates Zhang Yimou's film's cultural expression qualities, and investigates how he incorporates traditional Chinese cultural symbols into the film. Use textual analysis method to interpret traditional cultural symbols, including ink and wash painting, Qi and Seer ensemble, yin-yang and five elements, calligraphy, and architectural aesthetics. Finally, the communication effects of these traditional cultural markers in the film and their role in promoting Chinese culture are discussed. This study provides unique perspectives and ways for the transmission and development of Chinese culture, and it is a significant step in the promotion of Chinese films and culture.*

Keywords: *Chinese culture, traditional cultural symbols, Zhang Yimou, film, cinematic aesthetics.*

Introduction

Problem Statement:The film *Shadow* delves into the utilisation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols and examines the impact of these symbols on communication. The article thoroughly examines the utilisation of conventional cultural symbols in the film, such as ink painting, Qin and Seer ensemble, Yin-Yang and the five elements, Calligraphy Art, and architectural aesthetics. It assesses how these symbols are specifically portrayed and the symbolic significance they hold within the film. Next, the study explores the impact of these conventional cultural symbols on films, specifically in terms of generating a powerful cultural ambiance, intensifying the portrayal of topics, enriching the viewing experience, and fostering cross-cultural communication. In conclusion, the paper emphasises the significance of using traditional cultural symbols in films and advocates for increased utilisation of these symbols by directors. This serves to showcase the allure of their own cultures and foster cultural interaction and comprehension.

Methodology:This study employs textual analysis, semiotic analysis, and research methodologies in film and television culture to elucidate the significance and communicative impact of traditional cultural symbols in “*Shadow*”. This is achieved through the interpretation and analysis of these symbols within the film. The textual study examines the importance and impact of traditional cultural symbols in the film by evaluating particular scenes and their use, such as ink painting, zither ensemble, yin and yang, the five elements, the art of calligraphy, and architectural aesthetics. The essay utilises semiotic approaches to evaluate the traditional cultural symbols employed in the film, such as ink and wash painting and zither ensemble. It examines the symbolic significance and cultural implications of these symbols within the film. The essay utilises cinema and television cultural research methods, employing textual analysis of the film “*Shadow*,” cultural criticism, and film and television art theories to gain insight into the cultural manifestations and artistic practices employed.

Research question: How to effectively spread and promote Chinese traditional culture through the medium of film?

Research argument: As a mass communication tool, films have strong cultural communication power, and the use of traditional Chinese cultural symbols can enhance the cultural connotation and artistic charm of films. In order to verify this argument, the article selects Zhang Yimou's films as the research object, explores how he integrates traditional cultural symbols into film creation, and evaluates the quality of his cultural expression. Zhang Yimou's films provide a unique perspective and approach to the dissemination and development of Chinese culture. They also provide useful inspiration for how films can become an important carrier for the promotion of Chinese culture. This is a useful exploration for the development of China's film industry, and also provides an important contribution to promoting Chinese culture and enhancing the country's cultural soft power.

Zhang Yimou is a well-known Chinese director whose works have continuously drawn interest from audiences worldwide. His works show how closely he has examined and used traditional Chinese cultural symbols. *Shadow* (2018), one of his masterpieces, incorporates much of traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese people have created distinctive identifiers known as traditional Chinese cultural symbols throughout a lengthy historical evolution across a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, art, literature, architecture, and more. The Chinese people's spiritual aspirations and aesthetic preferences are reflected in these symbols, which have rich cultural meanings. As a mass culture communication medium, film is vital in transmitting and promoting a country's traditional culture. Incorporating traditional cultural symbols into films improves the plot, creative value, and audience viewing experience.

Zhang Yimou's works are well-known for his distinct creative style and cultural expression. Using cinematic art and narrative approaches, he is talented at showing the struggle and

integration of traditional Chinese culture and modern society. In *Shadow*, he employs a wide range of traditional cultural symbols, such as ink and wash painting, zither ensemble, yin and yang, the five elements, calligraphy, and architectural aesthetics, to present the audience with a distinctly Chinese image. The use of these symbols not only increases the film's visual impact but also deepens the idea it portrays.

