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Poetic Cinema: The Aesthetic of Yijing (artistic conception) in Chinese Art Film

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Poetic Cinema:

The Aesthetic of *Yijing* (artistic conception) in Chinese Art Film

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Abstract

This study explores the aesthetic mechanism of *yijing* (artistic conception) in Chinese poetic cinema, aiming to reveal its distinctive generative logic and expressive strategies in contemporary film. *Yijing* is rooted in classical Chinese aesthetics and emphasizes the integration of emotion and environment as well as the interplay between subject and object. This aesthetic reflects the Daoist worldview of harmony between Heaven and humanity. Within this framework, film becomes not only a visual narrative medium but also a perceptual and philosophical space.

Adopting a cross-cultural perspective, this thesis examines major theories of poetic cinema in dialogue with the aesthetic logic of Chinese poetic cinema, highlighting the distinctiveness of *yijing* as a central concept in the Chinese tradition. Drawing on the works of renowned Chinese aesthetic theorists such as Zong Baihua, Zhu Guangqian, and Ye Lang, the study further develops a theoretical framework for understanding how *yijing* functions in film. Based on this framework, the thesis analyzes four representative Chinese poetic films: *Kekexili*, *The Assassin*, *Still Life*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. It demonstrates how various types of *yijing*, such as the majestic and the subtle, or the realist and the surrealist, are expressed through visual rhythm, narrative structure, and spatial composition.

The study argues that *yijing* is not a stylistic label but a comprehensive aesthetic system that shapes both creative intent and audience perception. The aesthetic of *yijing* not only helps fill the current theoretical gap in film studies, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the unique characteristics of Chinese poetic cinema, but also offers inspiration for the pluralistic development of global film aesthetics.

Introduction

In the context of globalization, visual art has continually expanded the boundaries of narrative, style, and technology, giving rise to diverse forms of aesthetic exploration. Among these, poetic cinema stands out as one of the most creative and challenging modes of expression. Scholarly attention to this genre has been longstanding, with representative contributions including Pasolini's theory of the "cinema of poetry" and Tarkovsky's concept of "sculpting in time," alongside more recent analyses of increasingly diverse poetic imagery practices. Poetic cinema is thus regarded not only as a stylistic category but also as an aesthetic stance that challenges conventional narrative paradigms. However, within the dominant discourse of international film theory, the prevailing understanding of the "poetic" remains largely centered on avant-garde traditions, emphasizing formal deconstruction, subjective expression, and symbolic strategies. There has been insufficient systematic understanding or theoretical elaboration on the unique aesthetic mechanisms of Chinese poetic cinema, particularly those grounded in the classical Chinese aesthetic tradition of *yijing* (意境, often translated as 'artistic conception'). This absence not only obscures the rich aesthetic qualities inherent in Chinese visual culture but also reduces cross-cultural dialogue on poetic cinema to superficial comparisons, making it difficult to achieve deeper mutual understanding.

Poetic traditions across cultures reflect different philosophical and aesthetic concerns. Within the Chinese tradition, poetics has been deeply shaped by the worldview of the unity of Heaven and humanity (天人合一), where artistic expression seeks resonance between the inner self and the external world. This aesthetic emphasizes the creation of a poetic space in which emotion and scenery merge (情景交融), and the real and the illusory become intertwined (虚实相生). This aesthetic pursuit has developed an exceptionally distinctive perceptual logic: through the mutual resonance and fusion between subject and object, a work simultaneously represents the external world and evokes an inner response in the viewer, ultimately transcending material appearances to reach a combined experience of

philosophical reflection and emotional engagement. The culmination of this aesthetic ideal is the concept of *yijing* in classical Chinese art theory. Across poetry and painting, *yijing* is not merely a style or technique but an ideal artistic state, where the interaction and fusion of emotion and scenery generate a dynamic flow between subject and object, the finite and the infinite, the manifest and the imagined, thereby enabling unique aesthetic creation.

Therefore, approaching Chinese poetic cinema through the lens of *yijing* helps illuminate its distinctive qualities, which differ from traditions such as avant-garde cinema, poetic realism, and modernist experimentation. It offers a significant perspective that merits greater attention in global film aesthetics. Importantly, *yijing* in Chinese poetic cinema represents a comprehensive aesthetic system that encompasses narrative, imagery, emotion, and philosophy. This system shapes the core creative goals of filmmakers and deeply influences how viewers receive and perceive these works, giving Chinese poetic cinema a unique aesthetic character that connects content and form as well as emotion and philosophical reflection.

Building on the preceding discussion, this study investigates the following primary research question: How does Chinese poetic cinema, within the aesthetic framework of *yijing*, develop its distinctive artistic qualities? To address this core question, the study is further divided into three sub-questions. First, what are the shared features and differences between Chinese and other global poetic cinema? Second, as the core aesthetic mechanism of Chinese poetic cinema, what are the specific generative logic and expressive forms of *yijing*? Third, how does contemporary Chinese poetic cinema, through various creative approaches and visual strategies, present diverse types of *yijing*? To answer these questions, the study combines theoretical analysis, case studies, and comparative research. It is structured into three chapters. Chapter One offers a cross-cultural review of major poetic cinema theories and developments, identifying *yijing* as the key feature that distinguishes Chinese poetic cinema from global poetic cinema discourse. Chapter Two explores the philosophical foundations, generative mechanisms, and aesthetic expressions of *yijing*, drawing on the theories of scholars such as

Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua, and Ye Lang to analyze how films achieve subject-object interaction, the fusion of emotion and scenery, and the interplay of the real and the imagined. Chapter Three focuses on specific film examples, selecting representative works of Chinese poetic cinema to analyze the visual presentation and aesthetic effects of different types of *yijing* across dimensions such as the majestic and the subtle, realism and surrealism, and through aspects including audiovisual language, narrative strategies, and thematic content.

Through this systematic investigation, the study aims not only to offer a more in-depth and insightful analytical framework for understanding the artistic qualities of Chinese poetic cinema but also to address the current gap in global film theory regarding the understanding of Chinese aesthetic dimensions. The perspective of *yijing* proposed in this research is not intended to reduce Chinese poetic cinema to a single paradigm. Instead, it provides a distinctive entry point for the international scholarly community and offers an observational approach grounded in Chinese cultural experience.

Chapter 1 The Aesthetic Development of Poetic Cinema

Although poetic cinema exists globally as a distinctive form of cinematic aesthetic practice, its conceptual definitions and core characteristics differ significantly across cultural contexts. To accurately define the scope of this study, this chapter first traces the divergent origins of the concept of "poetry" across different historical traditions. It then compares the theoretical perspectives that shaped the respective understandings of poetic cinema, outlining the basic logic behind the formation of these concepts and summarizing the major historical trajectories of poetic cinema in different traditions. Finally, the chapter provides a brief analysis of the aesthetic commonalities and differences across cultural traditions of poetic cinema, establishing a clear conceptual framework that will serve as the foundation for the subsequent chapters.

1.1 The Origins and Development of The Concept of Poetry

As a literary and artistic form, poetry has a long history and a rich body of theoretical reflections across diverse cultural traditions, including both Chinese and other globally influential frameworks. These traditions differ considerably in their understanding of the nature and function of poetry, and such differences have directly shaped how the concept of "poetic cinema" has been formed and defined in later periods.

One influential lineage of poetic theory can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, where Plato and Aristotle offered some of the earliest systematic reflections on the nature of poetry. Plato put forward the idea of poetry as mimesis, suggesting that poets merely imitate the material world, which itself is only a shadow or copy of eternal Ideas (Plato 595a). In contrast, Aristotle defended poetry and endowed it with a higher epistemological and aesthetic value. In the *Poetics*, he likewise acknowledged poetry as imitation of action but emphasized that poetry imitates not simply what is, but what ought to be or what could be. For Aristotle, poetry is fundamentally a creative act (*poiesis*), and the poet's imagination allows poetry to transcend mere replication of reality (Aristotle 1451a). This theoretical

foundation set an important tone for one major tradition of poetic thought, emphasizing poetry's capacity to reflect reality as well as its inherent aesthetic creativity.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, neoclassicists, following classical models, codified rules for different poetic genres. They established a hierarchy that placed epic and tragedy above lyric poetry, emphasizing the importance of formal order and regulation. This system, however, faced rebellion during the Romantic era. At that time, the concept of poetry underwent a revolutionary shift: lyricism was elevated to the very essence of poetic expression. In the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), the British poet William Wordsworth famously defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 8). This redefinition marked a turn away from poetry as the imitation of the objective world and toward its recognition as the natural outpouring of the poet's subjective emotions and imagination. Moving into the modernist period, the formalist linguist Roman Jakobson introduced his theory of the "poetic function," arguing that among the many functions of language, the poetic function is characterized by its focus on the material and formal qualities of linguistic signs. In other words, it draws the audience's attention to the sensual dimensions of language—such as sound, rhythm, and texture—rather than its referential meaning (Jakobson 356). This shift has led modern poetic traditions, especially those influenced by European modernism, to view poetry as a self-referential art form, with poetic discourse emphasizing the beauty of its own structure rather than serving the communicative purposes of everyday language.

In summary, one influential trajectory in modern poetic theory traces a shift from mimetic approaches to lyrical expression, and ultimately to language-centered inquiry. This evolving understanding of poetry as a unique, emotionally charged, and symbolically rich form of discourse has helped shape later notions of the "poetic" in cinema.

By contrast, in the Chinese cultural context, poetry was not originally understood as a purely literary genre. Instead, it emerged as a form of vocal expression deeply embedded in songs, dances, and ritual practices. This tradition gradually evolved during the Western Zhou period

(1046–771 BCE) into the regulated structure found in the *Shijing* (*Classic of Poetry*). As stated in the Grand Preface to the *Shijing*: "Poetry is where intent leads; within the heart it is intent (志), when expressed in words it becomes poetry. When emotion stirs within, it takes shape in speech" (Zhu and Mao 1). Similarly, in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Scribe*), compiled by Sima Qian during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Confucius is quoted as saying, "The book conveys events, the poetry conveys intentions (意) (Sima 385). In the modern era, the renowned Chinese aesthete Zhu Guangqian also observed in his work *On Poetry* that the concepts of intent (志) and intention (意) inherently carry what modern language would call "emotion" (Zhu, *On Poetry* 6). It can thus be said that the understanding of poetry as an expression of emotion has been a shared conviction among Chinese poetry commentators throughout the ages.

In terms of linguistic characteristics, Chinese poetry excels at using rhythmic and condensed language to evoke associative thinking and emotional resonance, emphasizing the integration of external imagery with inner sentiment (Zhu, *On Poetry* 60). The language of poetry not only serves a representational or expressive function, but also participates in the generation of meaning, becoming a complex interaction of emotion, thought, language and sensory experience. For this reason, contemporary Chinese scholars generally hold that Chinese poetry should not be defined solely by its metrical patterns or formal genres. Instead, it should be understood as an expressive mechanism that uses language to stimulate imagination and achieve the harmony between scene and feeling, ultimately creating an aesthetic realm that transcends material imagery. Although language itself is finite, the meaning and emotional resonance it contains are boundless. This pursuit of subtlety, suggestiveness, and lingering aftertaste has been a defining aesthetic orientation throughout the tradition of Chinese poetry.

Overall, rather than viewing poetry merely as a vehicle for subjective expression or linguistic experimentation, the Chinese tradition understands it as an art form that arises from the dynamic interplay between inner emotion and the external world. Thus, when the modern medium of film emerged, it was perhaps inevitable that Chinese filmmakers would ask: could

cinema, like poetry, serve as a vessel for emotion, blend scene and sentiment, thereby realizing the continuation of traditional aesthetic spirit in a modern form? This question directly gave rise to the earliest stirrings of the concept of "Chinese poetic cinema."

1.2 Definitions and Theoretical Foundations of Poetic Cinema

As cinema gradually came to be recognized as an art form over the course of the twentieth century, scholars and artists began to explore the connections between film and poetry. In particular, poetic cinema began to take shape within the avant-garde movements of Europe and North America. Jean Epstein, for example, argued that through light, shadow, and montage, cinema could transcend the mere objective recording of reality and imbue images with a kind of poetic *photogénie*—a term referring to the ineffable spirit or charm of the cinematic image (Epstein 314). These avant-garde theories pushed cinematic aesthetics toward abstraction and formal experimentation, inspiring a wave of imaginative films such as *Mechanical Ballet* and *Un Chien Andalou*. These surrealist works expressed inner emotions and subconscious imagery not through linear narrative but through the associative linking of images. In this sense, the earliest conception of poetic cinema was rooted in a rebellion against traditional narrative cinema and in the excavation of the expressive potential of the cinematic medium. These pioneers argued that film need not be limited to telling stories. Like poetry, it could focus on conveying personal consciousness and emotion.

While the avant-garde tradition emphasized formal deconstruction and dreamlike imagery, the poetic realism movement that emerged in France in the 1930s offered another cinematic aesthetic that blended lyricism with realism. This style did not entirely abandon narrative structure. Rather, it embedded poetic elements naturally within the logic of storytelling, focusing on the fates of marginalized characters and cultivating a distinct atmosphere through the interplay of light and shadow. Directors such as Marcel Carné and Jean Vigo infused a strong lyrical quality into the realist narrative framework, creating a unique style known as poetic realism. As film scholar Dudley Andrew observed in his analysis of Carné's *Le Jour se lève* (1939), the greatness of the film lies in its ability "to discover poetry in the very social

conditions that are directly presented" and to elevate the experience of social life to what Bazin called a "metaphysical level". In Andrew's view, "poetic realism vaguely addresses what most audiences seek at the movies—something that is true to life, yet more concentrated and intense than life"(Andrew x). This aesthetic path, which generates poetic structure within a realist framework, not only deeply influenced postwar European cinema but also became a formative influence in shaping global understandings of what constitutes "poetic cinema."

