

# Analysis of Chinese Elements in Zhang Yimou's Films —Take *Hero* as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese elements are favored by many Chinese directors to use in films. Such film elements can make literary films or commercial films full of more cultural deposits and values. The Chinese elements in the film will also support more interlocking plots in the film, and they are used in many ways in films, such as martial arts, swordsmanship, calligraphy, color and music. Zhang Yimou uses Chinese elements in his films, even his commercial films are endowed with profound historical and cultural significance because of the Chinese elements. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* uses a lot of Chinese elements, color variations or the use of calligraphy, which affects the plot changes of the whole film. Director Zhang Yimou also made his way internationally by using Chinese elements, so that many international friends could understand Chinese culture and the cultural deposits in Chinese films.

**Keywords:** *Zhang Yimou, film, Chinese elements, calligraphy, color*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese elements refer to the images, symbols and customs that are recognized by most Chinese people and embody the spirit of traditional Chinese culture. Chinese elements are an indispensable part of China's display to the world. In modern society, film is a part of people's life, which is called "the seventh art". At the same time, Chinese element has gradually become an important element for Chinese directors to produce films. From the use of colors to the composition of characters and actions, Chinese elements are used and always leave a deep impression on people in classic films. Zhang Yimou shows Chinese elements incisively and vividly in his works. Early in Zhang Yimou's films, he consciously used a large number of Chinese elements and adjusted them according to different scenes and plot color tone. Chinese fencing, martial arts films, include the use of Chinese calligraphy elements and the use of some Chinese classical instruments. Through the use of these Chinese elements, Zhang Yimou also conveys a deeper meaning in his films, which is not just *Hero* that using Chinese elements<sup>[4]</sup>.

## 2. REVIEW OF THE MOVIE *HERO*

The application of Chinese elements in *Hero* is very profound. The application of Chinese elements runs through the whole film, even the plot of the film is also based on Chinese history.

At the end of the Warring States Period, the king of Qin wanted to unify the world and launched a crusade against Zhao and six other states. The king of Qin aroused strong

dissatisfaction among his knights, who wanted to assassinate him. Zhao's assassins Changkong, Jian and Feixue hate the king of Qin and want to kill the crown prince. The king of Qin ordered, "Whoever catches the assassin may go up to the king of Qin and walk twenty steps". Three years ago, assassins Can Jian and Fei Xue broke into the palace of the King of The State of Qin to assassinate him. However, in the end, Can Jian gives up assassinating the King of Qin. Fei Xue feels confused about this move. Three years later, Wu Ming, a knight of the State of Qin, avenged himself by attacking the state of Qin. He sneaked into the state of Qin and within ten years mastered the skill of killing people in ten steps.

Wu Ming came to discuss the assassination of Qin with Chang Kong, Can Jian and Fei Xue. When Wu Ming goes to Qin, Can Jian sends two words to Wu Ming: Tianxia. In order to prove himself, Can Jian died by Fei Xue's knife. The king of Qin summoned Wu Ming. Wu Ming told the king of Qin the story of "killing three men in ten steps"; but at that moment, Wu Ming finally gave up. Wu Ming called on the king of the Qin dynasty to unify China and end years of war and historical hatred. Finally Wu Ming died in a flurry of arrows.

## 3. COLOR USING IN ZHANG YIMOU'S FILM AND THE CHINESE ELEMENTS

### 3.1. Using of Color in *Hero*

Zhang Yimou's *Hero* uses a lot of colors, black and white, blue, green, yellow, red and white, and uses different colors in different scenes to highlight the theme. Someone

commented that Zhang Yimou's use of color in the movie *Hero* "White symbolizes the most beautiful death, blue the most noble contest, red the most fiery life, green the most peaceful memory, and black the most extensive mind".

### 3.1.1. *The Color of Black*

The whole tone of *Hero* is mostly black, using red, blue, green and white to tell the story respectively. Zhang Yimou's color scheme for The state of Qin was black. Black in Chinese elements is usually associated with death, sadness, melancholy, coldness, seriousness or anything connected with life. The beginning and end of the film are black, suggesting that Wu Ming entered the palace of the Qin dynasty to assassinate the king of Qin, and it is impossible to come out alive. At the beginning of the film, the clothes of the troops of the State of Qin, the clothes of its ministers, the design of the coils of dragons on the pillars inside the palace, the walls and floors inside the palace, and the clothes of the king of Qin are all in black tone. This gives people a very strong sense of oppression and expresses the dissatisfaction, resentment and anger of the people at the time when the king of Qin waged war against the six states. At the end of the film, Wu Ming and the king of Qin also used the black color tone in the palace of the Qin Palace. Although Wu Ming did not assassinate the King in the end, the black tone also meant that Wu Ming's death made it impossible for him to leave the palace alive.