Literature Review

In his thesis, Shiying asserts that Zhang Yimou's film *Shadow* incorporates the ink and wash style, drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese ink painting. Furthermore, Zhang Yimou incorporates several Chinese aspects throughout the picture to enhance the topic and creative impact of Chinese style, in addition to the ink space. Zhang Yimou employs the cinematic medium and contemporary technologies to narrate a Chinese tale in his film *Shadow*. It possesses both the physical characteristics of classic Chinese ink and wash style and the spiritual essence of Chinese Tai Chi philosophy. The film incorporates several traditional Chinese cultural symbols, which serve as a valuable resource for examining the creative adaptation of exceptional traditional Chinese culture in the modern media landscape and facilitating the global spread of Chinese cinema. Zhanghang unequivocally stated that Zhang Yimou's film *Shadow* is undeniably a triumph. The film's posters and colour palette adhere to Chinese aesthetics, resulting in a powerful and distinct visual effect. The soundtrack of the film incorporated classical Chinese musical instruments such as the zither, snake, bamboo flute, and sheng, in addition to the visually captivating pictures.

Traditional cultural symbols in *Shadow* (2018)

Ink Painting

Ink painting is a Chinese artwork particularly well-known for its ink sceneries. The Tang Dynasty established ink and wash landscape painting, which used black and white colours, a rich brush, and intense ink. In contrast to colourful Western paintings, Chinese ink landscape art can be defined as simplifying complexity, and black and white includes the wisdom of Chinese yin and yang polarity (Ying Shi, 2018). In *Shadow*, Zhang Yimou boldly abandoned his prior "thick ink and heavy colours" techniques in favour of ink painting's black, white, and grey tones. The film thoroughly embodies ink drawing as an essential aspect of traditional Chinese culture.

The film's black, white, and grey palette produces a distinct artistic style. The film's ink painting depicts the flavour of ancient Chinese culture and emphasises the depth and emotional entanglement of the characters' relationships. For example, the scene in which the leading character, Jingzhou, dances with XiaoAi employs ink painting motifs, mixing the characters with the background to create a dreamy feeling.

The film's characters' pleasures, sorrows, loves, and hatreds are all played out in ink and water. The audience views the film as if it were a Chinese ink scroll with rolling hills. The world of ink and wash becomes the most distinct emblem of Chinese elements in *Shadow* and the audience's strongest feeling. When most of the colours in *Shadow* are replaced by black, white, and grey, the original distinct feelings become muted, or the filmmaker no longer immediately displays the emotions on the screen but instead offers each viewer more space for feeling and comprehending. This level of nuance corresponds to the Chinese or Oriental aesthetic idea of concealment.

Qin and Seer Ensemble

In addition to the ink space, Zhang Yimou employs several Chinese elements in the film to emphasise the theme of the work and the Chinese artistic style. The "Qin and Seer" are the most remarkable Chinese elements in the picture. Traditional Chinese musical instruments include the zither and the serpent. According to legend, Fu Xi who is the ancestor of mankind in mythology and was proficient in music and melody invented them. The Qin and the Seer have various cultural connotations as traditional Chinese cultural symbols (Hang & Xing, 2020).



Figure1 Seven stringed Qin

Photo from Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum
(<https://www.meipian.cn/33emyt4s>)



Figure1 Black lacquer 25 stringed Seer

Photo from Hunan Provincial Museum
(https://www.sohu.com/na/448508538_120006290)

In Chinese culture, the Qin and Seer ensemble is a traditional type of music that depicts harmony and love between husband and wife. The aspect of Qin and Seer ensemble is utilised frequently in *Shadow* to portray the emotional entanglements between the characters. For example, in the film, PeiLiang is suspicious of JingZhou who is ZiYu's Shadow, and requires JingZhou and XiaoAi to play the Qin and Seer ensemble in an attempt to test identity of JingZhou; while Zi Yu also asks JingZhou and XiaoAi to practice the ensemble in order to eliminate Pei Yu's suspicion. These musical interludes enhance the film's auditory experience while highlighting the characters' nuanced interactions. The guzheng and the erhu are two examples of traditional Chinese instruments and musical elements used in the film's melody, which is ancient and gives it a distinct flavour. The Qin and Seer, a national instrument of China with deep symbolic meanings, is also employed in Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* to depict the love of a husband and wife between Ziyu and XiaoAi, the brotherhood between ZiYu and PeiLiang, and even to lend classical elegance to the portrayal of character.

