

# The Poetic and Aesthetic Presentation of “Spring in a Small Town” from the Perspective of Chinese Traditional Culture

Yiwen Zhang

Department of Film Studies, Graduate School of Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing,  
100029, China

## Abstract

In recent years, the construction of a Chinese Film School has increasingly become a distinguished school in the Chinese film academia. As a representative Chinese film, “Spring in a Small Town” has distinct national cultural characteristics in the poetic and aesthetic presentation of images, which is embodied in three levels: the creation of “airy atmosphere”, the generation of charm and artistic conception, and the manifestation of humanistic spiritual connotation. Through analyzing and interpreting the poetic aesthetics in “Spring in a Small Town” will help to build a film ecosystem with Chinese cultural characteristics and to promote the exchange and integration with the world's excellent film culture.

## Keywords

Chinese film; Traditional culture; “Spring in a Small Town”; Poetic aesthetics.

## 1. Introduction

Films are currently one of the most dynamic cultural carriers, and their influence is increasingly being valued by countries all over the world. In the context of international cultural exchange and dissemination, the unique culture of each country burst out in radiant splendor through film images. Therefore, we have to think about the unique aesthetic style of Chinese films, what kind of cultural features are reflected, and what cultural traditions are rooted in? To answer this series of questions, we might take the film “Spring in a Small Town” (1948) directed by Mu Fei as a sample for analysis. From the specific interpretation of the film text, try to describe the unique aesthetic taste of Chinese films and explore the cultural traditions it rooted in, with a view to improving the recognition of Chinese films in international cultural communication to tell a good Chinese story.

To a certain extent, the poetic expression in Chinese films has the unique aesthetic characteristics of Chinese traditional art. “Spring in a Small Town” is a film with a poetic style. Its director Mu Fei is also known as the “Poetic Director” in the history of Chinese film. Li Shaobai once praised him as “The pioneers of Chinese modern film insights who has a profound thought like a scholar and a unique philosopher.” [1]. The poetic aesthetics of “Spring in a Small Town” is mainly embodied through the sense of “airy”, the creation of artistic appeal and artistic conception, and the connotation of humanistic spirit.

## 2. The Sense of “Airy” Create Poetic Atmosphere

The film of “Spring in a Small Town” opened a precedent for poetic films, and the “sense of airy” in it is the most fundamental part of poetic atmosphere, as Mu Fei said: “If a film wants to attract the audience, it must assimilate the audience with the people in the play. In order to achieve this goal, I think it is necessary to create the “sense of airy” in the play” [2]. The “sense of airy” is not a literal meaning such as using smoke to set the scenery or adding fogging special effects, but a kind of haziness and ambiguity artificially made by space-time creation, contrast and

sound effects, and the photography itself, making the film feel like a non-deterministic and multi-sense aesthetic experience, which is also a model of traditional Chinese artistic aesthetics. First of all, the "sense of airy" created by photography itself. The camera replaces the eyes of the narrator and the intervention perspective of the audience. In "Spring in a Small Town", the perspective of photography is often blurred, starting with Zhou Yuwen's inner monologue, the camera was given the identity of Zhou Yuwen, and when Zhang Zhichen entered, from the perspective of Zhou Yuwen, it should have been unknown how Zhichen came from, but the camera changed to an omniscient perspective at this time. Zhou Yu Wen's reminiscence of self-talk is slowly combined with Zhang Zhichen. In fact, this shooting method violates modern film editing laws.

The narrative perspective combines the duality of Zhou Yuwen and the director. The narration is sometimes Zhou Yuwen's "slurs", and sometimes it becomes a bystander. This kind of deliberate approach by the director creates an "airy sense" of perspective, it was hazy and blurred. The audience follows the camera, sometimes as a participant entering the inner subjective world, and sometimes becomes a bystander away from the turmoil to think calmly. Under the command of the camera's perspective, emotions may go deep or withdrawn, and the audience's psychology will change accordingly. Following the narrator's change of different identities, the audience will switch their psychology and imagine the inner world of Yu Wen, which creates a strong and weak emotional resonance. "The narrator of this film is ambiguous regardless of the motive and position. The addition of narration is not uncommon in Chinese films, but there has never been an ambiguous performance better than "Spring in a Small Town" [3]. In essence, what the film mobilizes is the audience's sense of participation and imagination. This "sense of airy" has the same aesthetic acceptance method as Chinese poetry, brewing the poetic atmosphere of the film.