By the mid-twentieth century, theoretical discussions of "poetic cinema" had become increasingly rich and diverse. Among the most representative voices were American experimental film pioneer Maya Deren and Italian filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini. In her theoretical writings, Deren explicitly distinguished between two cinematic structures: the horizontal narrative structure and the vertical poetic structure. She likened conventional narrative films to a "horizontal" development unfolding along the temporal axis, while describing poetic or lyrical films as a "vertical" unfolding that deepens emotion and theme. In Deren's view, cinema either tells a story, like prose or a novel, or it condenses images and atmospheres, like poetry. She used the term "vertical cinema" to describe sequences of images that lack clear narrative progression and are connected through association and metaphor (Gunning 556–57). Deren's theory thus offered a general framework of "poetic cinema": nonlinearity, associative logic, and an emphasis on atmosphere are among its key features.

Pasolini, by contrast, approached the idea of "poetic cinema" from a linguistic perspective. In his famous 1965 essay "The Cinema of Poetry," he argued that the language of cinema is fundamentally different from written language. Traditional literary poetry employs linear signs, that is, words, whereas cinema uses image-signs. Words are governed by fixed vocabularies and grammar, but images have no preexisting "dictionary." As Pasolini put it, the filmmaker's signs are "not chosen from a dictionary but snatched directly from chaos" (Pasolini 39). It is precisely this quality, the emergence of signs from chaos, that gives cinema its dreamlike texture. Whether or not it adheres to narrative, cinema is inherently imbued with poetic qualities. He also discussed the literary device of free indirect discourse,

which Pasolini adapted to describe a cinematic mode situated between subjective perspective and third-person narration. In this mode, the camera operates as a means of presenting the characters' inner worlds through the subtle, implicit intervention of the author. Several works of European auteur cinema, such as those by Michelangelo Antonioni and Jean-Luc Godard, as well as surrealist films, achieve their poetic atmosphere precisely through this stylized use of cinematic language (Pasolini 48).

Over time, the development of poetic cinema has given rise to a wide variety of forms and styles. After surveying the different positions on poetic cinema, Gan Ning summarizes in "The Question of Poetic Cinema" that "Poetic cinema tends to be contrasted with narrative, although many theorists believe narrative films can include poetic passages" (Gan 564). Overall, many influential theories of poetic cinema have defined its poetic qualities primarily through formal experimentation and cinematic language. Such approaches often distinguish poetic cinema from mainstream narrative films, framing it as an aesthetic strategy that resists or subverts dominant commercial storytelling models.

In contrast to the concept of "poetic cinema" shaped by avant-garde art and modernist currents, Chinese poetic cinema draws upon a distinctive cultural heritage and follows its own generative logic. One reason why Chinese cinema has not, like French or Soviet cinema, produced an abundance of explicit definitions or theoretical manifestos around "poetic film" may be that poetic qualities naturally and often unconsciously permeate Chinese films—they are so pervasive that they require little elaboration (Rao and Liu 118). As Liu Chenghan observes in *Film as Fu, Bi, and Xing*, "The Chinese people's deep fascination with poetry and the profound influence of poetry on their everyday lives is something rarely seen among other cultures. It is therefore inevitable that Chinese modes of thinking, subconscious patterns, artistic styles, and aesthetic theories are deeply shaped by poetry. Even Chinese painting, a visual art form, is intrinsically tied to poetry, as the saying goes: 'There is painting in poetry, and poetry in painting.' Since cinema is also a visual art, why shouldn't the aesthetics of poetry serve as a theoretical foundation for the creation, analysis, and evaluation of films—especially Chinese films?" (Liu C. 12).

At the same time, classical Chinese philosophies such as Daoism and Chan Buddhism further reinforced an artistic worldview grounded in the unity of between humans and nature. This cultural background has profoundly shaped Chinese visual art's enduring emphasis on symbolism and negative space. In short, Chinese poetic cinema is aesthetically infused with the powerful influence of China's classical poetic traditions and the imprint of philosophical thought.

Building on this cultural foundation, Chinese filmmakers gradually began to explore how classical poetic sensibilities could be translated into modern cinematic language. Fei Mu's 1948 film *Spring in a Small Town*¹ is widely regarded as the foundational work of Chinese poetic cinema. The film employs minimalist narrative, spatial voids, and concise compositions to recreate the characters' subtle psychological fluctuations and the sorrow of the historical moment. As the review of this film stated, the overall structure of the film draws inspiration from the famous classical Chinese lyric *Butterfly Loves Flowers* (蝶恋花) by Su Dongpo, using the rhetorical techniques of comparison (比) and evocative association (兴) to construct an aesthetic world where "the words may end, but the meaning lingers" (Zhu 145-55). A particularly notable feature of Chinese poetic cinema is that it achieves poetic effect by emphasizing emotional atmosphere and symbolic imagery, thereby generating poetic resonance through the visual medium.

The idea of "poetic cinema" as a distinct style and conceptual category in China began to take shape around the second half of the twentieth century through discussions among scholars and critics. Following the rise of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, many Chinese films came to be celebrated as "poetic cinema" due to their lyrical tone and profound aesthetic sensibility. Chinese scholars began to explore how traditional poetics could help explain cinematic languages and styles with uniquely Chinese characteristics. Here, "poetic" suggests that cinema is no longer merely a tool for telling stories but becomes an artistic means of conveying a spiritual worldview and cosmic understanding. In Chinese philosophy, the

¹ *Spring in a Small Town* (《小城之春》, 1948) tells the story of a married woman who reunites with a former lover while her husband remains gravely ill. Selected in 1995 as one of the ten greatest Chinese films in 90 years of cinema history, the film's subtle tension between old and new, morality and desire, lifelessness and vitality serves as a poignant reflection of its historical moment.

experience of beauty is not limited to formal pleasure. It is understood as a fusion of poetry and thought, representing the individual's deep engagement with the essence of the world. Chinese art emphasizes intuition, wholeness, and transcendence in aesthetic experience, requiring artistic creation to capture imagery from the integrated flow of emotion and scene, rather than through the rational categorization of concepts. Poetic cinema, in this sense, relies on the complex emotional expressiveness of images to "awaken a natural world of lived experience, a lively world of sensuous perception, a poetic world filled with meaning and charm" (Gu C., "The *yixiang* Generation of Poetic Cinema" 6). This makes poetic cinema a deeper process whereby the atmosphere, rhythm, and visual elements of the film work together to guide the viewer toward sensing the film's profound layers of meaning and to inspire endless reflection (Jiang 147).

As a result, Chinese filmmakers gradually formed a cinematic discourse rooted in their own cultural frameworks. As Fei Mu once remarked, "Chinese cinema can only express its own national style " (Fei 89). Poetic aesthetics has thus become one of the key pathways through which Chinese filmmakers seek to maintain cultural subjectivity within the context of globalization. By clarifying the historical roots and aesthetic meanings of "poetry" and "poetic cinema" across different cultural traditions, we can now establish a solid theoretical foundation for the detailed analysis of poetic characteristics specific to Chinese cinema in the following chapters.

1.3 Historical Trajectories of Poetic Cinema Across Cultural Contexts

Building on the previous systematic discussion of the concept, characteristics, and theoretical origins of poetic cinema, this section shifts to the realm of cinematic practice, returning to the works themselves and their historical contexts. It offers a focused examination of how poetic cinema has developed across diverse cultural contexts, tracing its distinct trajectories and aesthetic pathways. By clarifying the emergence, maturation, and diversification of poetic cinema in global traditions, we can better understand the cultural specificity of Chinese poetic

cinema, particularly how it has absorbed external influences while preserving its indigenous aesthetic spirit and generating its own distinctive forms.

Among the early developments of poetic cinema, surrealist filmmaking in the 1920s stands out for its use of absurd imagery and associative editing to express subconscious emotions. Works like *Un Chien Andalou* further challenged cinema's narrative conventions, replacing linear storytelling with dreamlike sequences and symbolic visual logic. After World War II, directors of the French New Wave embraced highly personalized cinematic languages, abandoning conventional narrative rules and enthusiastically experimenting with shots and editing to seek out poetic effects and modes of self-expression. For example, Jean-Luc Godard's films often break dramatic illusion through jump cuts and characters speaking directly to the camera, showcasing the qualities of auteur cinema. The Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini also discusses how Godard's "poetic" style arises from his cool deconstruction and technical reassembly of reality. Godard places trivial details and mundane actions on an equal footing, dissolving their differences in meaning. Pasolini refers to this style as "atonal neocubism," a mode in which reality is shattered by technique and then reassembled in a rough, mechanical, and decentralized fashion (Pasolini 50). This form of poetic expression uses cinematic language to represent the fractured experience of the modern world, thereby creating a visual poetics charged with intense modernist tension.

Meanwhile, Pasolini argues that Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* offers yet another pathway for expressing poetic cinema. Unlike Godard, Antonioni approaches reality not through cold deconstruction but through the strategy of the free indirect point-of-view shot. By doing so, he replaces the objective world entirely with the protagonist's neurotic subjective perception, allowing his own aesthetic fantasies about the world to be filtered through her experience. This approach enables Antonioni to reawaken the world through her eyes and thus freely express his deepest artistic sensibilities (Pasolini 48). In this film, the protagonist's marginal psychological state becomes a medium for the director's release of personal style, establishing an analogy between her way of perceiving the world and the director's own fervent aesthetic sensibility. This freedom of expression allows the director to

reshape reality in an arbitrary way, transforming it into a poetic realm that hovers between hallucination and aesthetic perception.

Beyond this, among the global poetic cinema, Andrei Tarkovsky is undoubtedly one of the most representative directors. He introduced the concept of "sculpting in time", viewing cinema as an art that constructs the flow of time through the observation of life itself. He emphasizes constructing nonlinear structures of emotion and thought through poetic reasoning, allowing the audience to actively build meaning in the absence of plot-driven linear deduction (Tarkovsky 20). Tarkovsky opposed piling up metaphors in the name of creating poetry, arguing instead that true poetic quality comes from the image's attentive gaze upon reality and its capture of the essence of time (Tarkovsky 212–13). For example, in films like *Mirror* and *Stalker*, he used rhythm, restrained shots, and flowing fragments of dreams and memories to present a poetic language infused with spiritual weight and temporal depth. As he put it, "a film is born of direct observation of life; that, in my view, is the key to poetry in cinema. For the cinema image is essentially the observation of a phenomenon passing through time" (Tarkovsky 67). Tarkovsky's achievements demonstrate that cinema can, like poetry, express the inner experiences of the human soul and have served as a source of inspiration for many subsequent explorations of poetic filmmaking.

In the broader context of global poetic cinema's evolution, the development of Chinese poetic cinema has followed its own distinctive cultural trajectory. As early as the silent film era of the 1930s, Chinese filmmakers were already exploring poetic modes of visual expression. For example, *The Goddess* (1934), directed by Wu Yonggang, is regarded as a representative work from the formative stage of Chinese poetic cinema. It tells the story of a single mother, forced into prostitution, who struggles to protect her son's future while surviving in the cracks of a harsh society. The film's poetic quality lies not only in the director's sophisticated aesthetic orchestration of light, composition, rhythm, and performance but also in the emotional tension embedded within its tragic subject matter. The film integrates the cruelty of reality with the resilience of the protagonist's fate, achieving a restrained, symbolic, and

profound visual style. Another example is *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)², directed by Cai Chusheng, which not only draws its title directly from a classical poem but also repeatedly employs the image of the moon, using artistic techniques familiar to Chinese audiences, such as contrast and resonance, to create ethical effects through the evocation of *yijing* (Rao 118–19). This tradition culminates in *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), directed by Fei Mu, a film widely recognized as a milestone of Chinese poetic cinema. The opening monologue by Zhou Yuwen, paired with shots of her walking alone along the crumbling city wall, naturally conveys solitude and emotional enclosure through visual imagery. The symbols of the "dilapidated wall" and "ruined garden" carry layers of historical reflection and personal sorrow, turning the "town" in *Spring in a Small Town* into more than a physical setting. It becomes a spiritual city, an eternal one woven into the film's visual poetry (Gu C., "The *yixiang* Generation of Poetic Cinema" 4). Fei Mu, using a near-painterly poetic approach, exemplifies how symbolic landscapes can be used to express deep inner emotions through subtlety, restraint, and deliberate absence.

