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From Mediatized Dissemination to Platformized Co-Creation: The Transformation of Chinese Opera Audiovisual Representations in the New Media Context

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KEYWORDS

Chinese Opera Dissemination;
New Media;
Audiovisual Transformation;
Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

ABSTRACT

As a national treasure of Chinese culture, traditional opera enjoys a long history and rich cultural implications. A survey of its dissemination history reveals that in different times, opera has been combined with different media to facilitate cross-media transmission. In the age of new media, Chinese opera has further shown powerful agency and vitality in accommodating itself to new media environment. This article discusses the audio-visual transformation of Chinese opera in the age of new media. Through analysis of new formats like short videos, live streaming, and streaming archives, this article identifies some important features of current opera dissemination: fragmented content production, interactive ritual space, and cross-dimensional cultural integration. Based on these observations, the article seeks a viable route for the modernisation of opera communication, and offers suggestions for the transmission and protection of intangible cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of information and communication technology and the prosperity of various literary and artistic forms, Chinese opera as a stage art has suffered a serious loss of audience. How to develop Chinese opera by using modern media technology and how to make Chinese opera suitable for the current communication environment have become inevitable issues in its modernity and transmission. A review of the communication history of Chinese opera reveals that, outside the theatre, Chinese opera has been extensively combined with newspapers, photography, radio, cinema, television and the Internet, generating various modes of dissemination and exhibiting its vigorous communication vitality. An in-depth study on the audio-visual dissemination of Chinese opera in the new media era will enrich our understanding of its audio-visual transformation and provide approaches and methods for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AUDIOVISUAL TRANSFORMATION OF CHINESE OPERA

The audiovisual dissemination of Chinese opera dates back to 1905, when Beijing Fengtai Photo Studio filmed Dingjun Mountain. The film used relatively simple techniques to record some important scenes from the stage production of Dingjun Mountain, such as “QingYing”, “WuDao” and “JiaoFeng”. This event not only signalled the birth of Chinese cinema, but also the start of the audiovisual dissemination of Chinese opera. Follow-

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ing Dingjun Mountain, the integration of Chinese opera and audiovisual media has gradually deepened. Opera narratives and theatrical elements were gradually introduced into cinema, and the uniquely Chinese opera film was born. Using cinematic technology, Chinese opera was transferred from the traditional opera theatres to the screen, and produced classics such as The Fourth Son Visits His Mother(SiLangTanMu) (1933), Love and Hate of Life and Death (ShengSiHen)(1948) and The Female Generals of the Yang Family(YangMenNvJiang) (1960). The combination of Chinese opera and cinema allowed complete stage productions to overcome time and space limitations for the first time, marking the dawn of a new era of dissemination.

With the progress of television industry and the popularization of TV set among Chinese families, Chinese opera entered TV studios, thus giving birth to various forms of TV art, such as opera TV films, opera variety shows, TV gala of opera, etc.. Compared with film, the use of television as a means of spreading Chinese opera was much more convenient, for people could enjoy the beauty of Chinese opera without going out of their houses. In the same way, various TV opera programs enlarged the audience and enriched the channels of watching for opera lovers, playing an important role in the modernization of spreading Chinese opera.

With the prevalence of smart phones and the development of online video, especially short-video platforms, Chinese opera has seized the opportunity of new media to actively embrace new media. Through self-media platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili (hereafter B-site), Kuaishou and WeChat Channels, Chinese opera has participated in cross-media dissemination and produced communication patterns suitable for the features of new media. Chinese opera has been presented to the public in a new form and has achieved a surprising transformation. The technological features and the patterns of user behaviour of new media are very different from those of cinema and television. Communication context, content and power structure have undergone significant changes. The audio-visual dissemination contexts of Chinese opera have changed from ritualized, site-specific cinema screens and family-oriented television screens to more private and mobile smart phone screens.

This change has facilitated the appreciation of Chinese opera. The content spread via new media has also become more varied; it is no longer restricted to full-length traditional performances, but now extends to opera knowledge popularisation, sharing of performers everyday lives, and creative reinterpretations of excerpts of opera. The advent of new media technologies has largely shattered the single production and dissemination structure of traditional media. Each user has been endowed with the ability to produce and distribute content. The low production threshold and the dependence on networks and platforms technologically have allowed external forces to penetrate into the media scene and acquire communicative power.(Peng,L. 2022)

The audio-visual dissemination of Chinese opera via new media platforms has broken the traditional pattern of passive audience reception in opera films and television programmes. The audiences take on dual roles as recipients and disseminators, bringing unprecedented vitality to the modernisation of Chinese opera dissemination. It can be said that the dissemination of Chinese opera via new media is not simply a display on new platforms, but rather a profound interaction and integration between Chinese opera and new media platforms, based on its original ecology and authenticity, generating new forms and features different from those of other media.

AERIAL THEATRE: THE FORM OF ONLINE STREAMING ARCHIVES

In 2003 CCTV launched the programme Aerial Theatre. Full-length classic operas and excerpts were broadcast live or recorded to reach wide audiences. The programme constructed a substantial television archive for lovers of opera with its rich resources and broadcasting power. In the age of new media, the archive of Aerial Theatre has been extended in a digital format with new characteristics.

The Convenience of On-Demand Viewing

Due to their own media attributes, cinema and television usually confine the audience to certain times and places. The emergence of new media technology and the construction of the online Chinese opera streaming archive have extended the performance space from traditional theatres and fixed large screens to portable small screens. On mobile, repeatable and shareable new media platforms, opera audiences have transcended the shackles of time and the confines of linear dissemination. Fragmented time can be made full use of and the viewers can freely select when and where to watch opera videos and replay specific highlighted singing sections.

At the same time, this convenience has reduced the threshold for audience access to Chinese opera. In the past, many audiences were unable to witness excellent performances due to restrictions of time and space. Now, a large number of opera fans can watch videos on new media platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili (B-site), Kuaishou, WeChat Channels, etc., and with the support of functions like instant search, click, and play, the audience can appreciate the charm of Chinese opera without having to specially arrange to go to the theater. This change has enhanced the dissemination efficiency of Chinese opera.

Many users have uploaded a variety of media resources they have collected, preserved, or self-recorded such as opera audio, historical videos, live perfor-

mance footage to the web, thus constructing a massive online repository of Chinese opera on-demand. The spatial reach of Aerial Theatre has been further expanded and penetrated beyond conventional TV live and recorded broadcasts; audiences can overcome time and space constraints to access this virtual Aerial Theatre anytime and anywhere via mobile devices to savor Chinese opera art.

The Richness of Diverse Co-Creation

In the era of cinema and television, when building media archives, professional media practitioners had the ultimate discursive authority and monopolized communication resources. The process was characterized by centralization and unidirectionality. On new media platforms, the power to construct archives has shifted to each individual user, who transforms from a passive recipient into an active participant and creator. Thus, the construction of online streaming archives has taken on a decentralized and co-creative nature, with rich and abundant content.

Firstly, the diversity of the repertoire of opera is particularly worth mentioning. A keyword search on Bilibili (B-site) such as “Chinese opera”, “famous opera arias”, “opera classics” etc., will yield a wealth of varied content. The results of the search include a wide variety of classic Chinese opera repertoire from different schools and styles, such as The Generals Orders(MuGuiYing-GuaShuai), Dingjun Mountain(DingJunShan), The Red Maid(HongNiang), The Unicorn Purse(SuoLingNang), The Fourth Son Visits His Mother(SiLangTanMu), Love and Hate of Life and Death(ShengSiHen), etc.. On this platform, rich resources can be found for various performance types, such as traditional “laosheng” (old male roles), “qingyi” (virtuous female roles), “hualian” (painted-face roles), martial operas, etc.. The available materials are not only full-length performance recordings, but also compilations of famous arias, selected scenes, a cappella singing, various performance clips, etc.. For instance, videos on Bilibili such as “Compilation of Opera Xipi Fast-Paced Rhythms (Painted-Face Edition) Year of the Dragon Special” (51,000 views), “Powerful Opera Arias, Focusing on Fast-Paced Xipi For Beginners (II)” (697,000 views), “OperaHigh-Energy Arias Compilation (Without Overture, Just Excitement!)” (1.746 million views) etc. demonstrate how users integrate opera clips of similar content or rhythms into fragmented and fast-paced formats. These videos correspond to the short, quick and frequent media characteristics of new media platforms, enriching the content of cross-media dissemination of Chinese opera.