Secondly, "Spring in a Small Town" constructs a view of time and space that is intertwined with realism and freehand brushwork, and "a sense of airy" emerges spontaneously. Films can freely create time and space, not only in reality, but also in psychological ways. According to experience, "If time speeds up, you will feel that space is shrinking, on the contrary, if time slows down, the space will expand" [4], the slow narrative method of long shots in the film combines the physical space with the technique of slowing down time to expand the mental space as much as possible. Long shots are slow and long, and the flow of time slows down as the camera slowly follows. In a single shot, everything in the space of the object is fully visible, creating the beauty of realism. At the same time, the slow rhythm brews the emotions of the audience, accumulating the "lingering sorrow" through time and space, and realizes the freehand feeling of the inner world. In the film, the camera follows Zhou Yuwen's narration to slowly introduce her home destroyed by artillery fire. The narration is her "slurs", and with the slow movement of the camera, the dreamlike, seemingly realistic, broken and decayed walls appeared, with the application of various technologies superimposed to create a vague and erratic artistic ideographic space. In the first scene of the film, Zhou Yuwen walks on the city wall. Her gaze is looking outside the wall. However, Mu Fei did not tell the audience what is outside the wall, for the city wall is limited, but Yuwen's vision is endless, as a result, the space created is infinite. This technique limits the spatiality of the camera's shooting objects, but expands the infiniteness of the space imagined by the audience, which is the beauty from finite to infinite.

The film deliberately dilutes the past of Zhang Zhichen and Zhou Yuwen, all omitted from the video time, but reveals the tacit understanding and intimacy between them in the space. The view of time and space produces a sense of obscurity, which creates the psychological memories of the characters in the film and stimulates the imagination of the audience. It looks realistic but freehand in reality. The time and space view created by the two intertwined ultimately produces the poetic atmosphere of the film and the inner realism.

Finally, a poetic “sense of airy” emerges under the creation, “the so called to approach a subject without coming straight to the point”. The film always casts the external and internal activities of the characters into the scenery, which is the same as the ancient Chinese “All scenery is entrusted with sentimental thoughts”. Films use pictures to tell stories, and Mu Fei’s pictures are not only used to tell stories, but also to convey emotions. The city wall is an important object in this film, for it has a connection with everyone from beginning to end. It is speechless, but through the director, it produces the polysemous connotation of “silence here is better than the sound”.

As a concrete image, the city wall limits the physical space in which the story takes place, but as an image, the city wall stimulates multiple interpretations of the audience, forming a polysemy psychological space: Zhou Yuwen stands alone on the wall and looks out of the wall, at this time, the city wall is a wall of confinement that can't leave; when Zhang Zhichen and Zhou Yuwen narrated the past in the city wall, the city wall was a moral wall that they wanted to cross but could not; the wall where Zhang Zhichen played with his younger sister symbolized the unrequited love that she could not cross; and the wall where Dai Liyan and Zhou Yuwen stood to see Zhang Zhichen off was the emotional estrangement between the couple. According to the changes of different roles and the relationship between the roles, the meaning of the city wall is also changed. The image is ambiguous and mysterious. With the change of the audience's imagination, the inner empiricism is formed, and the “sense of airy” is produced between the screen and the audience's understanding. It is a poetic aesthetic paradigm of “there is no incomprehensible or unchanging interpretation of beauty”.

