



An Ethereal Paradise: On the "Artistic Conception" of Scene Art in Kaige Chen's Film "Legend of the Demon Cat"

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Abstract. Chinese film art places particular emphasis on the use of "artistic conception" to craft scenes, aiming to achieve a "poetic and picturesque" image and a "fusion of emotion and scenery" state. Kaige Chen's film "Legend of the Demon Cat" in 2017 perfectly displayed the charm of Chinese painting and oriental aesthetic implications. It is worth noting that the expression of "artistic conception" in the scene art of this movie reflected the "poetic and picturesque" atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty, making the audience feel like they were in a fairyland. Therefore, we can appreciate the beauty of the artistic conception in the scene art of this movie from the perspectives of Chinese painting, ancient poetry, and metaphysics, and enjoy the charm of Tang culture.

Keywords: beauty of artistic conception, Legend of the Demon Cat, film vision, Chinese aesthetics.

1 Introduction

Legend of the Demon Cat is a work directed by Kaige Chen in 2017. The film tells the story of how the poet Bai Juyi and the Japanese monk Hai Kong found out the truth about the case of the demon cat. By digging out the story behind the "Qingping Tune" composed by Li Bai at the "Feast of Bliss", the two men become aware of an old incident between the demon cat and Yang Guifei decades ago [1]. The visual positioning of this movie is an epic film with an oriental fantasy tone. The film's artists also designed the neatly stretched out 108 workshops of Chang'an City. It is clear that Chen Kaige is trying hard to understand the lost good times, and that he has contributed to the artistic aesthetic of the contemporary film industry [2], creating a magnificent atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty. Therefore, we can appreciate the beauty of this "artistic conception" from different perspectives in this film, such as exploring the presentation of the artistic conception of Chinese painting, Tang poetry, and metaphysics in the film, which can allow us to fully appreciate the charm of the oriental fantasy.

2 The Artistic Conception Of Chinese Painting: From Ancient Painting To The Presentation Of Color Styles In Scene Art

2.1 Style of Blue and Green Landscape Painting



Fig. 1. Conceptual diagram of the interior of the palace from *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017)

In *Legend of the Demon Cat*, what best reflects the prosperous atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty is the interior design of the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building in the Tang Palace. The overall interior of the building presents a blue and green color tone. Director Kaige Chen drew inspiration from the style of the blue and green landscape painting in the ancient Chinese painting to design the color tone of this main scene. The plot of Emperor Xuanzong's birthday banquet for Yang Guifei in the film was presented in the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building, which was also the climax of the film. The director's purpose was to show the bustling and lively scene of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, and green also symbolized prosperity in Chinese painting. Because in the five elements of Taoism, green and wood have the meaning of being alive, so green contains vitality. In addition, Blue and green landscape in the Tang, Song and Ming period of development is very brilliant, not only reflects the Chinese ancient artists on the natural landscape of the aesthetic perception and beautiful subjective expression, but also reflects the Chinese tradition of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and other schools of thought advocated the "unity of man and nature" [3]. At the same time, the combination of blue-green and yellow tones in the film could also reflect the noble status of the royal family and symbolize paradise in the eyes of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, as shown in Figure 1. In addition, the protagonist of this scene was Yang Guifei, who had Hu ancestry. Meanwhile, Tang Xuanzong and An Lushan, a general of Hu descent, played drums and danced in this scene. The most representative artwork of the Tang Dynasty, "Dunhuang Murals," also drew on the painting styles of multiple ethnic groups such as India and Turks, which coincidentally reflects the inclusiveness of Tang Dynasty culture. In contemporary research, a prevalent belief is that the murals in the Dunhuang Mogao Caves are the original form of Chinese Blue and Green Landscape Painting, and the painting style of the Mogao Caves is significantly influenced by Indian Buddhist art [4]. Therefore, the director gave the main scene the color of blue and green landscape

painting, which was more to indirectly reflect the active exchanges between the Tang Dynasty and foreign countries in cultural, economic, and other fields, and to reflect the strong inclusiveness of Tang culture.