By the 1980s, Chinese poetic cinema had gradually developed a poetic mode with a more prose-like quality. Wu Yigong's *My Memories of Old Beijing* (1983) became a landmark work of this stage. Adapted from Lin Haiyin's essay collection, the film follows Yingzi's childhood memories through three encounters—with the mentally unstable Xiuzhen, a fugitive father and son, and the family's nanny Song Ma. On the surface, these stories appear independent, but through the girl character Yingzi's emotional flow and subjective observations, they become intertwined, ultimately forming a unified atmosphere of gentle sorrow and quiet reflection. As director Wu Yigong remarked, "I tried to capture the characters' psychological states, and through that, to grasp the emotional elements, striving to unify the two" (Wang 40). The film consistently maintains Yingzi's childlike perspective to directly observe the social world around her. This emotionally driven, image-centered narrative disrupts linear structure, organizing the plot with a loose rhythm that presents a

² *The Spring River Flows East* (1947) takes its title from the famous Chinese poetic line "一江春水向东流," symbolizing the continuous flow of time and fate. This landmark film tells the story of a couple separated by war and hardship, showing how even early narrative-centered Chinese cinema naturally wove in poetic references, reflecting the profound influence of China's poetic culture on artistic expression.

concise visual poetics. The film's ending leaves the characters' fates open-ended, offering viewers ample space for imagination (Wang and Zhang 86).

With the rise of China's Fifth Generation directors, the development of Chinese poetic cinema expanded across broader cultural and geographical dimensions. Works such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* (1986) use powerful long takes, expansive natural landscapes, and restrained performances to place human spiritual dilemmas within grand national allegories, forming a poetic aesthetic shaped by epic sensibility. Meanwhile, Chinese-language cinema increasingly displayed a more diverse character through its encounters with international theories. For example, auteur directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wong Kar-wai, known for their distinctive personal styles, focus more on inner spiritual exploration and expression. Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness* and later *The Assassin* infuse the image with an almost philosophical sense of time and historical depth through slow pacing, extensive long takes, and nondramatic narrative. His artistic concepts embody a self-conscious experience of Chan, situating individual fate at the intersection of collective memory and social transformation, and using delicate audiovisual language to construct a poetic space imbued with Eastern philosophical reflection (Gu C., "Chinese Cinema and Chinese Aesthetic Spirit" 45). By contrast, Wong Kar-wai, with his distinctive personal cinematic style, skillfully blends the flow of light and shadow, fragmented rhythms, and the capture of sensory emotion to create a modern poetic imagery suffused with mood and drifting with consciousness. In his representative work *In the Mood for Love*, Wong not only addresses the moral dilemmas of extramarital love but also subverts the emotional intensity of traditional melodrama through an aesthetic of suppression and atmospheric expression. The loneliness, longing, and loss in the film seep quietly through restrained performances, confined and oppressive spaces, subtle details of color and light, and the repetitive actions embedded in the film's slow pacing. As scholar Gary Bettinson observes, Wong "dissolves crisp emotions into vaporous moods," transforming emotion into a hazy, ineffable atmosphere (Bettinson 105–107). Overall, during this period, Chinese-language poetic cinema was shaped by diverse intellectual currents, engaging in broader auteur

expression and cultural reflection, and exploring deeply into the complex relationships among image, individual emotion, and historical memory.

Entering the twenty-first century, Chinese poetic cinema has presented even more avant-garde and individualized paths of expression in the hands of a new generation of directors. Among the most representative is Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* (2016). The film unfolds along the life trajectory of a middle-aged man, Chen Sheng, who carries the dual identity of doctor and poet. Through the switching of three geographic spaces—real and fictional—it plays a game with time, and the polyphonic narrative structure dissolves the boundaries between past, present, and future. The narrative style of the film shows dreamlike, wild, chaotic, forceful, and hallucinatory qualities (Wei 178). By merging poetic dialogue with a mysterious spatiotemporal structure, Bi Gan stitches the characters' emotions together with the mountain and river landscapes, embedding them within fluid long takes. Time, memory, and imagery penetrate each other, forming a poetic time-space with a highly personal style. What Bi Gan constructs is not the classical poetic atmosphere of Chinese tradition, but rather a personal stream-of-consciousness structure that evokes the viewer's sensitivity to "poetry," bringing it closer to a modernist context of cinematic poetics.

Beyond this, in recent years, many works have also engaged in in-depth explorations within the category of "poetic quality," reflecting the dynamic growth of poetic cinema in the contemporary context. For example, certain works by Jia Zhangke similarly embody another direction of poetic aesthetics. He approaches social realities through a documentary style, embedding profound humanistic care within his calm visual language. In films such as *Platform* (2000) and *Mountains May Depart* (2015), the characters' loneliness, drifting, and silence are slowly released through highly restrained long takes and spatial orchestration, forming a kind of "realist poetic quality" that exists between narrative and imagery. His films are at once a poetics of disappearance and a documentary of salvation (Zhang and Wang 59). Yang Chao's *Crosscurrent* (2016) directly employs poetry as a narrative thread, a story annotation, and a narrative trigger, guiding the audience through the protagonist's magical journey, blending folklore and historical fragments to construct a modern poem infused with

river consciousness and mystical perception (An 87). Gu Xiaogang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (2019), on the other hand, uses the visual layout of traditional Chinese landscape painting and the rhythm of the changing seasons to gently wrap Jiangnan's everyday life and family emotions, containing profound poetic meaning within its calmness. These works not only continue the traditional Chinese aesthetic spirit of "unity between heaven and humanity" but also continuously probe the poetic boundaries of cinematic structure and language, granting the concept of "poetic cinema" new formal possibilities.

In summary, although poetic cinema has taken diverse paths shaped by different cultural contexts, it shares a common aspiration: to explore the expressive potential of the cinematic image and to convey emotions and spiritual experience in poetic form. From the experimental intersections of avant-garde and realism to the fusion of Chinese aesthetics of artistic conception and contemporary narrative structures, poetic cinema, as a cross-cultural aesthetic practice, consistently seeks tension and balance between form and thought. For this reason, tracing the development of poetic cinema across different cultural contexts helps clarify its conceptual evolution and aesthetic features, while also laying the theoretical groundwork for the following discussion of differences, resonances, and possible cross-cultural dialogues.

1.4 Shared Aesthetics and Theoretical Gaps in Poetic Cinema Across Cultures

Examining the development of poetic cinema across different cultural traditions reveals that, despite diverse theoretical foundations and historical trajectories, there are notable aesthetic resonances among them.

First, poetic cinema across cultures tends to depart from the causally driven, conflict-based dramatic narrative, pursuing a more lyrical expressive structure. It focuses on capturing the "flow of emotion" and the "fluctuation of consciousness" within the image, using nonlinear narrative approaches to create a dreamlike, imagery-linked mental landscape. While specific techniques vary between cultural traditions, lyricism remains a shared principle that shapes the viewer's cinematic experience. As Rao Shuguang points out, "whether it is the lyricism in Chinese cinematic narratives or the poetic nature of Western film art, both share common

practices and ideals at the level of aesthetic expression through cinematic language" (Rao and Liu 118).

Second, poetic cinema across cultural contexts often places strong emphasis on visual symbolism. Whether it is Antonioni's careful arrangement of industrial ruins, mist, and color palettes in *Red Desert*, or Fei Mu's use of crumbling walls, silent courtyards, and spring rain scenes in *Spring in a Small Town*, both demonstrate a deep engagement with on-screen objects and their symbolic reconstruction. Here, the image is no longer simply a tool for "representation" but becomes a mode of transmission that bypasses language, directly reaching perception and generating an emotional flow that transcends verbal meaning.

Furthermore, poetic cinema across different cultural traditions often foregrounds a strong sense of authorial subjectivity. This personalized visual logic often unfolds through the creator's psychological reality: Bi Gan, in *Kaili Blues*, fuses poetic dialogue with overlapping geographical spaces to construct a subjective system of wandering consciousness, while Antonioni, in *Red Desert*, substitutes the character's psychological perception with his own aesthetic fantasies, using the free indirect point-of-view to express a philosophical meditation on the alienation of modern life. These works all reflect a shared tendency to present a kind of "emotional truth" rather than "factual truth" on screen.

These common characteristics of poetic films reflect an aesthetic orientation that constructs a concrete yet ineffable inner experience through lyrical expression, symbolic visual construction, and a heightened sense of authorial presence. However, it is precisely upon these shared foundations that Chinese poetic cinema reveals its distinctly vivid aesthetic character, the core of which lies in the concept of *yijing*. *Yijing* is not only a key concept in traditional Chinese poetics and painting theory but also serves as a core aesthetic principle in Chinese poetic cinema. It represents a composite structure that weaves together material imagery, emotional resonance, philosophical reflection, and cultural spirit. As scholar Chen Linxia points out, "The theory of *yijing*, developed over generations of literary critics, carries the most distinctive national aesthetic features, the most representative national artistic forms,

and most fully embodies the aesthetic ideals of the Chinese people. In fact, it provides comprehensive guidance for cinematic art, covering the choice of subject matter, narrative techniques, spatial presentation, emotional types, tonal charm, and atmospheric expression. This guidance enables films to swiftly establish an aesthetic style within limited narrative time and to signal the cultural identity of the nation (Chen 181–82). While poetic cinema in other traditions may foreground linguistic deconstruction, psychological projection, or anti-narrative techniques, *yijing* in Chinese poetic cinema centers on the harmonious resonance between mind and environment, nature and humanity, imparting a sense of subtle richness and quiet depth.

Regrettably, within the current mainstream discourse of film studies, there remains a lack of sufficient theoretical engagement with *yijing*, the core aesthetic concept of Chinese poetics. Although works such as *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema* have begun to interpret Chinese cinema from a formalist aesthetic perspective, recognizing that "Chinese cinema has fostered artistic traditions to match any on the international stage" (Bettinson 6), their analyses largely remain focused on aspects such as cinematographic language, rhythm, and narrative structure. Notably, David Bordwell, in his essay "Five Lessons from Stealth Poetics," offers insightful reflections on the poetics of Chinese cinema, yet his framework remains formalist, characterizing these developments under the label of "Asian minimalism" (Bordwell 25). Even within scholarship on directors such as Wong Kar-wai, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Jia Zhangke, the concept of "poetics" largely follows the Bordwell's model, defined as "a series of conscious inventions in the means of expression proper to the cinema" (Yeh 175). While Gary Bettinson's meticulous analyses of Wong Kar-wai's visual aesthetics are highly insightful, they primarily center on the sensory pleasures of light, rhythm, and narrative patterning, offering little engagement with the embedded layers of the deeper perceptual mechanisms at play.

From a broader academic perspective, *yijing* remains almost entirely absent from mainstream analyses of poetic cinema. On the one hand, as a traditional cognitive mode, *yijing* is often reduced to vague notions of "atmosphere" or "visual mood," or simply subsumed under

global categories such as "slow cinema" or "meditative cinema." On the other hand, mainstream theoretical frameworks rooted in linguistics, psychoanalysis, or structuralism may fall short of capturing *yijing* as a multidimensional aesthetic system that integrates sensory intuition, philosophical reflection, and cultural tradition. This has contributed to the relative neglect of the essential spiritual and philosophical dimensions that help define Chinese poetic cinema.

Therefore, this study seeks to revisit and emphasize *yijing* as a defining feature of Chinese poetic cinema, addressing a critical gap in current international theoretical perspectives. By approaching *yijing* as a key aesthetic mechanism that bridges filmic texts and cultural traditions, sensory experience and philosophical reflection, formal strategies and audience perception, we can not only achieve a more holistic understanding of the aesthetic character of Chinese poetic cinema, but also open the possibility of developing a poetics of the moving image grounded in Chinese aesthetic thought and perceptual logic.

Chapter 2 The Aesthetics of *Yijing* in Chinese Poetic Cinema

As the central theoretical concept of this study, *yijing* provides a culturally specific framework for understanding the aesthetics of Chinese poetic cinema. Although, as Jan De Meyer has noted, "artistic conception" is commonly used as the English translation of *yijing*, the term's rich and multilayered meanings have led to various alternative renderings (De Meyer 368). In light of its distinct philosophical and cultural connotations in the Chinese context, this study retains the *yijing* to preserve the integrity and specificity of the concept. To explain how *yijing* functions as an aesthetic strategy in Chinese poetic film, this chapter provides a detailed exploration of the term's origins, mechanisms, and cinematic manifestations.

2.1 The Origins and Aesthetic Basis of *Yijing*

As Jan De Meyer observes in his introduction to *The Birth of Artistic Conception in China*, the English translation of Zong Baihua's seminal work, the first character of *yijing* (意境), *yi* (意), meaning "idea" or "concept," is itself composed of the characters for "sound" (音) and "heart" (心), and may thus be understood as "the sound of the heart." It also encompasses a wide semantic range, including meanings such as "intention," "interest," "wish," "desire," "anticipation," "suggestion," "opinion," "sentiment," "thought," and "purpose" (De Meyer 368). The second character, *jing* (境), refers to "realm," "situation," or "state." Other translations of *yijing*, a term that has been used since the Tang dynasty (618–907), include "prospect," "mood," and "spatial imagery," as well as more interpretive renderings such as Yolaine Escande's *état intentionnel* ("state of intentionality") and François Cheng's poetic *densité d'âme* ("soul's density"). These varied translations attempt to convey that *yijing* is neither a mere idea nor a specific visual image or spatial atmosphere, but rather a complex aesthetic experience that fuses emotion, perception, intention, and symbolic resonance.