Secondly, the abundance of multi-perspective representations is apparent. In addition to uploading videos that they have taped or collected, such as clips shot at live performances and personally created opera-related materials, new media users upload a variety of materials including documentation of performers daily lives, highlights of rehearsals, and explanatory or interview programs made by other media, among others, which offer different perspectives on Chinese opera. For instance, the Douyin creator Sunshine Jingyun Opera Experience Hall with 395,000 followers makes and uploads teaching materials for classic opera arias. One of the clips uploaded, Selling Water: Looking into the Mirror Early in the Morning has garnered 130,000 likes in total. Moreover, many famous opera performers such as Li Shengsu, Lu Song, Du Zhenjie, Ling Ke, and Yu Kuizhi have participated in new media platforms. They demonstrate both the onstage and backstage dimensions of opera via short videos, and present the arts charm from multiple perspectives. These activities help the audience acquire a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Chinese opera and enhance their knowledge and interest in the art.

Thirdly, the richness of multi-dimensional evaluations is worth mentioning. Since the construction of online Chinese opera streaming archives is decentralized, differences in users social backgrounds and knowledge levels have resulted in the emergence of multi-dimensional features in evaluation texts. On new media platforms, audiovisual texts and evaluative texts form together the textual structure of Chinese opera cross-media dissemination. An analysis of evaluative texts relevant to online Chinese opera on new media platforms indicates that they can be roughly classified into two types.

The first one is concentrated on the video text itself. In terms of artistic appreciation, these comments appraise performers vocal techniques, physical movements and acting techniques. They stay within the boundaries of the audiovisual text and tend to be subjective feelings of the viewers. The second one is constituted by extended comments beyond the video text. These comments do not focus on the performance itself but extend to other aspects of opera culture, comparisons between different performers, the creation background of the script, etc. They show certain objectivity and knowledge.

For instance, in the bullet comments and comment section of opera-related videos on Bilibili (B-site), one can find many in-depth discussions among both professional and amateur opera enthusiasts. They discuss and share information about opera genres, historical development, and background of specific repertories, which inspires and enriches the audiences understanding and appreciation of Chinese opera.

OPERA LIVESTREAMING ROOMS: THE ONLINE EXTENSION OF THE STAGE

As a form of stage art, Chinese opera embodies both temporal and spatial artistic characteristics, placing strong emphasis on the physical presence of the stage environment. During special periods, many opera troupes and performers were forced to suspend offline

performances and shifted to new media livestreaming rooms to continue performing.

For instance, the “Yiqi QianxingPerforming Arts World Cloud Theater-Charm of the East Opera Week” organized by relevant departments gathered different genres such as Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera, Shanghai Opera, Yue Opera, Huai Opera, and Pingtan, and held six live streaming performances during five days. The National Opera House jointly with the Hubei Provincial Opera House and 17 other opera troupes around the country organized the “Summer of Opera-National Opera Troupes Online Anti-epidemic Performance Month”. They livestreamed 28 excellent performances through new media platforms such as Xuexi Qiangguo, Kuaishou, and CCTV Video and gained considerable public attention.

During this time, many opera performers also opted to engage with audiences via livestreaming rooms, such as opera performer Ren Siyuan from Dalian Opera House (Douyin account: Ren Siyuan Opera , 325,000 followers), Wang Weijia from Shanghai Opera House (Douyin account: Opera Actor Wang Weijia , 66,000 followers) and young opera performer Guo Yuang (Douyin account: Guo Yuang ANG , 811,000 followers).

According to related reports, in 2022, more than 300 types of Chinese opera were covered on Douyin. More than 800,000 livestream sessions were held, with an average of over 3,200 viewers per session and a total viewership exceeding 2.5 billion. Online livestreaming has offered substantial support for the dissemination and development of Chinese opera, and become one of the most important forms of cross-media dissemination on contemporary new media platforms.

Constructing Imaginative Presence

Many scholars stress the significance of presence in theatre, claiming that the co-presence of actors and audiences in the same space and time is at the heart of stage art. As Grotowski put it, Theatre cannot exist without the emotional, direct and living relation between actor and audience. (Grotowski,J.,Schechner,R.,& Chwat,J. 1968) Chinese opera as a stage-based performing art also delivers stories and emotions via the theatricality generated in live performance spaces. This dimension is evidently missing in the dissemination of Chinese opera through livestreaming. Nevertheless, some media elements embedded in virtual stages have been employed to make up for this intrinsic deficiency. Some scholars observe that the only possible approach for mediatized theatre is to simulate the audience perspective and keep a stable performeraudience relation for theatre to happen (Mao and Yang, 2023).

In the virtual stage of opera livestreaming rooms, a single imitated perspective cannot establish interaction between performers and audiences. A stable performeraudience relationship should instead be constructed through their imaginative mutual gaze.

First, there is the actors gaze toward the audience. In livestreaming rooms, actors use the camera to simulate the audiences presence. They rely on comments and virtual gifting to imaginatively compensate for the absence of the theatrical environment, thereby achieving a form of performative presence.

Secondly, there is the gaze of the audience towards the actors. Theater-based opera performances are more complete and atmospheric compared with mediatised opera. However, livestream audiences can assemble a sense of theatrical wholeness through watching recordings or live broadcasts with diverse framings, camera movements, and edits. Real-time interaction via mobile screens compensates for the absence of live atmosphere, allowing audiences to imaginatively penetrate the stage space and attain a virtual presence in viewing.

Due to the characteristics of livestreaming, the mutual gaze between performers and audiences is most pronounced in individual performers livestreaming rooms, rather than in troupe-based performances. In individual livestreaming rooms, the interaction between performers and audiences takes place in real time and is more direct and convenient. The performers sense the presence and attention of the audiences, resulting in more engaged performances. The audiences, on the other hand, can sense the performers emotions and performance details more vividly, thus promoting interactivity and participation in the performeraudience relationship.

Opera livestreaming rooms, through feedbackresponse mechanisms, bridge the gap between physical and theatrical spaces. They allow audiences and performers to encounter each other on an imagined virtual stage, thereby realizing an experience of presence.

Constructing the Field of Interactive Rituals

According to the theory of interaction ritual chains, interactive rituals are social processes based on emotional connections. They generate emotional energy and symbolic capital, thereby enhancing group cohesion and a sense of collective identity (Fine, G. A. 2005).

When Chinese opera is mediated across media via new media livestreaming rooms, interactive ritual fields are created through affective connections between audiences, and between audiences and performers. From the audiences viewpoint, livestreaming rooms offer a shared virtual space in which viewers convene to watch opera performances. Sending bullet comments, posting text comments, and liking are ways that they engage with each other, reinforce affective ties, and forge social relations. Through such activities, a shared atmosphere of viewing marked by multi-directional interaction is nurtured.

From the performers perspective, opera livestreaming rooms serve as spaces for close interaction with audiences. During livestreaming, performers answer

audience questions and stage requested excerpts, enabling audiences to become part of the performance and strengthening emotional connections with them.