2.2 Style of Ink Painting



Fig. 2. Exterior Design of Maweiyi from *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017)



Fig. 3. Exterior Design of Maweiyi from *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017)

In *Legend of the Demon Cat*, the director not only portrayed the prosperous Tang Dynasty atmosphere but also paid attention to the style of ink painting to shape the depression scene after the prosperity, because the dream of the Tang Palace and the fairyland of the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building would become a thing of the past and disappear with the passage of time. There were also a large number of scenes in the film using the style of ink painting to reflect the desolate situation, such as Maweipo, the tomb, and the dilapidated Hua'e Xiang Hui Building. As for the spirit of ink painting, in the early days of Chinese ink painting, it was influenced by the Taoist thought of Laozi. Taoist thought is the essence of the philosophical system of Chinese painting, which lays down the implicit spiritual connotation embedded in ink painting.[5]. This style of ink painting was especially reflected in the scene of Maweipo, where Yang Guifei took

shelter, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. In the film, the director filmed scenes of a mutiny outside the Mawei Station and a large army pressing on the border, suggesting that Yang Guifei's life had come to an end. The exterior scene of Mawei Station extensively used black, white, and some dark tones, which also implied that Yang Guifei and Tang Xuanzong returned to the plain and desolate fate of black and white after experiencing a prosperous life. It also used black and white to depict the era of Tang Xuanzong, where prosperity and decline were inevitable, which reflected the spirit of Yin and Yang mutually reinforcing and neutralizing each other in ink painting. In addition, ink painting emphasized the use of ink and brush. The combination of ink and water, as well as the brightness and intensity of ink color, were expressed in different forms [6], which could reflect different artistic conceptions. For example, as shown in Figure 2, the scenery of mountains, clouds, trees, and houses in the Mawei Station scene had been processed into ink painting style by the director with special effects, where the scenes of clouds and mountains reflected the style of thick ink. However, the use of this thick ink style lacked the white space of the picture, and the use of large areas of black and dark colors gave the audience a feeling of suffocation in the face of an ambush on all sides, allowing the audience to feel the same. This also reflected that the ink painting style can convey a profound artistic conception to the audience and leave a lasting impression.

3 The Artistic Conception Of Tang Poetry: The Beauty Of Merging Emotion And Scenery

3.1 Scenery of Flowers and Females



Fig. 4. Scene of "Feast of Bliss" from *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017)

At the Feast of Bliss, the famous Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai wrote a famous poem of praise for Yang Guifei - "Qingping Theme". The first two lines of the poem, which were about flowers and women, were also designed by the director in the scene, reflecting the beauty of the fusion of emotion and scenery. In the film, the director intentionally staged a scene where Li Bai lies inebriated by the pool and composes a poem titled "Qingping Theme" to express his admiration towards Yang Guifei. From the first two lines "Clouds and flowers remind me of her dress and looks. Spring wind

brushes rails; dew moisten flowers" [7], it can be seen that the clouds, flowers, and female scenes expressed in these two lines are also arranged in the Feast of Bliss by the director. The most intuitive aspect is that the entire interior scene was decorated with blue-green clouds, aiming to create an ethereal paradise. The main manifestation of the flower scene in the poem was reflected in the setting of the main props, such as the large circular fabric used in the magic trick, as shown in Figure 4. It is interesting that Li Bai's poem did not explicitly imply which type of flower, but the director also cleverly used the pattern of peonies to decorate the scene.



Fig. 5. "Beauty with Hairpin Flowers" by Zhou Fang from <https://www.cnki.net>



Fig. 6. Scene of "Feast of Bliss" from *Legend of the Demon Cat* (2017)

In the "Beauty with Hairpin Flowers" by Zhou Fang, a famous court painter in the Tang Dynasty, the high-ranking noblewoman of the court wore peonies, as shown in Figure 5. Therefore, the director's main decoration in the Feast of Bliss scene was peonies, for example, the fabric used for magic was decorated with a lot of peony patterns to reflect the noble status of Yang Guifei, and the patterns of peony flowers were also a metaphor for Yang Guifei's beauty. Secondly, in the "Beauty with Hairpin Flowers", one can see the scenes of noble ladies holding fans, walking dogs, and watching cranes. Their healthy and plump bodies are different from other dynasties that deliberately demanded thinness as beauty for women, which is enough to demonstrate the inclusiveness towards women in the Tang Dynasty. The director captured many shots from a female perspective in the Feast of Bliss scene, such as Yang Guifei, dancers, female viewers, etc, who were all healthy and plump in the film. At the same time, the director also decorated the scene with many elegant ribbons, phoenixes, and other devices to express the charm of Tang Dynasty women, as shown in Figure 6. This also indicated that the

director wanted to convey an inclusive image of the Tang Dynasty to the audience. It also reflected the imagination of Tang Dynasty women in Li Bai's poetry, reflecting the poetic and picturesque atmosphere.

