

Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in Life of Pi: An Analysis of Traditional Chinese Aesthetics in Ang Lee's Films under Contemporary Context,

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Abstract

With the rapid development of film market in China, more Hollywood films involving Chinese philosophy has begun to proliferate. This paper attempts to investigate what is the impact of traditional Chinese Aesthetics on Hollywood movie. A specific analysis of Ang Lee's latest work **Life of Pi** is the focus in this paper. Taoist philosophy is employed as the fundamental analyzing framework. The concepts of "Jing-you" (鏡游) and "Jing-yun" (鏡韻) are further discussed. It is concluded that **Life of Pi** is a great success in practicing combining western and eastern aesthetics by integrating the most advanced technologies under Hollywood productions, while Taoism can be widely recognized as a universal Chinese-ness philosophy for vast form of artworks globally

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Introduction

Ang Lee, the award-winning director, “surprise” the world again by his latest film *Life of Pi* (Miller, 2013). The great 3D adventure film presents an epic journey within only one boat carrying an Indian boy and a Bengal tiger. This article aims to explore how Ang Lee integrates traditional Chinese aesthetics into this Hollywood 3D production and why the advanced technology is suitable for presenting traditional Chinese aesthetics. Canadian writer Yann Martel wrote the original story of *Life of Pi*, and David Magee together with Ang Lee wrote the adapted screenplay. Therefore, although this film looks like an Indian style story, it is actually the product of American and Chinese culture.

The computer graphic technology along with the advanced equipment for film shooting made it possible for Ang Lee to present his imagination on the screen. However, this paper goes beyond the simple discussion of why Ang Lee chose CG animation, 3D technology or how they made those amazing creatures. This paper tries to discuss not only the aesthetics, especially traditional Chinese aesthetics behind these technologies, but also the ideas that made Ang Lee to choose these elements in this film and the spirit Lee wanted to show. Therefore, it is not a film critic for *Life of Pi*. It is a comprehensive study on traditional Chinese aesthetics in Hollywood films. Moreover, it highlights Taoism as the philosophic basis of traditional Chinese aesthetics in contemporary filmmaking.

Rethinking of Chinese aesthetics

There are three reasons why we should rethink and focus on Chinese aesthetics in the 21st century, especially in Ang Lee's films. The contents should include the structure, the system, the method and the methodology.

First, Ang Lee believes in Taoism. And he consciously deploys Taoist spirit in his works. Ang Lee once described the use of water and the spiritual element in *Life of Pi* to the press: “I’m Chinese; I believe in the Taoist Buddha” (Ebert, 2012). Hence, it actually is not we choose traditional Chinese aesthetics to interpret Lee’s film; it is they, the production team, consciously use traditional Chinese aesthetics.

Secondly, China is becoming the world’s largest market, and it would bring fundamental change in Hollywood. In 2012, Chinese audience is worth \$2.7bn (£1.7bn), up from \$2bn in 2011, taking it past Japan, became the second largest market in the world (MPAA, 2012); and it continues to grow (Cunningham, 2012). Some studies believe that Chinese film market “is expected to exceed the US box office by 2020” (EY, 2012). This claim maybe has some exaggerations. However, it is undeniable that Chinese film market is too big to ignore. Many Hollywood productions are doing well in China by using Hollywood experience, such as large production scale, super stars, visual audio stimulating, etc. However, more and more Hollywood pioneers want to better cater to China, this most potential market. “According to recent figures from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) almost 70% of the studios’ annual revenue from box office now comes from international markets, particularly China and Russia.”(Brook, 2013) David

Hancock, Head of Film and Cinema at IHS Screen Digest, says: “If it’s a larger budget production that’s meant to go abroad then really the overseas revenues will be the dominant factor in that decision.” (Brook, 2013)

Hence, Hollywood productions would shape their content more accordingly; some of them even try to make co-production films in China (Lai, 2013). Therefore, they have to have a deep understanding of the audiences’ aesthetics.

Thirdly, the most important reason we can choose traditional Chinese aesthetics to analyze *Life of Pi*, is that this film is almost an all computer graphic artwork, in which the deployment of Chinese aesthetics is similar with those in painting, music, literature, opera or other traditional art forms. We can deconstruct this all computer graphic film into individual elements. And each element is painted frame by frame according to director's will, then the music, voice and other stuffs in need. It provides director an opportunity to develop the ancient aesthetics and increase its diversity through using experimental elements and then reconstructing those elements into a whole new piece which may include some extraordinary beautiful scenes even against natural phenomenon, otherwise, into practicing pure art. In this way, the director turns paintings with Taoist spirit into moving images.