The musical instrument known as "xiao" is included in the film in addition to the Qin and Seer. The xiao is an extremely old wind instrument that originated from the bone whistle. Though they are both traditional Chinese musical instruments, the xiao and the Qin and Seer have quite different cultural meanings as symbols. The "xiao" has the philosophical meaning of "solitude," Because Xiao's music is almost always solo by one person. but the Qin and Seer have the meaning of "unity."

In *Shadow*, the harmony between the husband and wife of the governor ZiYu and XiaoAi is eventually broken by the realm of the state, and the brotherhood between ZiYu and PeiLiang is ultimately swayed by power. The "unity" of the film is imaginary, while the "solitude" is real, and we have to marvel at the subtlety of the film's philosophical conception. The elegant timbres of Qin and Seer cannot be replaced by other instruments, and the combination of these two instruments has different temperaments, which is very suitable for the ink colors expressed in "Shadow". The straightforward and easy-to-understand plot and Zhang Yimou's identifiable white space approach may cause audiences to experience profound audio-visual experiences.

We may have endless ideas and reveries about the white space in the film after watching it. Three scenes in the film could be deemed the most vibrant. The first scene shows who Shadow is. Although Ziyu, the city's Governor, keeps his emotions to himself in silence, the second scene depicts the extraordinary bond between the Shadow and Xiao Ai. In the third scene, which also happens to be the only instance in which the Governor and his wife have ever played the zither in unison and expressed their love for one another in the film, they spar over the instrument in a hidden chamber, seemingly to determine whether or not their feelings for one another still endure. It also is a farewell to the Shadow, who has left the mirror state to fight with Yang Cang. The Qin and Seer roles in Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* are unquestionably important, and the film's cohesive visuals are essential for the internationalisation of Chinese traditional culture. China has never had a flavour that is so uniquely its own.

Yin-Yang and the Five Elements

In Chinese philosophy, Yin-Yang and the Five Elements are significant concepts that symbolise the cyclical nature and interconnectedness of all things on Earth and in heaven. The great Governor of *Shadow*, Ziyu, gets hurt and finds sanctuary in a cave with the help of his shadow, Jingzhou, and his wife, Xiao Ai, to figure out the true importance of the Yang family's swordsmanship—a Tai Chi drawing being created in a downpour. The Governor and the shadow are positioned at the opposite ends of the Tai Chi graphic. "Taiji" means "the beginning of all things." The Tai Chi diagram comprises an independent circular plane with a black and a white fish head to tail, with the black fish representing yin and the white fish representing yang. The white fish has black eyes, and the black fish has white eyes, and they are popularly referred to as yin and yang fish. The overall image of Tai Chi consists of circular arcs with smooth and complete lines, and the yin and yang fish are connected at the head and tail, implying that there is yin in yang and yang in yin, which are opposites of each other, penetrate each other, and transform into each other, containing the wisdom of Chinese philosophy of inter-relationships and unending life. The film's characters' relationships mirror the creator's understanding of Tai Chi, creating a tension between the real and the phoney, the false and the real, that draws the audience in.