As De Meyer also emphasizes, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, a successful work of art elicits an emotional resonance that matches the "soul" which animates it. Art is never reduced

to its purely formal dimensions, but is always the expression of a deeper spiritual essence (De Meyer 368). Zong Baihua writes: "The artist lets his spirit shine on every phenomenon on earth, and he speaks on behalf of the physical landscape. What he expresses is an osmotic blend of subjective sentiments related to his own life and the objective scenery of the natural world, thereby creating an unfathomably profound, spiritual vista, lively and ingeniously wrought, where all elements are in the right place. This spiritual vista constitutes the artistic conception—the element which makes art into art"(Zong, 371). These interpretations highlight the complexity of *yijing* as both a linguistic concept and an aesthetic ideal, pointing to the need for a deeper exploration of its cultural and philosophical foundations.

At the heart of traditional Chinese aesthetics, the concept of *yijing* is ultimately rooted in the philosophical worldview of "the unity of Heaven and humanity". By articulating the interrelationship between the cosmic order and human life, this mode of thought lays the metaphysical foundation for later developments in Chinese literary and artistic theory. This notion originates in Daoist cosmology, which advocates alignment with the natural order. As Daoism teaches, "The Way follows Nature" (Lao Tzu 82), meaning that all things in Heaven and Earth follow their own internal logic, and human beings should attune themselves to the Way rather than impose subjective control. As Zong Baihua observes, "Nothing represents the Way better than the arts. The arts, in all their magnificence, endow the Way with form and life" (Zong 382). Within this cosmological framework, *yijing* emerges as one of the most important aesthetic mechanisms. Here, *yi* (意) and *jing* (境) can be provisionally understood as the emotional and cognitive faculties of the subject and the state of being of the objective scene, respectively, though it is crucial to note that the two are never truly separate but are always conceived as an integrated whole. As Zhu Guangqian emphasizes in his discussion of the ideal of art, the fundamental mission of art is to dissolve the boundary between subjective feeling and objective imagery, bringing them into seamless integration (Zhu, On Poetry 76). In the cinematic context, the camera becomes not merely a recording device but a medium for contemplating the dynamic between human beings and the world. Thus, the construction of *yijing* in Chinese cinema is a cultural embodiment of "inner-outer fusion," where audiences

experience not only the characters' inner emotional states but also the resonances that arise from their relationships with nature, and society.

If the philosophical tradition provides the cosmological foundation for the construction of *yijing* in Chinese cinema, then the aesthetic practices of classical Chinese literature and art offer its most direct sources of expressive inspiration. Among these, the two most representative mediums are undoubtedly poetry and landscape painting. As Wang Guowei noted, "Where there is *yijing*, there is naturally elevated character and memorable lines" (Wang 1). For instance, Tang poet Wang Wei, known for his landscape poetry and painting, wrote, "Walking to where the waters end, I sit and watch the rising clouds" (行到水穷处, 坐看云起时). This line reflects the literati ideal of calm detachment and the Daoist pursuit of natural flow and nonaction (无为). The emotion in such lines is never overtly expressed, instead, it is conveyed through seemingly plain depictions of action, communicating a mental state of being "at ease amid limitation" and "perceiving through emptiness." As Zong Baihua observes in his essay, "With Wang Wei, the presence of the mind would make itself automatically felt in an indirect way, and outward forms would automatically occupy the right place. [...] It is also representative of how the Chinese create the movement of life and the taste of the generative forces of heaven and earth out of vacuity" (Zong 386). This aesthetic approach entering emotion through landscape and perceiving meaning through emptiness, which provides the internal paradigm for constructing poetic *yijing*.

A similar aesthetic logic extends into Chinese landscape painting, which has long emphasized the notion of spirit consonance as a source of vitality. As Li Zehou notes in *The Path of Beauty*, "Chinese landscape painting expresses a refined aesthetic taste and an ideal of beauty. The emotional force, dynamism, mood, momentum, and sense of space-time conveyed by the fluid turns of brush lines, the density and positioning of ink tones, form an essential artistic realm... This is something not found in nature itself but distilled, abstracted, and created over generations by human artistry" (Li 244). The focus of Chinese painting thus lies not in the faithful reproduction of objective reality, but in using natural scenery and brushwork to

convey the artist's subjective inner state. Especially in *xieyi* (写意) painting, artists transform the external forms of objects through expressive brushstrokes, liberating their art from mere formal likeness and achieving a leap toward capturing the spirit of things. For example, in Ma Yuan's Song dynasty work *Treading on Song*, the painting's bold sense of spatiality and deliberate use of blank space evoke boundless expanses of feeling, even though the depicted scene is confined to a few withered trees and a limited setting. This approach, as Li Zehou points out, "seeks spiritual resemblance beyond formal resemblance, drawing infinity from the finite (the frame of the painting), much like the development of Chinese poetry. Over time, it has become the fundamental aesthetic principle and hallmark of Chinese art" (Li 241). These artistic forms transcend language and belong to a realm of the ineffable, something that can be sensed but not fully verbalized. This tradition has deeply shaped the aesthetic style of Chinese poetic cinema.

Although the term *yijing* originates from the traditions of classical Chinese poetry and painting, this does not mean it is confined to the realm of classical art. As an aesthetic structure, *yijing* can be newly generated and reimagined within the modern medium of cinema. Film not only possesses the aesthetic potential to carry and express *yijing* but also expands its dimensions through temporal-spatial construction, allowing classical aesthetics to be reinterpreted and extended in a contemporary context. In fact, *yijing* offers a systematic and distinctive framework for reconfiguring cinematic language. This suggests the possibility of charting a third path beyond the dual traditions of American commercial cinema and European art cinema by drawing on the artistic forms and aesthetic experiences of Chinese traditional aesthetics (Chen 184).

2.2 Mechanisms of *Yijing* Formation

Luo Yijun, as early as his 1981 article "A Preliminary Exploration of National Style in Chinese Cinema," argued that the nationalization of Chinese cinema should focus on the aesthetic concept of *yijing* as a key element (Luo 13). This insight has provided an important inspiration for subsequent studies in Chinese film aesthetics. Building on this theoretical

foundation, this section will systematically examine the generative mechanisms of *yijing* in cinema through four key stages.

2.2.1 *Yi* and *Jing*: Fundamental Components of *Yijing*

To understand the generative mechanisms of *yijing*, it is first essential to clarify the basic meanings of its two components. As discussed earlier, *yi* (意) symbolizes the voice of the inner mind, representing the creator's subjective spiritual activity that comprises emotions, feelings, thoughts, and contemplation. The other component, *jing* (境), is not simply natural scenery or physical space but refers instead to a "situation" or "context" that has been emotionally activated and subjectively interpreted. Thus, *yijing* is not a mechanical combination of "idea and environment," but a dynamic process of fusion between spirit and world. Once an external object enters the creator's field of vision, it transforms from an objective presence into an emotionally and imaginatively charged "scene." As Zhu Guangqian notes in *On Poetry*, "What was originally only a fragment is, through art, given a complete image; it thereby becomes an independent, self-sufficient small universe, transcending spatiality and simultaneously manifesting its image within the hearts of countless empathetic viewers" (Zhu, *On Poetry* 55).

The question of whether *yi* (意) and *jing* (境) form a subject-object opposition has long been debated across different research contexts. In fact, the discussion of subject and object relationships is not limited to the internal structure of *yijing* aesthetics and also serves as a central issue in film theory. In contemporary film theory, the traditional subject-object dichotomy has increasingly been reexamined, with growing attention to how the two co-emerge and interact through perception. For Gilles Deleuze, the breakdown of the "sensory-motor situation" in postwar modern cinema signals the collapse of perception-reaction patterns driven by subjective interests and actions. As a result, cinema undergoes a process of de-substantialization, decentering, and transparency, where subject and object are no longer separate but engaged in continuous, boundless perceptual contact (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 59). Alongside this, film phenomenology views the film apparatus as a

perceiving entity, emphasizing the embodied experience shared between human and machine. In this view, cinema is no longer simply an object to be watched but becomes an extension of perception itself (Sobchack 21–22). When we shift this subject-object discussion into the context of *yijing* theory, especially from its Buddhist epistemological roots, we encounter a distinctively different mode of thinking. The Yogācāra school of Buddhist thought emphasizes a unique subject-object unity—not merely the coexistence of subject and object, nor their absolute emptiness, but an internal interconnectedness where neither subject nor object exists as an independent entity, and both form a unified whole. This perspective allows us to reinterpret the film apparatus as a medium that dissolves the boundaries between subject and object. As Huineng famously said, "From the beginning, there is not a single thing," indicating that subject and object are inherently non-substantial, so there is no need for the subject to forcibly decenter or negate itself, nor to sever its natural, everyday perception of the world (Fan 5–7). This dissolution of subject-object division deeply resonates with the Daoist idea of the "unity of Heaven and humanity," where human and world are never opposing poles but parts of a single responsive system. Wang Guowei said in *Poetic Remarks in the Human World*: "There is a *self-jing* (有我之境, realm with self) and a *selfless-jing* (无我之境, realm without self). The *self-jing* views the object from the self's perspective, so the object is endowed with the colors of the self. The *selfless-jing* views the object from the object's perspective, so there is no knowing of which is the self and which is the object" (Wang 2). Yet Wang ultimately points to a deeper realm, citing Xin Qiji's famous line, "I searched for him a thousand times among the crowd, but when I turned my head, that person was right there in the dim light" (Wang 8). For Wang, true and profound *yijing* is not confined to either complete unity or complete emptiness but exists in a space between sudden realization and gradual understanding, a deep fusion of self and no-self. This perceptual structure is precisely what gives Chinese poetic aesthetics its most distinctive spiritual orientation and aesthetic logic within the global context of cinema.

2.2.2 *Yixiang*: The Core Element of the Integrative Path

Within the dual structure of "*yi*" (意) and "*jing*" (境), *yixiang* (意象) serves as the fundamental unit that shapes *yijing* (Gu F. 179). As a core concept in Chinese aesthetics, *yixiang* refers to poetic imagery generated through the fusion of subjective intention and objective form. Unlike the concepts of "symbol" or "sign," *yixiang* does not rely on abstract logical transformation. Rather, it allows emotion to naturally permeate material images, endowing them with emotional warmth and spiritual direction. In film, multiple *yixiang* resonate, layer, and flow together, ultimately building a complete *yijing* structure. At the opening of *On Beauty*, Zhu Guangqian asserts that "the world of aesthetic experience is purely a world of *yixiang*." He further elaborates that the image of an object is a reflection of human sentiment and taste. This "image" differs from mere sensory impressions or representations, as it is *yixiang*, the essential embodiment of beauty. According to Zhu, *yixiang* arises from a profound fusion of subjectivity and objectivity, existing solely within the aesthetic act and constituting a product of human spiritual activity (Zhu, "On Beauty" 7). In the context of cinema, cinematic *yixiang* enables visual imagery to transcend realist traditions and narrative logic, allowing the image to become poetic. Chinese traditional culture holds an incredibly rich system of *yixiang*, with "moonlight" standing as one of its most iconic examples. From the famous poetic lines "I raise my cup to invite the bright moon, and with my shadow, we become three" to "People experience sorrow and joy, partings and reunions; the moon waxes and wanes, brightens and dims," the moon recurs frequently in classical poetry, carrying layers of longing, separation, reflection, and cyclical return. This collective cultural memory gives the moon immense emotional resonance, making it naturally capable of generating "scene-emotion resonance" in film. For example, in Xie Jin's *Hibiscus Town*, the moon becomes a key medium for lyrical expression. In several climactic scenes, the soft moonlight creates an atmosphere of stillness and purity, acting like a silent witness. When the male and female leads sweep the streets under the moon, their emotional connection is not spoken aloud but conveyed through the moonlight, which softly envelops their figures, allowing the audience to sense deep warmth and tension beneath the calm. This

"bright moon" scene is not simply a depiction of nature but a critical catalyst for emotional flow and the formation of *yijing*. Importantly, *yixiang* never exists in isolation. It is not merely a "container" for emotion but functions as a "cell" within the process of constructing *yijing*. Only through the linking, resonance, and flow of multiple *yixiang* can *yijing* fully emerge. Thus, from a structural perspective, *yixiang* is both the core trigger and the most basic aesthetic unit of *yijing*. It creates a flexible bridge between subject and object, allowing abstract *yi* (intention) to manifest through concrete *xiang* (image) and enabling the objective realm to take on the warmth of living emotion through the attachment of subjective feeling.

2.2.3 Fusion of Emotion and Scene: Dynamic Structural Logic

If *yixiang* is the core element of *yijing*, then the fusion of emotion and scenery constitutes its overarching organizational logic. As Zong Baihua observes, "In every form of artistic expression, emotion and scenery form an osmotic blend... The scenery becomes suffused with emotion, and the emotions are concretized and become scenery" (Zong 373). It is precisely on this basis of emotional and scenic interpenetration and transformation that *yijing* gains its sense of flow and vitality.

In concrete cinematic practice, this fusion can be further categorized into distinct structural types. Chen Linxia, In "*yijing* and Chinese Cinema", identifies three forms of "Fusion of Emotion and Scene": authorial, narratorial, and character-based (Chen 185). The authorial type often reflects the director's subjective intervention, where carefully designed camera work and color composition convey aesthetic intent but sometimes risk undermining emotional resonance because the director's personal vision dominates over the integration of landscape and narrative. The narratorial type, by contrast, operates from the standpoint of storytelling, using techniques such as empty shots and environmental sounds to establish psychological atmosphere. Most emblematic of the qualities of *yijing*, however, is the character-based fusion, where viewpoint alignment and shot arrangement allow the characters' emotions to be projected onto the scenery, making the landscape an extension of emotional expression. This integration of visual language and psychological structure

transforms the scenery from a mere narrative backdrop into a resonant emotional field shared with the characters.