Nevertheless, even lots of Chinese do not understand their own traditional aesthetics, let alone Westerners. Many contemporary mainland scholars who have studied traditional Chinese aesthetics for a long time still cannot get significant achievements because of using Marxist philosophy as methodology.

As Ye Lang said: “我们在综合运用多种方法的时候, 必须坚持自己的哲学基础, 即马克思主义哲学基础. 换句话说, 我们采用的方法是多元的, 而我们的哲学基础 (世界观、历史观) 则是一元的” (Ye, 1989).

He said that when we use multiple methods, we must insist our unitary philosophic basis—— Marxist philosophy as world and history view. This is a neither proper nor universal methodology to study arts. That's why many Mainland Chinese cinema criticisms cannot find appropriate approaches to contemporary cinema. However, it is always impossible to study traditional Chinese aesthetics without a deep understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy. Actually, we can feel the beauty deep inside ourselves by fully accepting and following the traditional philosophy. Taoism is a great ancient Chinese philosophy about ultimate freedom.

Life of Pi provides us a perfect sample to examine Eastern aesthetics developed and expressed in Western technology. We choose Taoist Buddha, which Ang Lee believes, in traditional Chinese aesthetics to analyze this "poetic aesthetic"(Sharkey, 2012) cross-culture production, which happens to tell a cross-culture story.

Why and how 3D CG could fulfill Chinese aesthetics?

Someone may argue that 3D animation against traditional Chinese aesthetics that presented as the normal manifestation (flat) of traditional Chinese paintings. Nevertheless, there are facts we have to consider:

Comparing to traditional Chinese arts, moving picture is a newly developed art form ruling the entertainment industry globally now that is invited by westerners based on optical photographic system in only above 100 years. Hence, no one, even Liu Xie (劉勰) or any other famous ancient Chinese painters or critics themselves, could shoot real world to flat figures, as Chinese paintings, by using mechanical optic system excepted making pure animation. Moreover, Taoism contains far more connotations than in that single particular explicit image representation that is fit on painting but seems like impossible to be made in film.

Additionally, film as an art form containing four dimensions into a 2D surface, it seems like can not be analyzed by any certain traditional Chinese aesthetics, nevertheless, the elements that constructed a moving-picture production, literature, drama and music etc., and many sub elements affect a movie, such as spirit, story-telling and production design etc. It acquires development of traditional aesthetics, especially those aesthetics were available before photography. Thereby, generation and generation's Chinese filmmakers try their best to search a way to practice their philosophy. The process is hard, but could work.

Emotion as fundamental of Taoist aesthetics

Many people believe that Ang Lee is a great storyteller no matter in East or West. But few people can tell why. When the Hollywood production company decides to turn this story into film, the producers think that only one director is able to handle this story. While others, from their Western point of view, believes that it is impossible to adapt it into a script or to visualize it. However, Ang Lee successfully makes it a masterpiece. Why? Because the Taoist aesthetics is based on emotion. It is different from Western aesthetics, which is based on rational knowledge and geometry. Chinese artists have learnt to feel and follow their emotions and present their emotions in artworks. The whole story in *Life of Pi*, in Ang Lee's point of view, is about emotions:

“I wanted to use water because the film is talking about faith, and it contains fish, life and every emotion for Pi. And air is God, heaven and something spiritual and death. That's how I see it. I believe the thing we call faith or God is our emotional attachment to the unknown. I'm Chinese; I believe in the Taoist Buddha. We don't talk about a deity, which is very much like this book; we're not talking about religion but God in the abstract sense, something to overpower you.” (Ebert, 2012)

The basis of traditional Chinese philosophy is *Yi - Yin* (陰) and *Yang* (陽), two *Qi* (氣) that make the universe. All creatures need to take *Qi* from heaven and earth. In the vivid circling of Yin and Yang, it creates a kind of rhythmic life. What all artists are willing to

do is to free their minds and their bodies, feel the nature, make themselves to be the universe. Then they can feel themselves, follow their emotions, follow the confluence of *Qi* from the universe and themselves, and find the rhythm of their life as well as the universe. Finally, they represent these feelings and thoughts naturally in their artworks. This is what makes Ang Lee, a master of Taoist artist, able to become a storyteller who can handle feelings and emotions better than anyone else.

Jingyou (鏡游) and Jingyun (鏡韻)

You (游) is the ultimate state and goal of Taoist philosophy. *You* means journeying (Lo, 2011). It also means swim or swimming. Moreover, it has an additional meaning of playing. These three major meanings for the single character you make it able to carry many cultural dimensions. *You* is the ultimate aura for all arts and all lives. The ultimate *You* can be understood as “xiaoyao” (逍遙, peripateticism) (Ye, 1989) because Zhuang Zi (莊子) wrote the book called Xiaoyao you (逍遙遊). It happens that in *Life of Pi* Ang Lee provides us a visual-audio masterpiece in 3D, which fits in every dimension of You. In this film, we can have a taste of the delicate and profound ancient philosophy of complete freedom.

