

Bright on the Grey Sea: Reconsider Film Poetry Through a Chinese Lens

Chen Chen, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This presentation stands between worlds. It has its roots in the beauty of the work of a Late Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin but its voice speaks into the realm of internationally considered film poetry as a form of short film. The researcher will showcase a practice-led, artistic project which develops a corpus of three film poems. Then the researcher will introduce the Xiang system (a philosophical and aesthetic system adapted from Chinese Tang Dynasty poetry) as the central creative strategy to heighten poetic thinking within film poetry. This approach becomes a mediator between film poetry and the researcher as a lyrically reflective practitioner. In introducing this project and laying the ground for its reflective journey through the research, the researcher will also briefly discuss the following topics: Li Shangyin's poetry in the context of the Late Tang Dynasty, the Xiang system, and film poetry as a media form. To date film poetry has been a largely understood as a Western media form. Given the rich and distinctive nature of Chinese poetry I believe that there is a reason for Chinese artists to engage with the media form as a way of not only surfacing and sharing Chinese ways of conceiving and understanding poetry but also as a way of exposing some of the nuance and delicacy of thinking that underpins the construction of Chinese poetic work.

Keywords: Film Poetry, Li Shangyin, The Xiang System

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Film poetry as a media form pays homage to both film and poetry. William Wees (1999) suggests as a subgenre of film, film poetry fuses spoken word poetry, visual images, and sound to create a distinctive presentation and interpretation of meaning. Often film poetry is characterized by a nonlinear style of editing where a flow of images and spoken or written words are used to interpret an existing poem. However, the media form has expanded in recent years so there are now examples emerging where an existing poem is no longer visually or aurally evident in the work. This recent phenomenon is indicative of my practice-led artistic research project where the film poems draw their essence from the poetry of Li Shangyin but they are not physical illustrations of his text. Instead, they reflect on the spirit of his writing to generate discrete artefacts.

Towards the *Late Evening 1&2* and *Le You Yuan*

Towards the Late Evening 1&2 are two short, related film poems. They are constructed in a lyrical documentary style. In them I compare an elderly New Zealand woman's life with that of my Chinese grandmother. This comparison is achieved through a consideration of small ritual activities accompanied by a voiced over monologue.

These two film poems are inspired by Li Shangyin's poem *Le You Yuan*. Li's poetry often deals with memories and Owen notes that he frequently compares "speculative images of permanence with the fragile and the transient" (Owen, 2006, p. 486). Through these comparisons, the reader gains a sense of the melancholic. *Le You Yuan* is typical example of this strategy.

The first two lines of this poem may allude to the melancholic in time and space.

Late in the day

... may suggest a psychological state of "lateness" rather than a period of physical time. The line is open to interpretation; it might also refer to the end of a dynasty, the closing period of a person's life, an unavoidable destiny or the final stages of a journey.

[The] ancient plain

... as the location of the poem may refer to a once prosperous place or to a site of deep physical or cultural history. Xun Jiang [蒋勋] (2012) notes that *Le You Yuan* (the ancient Le You Plain) suggests a delicate and melancholic beauty that emerges from a contrast between a supposed flourishing past and a present in demise.

The last two lines of Li's poem...

The evening sun was limitlessly fine,

It was just that it was drawing towards dusk.

... juxtapose the splendid evening sun and the encroaching dusk, as a way of reminding us that the resplendent scenery will soon disappear. In other words, at the end of the late

evening, darkness will descend. Thus, by considering the long-term quality of time and space in nature, we may also become aware of the brevity of our human lives and the transience of beauty that accompanies them. It is by this comparison that Li establishes the melancholic tone of his poem.

In my film poem, *The New Zealand woman*, Mrs Vinka Garelja, is of Dalmatian descent and her husband George had been dead for two years before I made the work. However, the memory of Sunday afternoon tea rituals with her husband were still palpable memories for her. Afternoon tea was a remembered event that was imbued with melancholic memories of love and the flourishing of earlier days. This state touches the essence of Li's poem *Le You Yuan* which considers the relationship between sorrow, a flourishing past and memory at the close of a period of time.

My grandmother, Mrs Aixia Shou, is a Chinese woman who is the same age as Mrs Garelja. She was born into a poor family. The liberation by the Communist Party saved her from poverty and provided her with an opportunity to study and work. In memory of the changes the Party brought to her life, she collected badges of Chairman Mao. This collection demonstrates her gratitude and ideological commitment. For my grandmother, framing Chairman Mao badges was a way of recalling the revolutionary passion of her youth and an idealism that contrasted with her later years. Li's *Le You Yuan* considers both the passion (the galloping coach) and the drawing of life into a quiet, gradual close. These two ideas form the primary concepts in the film poem.

The Xiang System

In my opinion Xiang, Yi Xiang and Yi Jing may be seen as components of a Xiang system. However, their conceptual emphases are different. Xiang is associated with appearance and exists through exterior physicality. Yi Xiang is a fusion of the exterior and interior, objectivity and subjectivity. Yi Jing is associated with the mental state, and it reaches into feelings beyond appearance.