The fusion of emotion and scenery is not a mere accumulation of techniques, but a fundamental aesthetic orientation. A comparable perceptual logic can be found in Gilles Deleuze's notion of the "affection-image." He points out that affection is not an intellectual comparison between ideas but a transition or transformation from one state of completeness to another. Affection is not a preexisting, objectified feeling but a continuously unfolding "force," a fold (*pli*) shaped by the collision of forces, always fluctuating and transforming through alternations of augmentation and diminution (Deleuze, *Seminar on Spinoza* 153). For Deleuze, it is not only human faces but also any close-up of an object that carries the potential for affectivity (Deleuze, *Cinema 1* 87). Thus, when the camera extracts a concrete object from its everyday spatiotemporal coordinates and renders it as an image on screen, the object undergoes an abrupt shift of force, transforming into a site of affect. Yet, while Deleuze's theorization of affect offers an insightful framework for understanding the interplay of emotion and object in cinematic perception, the underlying mechanisms diverge significantly. Deleuze's notion of affection emphasizes the manifestation and circulation of force, whereas the *yijing* of Chinese poetic cinema relies more on the delicate, shifting resonance between subject and object. It is not about abstracting meaning from the concrete but about allowing emotion to arise organically within the space of the unsaid and the indeterminate. This resonance mechanism, in turn, leads us to another key principle of *yijing* aesthetics: the interplay of the real and the illusion.

2.2.4 Interplay of the Real and the Illusion³: Audience Perception Pathways

The completion of *yijing* does not simply occur with the creator's act of expression. It is fulfilled within the mind of the viewer. In the process of generating *yijing*, the viewer first needs to *rujing* (入境, entering the realm), attuning themselves to the rhythmic field of the

³ The phrase "interplay between reality and illusion" is used here to translate the Chinese term "虚实相生" (*xushi xiangsheng*), following the formulation in Hu Jingzhi, "Image Composition and the Construction of Artistic Conception," in *Essentials of Chinese Literature and Art Criticism Volume I*, edited by Xu Yuechun and Wang Ning, translated by Zou Li, Palgrave Macmillan, 2025, p. 177.

work's emotional structure. Through a series of audiovisual cues, they gradually form their own perception. This eventually leads to *shengyi*(生意, emergent meaning), the lingering psychological resonance or the meaning beyond words and feelings beyond the frame, which emerges through aftertaste, reflection, and imaginative association. This marks the transition from the real to the illusion. Chinese aesthetician Ye Lang explains that *yijing* refers to transcending specific, finite objects, events, and scenes to reach into infinite time and space, allowing one to gain a philosophical sense and understanding of life, history, and the cosmos. This philosophical sense of life, history, and the universe forms the true connotation of *yijing* (Ye 17-18).

Importantly, the formation of *yijing* does not stop at the viewer's spiritual elevation. It also includes a dynamic psychological process that returns from the illusion back to real life. Zong Baihua describes this when he writes that humankind's noblest thoughts and feelings are concretized and embodied (Zong 371). Gu Chunfang similarly argues that the beauty in cinema ultimately illuminates a natural world of life, a vivid world of sensibility. She also emphasizes that the ultimate goal of the artistic spirit in Chinese aesthetics is not to recognize or analyze beauty within the realm of experience, but to perceive beauty and grasp reality within a transcendent domain (Gu C., "The *yixiang* Generation of Poetic Cinema" 6,11). In the end, the viewer's aesthetic experience does not remain suspended in abstract contemplation. It returns to the concrete sensations of everyday life, where the insights gained through the cinematic experience become integrated into the vibrancy of lived existence. In this process, the aesthetic pleasure flows from the materiality of the film to spiritual reflection and then back to the vitality of real life, thus fully realizing the core ideal of Chinese aesthetics, *yijing*.

2.3 Cinematic Expressions of *Yijing*

In Chinese poetic cinema, the expression of *yijing* operates as an integrated aesthetic mechanism constructed through the coordinated interaction of multiple audiovisual elements. As a stylistic pursuit, poetic cinema primarily manifests through the expressive use of

cinematic language, including structural arrangement, visual atmosphere, character creation, and the orchestration of sound, light, color, and other components. This section will explore this system in detail, analyzing how *yijing* is articulated in cinematic practice across the dimensions of space, time, and narrative.

2.3.1 Poetic Expression of Space and Imagery

While some artistic traditions have prioritized representational accuracy and linear perspective, Chinese painting has, since the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, gradually shifted toward the *xieyi* tradition, focusing on capturing the spirit through form and conveying dynamic vitality (Li 221–38). This aesthetic spirit of "pursuing spiritual resemblance" has been inherited and transformed in cinema into a set of visual and spatial strategies that construct an atmosphere rooted in Chinese artistic tradition. The visual construction of *yijing* often begins with the selection of space and specific material imagery. These spaces are not merely narrative backdrops but serve as vessels of emotion, forming a shared field where the viewer's inner world converges with the filmmaker's sensibility. As Wang Guowei observes, "All descriptions of scenery are expressions of emotion" (Wang 24). While many poetic films use dreamlike imagery, artificial spectacles, or surreal settings to convey symbolic meaning, Chinese poetic cinema often draws its aesthetic resources from nature (Liu S. 81–84). The waterways, mist-covered mountains, grasslands, plateaus, rivers, rain, snow, wind, and moonlight all provide natural spaces rich with poetic potential. Meanwhile, traditional architectural elements such as ancient city walls, stone bridges, narrow alleys, and tiled roofs, deeply rooted in national culture and collective memory, frequently appear in poetic films. These natural and cultural elements together form spaces that, on a visual level, inherently carry the aesthetic qualities of contemplation, tranquility, and ethereality. For example, the crumbling city wall in *Spring in a Small Town* or the surging Yangtze River in *Crosscurrent* represent quintessential "poetic spaces" that silently evoke the viewer's emotional resonance with grand themes such as solitude, life, time, and fate.

The visual presentation of these poetic spaces creates a subtle and suggestive aesthetic atmosphere through a range of audio-visual techniques. One of the most representative features is the use of *liubai* (留白, leaving blank space), a technique rooted in Chinese painting traditions. Here, the artist intentionally leaves portions of the canvas empty, providing imaginative room for the viewer to engage emotionally and symbolically with the work, rather than filling every inch with representational detail. It is precisely in the places where brush and ink do not reach that we enter the hazy realm of Heavenly Equality and of the changes operated by nature (Zong 387). In the cinematic context, *liubai* extends into multi-layered visual expressions, including framing, lighting, and spatial arrangement.

The most apparent manifestation is compositional *liubai*. Influenced by the *xieyi* tradition, Chinese poetic cinema often uses wide-angle and long-shot framing to depict vast, open spaces. Small human figures are placed against expansive and uncluttered backgrounds, such as a solitary figure in the snow, a fog-covered street, or an empty bridge over flowing water. These decentered panoramic compositions intensify the visual effect of "non-separation between self and surroundings" and evoke a lofty, transcendent sense of space. For example, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, during the bamboo forest fight between Li Mubai and Yu Jiaolong, the camera often cuts to distant, sweeping shots, revealing a scroll-like landscape where the combatants are seamlessly embedded within the bamboo grove. This integration of characters and environment produces an atmosphere of quietude and ethereal beauty.

Beyond composition, the principle of *liubai* also plays a vital role in the orchestration of light and shadow. In poetic cinema, light not only shapes space but conveys emotional undercurrents; shadow not only conceals but invites association. Directors often employ soft lighting, backlighting, moonlight, and silhouettes to produce an aesthetic that is ambiguous, layered, and suggestive. Again, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* exemplifies this: moonlight and mist together generate a gentle, tranquil nocturnal atmosphere, allowing the characters' movements to seamlessly merge with their surroundings, constructing a delicate and restrained world of light and shadow.

In poetic cinema, spatial construction is not simply the representation of concrete landscapes or terrains. It transforms these typical elements of poetic space into aesthetic imagery through audiovisual language, weaving them into a perceptible, contemplative, and emotionally resonant aesthetic field. While the specific cinematic frame carries narrative information, it must also possess aesthetic qualities to spark the viewer's imagination, thus forming the perceptual foundation of poetics and creating the poetic space necessary for the emergence of *yijing*.

2.3.2 Poetic Flow of Time and Emotion

Pudovkin pointed out: "Rhythm is the means of emotionally influencing the spectator. By this rhythm the director is equally in the position to excite or to calm the spectator" (Pudovkin 131). Rhythm is not merely a matter of structural arrangement; it serves as a strategy for guiding emotion. It is often seen as a technical issue closely tied to shot length, editing speed, and montage structure. However, for Tarkovsky, cinematic rhythm does not arise from the external splicing of edits but is rooted in the "flow of real time within the shot." This flow is not artificially imposed but directly reflects the director's perception of the rhythm of life and existence, embodying a deeply personal practice of "sculpting in time" (Tarkovsky 113–124). Within the context of Chinese poetic cinema, rhythm reflects a structural logic best described as "loose on the outside, tight on the inside." Externally, the splicing between shots tends to appear natural and unhurried, while internally, the structure carries emotional tension. As Ye Nan, the screenwriter of *Evening Rain*⁴, noted: "The film's rhythm... is smooth, rounded, and natural and it forms the poetic *yijing*." He compared rhythm to the flight path of a seagull, seeing it as an arc of emotion and imagery, a thread of poetic expression (Wang 42).

Although the movements within the shots are slow, the emotion quietly rises from within. In the film, the characters' gazes, tears, and the glint of red dates intertwine with the surging

⁴ *Evening Rain* (巴山夜雨, 1981), whose title references the famous Chinese poetic line "巴山夜雨涨秋池" ("the autumn pool rises under the evening rain in the Bashan mountains"), is considered by Chinese film scholars a representative work of 1980s Chinese poetic cinema. Directed by Wu Yonggang and Wu Yigong. They are both key figures of poetic filmmaking, with Wu Yigong also known for *My Memories of Old Beijing* (城南旧事). The film follows Qiushi, a poet wrongfully imprisoned and escorted by agents on a Yangtze River boat during the late Cultural Revolution, where encounters with fellow passengers reveal a quietly powerful meditation on resilience, political tension, and hope.

Yangtze River, its whirlpools, the navigating steamships, the shifting mountains, and the misty drizzle, achieving a poetic harmony.

To achieve an aesthetic effect where inner meaning and outer scene merge seamlessly, the connection between shots depends not only on rational concepts but more importantly on the emotions of the characters. *My Memories of Old Beijing* offers another typical example. Its external pacing flows as calmly as water, with the repetition of everyday routines. Yet it is precisely within this seemingly tranquil external rhythm that the characters' inner emotional waves surge beneath the surface. As the director once remarked, "I wanted the film to convey the rhythm of poetry, the sense of poetic phrasing. For example, the five repeated scenes at the well in the first half and the four repeated scenes of leaving school in the second half are all parallel moments of repetition. Life passes by every day in such ordinary ways, yet it is within this ordinariness that extraordinary things emerge. This creates a sense of life's flow, an artistic sense of rhythm, and even gives the audience a chance to exhale, to feel a sense of pause" (Wang 42). In poetic films, the internal motion of the shots is often smooth and restrained, resembling the slow unfurling of an ancient handscroll painting, presenting a flowing, atmospheric sense of time. Yet it is precisely through these steady shots and quiet images that viewers can feel the immense emotional waves within the characters and the intense rhythm that bursts forth as the emotions surge. In this way, tension and relaxation in the film's rhythm complement each other, blending into a unified whole, shaping the work's lyrical tone through its temporal structure.

In addition, sound serves as a crucial element in shaping the temporal experience of poetic cinema, which often relies on environmental sounds, distanced or alienated sound structures, and nonverbal sonic layers to create a subtle emotional atmosphere. For example, poetic voiceovers in the off-screen space, the sounds of wind or water during moments of character silence, or the near-silent ambient noises in empty shots all imbue the film with a rhythm closer to the pulse of natural life. According to Michel Chion, "sound endows fixed images with temporality" (Chion 13). Sound not only amplifies the rhythm but also redefines the

temporal dimension of cinematic images, inviting the viewer into an emotionally charged perceptual experience through auditory experience.

Poetic cinema relies precisely on this temporal treatment to realize its lyrical strategy of *liubai*. Influenced by the aesthetics of Daoism and Chan Buddhism, Chinese art and cinema embody what Gu Chunfang describes as a tendency toward "valuing restraint and subtlety" (Gu C., "Chinese Cinema and Chinese Aesthetic Spirit" 45). What matters is not how much explicit emotional expression the image provides but how much temporal space it leaves for the viewer to immerse, wait, and reflect. This lyrical restraint is a key mode through which poetic cinema conveys the essence of *yijing*.

2.3.3 Poetic Elevation of Narrative and Theme

Although the term "poetic" is often associated with non-narrative cinematic structures, the presentation of *yijing* in Chinese poetic cinema does not imply a rejection of narrative.