From such an affective interaction between performers and audience members, a ritual field is formed in which feelings of appointment, self-consciousness, and group identity are nurtured. This field makes it possible for performers without access to a stage to display their art and for audiences to enjoy Chinese opera in a convenient and interactive manner. Such developments speak to the vibrancy and adaptability of opera in the new media landscape, and offer new possibilities for its promotion and development.

SHORT VIDEOS FEATURING THE RE-CREATION OF OPERA ELEMENTS

On today's short video platforms, a large number of user-generated videos featuring opera elements exhibit diverse and innovative forms of development. They have become one of the most important modes of cross-media dissemination of opera on new media platforms, bringing new vitality to this ancient art form.

The Dimensional Integration of Piaoyou Culture

Chinese opera is the art of the role (jue), but it is also the art of the audience. Piaoyou refers to amateur practitioners who engage in the performance and study of Chinese opera and other traditional performing arts. This cultural group is characterized by its breadth, collectivity, self-entertainment, and learning-oriented nature (Yuan, 1996).

Piaoyou culture, rooted in the fertile soil of Chinese opera, has found new life in new media. Enthusiasts create self-produced short videos to show their affection for opera. A large number of young users take part in opera-related short videos on short video platforms. On Douyin, topics such as "#WhoSaysOperaDoesntBelongOnDouyin#", "#FamousOperaArtistsAndArias#" and "#Opera#" have attracted millions of participants and billions of views.

Users display their own performance or some opera excerpt in short videos and secondary creation is made through audio-visual matching technique, etc. Opera is thus presented in cross-dimensional forms. For instance, videos on Bilibili such as Tom and Jerry version of The Fourth Son Visits His Mother(SiLangTanMu), Tom and Jerry version of The Unicorn Purse(ZhuLianZai) and Tom and Jerry version of Debating the Scholars (SheZhanQunRU)combine opera arias with the cartoon series Tom and Jerry. These videos maintain the classic charm of opera and meanwhile utilize the humor and vividness of animation to attract young audience, thus endowing the art with a novel and unique attraction.

Moreover, many users do not stop at mixing opera excerpts with other cultural elements; they even create new opera excerpts, which shows how entertaining and educational Piaoyou culture can be on new media. For example, some Piaoyou tell films and animations on Douyin in their self-made opera. A creator called "Wuhuarouxianer de Sudong Jiaozi" mixes opera with Detective Conan, Tom and Jerry and The Adventures of Little Carp and comments on them with original opera recitatives and arias, which has been highly praised.

On Bilibili, creators like "Yige Zhengjing Fengping", "Jigu Gezhu Xicai" etc. put self-made opera excerpts into real-time commentary upon social and international issues, and tag them as Current Affairs Opera. Works like Meijiapo, The American Storm, Battle for Gaza, Current Affairs Opera: Peace in Palestine and Israel, not only exhibit the charm of opera, but also evoke reflection upon major current affairs.

These original and self-made short videos of opera made by Piaoyou show their talent and creativity, and allow more people to feel the charm and flexibility of opera art. With this kind of cross-dimensional experiment, opera is no longer a remote and mysterious traditional art, but an attractive form which is closely integrated with modern culture and brought into daily life.

The Multi-Layered Embroidered Portraits of Opera Elements

Traditional embroidered portraits engraved on scripts or porcelain vividly depict the images and characteristics of opera figures through delicate brushwork and exquisite visuals. On new media platforms, creators actively produce short videos rich in opera elements, aiming to embroider portraits of opera across multiple dimensions of cross-media dissemination.

Some scholars divide the audience-driven re-creation made possible by audiovisual technology into two kinds: re-creation based on texts and re-creation of emotions towards wider cultural systems (He,T. 2022). Following this line of thinking, the re-creation of opera elements in online opera short videos can be classified into two categories: content-based re-creation of opera texts and emotional re-creation beyond the original textual elements.

Content-based short videos mainly refer to users directly performing or interpreting traditional opera repertoire, arias, and performances in short video formats, as well as educational videos on opera plots, cultural background, stage props, script development, and music rhythm. These two types take original opera elements as their creative blueprint, and their re-creation is still closely related to the original content and forms.

In contrast, emotion-oriented short videos beyond the original texts highlight the humanistic traits and emotional expressions. Besides the self-made opera excerpts made by Piaoyou, there are also short videos made by professional opera performers. In such videos, the performers themselves are the origin and focus of emotional projection, and the attached opera elements mainly serve as crucial narrative hints. For instance,

Douyin accounts like Guo Xiaojing and Opera Actress Wang Mengting mainly produce videos showing the backstage stories of makeup preparation and rehearsal.

These videos go beyond listing opera elements. They are created against the backdrop of performers daily lives, emphasizing humanistic qualities. By integrating opera elements, they activate audiences experiential emotional mechanisms and evoke emotional resonance.

These diverse short videos re-creating opera elements present the appeal of opera in various forms, attract wider audiences, and foster both the transmission and innovation of opera in contemporary society.

IMPLICATIONS OF NEW MEDIA AUDIOVISUAL DISSEMINATION OF CHINESE OPERA FOR INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE PROTECTION

At present, the audiovisual dissemination of Chinese opera through new media has achieved remarkable results. It offers an innovative record disseminate revitalize model for the protection of opera as intangible cultural heritage, providing valuable experience and profound insights for broader intangible cultural heritage preservation.

Living Heritage Protection Enabled by Platforms

Making full use of the strengths of new media platforms and exploring the possibilities of intangible cultural heritage protection from various perspectives will create more favorable conditions for the authenticity preservation and living transmission of opera-related and other intangible cultural heritage projects. New media platforms offer a new avenue for the authenticity preservation of opera-related intangible cultural heritage, transforming from static retention to living transmission.

Many rare old audio recordings and historic performance videos have been digitized via user uploads to new media platforms. The openness and sharing ethos of new media platforms enable such precious materials to overcome temporal and spatial barriers to be disseminated and acknowledged in wider cultural spaces. This helps facilitate wider transmission and promotion of the authenticity of opera-related.

On the other hand, the interactive nature of new media platforms has transformed opera from an isolated art form into a vibrant arena of cultural exchange, enabling more audiences to become new driving forces in its transmission.

intangible cultural heritage protection should make full use of the openness, sharing and interactivity of new media platforms to further extend the boundaries of heritage transmission, enrich its contents, and establish a complete and multi-layered system for intangible cultural heritage protection and dissemination. The uploading of heritage-related audiovisual materials takes advantage of the openness and sharing nature of new media platforms to overcome professional and geographical barriers to transmission, allowing intangible cultural heritage to be kept authentic in digital form.

Relying on the interactive nature of new media platforms, innovative interactive models for heritage transmission can be developed, encouraging more users to actively participate in intangible cultural heritage protection and fostering a sustainable transmission ecosystem.

Dynamic Development Through Multi-Party Co-Creation

The multi-party co-creation is the most striking feature of the audiovisual transformation of Chinese opera in the era of new media, and it is also the main driving force behind the vibrant development of this intangible cultural heritage project. People from different backgrounds participate in the creation and dissemination of opera contents in new media platforms. This process has produced a rich diversity of audiovisual forms that retain the authenticity of opera and at the same time extend its expressive limits.

Therefore, the multi-party co-creation model developed in the audiovisual dissemination of Chinese opera should be actively adopted in the transmission of other forms of intangible cultural heritage to promote their innovative development. ICH initiatives should leverage the advantages of new media platforms to fully mobilize the enthusiasm of multiple actors.

Professional inheritors should be the main force, using audio-visual technology to record the intricate production process and exquisite craftsmanship, producing vivid visual works to capture the audience's attention on intangible cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the traffic advantages of short video platforms can be utilized to motivate inheritors to establish their own accounts and cultivate unique personal IPs, assisting intangible cultural heritage in reaching wider audiences.