### 3.1.2. *The Color of Blue, Green and Red*

When Wu Ming tells Qin Wang the story of Can Jian and Fei Xue, he uses red, blue, green and red in Chinese elements, which gives people two contrasting expressions. One represents a joyous atmosphere, the other an expression of blood and passion. In Zhang Yimou's film, the scene in which Can Jian and Fei Xue stab the King of Qin is red with strong color expression like blood, which is a kind of exciting scene <sup>[4]</sup>. In the film, the blood, the red clothes of the people in the library, the writing are all in cinnabar, and the yellow leaves between the red clothes later. The color suggests a struggle for life and death. Later, the blue clothes in the film expressed a calm state of mind. Blue is a cool color, a symbol of calmness, and also a symbol of their love story. Later, Can Jian used green as the main color tone in his conversation with Wu Ming. Green is also cool and tonal, expressed a kind of halcyon feeling. Can Jian wants to express that there is no hatred in his heart at that time; it also implies that Wu Ming does not want to assassinate the King of Qin. This green color is well used in Zhang Yimou's films. It is difficult to think of green as an element of Chinese elements, but Zhang Yimou uses green to express a sense of inner peace and implies a desire for peace. Green also represents the hope of life.

### 3.1.3. *The Color of White*

Later, Zhang Yimou uses white in his films. White means peace, not war. At the same time, it implies that even if the king of Qin is assassinated, or the assassination fails to succeed, it will generate bad influence to the country, and the people in the society will still suffer. Therefore, Zhang Yimou uses white color elements in the film to express the wish of the King of Qin to unite the six states and live in peace.

## 3.2. *Using of Color in Other Films*

In Zhang Yimou's films, color, as a Chinese element, has always been used to express characters' emotions. In earlier films like *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou mainly used the color element of Chinese red, which was used to express the main emotional color of prosperity and happiness in the film. Later, the film *House of Flying Ducks* also used a wealth of color elements, such as turquoise official caps and red buildings, which also represented the characters and plot in the film <sup>[1]</sup>. In recent years, the film *The Shadow* also uses rich color elements. The whole film narrates the whole story in the form of black and white color tone and ink painting. The clothing in the film is also mostly Chinese elements of ink as the main body, including throughout the film *Tai Chi* that is also black and white color <sup>[2]</sup>. Zhang Yimou used different colors to narrate the plot of the story, and made a good communication with the audience through the ingenious use of colors. The layers shown in color and the picture and artistic conception highlighted by color give the audience a good visual effect.

## 4. EMBODIMENT OF OTHER CHINESE ELEMENTS IN *HERO*

Zhang Yimou is good at using Chinese elements in his films or works, such as swordsman, martial arts, calligraphy, classical music, color and so on, which are well applied. Moreover, Zhang Yimou will use these Chinese elements in his films to create profound characters and make smooth connections between plots. This is not the first time that Zhang yimou has used Chinese elements in his work. He used Chinese elements in his first film, *Red Sorghum*, and later in *Raise the Red Lantern*. He uses Chinese elements incisively and vividly in his works. The most comprehensive use of Chinese elements in *Hero* is the perfect fusion of swordsmanship, martial arts, calligraphy and classical music.

### 4.1. *Calligraphy*

Many calligraphy elements are used in *Hero*, among which two calligraphy elements Can best promote the plot development. The first time is when Wu Ming went to

Zhao Guo Library to ask Can Jian for the word "sword". The second time is when Can Jian persuaded Wu Ming to assassinate the King of Qin, and he wrote the word "Tianxia" in the desert.

The first time Wu Ming went to Zhao Guo Library to look for Can Jian and begged for words, just when Can Jian finished writing the word "sword", the arrows came in randomly, but Can Jian was still calm. Can Jian uses seal script to write the character "Jian", and it is written in cinnabar ink <sup>[5]</sup>. Because when the author writes calligraphy, fingers, wrists, arms as well as the whole body are used. In the film, when writing, Can Jian's long hair and streamers on his clothes, while writing with the wind, express the swordsmanship of "Can Jian". This kind of swordsmanship is not realized from real martial arts, but reflected from calligraphy. Zhang Yimou's use of this calligraphic element not only allows the audience to see that in calligraphy, but also in the face of random arrows, they are very calm. Even if the wind blows and the grass moves, it will not affect the writer's heart. At the same time, Zhang Yimou let the audience see Can Jian's superb swordsmanship in a deeper level.