Chinese film scholar Dai Qing has noted that Chinese poetic films differ from the French avant-garde tradition of *cinéma poésie* and the Soviet concept of "poetic cinema," both of which dismiss narrative and insist that cinema, like lyric poetry, should allow imagination to roam freely and that "a film without plot is a poetic film". In contrast, Chinese poetic cinema replaces intense dramatic conflict with the lyricism of narrative, using symbolic visual language to trace delicate emotional undercurrents and to pursue the graceful and lingering beauty of *yijing* (Dai and Duan 154). Moreover, the depth and richness of *yijing* often rely on carefully crafted narrative structures and thematic construction, which elevate and refine the aesthetic experience. By telling stories, the filmmaker conveys both the events themselves and the underlying philosophical reflections and spiritual symbolism. This integration of poetry and thought in narrative form is one of the defining features of *yijing* within Chinese poetic cinema.

Whether it is depicting scenery or expressing emotions, there must be a narrative event as a foundation, but the narrative that can generating *yijing* is always an imagistic one. It integrates storytelling, scenic description, and lyrical expression into a unified whole. In

cinema, both emotion and intention are expressed through the cooperation of scene and event. *yijing* emerges precisely within this structure of blending reality and illusion across landscape, event, and feeling (Liu S. 218–19). Replacing strong dramatic conflict with lyrical, imagistic narration does not mean the film's structure becomes loose or fragmented. On the contrary, in a structure shaped by the fusion of emotion and scene, delicate emotional threads connect the narrative. The film *My Memories of Old Beijing* is a particularly apt example. The story unfolds as a childhood recollection. The protagonist Yingzi's brief encounters with the disturbed woman Xiuzhen, and Xiuzhen's obsessive search for her lost daughter, become a child's first glimpse into human suffering. Yingzi's ambiguous friendship with a fugitive, meanwhile, avoids the binary of right and wrong. Finally, the death of her father and her farewells to familiar people form Yingzi's first true confrontation with mortality and the passage of time. In this way, it is the subtle and imagistic narration that renders the film's emotional structure poetic, imbued with a quiet sense of *mono no aware*.

A landscape separated from narrative becomes an empty scene, and emotion separated from narrative becomes an empty sentiment. Wang Guowei, in his discussion of *yijing*, places scenic description, emotional expression, and narrative side by side. Hu Jingzhi similarly points out that "in the blending of *yi* and *jing*, *jing* can take many forms. It can describe landscapes, tell stories, portray objects, or depict people" (Hu 260). At the end of *My Memories of Old Beijing*, the image of the father's grave, the gradually receding figure of the old maid Song Ma, and the wild autumn grasses across the hills all allow Yingzi's feelings of parting and sorrow to pour forth. The film's final avoidance of a resolved ending and its use of *liubai* create a narrative silence. Without the characters' misfortunes and without concrete narrative events, this *yijing* would not be possible. Through a gentle, restrained, and lingering narrative style, the film weaves together emotion, scenery, and thought into its imagery, allowing *yijing* to reside in the atmosphere of visuals and sound as well as within the deeply moving narrative itself.

On the whole, as the most culturally distinctive aesthetic mechanism within Chinese poetic cinema, *yijing* is deeply rooted in classical Daoist and Chan philosophy and has been richly

developed through the practice of traditional Chinese poetry and painting, seamlessly extending into the cinematic art form. Its formation arises from the ontological interplay between *yi* (意) and *jing* (境), relies on the crucial bridging function of *yixiang*, and ultimately achieves completion through the dynamic fusion of emotion and scenery and the perceptual interplay between reality and illusion. From visual space to temporal rhythm, from emotional pauses to narrative structure, the construction of *yijing* consistently carries the lingering resonance of Chinese aesthetics. This chapter has systematically explored, on a theoretical level, how *yijing* is generated and expressed in film. Although *yijing* is never confined to a fixed form, it manifests through diverse artistic expressions and spiritual orientations that evolve with the themes, styles, and cultural contexts of different works. In the next chapter, this study will turn to concrete film analyses to further investigate the varying types and stylistic variations of *yijing*, revealing how it unfolds into complex and moving cinematic expressions.

Chapter 3 Types of *Yijing* and Case Analyses

The previous discussion has explored the relationship between *yi* and *jing* through philosophical and aesthetic lenses, showing that *yijing* emerges not from a subject–object dichotomy, but from their dynamic interplay. If we were to rigidly divide types of *yijing* according to Wang Guowei's distinction between the *self-jing* and a *selfless-jing*, we would risk oversimplifying the matter, as these two states frequently intermingle within artistic works. However, Wang Guowei's "theory of the three realms" further reveals the creator's spiritual progression in artistic practice: from the first stage of "gazing toward the ends of the earth,"⁵ marked by longing and anticipation, to the second stage of "my belt gradually loosens, yet I do not regret it,"⁶ reflecting perseverance and devoted effort, and finally to the third stage of "suddenly turning back, that person is there in the dim light,"⁷ representing a moment of sudden realization or enlightenment (Wang 8). This third realm, in fact, contains the deep psychological mechanism of self-forgetting, a moment of qualitative transformation that emerges from the profound fusion of subject and object. Here, "self-forgetting" does not imply the erasure of subjectivity but refers to the subject entering an aesthetic state where self and object become unified and perception merges with existence. As we see in Chinese classical philosophy, particularly Zhuangzi's notion of "zuowang" (坐忘, forgetting desires), the relationship between self and world tends toward fluidity and integration: the "I" is neither fully identical to nor wholly separate from the "non-I," but exists in a dialectical relation that is both connected and distinct (Qian 248). This condition forms the true core of *yijing* generation in poetic cinema. The reason why a film like *Spring in a Small Town* resonates so deeply on an aesthetic level is precisely because the director fuses personal emotion, the historical pain of the era, and the lyrical qualities of the cinematic medium,

⁵ The line "独上高楼, 望尽天涯路" comes from *Butterfly Loves Flowers* (《蝶恋花》) by Yan Shu (晏殊), a renowned Song dynasty poet. While in the original poem it describes personal longing and sorrow, Wang Guowei appropriates it to symbolize the first artistic realm: one of longing, searching, and aspiring toward distant ideals.

⁶ The line "衣带渐宽终不悔, 为伊消得人憔悴" is from *Phoenix Hairpin* (《凤栖梧》) by Yan Jidao (晏几道). While the poem originally expresses romantic yearning, Wang Guowei reinterprets it to represent the second artistic realm: the stage of perseverance and self-sacrifice in pursuit of one's artistic or intellectual goal.

⁷ The line "蓦然回首, 那人却在灯火阑珊处" comes again from *Butterfly Loves Flowers* (《蝶恋花》) by Yan Shu. While originally it depicts a sudden encounter with love, Wang Guowei uses it to symbolize the third realm of artistic creation: a moment of sudden realization or enlightenment where understanding dawns unexpectedly.

reaching an artistic state of "forgetting both self and object," where expression flows naturally and effortlessly.

Based on the above understanding, this study argues that while the distinction between "with self" and "without self" offers theoretical insights, it is not sufficient as a fundamental basis for categorizing types of *yijing* in poetic cinema. Instead, a more analytically valuable approach is to start from specific aesthetic dimensions and examine the different pathways through which *yijing* is constructed within cinematic space and narrative structure.

Accordingly, this chapter proposes two core dimensions: the first contrasts "majestic *yijing*" with "subtle *yijing*," focusing on distinct aesthetic dispositions and expressive atmospheres. The second contrasts "realistic *yijing*" with "surreal *yijing*," addressing the modes of perception and ontological logic of *yijing* across realist and surrealist expressions. It is particularly important to note that the films discussed earlier primarily emerged in the twentieth century and were intended to clarify the aesthetic origins and basic forms of China's poetic cinema tradition. However, with the ongoing shifts in social context, media forms, and aesthetic tastes, a critical question arises: how has twenty-first-century Chinese poetic cinema inherited and transformed the tradition of *yijing*, and how has it regenerated within new cinematic languages? The following sections will analyze four representative poetic films from the twenty-first century, using the two proposed dimensions to explore the typological variations and underlying logic of *yijing* in contemporary practice.

3.1 Majestic and Subtle: Two Aesthetic Modalities of *Yijing*

The modality of *yijing* describes its qualities and characteristics, encompassing both a static aesthetic presentation and a dynamic generative process. As Zhuangzi wrote long ago, "*Yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳) illuminate each other, cover each other, govern each other... The female and male intermix, and thus things come into being (Chen G. 798)." This intermingling of complementary forces underpins the duality of firmness and softness, which in turn provides the philosophical foundation for distinguishing aesthetic temperaments. In the Tang dynasty, *The Twenty-Four Styles of Poetry* developed typologies such as "majestic" (雄浑),

"detached" (冲淡), "delicate" (纤秣), establishing the basic stylistic spectrum of *yijing* (Sikong). In the Ming dynasty, Zhang Shiwen was the first to propose the division of ci poetry into "majestic" (豪放) and "subtle" (婉约), noting that the former is characterized by "magnificent momentum," while the latter embodies "restrained and implicit sentiment" (Xia 39). By the late Qing and early Republican period, Wang Guowei systematized the theory of *yijing*, stating that *yijing* differ in scale but not necessarily in merit. What he called the large realm approaches the majestic and vast, while the small realm tends toward the delicate and remote (Wang 3).

In contemporary poetic cinema, these two aesthetic temperaments continue to be extended and reimagined, generating distinctive stylistic pathways in visual expression. This section selects *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (Lu Chuan, 2004) and *The Assassin* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2015) as case studies, representing the two modalities of "majestic *yijing*" and "subtle *yijing*." The former, with its vast natural landscapes, tragic narratives, and silent shots, constructs a sublime and solemn "realm of heaven and earth." The latter, through its *liubai*-based visual structure, restrained narrative pacing, and misty, ambiguous sensory atmosphere, reveals a reserved and profound poetic sensibility. In this juxtaposition between the majestic and the subtle, poetic cinema sustains the spiritual temperament of classical aesthetics within contemporary expression.

3.1.1 *Kekexili* and the Construction of Majestic *Yijing*

In the development of contemporary Chinese poetic cinema, *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*⁸ stands out as one of the most representative cinematic paradigms of the "majestic *yijing*." Set against the extreme environment of the Kekexili region⁹ on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the film conveys the overwhelming power of natural landscapes while simultaneously constructing a majestic *yijing* that integrates grandeur, vast space, elevated tone, and deep

⁸ *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* follows a journalist and a group of volunteer patrolmen as they struggle to protect Tibetan antelopes on the remote Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, ultimately facing harsh survival dilemmas and tragic losses in their confrontation with ruthless poachers.

⁹ Kekexili (可可西里), also known as Hoh Xil, refers to a vast, uninhabited region on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, renowned as one of the world's largest no-man's lands, characterized by extreme altitudes, harsh climates, and its significance as a protected nature reserve.

compassion. Using Xia Zhaoyan's summary of the four characteristics of the majestic and vigorous *yijing* — magnificent momentum, expansive space, elevated tone, and melancholy reflection (Xia 58–63), this section closely examines the poetic structure constructed in *Kekexili*.

The film establishes its magnificent momentum through minimalist cinematography, notably in the opening sky burial scene. Here, circling vultures and exposed corpses, framed in stark, wide-angle shots, coupled with the solemn chanting of Tibetan lamas, immediately immerse viewers in a powerful, ritualistic tension. Cinematographer Cao Yu noted in an interview that "*Kekexili* is not a landscape film; it is harsh, it is somber (Pan 87)." This deliberate refusal to romanticize the landscape gives every inch of mountain rock and snowline a raw, oppressive force. The film's magnificent momentum emerges from the relentless presence of wind, snow, desert, and glacial rivers, combined with the characters' perseverance against nature, coming together to form a sublime, life-affirming tone.



Fig. 1. Patrol camp with a red flag overlooking the desolate landscape.

Secondly, The film's sense of spatial vastness is conveyed through the extensive use of long shots and empty frames, presenting the boundless expanses of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. Ice fields, deserts, yellow sands, barren mountains, and snow lines together form a spatial structure that feels infinitely extending. Most scenes unfold under overcast skies or snowfall, creating the unique layers of light and shadow and the somber atmosphere characteristic of *Kekexili*. Within these compositions, human figures are often placed at the edges or appear as small points at the center (fig. 1). The film's vast spatiality emerges vividly when patrolmen

drag a cart across a frozen river. The long shot places the tiny human figures precisely in the center of an overwhelming, boundless ice field, visually compressing their struggle into a poignant moment of existential insignificance. Human vulnerability contrasts sharply with the expansive, indifferent landscape, prompting viewers to reflect deeply on individual fragility within the cosmos.

Third is the elevated tone. Xia points out that "elevated tone" does not refer to loud voices or intense emotions but to a sense of spiritual height embedded in rhythm and structure. It conveys a somber solemnity and a psychological resonance that lingers beyond the surface (Xia 61–62). In *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*, this quality is crystallized in the scene of Liu Dong's death. Though a life of love and possibility awaited him, he chose instead to join the patrol as a volunteer and was ultimately swallowed by quicksand on a supply mission. The camera holds a steady, low-angle close-up as the sand gradually engulfs his face. He struggles at first, clawing at the sand in a desperate attempt to escape. Gradually, his movements weaken. His arms fall still, his breathing slows, and he lies motionless, eyes open, quietly accepting the approach of death. There is no music, no cry for help, only the sound of sand flowing over his body. This moment resists sentimentalism yet evokes overwhelming emotion: helplessness, dignity, and the quiet sublimity of a life erased by a cruel nature. Through the emotional weight of this scene and its understated visual presentation, the film reaches an elevated tone and solemn poetic intensity.