The characters and plots of *Shadow* are all related to the five aspects of yin-yang, such as the presence of the shadow realm state itself being the embodiment of yin and yang complementarity. Simultaneously, the costumes and props in the film represent the concept of the five elements of yin and yang. Yang denotes strength, like in the case of the Dudu, as well as the Yang family's sword style. Yang Cang, an enemy army general, is skilled with the sword, and his sword is so mighty that he can break the opponent in three strokes. Zi Yu had been injured by Yang Cang's sword and was resolved to avenge himself, but he could not discover a means to break the blade. Yin, the female gender, represents wisdom. Xiao Ai, the Governor's wife, is astute and advises entering the Pei Parasol in the form of a lady, swinging her hips, and stepping in snake movements to soften the rigidity and finally break the Yang family's sword. The conceptual relationship between yin and yang also includes males and women, rigidity and flexibility, strength, and wisdom.

Furthermore, as an essential emotional thread in the film, the connection between Du Du's husband and wife carries the philosophical meaning of truth and lie. In Pei, Zi Yu and Xiao Ai are a real couple as well as a model pair. The Dudu has been hurt and is being held in a secret room. In front of strangers, Xiao Ai and Jingzhou pretend to be husband and wife. They spend time together day and night, growing empathetic and loving each other until the "fake couple" becomes the "real couple." Everything is polarised, and there is no such thing as a consistent

relationship. This is equally true of the relationship between king and subject and between husband and wife.

Using these symbols adds philosophical overtones to the film and enhances the narrative. For example, the colours of the characters' outfits and the shapes of the objects in the film all represent the concept of yin and yang and the five elements, giving philosophical thought and the expression of life themes to the film.

Calligraphy Art

Calligraphy is a significant component of traditional Chinese culture, vividly shown in *Shadow*. Moreover, such depictions have an artistic appeal. To begin, the depiction of calligraphy appears repeatedly throughout the film. These calligraphic works not only demonstrate the traditional Chinese art of calligraphy but also communicate the theme and mood of the film through the morals and symbolism embedded in the sayings. For example, the appearance of a piece of calligraphy work with the character of "patience" at the film's beginning implies the main character's fate and the theme of patience and sacrifice in the film's narrative. Second, calligraphic elements in the film are used in scene design and prop fabrication. Elements such as calligraphy works and couplets are meticulously crafted and used in the film's study room, temple, and other places to create an ancient and elegant ambience. Through their textual contents and symbols, these calligraphic components illustrate the thickness and richness of traditional Chinese culture and inject greater depth of thought and cultural connotations into the film. These calligraphic symbols create an antique and lovely ambience and demonstrate the depth and breadth of traditional Chinese culture.

Finally, in the film, calligraphy represents the character's individuality and inner world. For example, in the film, the calligraphy of the character "夫" not only expresses the main character's sense of responsibility and commitment to his family but also demonstrates the main character's strong and bold character traits through the momentum and strength of the calligraphy. The scene in the film in which Pei Liang performs calligraphy in his study displays the allure of traditional Chinese calligraphy art. This application emphasises the aesthetic significance of calligraphy and the pursuit of spiritual cultivation in ancient Chinese culture. The art of calligraphy in Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* exhibits the distinct charm and profound history of traditional Chinese culture. It expresses the film's theme and emotion through textual content and symbolism. Simultaneously, the employment of calligraphic elements enhances the film's visual impression and artistic expression, presenting the audience with a picture scroll replete with Chinese characteristics.

Architectural Aesthetics

Shadow's architectural aesthetics mirror traditional Chinese culture as well. The film's buildings, which include official houses and government offices, temples, and bridges, exhibit distinctive styles and excellent craftsmanship. These architectural symbols create a nostalgic atmosphere and represent the distinct charm and historical roots of traditional Chinese culture. The sequence in the film in which Jingzhou and XiaoAi hide in a cave, for example, demonstrates the architectural beauty of mountain rocks and deep caves. This application exemplifies the style and qualities of traditional Chinese architecture and the historical origins and geographical characteristics of traditional Chinese culture.