Ordinary participants are the main driving force of multi-party co-creation in intangible cultural heritage practices. In the case of opera, most secondary transmission works on new media platforms are produced by ordinary Piaoyou. Their creativity and enthusiasm from the grassroots have greatly enriched the forms through which opera is disseminated online.

For other forms of intangible cultural heritage, ordinary participants can play a similarly important role. By launching relevant challenges on short video platforms, more users interested in intangible cultural heritage can be encouraged to participate, learn about heritage actively, engage in its dissemination, and create related content. Through these practices, the dynamic development of intangible cultural heritage can be achieved.

CONCLUSION

In the new media era, Chinese opera has undergone a dynamic transformation into audiovisual forms. The innovation of its dissemination modes has expanded the boundaries of artistic expression and opened up a new path for the living transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

With the development of emerging technologies, virtual and augmented technologies such as AR, MR and VR will be used in the transmission and protection of intangible cultural heritage. Innovation of technology is accompanied by the demand for balancing innovation and the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage. The expansion of dissemination scope at the cost of cultural foundation may jeopardize the heritage itself.

Only by grounding technological applications in the protection of authenticity can intangible cultural heritage continue to thrive amid the tides of the times.

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Research article

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An Auto-Ethnographic Research in *See and Gain*

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KEYWORDS

Exhibition; Contemporary Art; Painting; Artist; Gallery

ABSTRACT

The research applied the methodologies of auto-ethnographical research and case study on artist Jiaqi Li's solo exhibition at Studio Gallery in Shanghai, 2025. Three core characteristics distinguish this exhibition from traditional ones: a critical response to the digital media era, an artist-led collaboration model between the artist and the gallery, and multidimensional experiments conducted at exhibition openings and academic events. The exhibition drew on the theories of "simulacra", "post-internet art", and "trompe l'oeil", and responded to the gap between "images" and "reality". At the same time, the study elaborates on the practical process of artist-led exhibition placement, as well as how to transform the exhibition from a static display to a dynamic, multi-sensory dialogue field through the introduction of psychological experiments and a series of lectures. *See and Gain* is not only a milestone for the artist himself, but also provides valuable reference cases for the contemporary art industry ecology.

INTRODUCTION

See and Gain was the Chinese young artist Jiaqi Li's fourth gallery solo exhibition, and it was his second time presenting a solo exhibition at Studio Gallery in Shanghai, from July 5th to August 16th, 2025 (Figure 1). The critical response to the digital media era, the artist-led cooperative mode between the artist and the gallery, and the bold experiment on exhibition opening and academic activities were the three things that made See and Gain distinguished from other exhibitions.

A critical response to the digital media era is urgent. After experiencing the hype between 2020 and 2023, the public focused on contemporary artists born in the 90s. There are Yifei Sun, Hang Gao, Dalun Lao, Yuxuan Shao, etc. Growing up with digital displays, AI, and VR headsets, technology is profoundly changing a new generation on their perception of the world. In everyday life, where the digital and the physical are increasingly intertwined, artists are emerging whose work is born out of an "internet state of mind" (Archey & Peckham, 2014). Jiaqi Li's work sits among them. Li's work is a playful yet profound investigation into the nature of reality and illusion. And he keeps asking a question of how one should define "reality" in a world filled with unlimited copies of the original and digital manipulation (Baudrillard, 1994). Also, it is an ongoing inquiry by centuries of artists and philosophers. In the post-internet era, it bears a new urgency.

A new cooperative mode between artist and gallery is essential these years because the industry is experiencing a harder time. According to a recent survey of global collecting, the bubble of the gallery industry has decreased to a certain extent in recent years, and we are experiencing a transformation in which collectors are more cautious than in the past few years (McAn-

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Figure 1 | Exhibition scene of *See and Gain*

drew, 2025). See and Gain has gained valuable feedback and contributed considerably to the industry. The artist-led cooperative mode has been proven to be effective. As a tradition proposed by Studio Gallery, this new cooperative mode best delivers artists' intentions through on-site practice and conversation.

A multi-dimensional presentation is another highlight in See and Gain. Focusing on a single piece of work would not be able to unveil the whole picture. There were around 20 pieces of acrylic paintings, digital prints, and videos exhibited. There were two academic lectures, "Printed 'Trompe l'oeil' and Our Pictorialized Lives" and "The Art Journey of Jiaqi Li from 2017–2025", demonstrating Li's research and practice, respectively. An experimental experience, "Rubber Hand Illusion", for the viewers at the opening provided a better understanding of Li's worldview. The combination of the work, the talks, and the activities was to challenge the tradition of exhibition openings, which was the loop of reception and PDF sales, and try to generate more academic influence.

A CRITICAL RESPONSE THROUGH ART

Theoretical Framework

See and Gain aimed to argue about our daily sensations and how we define "reality". There is a well-known advertising annotation, "the images are for reference only; the actual product shall prevail." Jiaqi Li has long believed that the gap between "images" and "reality" is deeply intriguing. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard provided a powerful insight into Li's work. In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard (1994) argued that in a media-saturated society, people lost the ability, or it could be effortless, to distinguish reality and the signs or symbols that represent it. That explains the reason that signs and symbols are key elements in Li's paintings. In Baudrillard's hyperreal world, images no longer refer to an external reality, but only to other images. It creates a self-referential loop that detaches us from any sense of the real. And Li is drawn to such a looping process of images being captured, re-presented, and re-captured or perceived. The reflections or mirrored images in Li's painting are a response to today's "spectacle" (Debord, 1967) of mass media being predicted decades ago.

In a post-internet world, Li's work is also a reflection of our times. Post-internet describes a world where the internet has become an invisible force that shapes our perception of the world (Mosco, 2017). If Baudrillard diagnosed the cultural syndrome we are in, then "post-internet art" is the artistic practice born from this syndrome. And post-internet art is "a response to the internet culture, no matter the medium of the work. (Olson, 2012)" It is art that acknowledges the internet's profound impact on our social, political, and aesthetic lives. Yue Chen (2025)commented on Issy Wood's work that it is difficult to depict a scene to reflect our times, but depicting the "subtleties" of emotion would be more effective. Li's work is also an example of this sensibility. His collection of images from a wide range of online and offline sources, his use of a graphic design aesthetic that resembles 2000s web design, and his interest in the circulation and mutation of images are all hallmarks of a post-internet artistic practice.

The way Li processes the reflected or mirrored images, as mentioned earlier, is heavily influenced by a painting technique – trompe l'oeil. There has been an ongoing inquiry in art practice into using 2D images to create illusions. Trompe l'oeil, as an art technique with a long history, deceives viewers into believing that the painted objects actually exist. Trompe l'oeil has a long history in art. Zeuxis once depicted a bunch of grapes that birds flew down to peck at them. Parrhasius paint-

Figure 2 | Jiaqi Li, *Prince Trompe L'oeil*, Acrylic on canvas, 140×100cm, 2025

ed a curtain so convincing that Zeuxis tried to pull it aside. This is known as the origin story of trompe l'oeil, which dates back to ancient Greece. And one of Li's works, Narcissus's Love (2025), directly responds to this history. By the Renaissance, illusionistic techniques were widely employed in mural and architecture. For example, in a Roman palace, the 17th-century architect Francesco Borromini painted sculptures and shrubs that follow the perspective lines to make a gallery appear visually deeper. Only by 1800, the term "trompe l'oeil" was formally coined by Boilly (Ihringová, 2021). Trompe l'oeil also offers a lens to examine our daily perception. Roger Caillois and Shepley's (1984) research into insect mimicry in biology challenges assumptions about camouflage and echoes Baudrillard, showing that the mechanism of deception does not truly fool predators, but it is an "impulse to merge with the environment". Similarly, trompe l'oeil deeply binds with its surroundings. In psychology and anthropology, scholars claim that trompe l'oeil requires psychological imagination to complete the illusion (Ferretti, 2020; Jiménez, 2013). Li's work, Prince Trompe L'oeil (2025) (Figure 2), which depicts a girl fan holding a cardboard cutout sign of a prince, is a response to the psychology study as well.