Finally, there is the dimension of melancholy reflection, regarded as the deepest layer within majestic *yijing*. Throughout the entire film, the vulnerability of life is displayed against the vastness of the environment. The scattered corpses of Tibetan antelopes across the barren plains express no overt emotion, yet they evoke for the viewer the heavy reality that "heaven and earth are unkind, treating all things as straw dogs."¹⁰ The leader of the patrol, initially chasing poachers, is ultimately forced to sell the pelts of antelopes in order to survive. In the film's final moments, after the poachers kill the patrol leader and disappear into the distance,

¹⁰ This line comes from the *Dao De Jing* (Chapter 5), attributed to Laozi. The original Chinese is "天地不仁，以万物为刍狗," suggesting that nature operates with impartiality, indifferent to human concerns.

fierce winds accompanied by blinding snow sweep across the screen (fig. 2). The storm rages, the snow dances wildly, and the towering snow-covered mountains and boundless plains fill the frame. The film realistically presents the harsh environment of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and, even more strikingly, exposes the moral dilemmas and human choices faced by those living within it. Through the sublimity of nature and the tragic struggles of life, the film evokes an almost fatalistic aesthetic contemplation.



Fig. 2. The aftermath of the patrol leader's death

Kekexili achieves a uniquely Chinese sense of "desolate beauty" through its natural compositions, emotional restraint, and philosophical reflections on life. This majestic *yijing* is not merely an external sublimity derived from the natural landscape but represents a philosophical dialogue between human consciousness and the vastness of heaven and earth.

3.1.2 *The Assassin* and the Construction of Subtle *Yijing*

The Assassin represents a poetic aesthetic approach entirely distinct from that of *Kekexili*, embodying what can be called the "subtle *yijing*." This mode of *yijing* establishes a delicate and profound viewing experience through subtlety, tranquility, and ethereal qualities. In examining *The Assassin*, we can draw on Xia Zhaoyan's summary of the delicate and remote type of *yijing*, characterized by "gentle momentum, lingering charm, evocative emptiness, and deep resonance," to explore how the film cultivates a subtle *yijing* through restrained and refined expression (Xia 63-77).

Just as the starting point of the subtle *yijing*, the overall aesthetic realm of *The Assassin* is characterized by lightness and gentle resonance. In his *Ancient Record of Painters' Assessments* from the Southern Qi dynasty, Xie He famously placed "vitality and spirit" (气韵生动) as the first principle of artistic excellence, which remains a foundational criterion for the subtle mode of *yijing* (Xie 2). As a martial arts film, *The Assassin* almost entirely abandons the intense fight scenes and driving narrative momentum typical of the *wuxia* (武侠) genre. Instead, Hou Hsiao-hsien constructs an atmosphere of restraint, lightness, and stillness through his signature long takes, empty-frame shots, slow-paced editing, and desaturated color palette. The film opens in black and white, with the nun calmly instructing Nie Yinniang to carry out an assassination. Departing from conventional *wuxia* storytelling, this opening features no music and no dialogue from Nie Yinniang, establishing an immediate tone of quiet stillness. By reducing dramatic tension, the film gently draws viewers into a subtle yet vividly alive aesthetic realm.

Looking further, *The Assassin* conveys a lingering charm with its distanced visual presentation. The film frequently employs long shots, empty frames, and landscape imagery, constructing a sense of visual remoteness and emotional detachment. At the end of the film, Nie Yinniang bids farewell to the nun who raised and trained her on the top of a misty mountain. Her decision to forgo the assassination unveils a deep divergence between her inner convictions and the path laid out by her master. However, the lines are only a few words, there is no musical accompaniment, only the subtle sounds of nature. In the long shot of farewell, their tiny figures are distributed in the misty fog in the valley, presenting their spiritual alienation in a visual way. Through such restrained composition and distant framing, the film creates a quiet yet lasting resonance, subtly lingering in the viewer's perception.

The third characteristic is the sense of evocative emptiness, marked by delicacy and ethereal subtlety. In *The Assassin*, emotional expression relies less on dialogue or overt performance and more on the "meaning beyond words" that emerges through *liubai* and the accumulation of poetic imagery. Nie Yinniang speaks fewer than ten lines throughout the entire film, and even moments of grief are shown with her covering her face, without overt display. Shu Qi

was directed to avoid exaggerated expressions, conveying emotion instead through minimal gestures and subtle camera movements. For example, when she watches Tian Ji'an's tender interaction with Huji behind a curtain, the shot's partial obscurity and the shifting play of wind create a hazy, ambiguous visual field (fig. 3). The viewer cannot fully discern her inner state, yet is nonetheless drawn into its emotional undercurrent. As expressed in *the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, "It is not the wind that is moving, and it is not the banner that is moving. It is your minds that are moving" (The Platform Sutra 26). Through this extreme restraint, the film builds a profound artistic resonance and philosophical depth, conveying meaning that lingers beyond the visible frame.



Fig. 3. Nie Yinniang observed through sheer curtains

The final dimension lies in the film's rich implication, which is deeply rooted in its narrative and symbolic system. From Nie Yinniang's personal choices regarding her lineage, to the hidden power dynamics between regional lords and the imperial court; from Qingluan's death and the passing on of the mirror as a symbolic object, to Nie Yinniang's ultimate decision to abandon her assassination mission and retreat into seclusion with the mirror-polishing boy, every narrative node carries deep significance. Qingluan's death and the mirror she leaves behind provide Nie Yinniang with a symbolic axis through which she re-encounters her own self. Meanwhile, the flowing movements of "wind" and "cloud" permeate Nie Yinniang's bodily movements, her wavering will, and her drifting fate. In the final scene, as she disappears into the mist with the mirror-polishing boy, this act not only symbolizes her

narrative withdrawal but also suggests a spiritual return, marking her renunciation of power structures and her embrace of life's essential nature (fig. 4). The profound meaning of *The Assassin* lies precisely in what is left unsaid, in what is carried by silence. Through its use of *liubai*, the film invites viewers to discover their own resonances and answers within.



Fig. 4. Nie Yinniang and the mirror-polishing boy retreating into the mist

The Assassin constructs a quintessential "subtle *yijing*" through Hou Hsiao-hsien's distinctive cinematic language, its restrained and distant emotional expression, and its intricate system of imagery. This mode of *yijing*, shaped by slowness, stillness, distance, and delicacy, weaves poetic and philosophical depth into the very texture of the film. In contrast to the majestic vastness of *Kekexili*, *The Assassin* presents an equally profound path of poetic expression: a passage leading inward, a contemplative aesthetic journey into the heart.

Through the comparative analysis of *Kekexili* and *The Assassin*, it becomes clear that poetic cinema's *yijing* can manifest either as the poetry of nature, with its expansive and majestic force, or as the poetry of *wuxia*, characterized by subtlety and restraint. If *Kekexili* and *The Assassin* stand as two paradigmatic examples along the modalities of *yijing*, the following analysis will further shift the focus to the narrative dimension, exploring how *yijing* gives rise to new poetic expressions when oscillating between realist and surreal modes.

3.2 Depicting and Creating: Dual Pathways of Realism and Surrealism

The presentation of *yijing* involves not only differences in stylistic temperament but, more fundamentally, hinges on how the creator expresses the mode of cinematic existence. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, Wang Guowei's distinction between *xiejing* (写境, realist depiction) and *zaojing* (造境, surrealist creation) offers a classical framework for differentiating creative principles (Wang 1). The former emphasizes the perception and representation of the real world, transforming the textures of nature, daily life, and survival into a poetic realm through restrained observation. The latter, by contrast, is rooted in the subjective construction of poetic experience, using dreams, memories, and hallucinations to craft a transcendent spiritual space beyond reality. This distinction also resonates with David Bordwell's narrative theory, which holds that film narrative does not simply reproduce a preexisting world but actively constructs the story world that the audience experiences through its narrative system. Whether through "realist narration," which relies on everyday details and a sense of authenticity, or "art cinema narration," which draws on symbolism, perceptual drift, and temporal discontinuity, each mode generates its own world. Bordwell refers to this as the "demiurgic power" of narrative, explaining that the narrative system produces everything from environment and actions to the very concept of reality (Bordwell 110–20). This section will examine Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006) and Bi Gan's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018) as case studies to explore the construction methods and aesthetic values of realist *yijing* and surrealist *yijing*. This comparison goes beyond two modes of cinematic creation and offers a deeper analysis of the underlying worldviews that shape the generation of *yijing*: how realist depiction extracts poetry from reality, and how surrealist creation reaches for transcendence at the spiritual level through subjective invention.

3.2.1 Realist Depiction: Embedding Emotion in Scenery

As one of the most influential contemporary realist directors in China, Jia Zhangke's cinematic work aligns closely with the concept of *xiejing* (realist depictions) as defined earlier. Through his distinctive filmic practice, Jia redefines the possibilities of realism,

blending personal social observation with poetic expression and providing a crucial reference point for contemporary poetic cinema. This is especially evident in his representative work *Still Life*, where Jia has developed a mature and cohesive aesthetic system. Rather than replicating reality, he gazes upon the vast and historically weighty backdrop of the Three Gorges Project to unearth a "realist *yijing*" that interweaves individual fate and the fractures of an era.

Jia Zhangke once reflected that if cinema is a method of preserving memory, then what fills our screens is almost entirely the official narrative. Many tend to overlook mundane life and dismiss everyday experience, choosing instead to craft legends within the dimension of history. "These are things I respectfully distance myself from," Jia explained. "What I want to convey are the feelings deeply buried in the passage of time, those personal experiences charged with unnamed impulses but with nowhere to go" (Jia 103–104). Since *Xiao Wu*, Jia has consistently focused on marginal characters and individuals swept up by the tide of modernization yet forgotten by mainstream society. His camera is not a cold, distant observer but one marked by attentiveness, tenderness, and a close, textural gaze. This approach embodies a classic mode from Chinese poetics: embedding emotion in scenery (寓情于景), where the emotion of the characters is entrusted to the scenery of reality, and the tactile texture of life emerges through documentary-like details.

In terms of visual style, Jia Zhangke draws upon Italian Neorealism while also reflecting the influence of French Poetic Realism. Employing long shots, fixed camera positions, non-professional actors, and regional dialects, Jia allows the texture of the real world itself to become the central subject. Although both Jia Zhangke and films like *Kekexili* emphasize realism, Jia's realist approach differs fundamentally from *Kekexili*'s natural poetics and spatial landscapes. Rather than focusing on the abstract confrontation between humans and nature, Jia's attention centers on individuals struggling and stagnating within the fractures of time and society. For example, the opening long take of *Still Life* slowly leads the viewer through the various figures aboard a boat: migrant workers playing cards, a child biting his nails, an old man sitting in silence, a fortune teller reading palms. These seemingly ordinary scenes,

when gradually revealed through the camera's slow movement, unfold like a flowing Chinese landscape scroll, portraying a collective portrait of the people of the Three Gorges. Particularly evocative is the image of the protagonist Han Sanming standing alone, gazing toward the canyon (fig. 5) — an image that naturally recalls the desolate beauty often evoked in Chinese poetry, such as the verse "the boundless falling leaves rustle down." Yet in Jia's films, there is almost no trace of the clear, luminous imagery found in more conventional poetic cinema. Instead, his frames are marked by roughness, disorder, decay, and dilapidation. He does not romanticize the world but strives to faithfully reproduce the imprint of his own inner truth. Rather than deliberately "creating" poetic effects, Jia invites the audience to discover poetry within documentary-like images, embedding genuine emotion within scenes of reality. This, in essence, captures the core of "embedding emotion in scenery" and has become Jia's distinctive artistic strategy for engaging with social reality.



Fig. 5. Han Sanming gazing across the river

In terms of narrative, although Jia retains a basic linear structure, following the parallel storylines of Han Sanming searching for his wife and Shen Hong searching for her husband, the film's true poetics emerge through the many "casual moments" scattered throughout. His narrative approach avoids clear climaxes or dramatic turns, instead dwelling extensively on scenes of characters walking, waiting, drinking and chatting, or sitting in silence. This fragmented temporal collage allows the raw texture of everyday life to surface. By the film's ending, Shen Hong, after sharing a quiet dance by the river with her estranged husband

(fig. 6), calmly walks away alone; Han Sanming returns to the Shanxi mines to continue struggling for survival. These understated and non-cathartic endings become the film's most affecting aspect: there is no so-called dramatic climax, only a reflective glimpse into a fragment of real social life. Throughout the film, recurring motifs of cigarettes, alcohol, tea, and sugar function not merely as narrative devices but as emotional metaphors deeply embedded in Chinese daily life. They reveal the social ties between people, embodying the subtle bonds that connect individuals not only to each other but also to the material world around them.