3.2 Scenery of Celestial Mountain and Yao Terrace



Fig. 7. Interior decoration of "Feast of Bliss"



Fig. 8. Interior decoration of "Feast of Bliss"

In the last two sentences in Li Bai's Qingping Theme "If she's not a fairy descended from Mountain Qunyu, she has to be a goddess from Yao Terrace in moonlight" [7], mountain fairies and Terrace were included. Therefore, the director specifically designed the corresponding scenes based on the two words in Li Bai's poem, showing the beauty of the scene depicted in the poem. The last two sentences of this poem also reflect the open-minded mood and heroic style of the poet Li Bai. Therefore, the director also combined the heroic and magnificent style of Li Bai's poem to design the whole scene. Firstly, there was the scene of "Celestial Mountain". In ancient Chinese mythology, there was a legend that immortals lived on the "Celestial Mountain". The ancient Celestial Mountain legend mainly consisted of two major systems: Western Kunlun and East China Sea fairy island. It is said that Kunlun Mountain was inhabited by the West Queen Mother, with a Yaochi and a palace on top [8]. Therefore, according to this ancient Chinese Celestial Mountain legend, the director also designed the scene

of "Celestial Mountain" inside the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building, as shown in Figure 7. The entire interior of the palace was covered with strange blue-green mountain stones, which were porous and uniquely shaped, leaving many small spaces for many actors to stand in and watch the performance of the Feast of Bliss. These actors dressed in ancient costumes stood on the "celestial mountain" as if they were immortals living in heaven and overlooking the human world. At the same time, the director used special effects to create a scene of clouds and mist on the top of the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building, which further highlighted the artistic conception of the immortal mountain in Li Bai's poetry. Secondly, according to legend, there were palaces and Yao terraces on the Celestial Mountain. The director built pavilions around the imperial throne in front of the palace, as shown in Figure 8. Above the throne, there were many small cloud carvings, which were gathered and carved into a beautiful lotus shape. On top of this cloud sculpture was a small pavilion installation, which was particularly prominent when lit by many candlelights. At the same time, there were many phoenix carvings surrounding it. This scenery precisely reflected the scene of Yao Terrace, where the West Queen Mother lived in Chinese mythology, and also shaped the fairyland of Yao Terrace in Li Bai's poems.

4 The Conception of Metaphysics: Philosophical Metaphors of Taoism and Buddhism

4.1 The Philosophy of "Round Sky and Square Earth" in Taoist



Fig. 9. The circular architecture in the Tang Palace



Fig. 10. The circular architecture in the Tang Palace

It is worth noting that in *Legend of the Demon Cat*, both the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building and the Treasure Pavilion in the former palace were designed as circular shapes, which embodied the philosophy of "round sky and square earth" in Chinese Taoist philosophy, and reflected the ancient Chinese people's understanding of the mystical imagery of heaven and earth. The ancient Chinese thoughts of "Round Sky and Square Earth" and "Harmony between Nature and Human" belong to the realm of Taoist thought. The concept of "Round Sky and Square Earth" embodied the reverence of the ancients for the universe. In Taoist thought, ancient sayings such as "Heaven is Yang, Earth is Yin" and "Heaven is Round like a Cover, and Earth is square like a Chessboard" [9] all explained the philosophy of "Round Sky and Square Earth". In ancient Chinese architecture, the circle represented heaven. For example, the ancient building "Temple of Heaven" in Beijing was designed as a prototype, representing reverence for heaven. And the sky was infinite, as stated in the Tao Te Ching "The Tao was called the Great Mother: empty yet inexhaustible, it gave birth to infinite worlds" [10]. Based on the philosophy of "Round Sky and Square Earth", director Kaige Chen wanted to design the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building as a fairyland full of magic, as shown in Figure 9. Therefore, the entire building was designed as a large circle, which represented a sense of awe towards heaven. In addition, in the film, Tang Xuanzong hid Yang Guifei's hair in the treasure pavilion of the former palace as a commemoration. This treasure pavilion also reflected the characteristics of "Round Sky and Square Earth", as shown in Figure 10. This treasure pavilion was the place where Yang Guifei's hair was enshrined, and inside was the shrine where Yang Guifei was enshrined. Because ancient Chinese believed that the soul of a person would ascend to heaven after death, the director paid more attention to the respect for heaven, so the entire treasure pavilion was also designed in a circular shape. Additionally, the ceiling of this treasure pavilion was also a circular dome, and the shrine enshrining Yang Guifei's hair faced the ceiling with an exquisite Eight Trigrams pattern. The surrounding area of the Eight Trigrams pattern on the ceiling was filled with ancient Chinese astrological diagrams, which reflected the Taoist ontology of "Tao Produces All Things" and the metaphysical conception of "Round Sky and Square Earth" and "Harmony between Nature and Human".