In the process of my artistic practice, the Xiang system functions as the mediator between the artwork and the idea or concept underpinning it. There are three possible layers according to the Xiang system. The first layer is the appearance of Xiang, which is a pathway that guides the interpretation of Yi Xiang. The second layer is Yi Xiang that embraces the mental picturesque scene [画境] which will emerge through creation. The third layer is Yi Jing, which stimulates the philosophical feeling and comprehension of life, memory and the universe that goes beyond the specific Xiang, event and scene. Once Yi Jing is achieved, the function of the facilitators Xiang and Yi Xiang is rendered redundant.

In order to illustrate these ideas, let us consider a piece of blue velvet. This fabric can be found inside my film poem *Towards the Late Evening 2*. We can use Xiang, Yi Xiang, and Yi Jing as three theoretical lenses to interpret this cloth.

Looking at the blue velvet through the lens of Xiang, we may focus on its physicality, for instance its colour, texture, or the way that light moves on it. Using the lens of Yi Xiang, we bring our subjective and emotional responses to interpret the materiality of the cloth. Through this lens, our subjective response and interpretation will differ based on past experience. For instance, my grandmother might interpret the cloth as passion, based on her experiences selling blue velvet when she worked for the communist party. Conversely, when I see it from

the perspective of a filmmaker, I may link it to the mysterious feeling I recall when watching David Lynch's 1986 American neo-noir mystery film, *Blue Velvet*. Another person might interpret it through their childhood memories of a comfortable velvet covered toy. All of these responses are subjective. As Yi Xiang they are emotional reactions to the Xiang (physicality) experienced through the first lens.

Looking through the third and most abstract lens of Yi Jing, we may consider the piece of fabric as a representation of deeper philosophical understandings and comprehensions of life. This consideration is normally generated from responses at the first two levels. In my grandmother's case, the velvet may link to the communist ideology. In my case, it may relate to the philosophical concept of mystery.

Inspired by the Xiang system from Li Shangyin's poetry, I will discuss integration and how it impacts on approaches to editing. In Li Shangyin's poetry, on the surface, different Xiangs may not bear direct or logical relationships to one another in a poem, but they contribute to the flow of feelings throughout a poetic text. Jingbo Zhao [赵景波] (1990) argues that the underlying connections inside the Xiang system come from Li's "stream of consciousness" [意识流]. In other words, the Xiangs and Yi Xiangs are arranged according to Li's psychological sense of space and time.

In general, I consider editing a process of integrating Xiangs. I see imagery, sound, light, colour, music, objects and people as different categories of Xiang. Under each category there exists a series of Xiangs. Depending on the constitution of an audience, different categories of Xiangs may gather together to become either several or a single Yi Xiang. Yi Jing may appear based on the construction of the Yi Xiangs in the work.

For example, when I was editing the scenes of the community where my grandmother was born, I imported footage and sound that I had recorded. While dwelling with this material, I recalled my senses when I was shooting the material. I remembered how when I stepped into this world, I inhaled the mixed scent of fried food and dry plants ... I heard the subtle sounds of dog barking nearby... several light notes of traditional music in the distance ... and the faint sound of water. Concurrently I saw the texture of empty buildings ... old objects in the ancestor's house ... and I heard the sound of an old electro car passing.

In my mind's eye, I "saw" my grandmother walking in an uninhabited house. I searched through the footage and audio recordings and selected a range of Xiangs (including imagery, sound, light, colour, music, objects and people) that were able to generate the same emotional responses that I felt on location. In this process I was able to connect olfactory, auditory and visual Xiangs, and through the contemplation on physical experience surfaced a central Yi Xiang of "the timeless hometown".

Conclusions

To date film poetry has been widely understood as a Western media form. Given the rich and distinctive nature of Chinese poetry, I believe my research will not only share Chinese ways of conceiving and understanding poetry, but also expose some of the nuance and delicacy of thinking that underpins the construction of Chinese poetic work.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep appreciation to my colleague and PhD supervisor Professor Welby Ings for his valuable and generous suggestions in both filmmaking and academic research. I am also grateful for the support offered by the School of Art and Design and the Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies at Auckland University of Technology, particularly for the research grant for materials and consumables that has helped in the realization of this research.

References

Jiang, X. (2012). *Jiang Xun talks about poetry of the Tang Dynasty*. Beijing, China: China Citic Press.

Owen, S. (2006). *The Late Tang: Chinese poetry of the mid-ninth century*. Cambridge, MA: the Harvard University Asian Center.

Wees, W. (1984). The poetry film. In W. Wees & M. Dorland (Eds.), *Words and Moving Images*. Montreal, Canada: Mediatexte Publications.

Zhao, J. B. (1990). A discussion on the mechanism of Menglong from Shangyin Li's untitled poetry. *Journal of Qiqihar University*, 6, 44-50.

Contact email: chen.chen@aut.ac.nz