The second use of calligraphy element is that Can Jian told Wu Ming not to assassinate the King of Qin and wrote the word "Tianxia" in the desert. Zhang Yimou uses the calligraphy element here in the film because through these two characters, he establishes the image of the character. At the same time, through the Chinese element, he tells the audience that Can Jian wants to unify the country, does not want constant wars but peace. Because the world belongs to the common people, it also reflects a very important point in the Chinese element, which is unity and reunion. Only when the world is at peace, can the people have the chance to reunite and have a peaceful reunion.

The use of Chinese elements in the film arouses people's life consciousness and emotional thinking. But because the depth of calligraphy shows the essential strength and directness of human being, it also has corresponding rhythm and rhythm of human emotion <sup>[6]</sup>. "Sword" expresses unrestrained, so it expresses the strongest feeling. In the plot of Wu Ming assassinating the Qin Dynasty, Nameless "realizes" the significance of "the world" at the last moment, so he gives up stabbing the Qin Dynasty, which shows the importance of calligraphy in arousing people's emotion.

In addition, according to theory, the calligraphy of the state of Zhao should be jin Script, namely, Da Zhuan. However, it was only after Qin unified China that xiao Zhuan was invented. Xiao Zhuan is derived from Da Zhuan, so the two are quite close. The character "Jian" hanging above the high hall of the Qin Palace is obviously xiaozhuan, which actually indicates that the Qin Dynasty unified China and Chinese characters.

The implied meaning of calligraphy, or the profound implied meaning of the word "sword", all show profound national cultural connotation and have traditional Chinese characteristics. The application of calligraphy makes the film rich in national cultural connotation, which is also a major feature of Zhang Yimou's films. What makes a

commercial film culturally valuable is that Zhang Yimou often uses Chinese elements in his films.

## 4.2. Swordsmanship

After knowing the ambition of the king of Qin to rule the world, Can Jian in *Hero* gives up the chance to assassinate the king of Qin for the peace of all the people in the world. The expression of this concept in the film is expressed through the artistic conception of calligraphy.

In Chinese elements, even in this film, swordsmanship and calligraphy are the same, from which the author finds peace. Through the application of calligraphy elements, heroes express the essence of traditional culture, and from the artistic conception of calligraphy, the highest realm of ancient people's experience is "unity of man and nature" <sup>[3]</sup>. Swordsmanship runs through the film, whether it is the battle between Wu Ming and Qin Wang, or the battle between Can Jian and Fei Xue, etc. At that time, swordsmanship was an important skill for people to use in fighting. Zhang Yimou applies the Chinese element of swordsmanship into the film. Swordsmanship requires stability of mind and concentration to make a good sword. The use of this Chinese element makes the image of the assassin in the whole film more three-dimensional, as well as makes the plot of the whole film more coherent.

Swordsmanship and other Chinese martial arts are often used in Zhang Yimou's other films and works. For example, in the film *Ying*, the masculine martial arts of men and feminine martial arts of women are basically used throughout the film to achieve a Chinese-style effect. The use of such Chinese elements undoubtedly adds value to the film.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the films directed by Zhang Yimou, the application of color, calligraphy, martial arts, swordsmanship and music all add cultural value to literary films or commercial films. In addition to *Hero*, many films directed by Zhang Yimou have used Chinese elements, and even the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games—the use of ink painting, which adds value and culture to the work of art <sup>[4]</sup>. Zhang Yimou is also making commercial films, but his commercial films have a deeper cultural heritage because of the integration of Chinese elements. In the research of this paper, the author only made a detailed analysis of the film *Hero* as well as studied and interpreted the Chinese elements used in this film. In the future, the author may continue to study the Chinese elements used in Zhang Yimou's other films, such as the eight Diagrams Tai Chi element used in Film. Zhang Yimou has made extensive use of Chinese elements in his films, from his early films to his recent commercial films <sup>[5]</sup>. This application lets the Chinese elements to become more international, and lets the international friends understand parts of the Chinese elements. At the same time, China's film industry also

stands a very profound position in the international film industry. In addition, due to Zhang Yimou's use of Chinese elements in films, it is not only shown in literary films or commercial films. For China's film industry, Chinese elements should be used more in films, so that the development of films can still have the foundation of Chinese culture.

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