### 3. The Artistic Appeal of Films and Beauty in Artistic Conception

The Artistic appeal can also refer to “Qi Yun”. It is derived from ancient Chinese painting theory, which was first seen in Sheik's “Six Rules of Painting”, for he said, “the Qi Yun is a kind of vivid spiritual charm”. It is an aesthetic form that transcends specific images and penetrates into the spiritual world, which has formed a strong contrast to that in the West, where artistic pursuit is simulation and lifelikeness. What Chinese people appreciate is the beauty of “Be subtle by artistically depicted to be both real and unreal”, and the charm of “the subtlety is beyond description though it can be sensed.”, and the ultimate destination is the philosophical realm of the essence of life. As a dynamic image of an imported product, the film has been introduced into China across the sea, and the scenery of the film must also contain the artistic beauty of the Chinese mainland, which is the artistic appeal of it.

So what is the “Qi Yun” of the film? “Qi” has the meaning of vitality and continuity as a whole, and the “Yun” has the meaning of sounds in symphony and harmony. It means “artificially perfected just like nature itself.” [6], “Qi” is a kind of coherent and integrated beauty in one breath; And the “Yun” in the film is a kind of part that is vaguely outside the concrete image, or the part that can be extracted from the image as a whole, and forms the “extension” of the image in the audience's psychology through audiovisual. Obviously, the poetic director Mu Fei applied the category of charm in Chinese aesthetics on the screen in “Spring in a Small Town”. So how does the film create the “Qi Yun” on the screen?

It is not difficult to find that Mu Fei prefers soothing full-length shots in “Spring in a Small Town”, which are not the same as the “full-length shots aesthetics” proposed by the contemporary French film theorist André Bazin. Bazin believes that the full-length shots and the depth-of-field shots ensure the integrity of time and space and the ambiguity of content, while a zoom within a single shot can produce multiple and complex connotations. Strictly speaking, Mu Fei practices “single-shots aesthetics”, and all the full-length shots in “Spring in a Small Town” are not zoomed, which is different from Bazin's view of time and space. The reason comes from the different aesthetics viewpoints between East and West, for the emergence of photography has

an indissoluble bond with Western painting, who concerns "focus perspective", and emphasizes the sense of hierarchy in space; The eastern painting is "scattered perspective", which is closer to the state of "travel". If the West seeks the depth of space, the East seeks the breadth of space, and the difference of viewpoint is reflected in the lens, it forms the contrast between the "single shots" of Mu Fei in China and the "long shots" of Bazin in France. Mu Fei's use of single lens in the film is like an unfolded picture, while watching the film is close to "enjoy" and "tour" in the scenery, resulting in the beauty of changing scenes step by step. In addition, there are few reverse-angle shots in "Spring in a Small Town", and the display of character relations is always described by a single shot, which not only realizes the continuity of "Qi" of achieving goals in one breath in terms of techniques, but also realizes the accumulation of emotions in the full-length shot, resulting in a unique "Yun" dissociated from the whole work, so that the "Qi Yun" of Chinese films came into being.

The artistic appeal and artistic conception in traditional Chinese aesthetics are often mentioned together. Artistic conception is an important aesthetic category of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Just like "Qi Yun", it is not specific and visible, but a deeper aesthetic experience, which can only be obtained by grasping the specific form and entering a higher aesthetic field. The production of artistic conception is divided into three aspects: the blending of scenes, the coexistence of the virtual and the reality, and the endless artistic appeal. The creation of the artistic conception in the film "Spring in a Small Town" is similar to the creation of the artistic conception of ancient Chinese literature. Hong Kong scholar Liu Chenghan put forward the theory of "the Narrative, Analogy, and Association of film" and applied the technique of classical poetry creation to film analysis. The "Association" of "Spring in a Small Town" is more distinguished than "Narrative" and "Analogy". With the help of the relationship between the scenery, characters and the environment, the director cherishes "a touch of sorrow". At the same time, the slow movement of the film shots and the soothing dissolve shots also have the effect of "Association". There are many dissolving mirrors in the film, which are used to show the inextricable relationship between Zhang Zhichen and Zhou Yuwen. "Mu Fei's poetic style and his unique application of dissolve shots are based on the "Narrative, Analogy, and Association" theory of poetry and the aesthetics of opera... It is obvious that it has the tradition of "Chinese national style" in the Book of Songs, which is Mild, Gentle, Sincere, and Broad-minded; Express Enjoyment Without Indulgence and Express Grief Without Excessive Distress; Express Resentment Without Anger" [7], this unique shot technique "presents in the image, feels in the eyes, and will be in the heart", which makes the audience experienced the feeling of "have a special taste in heart", and thus makes the relationship between the characters in the play more tangled.