The concept of Jingyou was developed in the early 1980s by the Hong Kong film scholar Prof. Lin Nien-tung (1944-1990). “The concept consists of two words. The first word ‘jing’ means the lens, and the second word ‘you’ originating from Taosist philosophy” (Lo, 2011). June Yip translates the term as “wandering in the lens” instead of “wandering lens” (Yip, 2004). But Dr. Lo Wai-luk who followed Lin’s scholarship in Hong Kong, prefers the explanation of “experiencing through the lens”; and they both agree that “jingyou is an aesthetic strategy that is not found in conventional Hollywood filmmaking but can clearly be seen in Hou Hsiao-hsien's work” (Yip, 2004). However, it is too early to say it. I will apply the concept of jingyou to *Life of Pi*.

The other concept *Jingyun*(鏡韻), is developed by Lo Wai-luk. It is also grown out of Taoist painting philosophy *Qiyun shengdong* (氣韻生動), “which means the vividness that moves and flows” (Lo, 2012). And *Jingyun* also consist Jing (lens). Lo describe yun from the formation of the Chinese character. Nevertheless, I prefer go back to the original word “*Qiyun shengdong*” to find out the meaning of *yun* in “*Jing-yun*”, which is created by Lo. Zong Baihua describes it when talking about Chinese painting: “中國畫的主題‘氣韻生動’,就是‘生命的節奏’或‘有節奏的生命’”(Zong, 1987, pp.377). The theme of Chinese painting is “*Qiyun shengdong*”, which means “the rhythm of life” or “the rhythmic life”. More than thirty years later, he explains “*Qiyun shengdong*” as creative works’ ultimate goal and the ultimate state. It is the major standard of painting criticisms: “氣韻,就是宇宙中鼓動萬物的‘氣’的節奏,和諧.繪畫有氣韻,就能給欣賞者一種音樂感”(Zong, 1987, pp.395). It says “*Qiyu*” is the rhythm and harmony of *Qi*, which is motivating everything in the universe. If painting has *Qiyun*, then audiences can feel the musicality.

Here we should know traditional Chinese philosophy musicalizes literally everything, such as lives, emotions, the universe, time, space and so on. Anything made by Qi should be musicalized. As our above discussion points out, in Taoist philosophy, everything grows out of the two Qi: Yin and Yang. Consequently, everything has its own rhythm. The rhythm is called Yun (韻). Hence, Jingyun can also be a concept about the rhythm of cinema. “*Shengdong*” means vivid, lively, and energetic. Therefore, from *Qiyun shengdong*, we can develop the concept of *Jingyun shengdong*, it would be an interesting notion when people are making cinematic experience critiques.

Jingyou Pi

In *Life of Pi*, the whole film is about Pi's lonely and dangerous journey. The journey itself is a kind of You. Director Ang Lee provides us lots of spiritual elements such as water, floating island, green light jellyfishes, etc to visualize all the reality and imagination in the adventure, which can be called *Muyou* (目游, eyes' journey). Yet the journey that changes Pi's mind and effects his emotions at last makes him grow up. This experience can also be called *Xinyou* (心游, heart and spirit' s journey) (Lin, 1987). Chinese believe that your heart can decide what you look like (相由心生). All the external representations are the reflections of internal motivations. As the external representation, Pi's *Muyou* has lots of Chinese aesthetics reflections.

The typical Chinese aesthetic elements

Mountain and water are the most popular elements in Chinese painting. It is because Chinese believe mountain and water are the closest elements to nature. Besides, there are gods living in them.

The space consciousness and perspective

Taoist artists reject using perspective as the composition of pictures. They believe that no matter which point you choose, you will lose lots of details when composing pictures from one certain perspective. They believe that perspective will severely limit people's mind and horizon. Artist should provide horizon in their works as long as they can in order to free all minds, let audiences you (journey or swim) inside the artwork by themselves and decide where to look at by themselves. Sheng Kuo points out: “大都山水之法, 蓋以大觀小, 如人觀假山耳。” (Kuo shen, 1086). It means that the way of painting *Shanshui* (views) should be presenting objects as small things. Artists should present the whole view layers by layers. The point of view should not be settled. It should be freely you by following the natural *Qi*.