Related Work

In See and Gain, Li began to draw inspiration from the spirit of "Trompe-L'oeil" and explore the connections between concepts such as reality, virtuality, Simulacrum, reflection, and appearance. He integrated popular character images into the exploration and research of these concepts and cleverly presented them in his paintings with his unique humor and wisdom to form unexpected visual combinations. But, "what is reality?" is Li's long-time inquiry.

Li developed a profound interest in "vision and perception" during his student years, with his artistic trajectory unfolding across distinct phases. From 2017–18, he designed and wore "mall camouflage" for performance photography, responding to a socio-security incident. In 2018–19, he produced over 50 hollow paper sculptures using digital printing techniques to isolate objects' surface patterns. His 2020 project involved patching damaged walls and pavements in Chicago with color-printed paper fragments. During 2021–22, he painted television packaging boxes in oils on canvas, folding the canvases into three-dimensional box forms. Since 2023, he has returned to acrylic painting and readymade objects, exploring commercially packaged imagery from movies and advertising. Li has long believed that the gap between "images" and "reality" is deeply intriguing. It seems we have arrived in the world foretold by Baudrillard, one where "images replace reality", yet these two systems still appear unable to fully substitute for one another.

In addition to questioning "what is real" in visual perception, Li also applied this spirit to other details. For example, he used AI to age his own photos and created a virtual persona called "Old Li" as his image on social media platforms; feminized his own photos and created "Baowen He" as his writing secretary. So much so that some collectors ask, "Is Li really 69 years old?"

Li never tires of fabricating facts. In Down and Out Designer (2020), he plays a fashion designer whose inspiration has been stolen in response to a funny incident where an old work of his is identical to a product on the market. While gaining brand popularity, it also promotes its own works to a certain extent. The most direct inspiration for his work was comedian Nathan Fielder. Fielder played a surviving passenger in an aviation accident in the video work Blow Out (2007). The combination of authentic information from the Discovery Channel and some of Fielder's comedy performances makes it difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood for a moment. But some performance traces suggest our answer. And the audience also gained comedic effects and reflections on life through questioning and enlightenment.

Method and Technique

Collage as a Method

Li's artistic practice is based on a clear and unique creative method, with the core of integrating collage and appropriation, and using it as the main method to engage in dialogue with this image-saturated world and indistinguishable facts.

Collage is the key to understanding its creative methodology. From cubism in the early 20th century to the present day, collage as an artistic technique has always posed challenges to authority, originality, and media purity (Taylor, 2004). However, Li expanded the significance of collage. In his practice, collage is no longer a literal cutting and pasting of paper-based materials; it transcends a formal technique and sublimates into a conceptual tool. It essentially involves the strategic combination of materials from different sources. That is because Li has been trained in an art studio that focuses on conceptual art and installation art. He is familiar with the nature of materials. And during his training as a student, he tends to combine different materials to create an installation. That, to him, is another form of collaging. The objects of its collage span different visual languages (painting and photography), different dimensions (two-dimensional and three-dimensional), and different sources (handmade and industrial ready-made products).

This expanded collage concept directly serves his practice of appropriation techniques. He did not create new images out of thin air, but chose to enter existing, vast public image database – especially popular culture image database – for selection, extraction, and reorganization. His collage materials include Disney princesses or superheroes; these highly recognized symbols have become the "material" for his collages. His appropriation is not simply copying, but a deep and personalized translation. For example, in Angel Takamiy (2025) (Figure 3), Li depicts an angel referencing Cherub Playing a Lute (1521) by Rosso Fiorentino. However, the angel holds an electronic guitar with a shape of an angel, which is identical to Japanese singer Toshihiko Takamizawa's guitar "ESP Ultimate Archangel". During the circulation of different images, he "embedded his philosophical reflections on reality and illusion into broader cultural references" (Studio Gallery, 2025). This combination creates a strong visual and conceptual "friction", forcing the audience to question how images are constructed, the truth under, and the meaning of representation. Through playful and absurd recombination, he stripped away the original commercial and ideological attributes or context of these symbols. Thus, his works are a mixture of painting, sculpture, and installation, echoing the idea of the historical avant-garde artist who wishes to bridge the gap between art and life (Krauss, 1986).

Materiality and Color Choice

Electronic visualization is dominating people's eyes. But Li believes that there should be a return and emphasis on touchable materials in artwork. His self-aware exploration of materiality is influenced by his training as a student as well. As collaging different materials is important, this focus on materiality has taken his works beyond pure visual exploration and into contemplation of texture and presence. In a documentation film, he showed that his hands were in the process of making wooden frames, mounting canvas, and applying base material. The thickness of the pigment stack or the gloss of the ready-made product has become a crucial part of its artistic language. He is against virtualization and de-materialization. The physical present is a statement in a digitalized world.

Figure 3: Jiaqi Li, *Angel Takamiy*, Acrylic on canvas, pencil, 120×80cm, 2025

At the same time, his vivid, bold, and dazzling color system creates the visual impact of his works. Influenced by his father, Hollywood movies such as The Matrix (1999), Fast & Furious (2001), Jurassic Park (1993), and True Lies (1994) became Li's childhood visual aesthetic accumulation. The fictional, fantastical, and dramatic "Hollywood" aesthetic is embedded in Li's works. Meanwhile, the screen, as the objective environment of this generation's upbringing, becomes an important stylistic feature in his artworks. Besides, his palette was also significantly influenced by Internet culture, graphic design aesthetics, and 2D comics in the early 2000s (Studio Gallery, 2024). The high saturation, high contrast flat color blocks together create a visual style that is both retro and futuristic. "Like moths to fire." Li once said. As screens greatly change people's color feelings, his aesthetic choice is not accidental; it accurately captures a common sense in the post-internet era: a visual experience that is both charming and illusory, shaped by the screen light sensation.

In many works, Li has demonstrated his delicate realism painting ability. In Nada Had To Choose (2025), Picasso's Breadman Illusion (2025), and The Principle of Symmetry (2025), he explored a method of using transparent colors such as Indian Yellow Hue and Transparent Red Iron Oxide for skin tone, which showcases both the facial structure of the characters and the delicate transition of light.

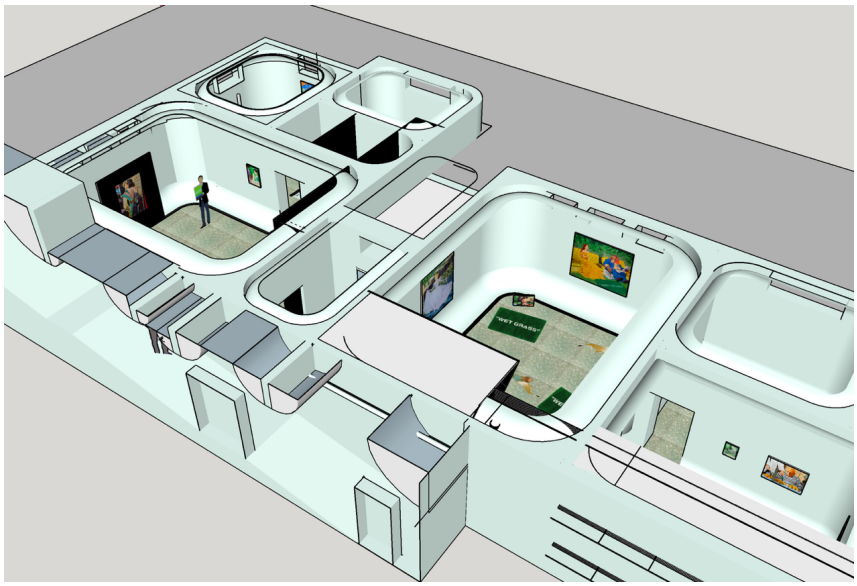

Figure 4 | *See and Gain* exhibition planning model in SketchUp
© Image courtesy of Studio Gallery and Jiaqi Li, Shanghai, 2025