The Effectiveness of Communication of Chinese Traditional Cultural Symbols in *Shadow*

China's film industry has proliferated recently, and the domestic box office has skyrocketed. According to data released by the Film Bureau of the General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, the total box office of national films in 2017 was 55.911 billion yuan, a 13.45% increase year on year; the box office of domestically produced films was 30.104 billion yuan, accounting for 53.84% of the total box office, and there were 92 films with a box office of more than one hundred million yuan, 51 of which were domestically produced (Legal Evening News [EB/OL]). Films significantly impact the dissemination of positive traditional Chinese culture and the promotion of national soft power as an emerging cultural carrier. Zhang Yimou's film *Shadow* exemplifies how to use Chinese themes and tell a solid Chinese story through the audio-visual language of film.

Creating a strong cultural atmosphere

Through traditional Chinese cultural symbols, the film *Shadow* establishes powerful cultural emotions. In addition to showcasing a picture scroll with classic Chinese characteristics, this cultural setting helps the audience learn more about China's historical background and traditional ways of life. This communication effect positively impacts the transmission and advancement of Chinese culture.

Maximise the thematic expression

The traditional cultural symbols in the film "*Shadow*" not only enrich the content of the film, but also deepen the theme expression of the film. For example, the use of symbols such as ink and wash painting and musical ensemble injects philosophical connotations and emotional entanglements into the film; the embodiment of yin and yang and the five elements injects philosophical thinking and the expression of life concepts into the film; and the use of calligraphy and architectural aesthetics expresses the heaviness and richness of traditional Chinese culture. The use of these traditional cultural symbols makes the film more thought-provoking and culturally meaningful.

Enhance the film-going experience

The film-going experience, as a type of audio-visual art, is an essential criterion for determining the quality of a film. The employment of traditional cultural symbols in the film *Shadow* provides visual and auditory enjoyment to the audience and allows them to appreciate the charm of traditional Chinese culture while watching the film. This improvement to the film-going experience encourages more people to pay attention to and appreciate traditional Chinese culture.

Promoting cross-cultural communication

Cross-cultural communication has become an essential means of communication and cooperation among countries worldwide as globalisation has progressed. Films, highly influential to popular culture, serve as a means of cross-cultural communication. The utilisation of a significant number of traditional Chinese cultural symbols by Zhang Yimou in *Shadow* highlights the distinctive charm of Chinese culture and encourages cross-cultural communication.

On the one hand, the film *Shadow* allows domestic and foreign audiences to grasp and recognise Chinese culture's rich connotation and unique charm by displaying classic Chinese cultural

icons. Using these ancient cultural symbols helps break down cultural boundaries and improve the knowledge and comprehension of Chinese culture among domestic and overseas audiences.

Conversely, the film *Shadow* showcases Chinese cinema's artistic merit and inventive power in global exchange. This film has captured the hearts and admiration of both domestic and international viewers with its own creative style and cultural representation. This type of cross-cultural dialogue raises Chinese cinema's profile internationally and contributes to its increasing influence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the communication of traditional Chinese cultural symbols in Zhang Yimou's film *Shadow* has a beneficial effect on generating a solid cultural atmosphere, expanding the theme's representation, improving the film-going experience, and boosting cross-cultural communication. The deft employment of these ancient cultural symbols reveals the distinct charm of Chinese culture. It garners more attention and recognition for Chinese films in international communication.

Cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly vital today, and films, as a popular culture, have widespread diffusion and effect. We can better demonstrate the charm of our own culture and foster communication and understanding between different civilizations by using traditional cultural symbols in films. This not only helps to support the inheritance and growth of our own culture but also helps to increase our own culture's influence in the global arena.

At the same time, we should recognise that using traditional cultural symbols is more than just stacking and listing. It must be integrated with modern society and the context of the times, and traditional culture and modern elements can be organically combined through skilful creativity and careful design to create excellent works with both traditional cultural heritage and modern sense.

Popular cultural forms like films have a significant role in facilitating cross-cultural exchanges. Encouraging and supporting talented directors to incorporate traditional cultural symbols into their works is essential. Doing so not only showcases the uniqueness and charm of their cultures but also promotes understanding and interaction among different cultures. Simultaneously, we should strengthen our research and knowledge of historic cultural symbols, delving deeper into their implications and ideals to provide fabulous inspiration and impetus for modern society and cultural growth.

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