Putting Taoism into film, Lin believes there is a space composition theory named “以遠取象” (catching the distant view) (Lin, 78). Lin says that although cinematography is limited by photographic technology and basic principles of optics, Chinese artists try to use middle shot lens system to avoid the distortion. They put lens far away, focus on the “第三向度中間層” (the middle layer of third dimension), and use high angle and

further camera position to widen horizon. The use of CG was not developed as a common technology in filmmaking when Lin established this concept. The third dimension here is the depth of picture, which is, constructed perpendicularly to the screen in the two-dimension surface. Before Ang Lee, deep focus lens has already helped Taoist filmmakers a lot. However, Ang Lee does it better than ever. Based on the advanced computer graphic technology, Ang Lee can break the limitation of optimistic system and provide wide-angle shots without strange distortion through the use of high angle deep lens full shot to present images. The CG can make the focus so deep that we can see storm miles away coming clearly as the foreground in *Life of Pi*. We even can see both the animals under water and the clear golden clouds from sky. When the green light jellyfishes come at the dark night, the full star sky, brighten sea animals and Pi with his boat are all clearly presented in one single shot, that we can put our eyes anywhere inside the picture and choose the elements that touch us by following our hearts. That is *Jingyou*, the whole new experiences to Western and Eastern audiences in moving images history. You can forget yourself, and forget this is the 3D movie. You can be fully in love with the incredible futures and forget what is real and what is fantasy. Moreover, that is also *Jingyun*, the rhythm you follow freely in your mind and the journey you follow in your heart.

Peter Travers of Rolling Stone says, “Lee uses 3D with the delicacy and lyricism of a poet. You don't just watch this movie, you live it.” (Travers, 2012). *Parmita Borah of Eastern Fare* says, “There is this one scene in particular where the entire ocean is covered with jelly fishes which makes you feel like ‘this is what heaven must look like’.” (Borah, 2012) Those feelings are just like the saying of the well-known painter Yun Nantian (惲南田) in Qing Dynisty: “諦視斯境，一草一樹，一丘一壑，皆潔庵靈想所獨辟，總非人間所有。其意象在六合之表，榮落四時之外” (Zong, 1936). It describes the deepest state of art. Art is illusion. But through imagination, we can create the arts not only exist in the world but also go beyond time and space. This kind of art will only follow our hearts.

Another Taoist philosophy shown in this film is the relationship between human and nature. It is another journey for Pi. It is his inside change--*Xinyou*, the journey of heart. The film begins with Pi in his childhood; he is confused about gods and nature. It makes him believe many religions. But as Ang Lee says: as Chinese, “We don't talk about a deity, which is very much like this book; we're not talking about religion but God in the abstract sense, something to overpower you” (Ebert, 2012). Hence, when Pi begins his journey with confusion, he seems to admire Gods and nature. But deep inside his heart, he is trying to control the nature. Like Western fundamental philosophy since ancient Greece, he believes the opposition of men and things, heart and situation, the subjective and objective opposite. He also has a little sense to argue with his father about it. When the disaster comes, on one hand, he is sad and trying to find a way to survive, on the other hand, he is actively trying to handle the environment surrounds him. But when the passenger liner ignored his rescue signal, when the foods and clean water are gone, when the storm comes again, he is in despair. At this stage, he is deeply in awe of nature and tries everything to follow the nature. However, it still cannot save him. Then, suddenly, after he asked:

I'VE LOST MY FAMILY!
I'VE LOST EVERYTHING!
I SURRENDER!
WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT?

He realizes something and turns himself into the third stage, the ultimate stage. In this stage, he gives up the opposition of man and nature, objective and subjective. He turns himself into nature and become a part of nature. There is no more human and cruel nature. The human - nature opposition is just gone. There is only one united nature: Pi makes himself nature. Then he says: "I'm sorry Richard Parker!" This is the highest spirit in Taoism: the unity of human and nature. They must combine as one entity in order to feel the nature's flow and free them all. It is the fundamental philosophy of Taoism, and fortunately, it seems could be accept by spectators globally.

Conclusion

Undeniable, *Life of Pi* is a success practice in presenting and combining western and eastern aesthetics. Ang Lee, a culture phenomenon, reveals eastern - western culture encounters are more and more frequently nowadays, it causes increasing impact of Taoism, a robust brunch of traditional Chinese aesthetics, in Film globally.

As the wide illustration of Ann Lee's Taosim Philosophy in his *Life of Pi*, the most advanced 3D and CG technology made Ann Lee's initiative of presenting Taoism in his film possible.

Assuming the tendency, growing of Chinese economy, pursues as now, more and more Hollywood productions would take the market as increasingly significant factor to their works, also more and more Chinese students, as Ang Lee, Mabel Chueng etc., would be sent to U.S. to learn and join the film productions in United State, considering more Chinese culture or borrowing more Chinese elements may become a future trend of tactic that gaining overseas success.

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