THE ARTIST-LED COOPERATIVE MODE

As the first commercial gallery in Shanghai to support international artist residency, Studio Gallery, established in 2016, has always advocated a model of "artist-led" cooperation. This collaborative concept is fully reflected in See and Gain. This cooperative mode encouraged the artist not only to provide works, but deeply involved in the curation process, planning the exhibition scene together with the gallery. That is because the artist knows their work best. This proposal comes from Celine Zhuang, the founder of the gallery, whose been training as a sculptor during her student age as well. In the conversation between the artist and the gallery, both parties agreed that the gallery space should not passively serve as a "white cube" (O'doherty, 1999), merely transporting and displaying works from the artist's studio. On the contrary, the core purpose of curatorial activities is to present the exhibition logic clearly from all aspects. Only that can maximize the power of the works.

The intention was to treat the entire exhibition as an organic whole, as a single artwork. And the curation started with putting artworks into a gallery model in SketchUp (Figure 4). Jiaqi Li placed over 20 pieces of his artworks in different media across four gallery halls. The main hall at the entrance contained various larger paintings depicting princes and princesses. One other larger hall featured works focusing on reflections, mirrored images, and commercial representation. One smaller hall exhibited three works with the theme of Picasso and his bread-shaped hands. And the last smaller hall with Angel Takamiy enhanced the spiritual vibe with a church arrangement.

There was a back-and-forth negotiation between Li and the gallery that lasted two weeks. And after Li arrived at the gallery space about one week before the opening, more adjustments were made according to the reality. For example, the sticker with the words "wet grass" was changed into Greenland's shape, for multiple reference meanings. Light Steel Keel Composite Wall was constructed on-site to create a floating illusion of the artwork. And a table made of PC Sunlight Plates was used to mimic a water reflection for the work Narcissus's Love. The overall lighting was bright with small windows open, so there was natural lighting as a supplement. We agreed that nurtural light would allow all color to perform their best. In a way, the light outside the windows is utilized to echo the content of a few works (e.g., car back lights echoed with the red color on Prince Trompe L'oeil, and the shade of leaves echoed with the context of Wet Grass Accord).

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PRESENTATION

Based on the artist-led cooperation model, See and Gain was able to break through the limitations of static display and present itself as a cross-media, dynamic, and bold experimental exhibition. Its multidimensionality is first reflected in the composition of the exhibition content: in addition to Li's artworks, the exhibition included experimental experience activities on the opening day and two academic lectures. Several events aim to transform the exhibition from a static display into a dynamic and dialogical field.

As part of a presentation strategy, the "Rubber Hand Illusion" experience activity on the opening day aims to reproduce a classic psychological experiment proposed by Botvinick and Cohen in 1998. This experiment is used to study the mechanism of human self-perception of the body (body ownership) (Kammers et al., 2009). At the scene where the artist served as the experimenter, volunteer participants were induced to incorporate their rubber hands into their own bodily perception by synchronously stimulating their real hands outside

their sight and their rubber hands in their sight. When the experimenter (the artist) finally hits the prosthetic hand with a hammer, it triggers a contraction avoidance reaction of the real hand of the experimental subject. Over 10 people participated in this experience. This event extends the theme of the exhibition from “viewing” to the level of “full-perception”.

The dimensions of exhibitions are also expanded through the construction of theory and discourse. The special lecture “Printed ‘Trompe l’oeil’ and Our Pictorialized Lives” on July 4th, 2025, showcases Li’s academic research beyond artistic practice. He explores how the technique of (printed) trompe l’oeil has transformed from art to a popular visual tool (such as forest textures on construction site fences), and analyzes its history and related contemporary art practice. The other event, “The Art Journey of Li Jiaqi from 2017–2025” on July 5th, 2025, reviewed how Li lived and worked across Beijing, Glasgow, and Chicago, and developed an interest between “vision” and “reality” through humorous and absurd techniques (such as the “collage” method). The talk showcased his interdisciplinary thinking between sculpture, paper, and painting.

In terms of other documentational materials, they show Li’s ongoing research on perception and reality. Paper and video documents included his video essay Effective Ineffectiveness: Facts About Space Collage (2020), the journal article Research of Social Visual Phenomenon: Space Collage (2022), and a university seminar presentation titled Printed Trompe-l'oeil: Urban Visual Tricks (2025).

CONCLUSION

See and Gain, as a milestone solo exhibition for Jiaqi Li, was a novel experiment in three aspects: the critical response to the digital media era, the artist-led cooperative mode between the artist and the gallery, and the bold experiment on exhibition opening and academic activities. As a young artist, Li actively embraces our times. The artist-led gallery cooperation mode maximized both parties’ potential. The bold experiment on the opening reception, other well-designed activities, and post-documentation provided a vivid example of a young artist’s hard work for the industry ecosystem.

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Paradoxical Narrative and Cultural Critique: A Study of Conrad's Under Western Eyes

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KEYWORDS

Paradoxical Narrative;
Linguistic Skepticism;
Alienation of the Individual;
Negation of Revolution

ABSTRACT

This study adopts the method of close textual analysis to systematically examine the intricate paradoxical narratives in Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes. The research reveals how the novel consistently creates paradoxes across its narrative structure, character development, and narrative perspective in order to create a polysemic and ambiguous aesthetic tension. Narratively the dual narrative voices and meta-fictional framework perpetual constantly suspend any definitive "truth," foregrounding Conrad's profound skepticism toward linguistic reliability and fiction's function to reflect reality. In characterization, the diverse revolutionaries—alienated and trapped in contradictions between identity and action—expose through their hypocrisy, chaos, and disorder Conrad's thorough negation of the Russian Revolution. Culturally, the conflicted identity of the narrator, the "English teacher," simultaneously demonstrates the limit of Western-centric perspectives and manifests the author's critical doubt and a reflection of colonial discourse and Western hegemony. Thus, paradox emerges not merely as Conrad's crucial narrative strategy but as his distinctive mode of critical engagement with history, politics, and culture. This research ultimately demonstrates how Under Western Eyes achieves a synthesis of literary aesthetics and cultural critique through paradoxical narration, offering new perspectives for reassessing Conrad's literary project.

INTRODUCTION

Under Western Eyes is one of Conrad's four political novels and his only full-length novel set primarily in Russia. Setting in pre-October Revolution , the novel explores the conflict between autocracy and revolution, describes the fates of various Russians entangled in this conflict, and analyzes the underlying Russian psychology. Due to the themes of "crime" and "repentance", Anglo-American academia regards it as a sister work to Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment.

John Peters notes "Under Western Eyes perhaps is Conrad's most unusual novel. It is the work closest to his painful memories, the most humanized work, and the finale of his creative peak. In many ways, Under Western Eyes contains Conrad's most important ideas. The great questions of political philosophy—solidarity, betrayal, polity, society, the individual, the nature of human life—are fused together in this work. After its publication, Conrad's writing changed dramatically. Under

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Western Eyes amalgamates everything Conrad sought to express in his earlier and later works; thus, it can be seen as the pinnacle of his peculiar and glorious literary career" (Peters,2013). The comment illustrates the significance of this novel for Conrad and indicate its complexity and appeal as a fiction. One reason for its complex polysemy and compelling nature is the pervasive use of paradoxical narrative throughout the novel. This article categorizes the paradoxes in the work into three types as follows and further explores their implications.