#### 4. Humanistic Spirit and Care

Chinese literati have always been influenced by traditional Chinese Confucian and Taoist philosophies, and they have the dual ideals of being transcendental or mundane, so that the works of literati and artists naturally also have this concept of not only can they actively participating the society, but also can they going out of the secularity, which makes their literature and art works have humanistic spirit and care. Confucianism emphasizes the application of knowledge, the appreciation of people's sentiments, pay attention the cultivation of ethics and encourage education, which affords wide views in a small, connects the individual and the society. Taking the individual as the subject of the nation and the country has become one of the customary creative methods of literati. The complementary Taoist philosophy provides a spiritual habitat for the literati, away from the chaos of the world. The unity of Confucianism and Taoism enabled Chinese literati to have the dual mission of social responsibility and personal care, and formed the core of the spirit of Chinese literary.

Mu Fei was a literary director, who expressed his attachment to the homeland and his personal melancholy in films when the Chinese nation was in danger in the 1940s. "Spring in a Small City" represents Mu Fei's weaved emotions of personal sorrows and joys with the feelings of attachment to the homeland. The broken walls in the film are not only present the ruin of Zhou Yuwen and Dai Liyan's small family, but also a kind of metaphor for national crisis and the decline of the whole country. This is an advanced way of conveying ideas. Unlike the left-wing films of the 1930s that use images to achieve radical goals, Mu Fei's films seldom deliberately promote emotions, but grasp what he wants to convey with every breath, which is a kind of literati expression and not so straightforward or deliberate, but expresses the inner emotions through the images. The audience can also produce emotional resonance when watching the film, and when the two sides reach the same emotional agreement, naturally, we can comprehend the inner meaning of "the subtlety is beyond description though it can be sensed." The expression of personal sadness is simple and clear, which is related to the direct embodiment of individual concern in Taoist philosophy. Why does the audience be in the same mood with the characters in the film? In fact, the watching process of a film is like reading a diary, for when we write a diary, the scenery is given subjective emotion before it is written down, therefore, when we read it again, the memory will mobilize our previous emotions to perform again in the brain. In the hypothetical memoirs on the screen, the image will mobilize the audience's imagination to realize the synchronization of emotion. Mu Fei's film virtualizes the audience in front of the screen as a person who try to memorize the past when reading a diary, and the emotional resonance is naturally realized.

The close connection between the individual and the country constitutes a paradigm for the expression of the humanistic spirit of Chinese films. In Mu Fei's film, there is not a non-equivalent replacement value model of "sacrificing self-interest for the benefit of the country", but a kind of "both personal and national interests are considered", which give equal attention to national and personal benefits. The longing for the other side of love far away from the bondage of the family in the film is also the expectation for a peaceful society and a country far away from the flames of war. In the realization of self-spiritual pursuits, he completes the description of national cohesion and identity. Mu Fei's films show the subjective representation of the humanistic spiritual image based on the integration of Chinese literary temperament and the unity of Confucianism and Taoism.

## 5. Conclusion

In recent years, local films with poetic models have sprung up in the film market, which have both the continuation of the aesthetic paradigm of the Chinese School and the overall vision in the context of globalization, and highlight the style of national aesthetics in the international scope. Poetry has a global background, although different countries and regions have different creation, understanding and acceptance of poetic images, the infinite imagination space caused by shots in emotion is common. Of course, poetic is not a rigid metaphor of "expressing unnecessary sorrow for new works". Based on the historical tradition of Mu Fei's poetic image and the emergence of new imaging technology, Chinese film school will emerge more films with national poetic aesthetic style and appreciated by all nationalities, just like "Spring in a Small Town.

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