Fig. 6. Shen Hong's final dance with her husband by the river

The most profound aspect lies in how this *xiejing* (realist depiction) generates meaning beyond the immediate imagery. Jia's works are often described as a "poetics of disappearance" because they point toward a vanishing homeland and the fading ways of life attached to it. The relocations and demolitions caused by the Three Gorges project, the soon-to-be-submerged villages, the laborers' dormitories, and the exhausted dock workers are not romanticized by the director. Their poetic quality emerges precisely from the gravity of social reality itself. How do the ordinary people of the Three Gorges region retain their faint yet resilient spiritual strength amid the dramatic upheavals of the surrounding world? Even as they struggle just to survive, they continue to share cigarettes, alcohol, tea, and sweets, upholding the values of loyalty, perseverance, and hard work. The loss of home, the fading of familiar lands, and the sense of wandering resonate deeply with the classical Chinese poetic

sentiments of "things remain, but people have changed." By the end of the film, when viewers quietly ask themselves, "Where will these two characters go next?" the question echoes into something larger — a reflection on the self and on the spirit of the times. This is the most profound "meaning beyond the image" at the heart of Jia Zhangke's *xiejing* aesthetics.

3.2.2 Surrealist Creation: Shaping Scenes through Emotion

In Wang Guowei's theoretical framework of *yijing*, *zaojing* (surrealist creation) refers to the artist's creation of an imagined aesthetic realm that transcends visible reality, shaped through subjective imagination and emotional infusion (Wang 1). The artist selectively highlights the most expressive elements, sacrificing some factual details to reveal deeper essences and enhance the work's emotional and formal power. Among contemporary Chinese directors, Bi Gan stands out as the most representative figure working in this mode. While he openly acknowledges Andrei Tarkovsky as a key influence, his work remains a distinct exploration grounded in local Chinese experiences and traditional aesthetics. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is his most emblematic work, and the following analysis will explore how it constructs a surreal *yijing* with its own rich aesthetic architecture. Bi Gan's distinctive style first emerged in his debut feature *Kaili Blues*, where his visual world exemplifies a "shaping scenes through emotion (缘情写景)" approach. His images begin with a subjective, emotional impulse that actively seeks, constructs, and embeds itself in the visual landscape. By the time of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, this technique had reached full maturity.

What, then, is the core emotion that Bi Gan seeks to express? It stems from his personal experiences, his memories of his hometown and his own life. As Bi Gan himself has remarked in interviews, "My views on cinema come entirely from the practice of filming and from tracing back through myself" (Bi and Ye 95). In *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, these realms take on concrete geographic and symbolic forms: the real town of Kaili, the fictional place Dangmai, mines, old streets. These spaces and characters that are at once physically present and projections of Bi Gan's inner world. He uses his own emotional drive to summon,

weave, and transform a cinematic space, projecting inner feeling onto the external world and turning it into a symbolic extension of his emotional landscape. This construction develops mainly across three dimensions: the deployment of *yixiang* (poetic imagery), the reorganization of temporal and spatial relations, and the layering of emotional meaning.



Fig. 7. Eating the apple as a token of farewell in the dream

First, the film establishes its sensory system through a rich array of distinctive *yixiang*. Objects like honey, torches, clocks, and mines repeatedly appear, creating emotional nodes and perceptual pathways. One key motif is the wild pomelo: in the film's first half, Wan Qiwen uses the search for wild pomelos as an excuse to escape her relationship with Zuo Hongyuan; in the dreamlike second half, Kaizhen likewise invokes the pomelo to justify fleeing Dangmai. The pomelo becomes a link between reality and dream, signifying escape from memory, from entrapment, and from emotional weight. More deeply, when Luo Hongwu embarks on his own search for the "wild pomelo," the film layers this *yixiang* with the apple, which connects the death of Baimao, Luo's meeting with Wan Qiwen, and the intertwined stories of his mother and lover. In the dream sequence, a man slowly eats an entire apple while a woman leans on his shoulder in red light. He remains silent, tears welling in his eyes, and does not stop even after finishing the apple's core. The act is quiet yet deeply affecting. It becomes a ritual of farewell, absorbing grief and memory into the body. These

yixiang are not fixed symbols but emotional currents that flow through the film's visual world. Bi Gan assembles them into a poetic space shaped by memory, sensation, and inner tension.



Fig. 8. The texture of the dreamworld constructed by Bi Gan.

A further dimension involves how Bi Gan interweaves time and space to construct a distinctive *yijing*, allowing past and present, reality and memory, dream and illusion to permeate, overlap, and entwine. In the narrative, the real town of Kaili, the imagined locale of Dangmai, and the subconscious dreamscape together form a densely layered temporal and spatial web. The first half of the film presents scenes grounded in the real world, while the second half unfolds as a one-hour 3D long take set entirely within a dream sequence (fig. 8). As Bi Gan has described, "Time is an invisible bird, one you cannot see. I place it under a cage and paint it with colors, and then you can see it. The entire continuous space becomes that long take — it is the cage — and the dreamlike narrative is the color. When the long take captures the continuous flow of time, and the dreamlike narrative adds its hues, the audience can finally perceive what time truly is." (Bi Gan, "Time Is That Invisible Bird") Through his visual language, Bi Gan presents a sense of circular time, a cyclical experience of individual life: the protagonist's identity shifts between father, friend, lover, and son; the spaces flow between mines, cinemas, old streets, and ruins; and time spins between past, present, memory, and hallucination. The film's recurring images serve as temporal markers and memory nodes, stitching together these varied temporalities and jointly creating a surreal domain.

Ultimately, the distinctive artistic height of Bi Gan's cinematic world lies in his profound exploration of time, life, and existence. For Bi Gan, time is not a linearly progressing flow but a cyclical and returning life experience. In interviews, he has remarked that the Buddhist notion from the *Diamond Sutra* — "the past mind cannot be grasped, the present mind cannot be grasped, the future mind cannot be grasped" — most closely resonates with his own sense of time. Yet at the same time, he believes that memory is tangible: memories tied to places and emotions are always traceable. Different audiences bring different interpretations and resonances to *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. For example, French viewers tend to focus on fundamental cinematic questions, such as issues of time and memory, even asking whether the film is influenced by Marcel Proust. Meanwhile, audiences in Taiwan are most concerned with emotional matters, raising questions about the characters' relationships (Bi and Ye 91-92). This multiplicity of responses exemplifies what Chinese aesthetics calls the "meaning beyond the image", or the lingering significance beyond what is shown. Bi Gan has said that while everyone knows cinema is artificial, it is only when he interacts with the audience in the right way and makes it clear that the film is fictional that they are able to recognize the emotions within it as real (Bi and Ye 94). Notably, the final one-hour 3D long take creates a space for immersion and reflection, inviting viewers to drift with the film's continuous time. Near the end, the two protagonists enter a "sweet room," where one recites lines like "Have you ever counted the stars? They parachute in my chest like birds." The room slowly begins to rotate, as if triggered by a hidden spell, echoing the film's circular structure and bringing it to a quiet close. This moment captures Bi Gan's artistic vision, where poetic imagery, personal memory, and emotional resonance converge in a world suspended between dream and reality, offering a poetic meditation on time, memory, and human presence.

It is worth noting that although this chapter categorizes Jia Zhangke under *xiejing* (realist depictions) and Bi Gan under *zaojing* (surrealist creations), this distinction is mainly intended to clarify their respective aesthetic characteristics and unique contributions within the practice of poetic cinema. However, their creative approaches are not strictly separate. As Wang Guowei famously stated, "There is the creation of *jing* and the depiction of *jing*; this is

where the idealist and realist schools divide. Yet the two are difficult to separate, for the *jing* created by great poets must accord with nature, and the *jing* depicted must approach the ideal." In this sense, Jia's realist depictions also integrate subjective emotional projection, while Bi's surrealist creations are deeply rooted in the details of nature and everyday life. Ultimately, both directors reveal *yijing* not through form alone but through the interplay of emotion, thought, time, and space.

Overall, this chapter has not only mapped out the concrete visual expressions of *yijing* across different modalities and creative approaches but also illuminated its underlying spiritual orientation. Whether majestic or subtle, realist or surrealist, these filmmakers use cinema to explore a unique poetic expression situated between subjectivity and objectivity. One can say that Chinese poetic cinema, through its diverse constructions of *yijing*, reveals an artistic depth and resonance that is entirely its own.

Conclusion

Through a comparative study of poetic cinema across different cultural contexts, this study reveals the unique aesthetic value of Chinese poetic cinema. Its core lies not in the mere poeticization of form but in *yijing*, a profound aesthetic mechanism central to Chinese artistic tradition. Placed within the broader context of global poetic cinema, however, the logic behind poetic imagery is not exclusive to China. Films from different cultural backgrounds present diverse paths and aesthetic frameworks. In the European poetic tradition, for instance, the concept of poetry has been interpreted in multiple ways over time, including ideas such as *mimesis* in ancient Greek thought, lyrical expression in Romanticism, and a tendency to focus on the materiality of language in modernist approaches. Consequently, poetic cinema has taken various forms. Tarkovsky explored the relationship between image and spiritual experience through his notion of "sculpting in time." Pasolini introduced "free indirect discourse" to explore how film language renders the shifting relation between narrative voice and inner subjectivity. Modernist and surrealist works emphasized dreams, symbols, and the unconscious. These forms of poetics often rely on tensions between form, perception, and psychological experience, seeking to express the depth of subjective consciousness. Many of them also reflect a conscious resistance to mainstream narrative and commercial conventions.

Notably, the Romantic tradition in European art often expressed an emotional resonance between inner feeling and the external world, which in certain respects echoes the aesthetics of *yijing*. Yet this resonance is more of a philosophical affinity than a convergence in aesthetic mechanisms. *Yijing* reflects a holistic artistic mindset grounded in the Chinese philosophical notion of the unity between heaven and humanity, viewing the individual, nature, and society as inseparable parts of an organic whole. This creates a depth of meaning that transcends the surface of material forms. *Yijing* stands as a distinctive artistic style while also serving as a spiritual approach that weaves together philosophy, emotion, and visual experience. This makes it a defining feature of Chinese poetic cinema within the global tradition of poetic filmmaking.

The central argument of this study is that *yijing* serves as a key lens for understanding Chinese poetic cinema and functions as the spiritual thread running through both its creation and reception. When transposed into cinematic art, the idea of *yijing* transforms into a distinctive visual language and narrative mode: the use of visual *liubai* (leaving blank space) and subtlety, the balance of slow and condensed pacing, and the layering of philosophical depth and lingering resonance—all aim to create a space of meaning that transcends the surface of concrete forms. Accordingly, Chinese poetic cinema often employs restrained expression and controlled rhythm to guide the viewer into perceiving the inner poetics of the image, drawing the audience into an experiential domain beyond mere representation. Rooted in a culturally specific worldview, *yijing* informs every level of film creation, from audiovisual language to narrative structure and thematic design. It shapes an aesthetic paradigm that stands apart from other poetic cinema traditions.

The case studies further confirm the above insights: *yijing* is not a rigid or singular model but rather a diverse yet internally unified aesthetic pursuit. The four Chinese poetic films examined in this study span dramatically different "aesthetic temperaments" of *yijing*. Lu Chuan's *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* creates a desolate and sublime natural realm through its vast and tragic poetry of nature, while Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Assassin* employs an exquisitely restrained aesthetics of *liubai* to evoke the enduring, delicate charm of Chinese poetic expression. These contrasting styles highlight the expansive range and vitality of *yijing* aesthetics across the extremes of the majestic and the subtle. On the narrative level, the distinction between "realistic *yijing*" and "surreal *yijing*" is equally illuminating. Jia Zhangke, in works such as *Still Life*, is rooted in reality, using a cold, unflinching gaze at everyday life to distill a profound, lingering poetic landscape out of the fragments of historical change. Bi Gan, by contrast, constructs subjective, dreamlike temporalities to create fluid, hallucinatory mental worlds, opening up endless possibilities for contemporary cinematic surrealist constructions. These examples reveal that the *yijing* tradition in contemporary poetic cinema has not remained static but instead continually evolves through the diverse aesthetic explorations of different filmmakers. Through this ongoing

process, *yijing* aesthetics demonstrates its remarkable inclusivity and unifying force, emerging as both the spiritual core and aesthetic anchor that connects multiple cinematic styles.

With these key findings in place, it is also necessary to acknowledge the study's limitations. Due to constraints of scope and perspective, the analysis has primarily focused on the explanatory power of the aesthetic category of *yijing* for understanding poetic cinema, without attempting to exhaust all the potential features and phenomena encompassed by the concept of poetic cinema. Similarly, while the study identifies several representative cases from other cultural contexts for comparison, it does not encompass the full complexity of poetic cinema traditions worldwide. Broader and deeper exploration may uncover richer aesthetic parallels and alternative ways of perceiving memory, subjectivity, and time, thereby deepening our understanding of poetic expression across cultures and open new paths for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study offers a systematic examination of the inner aesthetic mechanisms of Chinese poetic cinema through the lens of *yijing*, helping to address gaps in existing scholarly research. Within the global landscape of film theory, Chinese aesthetic categories are often absent or placed in subordinate positions, leaving discussions of "poetic" expression without a truly equivalent framework for comparison. By returning to the indigenous aesthetic traditions of Chinese culture, this study highlights the irreplaceable value of *yijing* for understanding Chinese poetic cinema and hopes to encourage greater recognition of such local aesthetic concepts within international film studies.

While *yijing* is not the only framework for interpreting Chinese poetic cinema, it undoubtedly offers a vital entry point for deepening understanding and fostering cultural dialogue.

Through this perspective, one can move beyond surface-level formal comparisons and meaningfully engage with the profound spiritual meanings interwoven within Chinese poetic cinema. This kind of sustained attention to local aesthetic dimensions helps broaden and enrich the conceptual scope of global film aesthetics.

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