It should be noted that the definitions of paradox, both in Chinese and foreign scholarship, tend to be ambiguous and polysemous(Chen,2014). This paper adopts the meanings of contradiction, polysemy, irrationality, and apparent plausibility masking actual falsity.

ELUSIVE TRUTH: MULTIPLE NARRATIVES AND META-FICTIONAL STRUCTURE

The text employs a meta-fictional narrative structure through the use of two narrators—the "English teacher" and Razumov—resulting in narration and comment from different perspectives based one event, leading to ambiguity and polysemy in the text. Furthermore, the first narrator, the "English teacher," consistently reveals doubts about his own cognitive abilities, particularly hist understanding of Russians. Meanwhile, Razumov, who narrates through his diary, employs an unconventional diary-writing style that makes readers deeply suspicious of the truth of his accounts and his writing intentions. The paradoxes existing on these two levels create a distance between the events recorded in the text and the actual occurrences, bringing a sense of elusive truth to the reader.

In terms of the entire work,on the surface, all content we encounter in the work is relayed by the English teacher, the first-person narrator. He obtains the diary of Kirylo Sidonovich Razumov and attempts to "present" its contents to the reader: "It is based on a document; all I have brought to it is my knowledge of the Russian language……" (Conrad,2013). However, beneath the English teacher, the protagonist Razumov narrates through his diary. Thus, the work presents two basic levels: the author Conrad who depicts the storyteller, the "English teacher"; and the "English teacher" describes Razumov, the story's protagonist. This structural arrangement makes readers question and doubt the true narrator of the work and its veracity.

While the structure already suspends the story's truthfulness, it is even more striking that the first-person narrator, the English teacher, expresses self-doubt. Firstly, as a Westerner, he admits his inability "to understand the Russian soul." Secondly, he believes that "words are the great foes of reality." Thirdly, he engages in retrospective narration from an omniscient, even interpretive, standpoint. Fourthly, the entire story is not presented in the sequence of his "moving from ignorance to knowledge"—there are a lot of flashbacks and interludes in the text. For example, in Part One, the English teacher uses a flashback to recount how the revolutionary Haldin, after assassinating Minister P in St. Petersburg, turns to Razumov for help; Razumov, after an internal struggle, decides to betray Haldin, leading to his arrest and execution. Razumov then decides to "vanish," wishing to continue his studious life. In Part Two, the elderly English teacher recalls, again in flashback, his various experiences encountered Haldin's sister in Geneva. Part Three is narrated by the English teacher, describing Razumov's meeting with Madame S and conversations with revolutionaries. Part Four begins with the narrator "I" tracing back to the end of Part One regarding Razumov's conversation with Councillor Mikulin. With Mikulin's advice and arrangement, Razumov finally goes to Geneva as a spy, fulfilling his mission to "keep an eye on European revolution." All this significantly undermines the credibility of the narration.

Simultaneously, the account by Razumov—the person involved in the events, the owner of the diary, and the story's protagonist—should be reliable conventionally. But in fact, the diary left by Razumov defies convention, not entirely conforming to the typical form of a diary. For instance, most of the content is not written chronologically; although all items are dated, some span months and extend for dozens of pages. The beginning of the diary is a recollection—narrating an event that happened about one year ago (Conrad,2013). Moreover, even more unbelievably, the author hints that the very act of writing the diary might be deceptive. For example, when five lines written by Razumov are discovered by the authorities and presented to Mikulin as evidence of his wavering convictions, Razumov explicitly tells Mikulin that his intention was merely to deceive (Conrad,2013). That is, the protagonist Razumov might have fabricated parts of the facts in his diary; his reason for writing the diary may not have been simply to record daily events truthfully—it might contain fabricated content, even elements intended to exonerate himself. Thus, specifically regarding Razumov as the third-person narrator (within his own diary), everything is fraught with paradox and contradiction, making it impossible to discern truth from falsehood.

In summary, structurally, this work is a story within a story, possessing a typical meta-fictional narrative structure. This aligns with the scholarly observation that most of Conrad's novels have two basic levels. First, Conrad depicts the storyteller, and the storyteller describes the characters. Consequently, the text presents two narrative levels, corresponding to the presence of multiple narrators, leading to the same events and characters being repeatedly recounted and commented upon by different narrators. Second, and more notably, the two narrators—the English teacher and the protagonist Razumov narrating through his diary—both express doubt about the truthfulness of their own narra-

tives, further obscuring the truth within the work. The existence of these two aspects maintains a distance between the reader seeking the truth and the indiscernible reality, creating aesthetic tension. In other words, the use of meta-fictional narrative structure makes the work's implications more polysemous, rich, and ambiguous, thereby leaving ample space for multiple interpretations by the reader.

Why, then, did Conrad employ these narrative techniques to innovate upon and expand the great tradition of literary realism prevalent in his time? This is closely linked to his view of language and his understanding of the relationship between fiction and reality. In the literary tradition before Conrad, novels were typically narrated by a single narrator and were seen as a reflection of the real world ; realism was the conventional mode, and the function of the novel was considered to be the reflection of reality. Underlying this proposition was the belief that language could accurately reflect reality. Conrad, however, held a different view, as expressed in the novel's outset through the English teacher: "If I have ever had these gifts in in any sort of living form they have been smothered out of existence a long time ago under a wilderness of words. Words as is well known are the great foes of reality" (Conrad,2013). That is, in Conrad's view, language is unreliable and cannot fully represent reality; therefore, the novel, constructed from language, lacks truthfulness. Concerning the relationship between the novel and reality, Conrad believed that the novel cannot reflect reality; it is merely a fabrication. As one researcher summarizes, the arrangement of meta-fictional structure and dual narrators "force the reader to understand the constructed nature of the novel, while simultaneously invite the reader to reflect on the subjective construction of the real world we live in. After recognizing the fact of construction, all absolute truth vanishes, and skepticism becomes the only reliable intellectual force"(Deng,2013).It was precisely Conrad's skepticism regarding language's representational capacity—his sense of linguistic crisis—and his different understanding of the relationship between language and reality that led him to pioneer the novel form that intersperses narration with commentary, thus establishing him as a forerunner of modernist fiction.

FROM PERSONAL ALIENATION TO THE NEGATION OF REVOLUTION

In the author's depiction, Russian citizens—whether university students like Razumov and Kostia, revolutionaries like Peter Ivanovitch, Sophia Antonovna, Nikita, the peasant Ziemianitch, or even Councillor Mikulin, a high-ranking state official—though differing in status and position, are all replete with paradoxes such as the disjunction between words and deeds, the confusion of good and evil, mismatched attire and identity, and severe incongruity between status and actions. This arrangement aims to show that under dark autocratic rule, the Russian people, from top to bottom, are severely alienated and their humanity is distorted. Placing the burden of revolution on such a nation is doomed to failure and holds no promise.

Through detailed descriptions of language, appearance, psychology, and life experiences, the novel portrays dozens of distinct characters. Nevertheless, they share similarities: first, the vast majority are Russians, or at least directly connected to the Russian revolution; second, they all exhibit paradoxes to varying degrees. Given the relatively abundant research on Razumov, this article will focus on other characters.

Peter Ivanovitch is a Russian exile and one of the main leaders of the Geneva revolutionary group. In his youth, he lived a dissolute life. The sudden death of a high-society girl he was preparing to marry prompted a spiritual repentance. Later, the autocratic government watched him, imprisoned him, and beat him severely. Subsequently, shackled, he managed to escape prison, crossed the Suez Canal and reached the West. Upon reaching the shores of Southern Europe, he stopped and began writing his autobiography. This autobiography became an annual bestseller upon publication. Then he wrote other books, which are all aimed at promoting humanity. A concurrent theme throughout these works is the worship of women.