4.2 The Philosophy of Tranquil Extinction and Suffering in Buddhism



Fig. 11. The destroyed Tang Palace buildings and the pool in front of Yang Guifei's tomb



Fig. 12. The destroyed Tang Palace buildings and the pool in front of Yang Guifei's tomb

Legend of the Demon Cat also contained a lot of Buddhist philosophies. When Japanese monk Konghai and poet Bai Juyi learned the truth about Yang Guifei's death, they seemed to appreciate the "supreme secret" of Buddhist philosophy when facing the dilapidated Hua'e Xiang Hui Building. In the final scene of the protagonists gathering in the dilapidated Hua'e Xiang Hui Building shown in Figure 11, the director added his own thoughts on Buddhist philosophy, most importantly on the "impermanence" of life. In Buddhism, *dukkha* stands for pain, *dukkha* is one of the three marks of existence, along with impermanence and *anattā* (non-self). Buddhism, like other major Indian religions, asserts that everything is impermanent (*anicca*) [11]. Therefore, the director also used the technique of montage when shooting the scene of the dilapidated Hua'e Xiang Hui Building at the end, deliberately adding memories of the previous prosperous Hua'e Xiang Hui Building, comparing two identical scenes from different periods, demonstrating that everything has a process of transition from prosperity to decline, and showing the philosophy of tranquil extinction and impermanence in Buddhism. In addition, Buddhism also teaches people to recognize the causes of pain, because the truth of *dukkha* is the basic insight that life in this mundane world, with its climbing and crawling to eternal states and things [12]. Due to her obsession with love,

Yang Guifei died in extraordinary pain in the end. It is worth noting that when the protagonists went to the tomb of Yang Guifei, they needed to pass through a low-lying pool filled with trees, as shown in Figure 12. This scene was carefully designed by the director, considering that ancient Chinese people would hardly choose a cemetery in a place with unfavorable feng shui and very humid conditions. The director deliberately arranged this water scene because this pond was like a sea of persistent suffering, filled with Yang Guifei's reluctance and obsession with love. At the same time, the presence of water in this scene served as a metaphor for the arduous journey of seeking truth. As Konghai and Bai Juyi traversed through this watery terrain, they experienced the same obsession and bitterness felt by Yang Guifei, while also encountering Buddhist themes of impermanence of life.

5 Conclusion

The *Legend of Demon Cat* undoubtedly brought an exquisite feast of the Tang Dynasty illusion to the audience, allowing them to dream of the Tang Dynasty and taste the elegant artistic conception and unique oriental fantasy aesthetics. In the scene art of *Legend of Demon Cat*, we can not only appreciate scenes of blue-green landscape style and ink painting style but also experience the marvelous Chinese artistic conception. We can also savor the fairyland in Li Bai's poem *Qingping Theme* from the Hua'e Xiang Hui Building, and feel the artistic conception of Tang poetry with fused emotion and scenery. Moreover, we may also experience the mystical atmosphere of the dilapidated Tang palace architecture, and learn the impermanence and tranquil extinction of Buddhist philosophy. The Tang Dynasty illusion in the film meticulously crafted by Director Kaige Chen not only showcases a "poetic and picturesque" scene but also allows the audience to feel the artistic conception of "fused emotion and scenery". *Legend of Demon Cat* conveys the spiritual connotation of the national style of Chinese film art, reflecting the aesthetic character of oriental connotations. Its unique artistic conception aesthetics elevates the theme of the whole film, which not only leaves the audience with endless aftertaste but also shocks them with the paradise that is both real and fantasy.

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