The text specifically quotes Ivanovitch's writing about his beliefs from his "autobiography" to illustrate his judgment from other perspective: "The great Powers of Europe are bound to shall disappear—and the cause of their collapse will be very simple. They will exhaust themselves struggling against their proletariat. In Russia it is different,.In Russia we have no classes to combat each other,one holding the power of wealth and the other mighty with the strength of numbers. We have only an unclean bureaucracy in the face of a people as great and as incorruptible as the ocean. No, We have no classes"(Conrad,2013).

Here, anyone with slight historical knowledge can spot the flaw—his analysis of the domestic situation in Russia is severely mistaken. How can a revolutionary who fails to accurately grasp the domestic situation lead a revolution? Can a revolution led by such a person succeed? The outcome is predictable. It is from here that the paradoxes in his character gradually emerge.

As a feminist, the words he describes Russian women like this: "But we have the Russian woman. The admirable Russian woman! I receive most remarkable letters signed by women. So elevated in tone,so courageous,breathing such a noble ardour of service! The greatest part of our hopes rests on women" (Conrad,2013).But in fact, while praising women, he simultaneously torments and mistreats his female servant. This is presented very directly twice in the text. Once, when Miss Haldin first goes to the Château Borel to meet Madame S, the servant Tekla voluntarily tells Miss Haldin about her plight (Conrad,2013). Another time is during Razumov's first visit to Madame S; the

maid's reaction to Ivanovitch's actions—"would dart out to the table and pour him out another tumblerful," "She was nervous, tremulous……Have they terrified her out of her senses with ghosts……her lips trembled in the manner of a scared person about to burst into speech" (Conrad,2013)—also reveals his usual attitude towards the maid. This directly reveals his true nature—a veritable pseudo-feminist.

Furthermore, he appears enthusiastic about the revolution on the surface, but in reality, he lacks a clear understanding of it and does not organize practical, effective actions, merely inciting Miss Haldin to become a fanatic (Conrad,2013). Simultaneously, his focus is not the revolutionary career but the pursuit of the wealthy widow Madame de S, eagerly hoping to inherit her vast fortune. As a revolutionary, he is money-grubbing and pursues a wealthy widow, which indicates that he lacks of class stance; he is fundamentally a pseudo-revolutionary.

Additionally, he exhibits other behaviors inconsistent with his identity. For instance, the maid says that his forgetfulness or breaking appointments is commonplace (Conrad,2013), a habitual behavior clearly unbefitting a serious revolutionary. The maid tells Razumov: "Don't you understand that Peter Ivanovitch must direct, inspire , influence ? That's the breath of his life. There can never be too many disciples. He can't bear thinking of anyone escaping him. And a woman too! There is nothing to be done without women he says" (Conrad,2013). This reveals his desire of control. In fact, this behavior is little different from that of an autocrat.

Beyond his behaviors, his attire is also full of paradox. He" ……in a long dressing-gown of some dark stuff. It descended in straight lines down to his feet. He suggested a monk or a prophet, a robust figure of some desert-dweller—something Asiatic; and the dark glasses in conjunction with this costume made him more mysterious than ever in the subdued light (Conrad, 2013). Generally, leaders of revolutions project an image of uprightness and openness. Here, however, Ivanovitch does not show his true face, giving an impression of inscrutability. Moreover, the cassock, attire clearly inconsistent with his identity, which further deepens the reader's suspicion about his true role.

Sophia Antonovna is a female revolutionary liaison, Ivanovitch's deputy, operating in the United States, Russia, Poland, and elsewhere. She is renowned, possessing a perplexing gaze and an eccentric demeanor (Conrad,2013). As one of the revolutionary leaders, her cautious vetting of Razumov's background seems reasonable on the surface. But upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that her interrogation of Razumov reveals fanaticism, radicalism and violence—"Life, not to be vile must be a revolt—a pitiless protest—all the time" (Conrad,2013), she declares. Razumov's comment and evaluation toward her are, "black and impenetrable like the mental caverns where revolutionary thought should sit plotting the violent way of its dream of changes." Simultaneously, her" word had such a weight in the 'active' section of every party . She was much more representative than the great Peter Ivanovitch. Stripped of rhetoric, mysticism, and theories she was the true spirit of destructive revolution" (Conrad,2013).

As the plot unfolds, through her behaviors, especially her evaluation of Ivanovitch, we see that she is a person who confuses right and wrong and lacks any firm stance. In fact, she knew early that Ivanovitch's approach to Madame S was for money. But when Razumov expresses "disgust" at Ivanovitch's behavior, Antonovna immediately defends him, believing he is "an inspired person" (Conrad,2013). Furthermore, about two years after Razumov's confession, the narrator, the English teacher, meets Antonovna. When discussing that Antonovna knew about Ivanovitch's secret meeting with the Head of the Secret Police, Mikulin, she is not only unsurprised but still defends him. Particularly when the narrator learns that Ivanovitch, failing to obtain Madame S's inheritance as desired, is not living in his coveted Mediterranean resort, the Riviera, but with a peasant girl in Russia, the narrator expresses surprise and speaks disrespectfully. This female revolutionary, abnormally, again emphasizes that "Peter Ivanovitch is a man inspired." That is, even at this point, she still defends him, showing she is a pseudo-revolutionary who confuses black and white.

Among the revolutionaries in Geneva, there is one particularly noticeable figure. This is primarily due to his appearance: "The first ,great white hairless face, double chin, prominent stomach, which he seemed to carry forward consciously within a strongly distended overcoat……" (Conrad,2013). Furthermore, the author clearly describes his voice: "The abrupt squeaks of the fat man seemed to proceed from that thing like a balloon he carried under his overcoat" (Conrad,2013). His overall impression left is: "the stolidity of his attitude ,the big feet ,the lifeless,hanging hand,the enormous bloodless cheek, the thin wisps of hair straggling down the fat nape of the neck"(Conrad,2013), giving Razumov the overall feeling of being "terrible and ludicrous." Such an image and impression of a revolutionary greatly contradict our normal expectations. Usually, regardless of a revolutionary's physical appearance, their involvement in a glorious and great career renders them noble. But here, the author's unconventional description of Nikita's image leaves us deeply perplexed. Later, after Razumov confesses everything, while others hesitate about how to deal with him, Nikita is the first to step forward, ostensibly acting righteously for the revolutionaries, and bursts Razumov's eardrums. But in reality, Nikita "was a legacy from his predecessor to Mikulin." That is, he had long been embedded within the revolutionary party, a spy sent by the secret police.

Ziemianitch was originally a peasant, after moving to the city, who made by a living renting sledges and car-

riages. In the eyes of the brave revolutionary Haldin, the driver Ziemianitch has "a bright spirit!,a hardy soul" (Conrad,2013), he is even "the bright soul " (Conrad,2013) of Russia. But in reality, he is a drunkard, often drinking himself into a stupor. In the story, when the protagonist Razumov, following Haldin's instructions, goes to the suburban inn to find Ziemianitch, the latter is dead drunk because a woman he liked (reportedly a witch) has run away. No matter how Razumov tries to wake him, it's useless. Finally, the exasperated Razumov beats him severely. That is, if Ziemianitch had not been drunk then, he might have successfully helped Haldin escape, thus preventing Haldin's arrest, Razumov's confession-induced deafness, and a series of subsequent tragedies. More importantly, as a driver, he transports both good and bad people(Conrad,2013). Of course, one might interpret his equal treatment with all customers as a means to conceal his true identity as a revolutionary. However, this is not the case; the text repeatedly shows that he fundamentally lacks principles and stance, merely being a muddle-headed laborer.

Furthermore, Councillor Mikulin, Head of the Secret Police, is originally a character loyal to the autocratic system, low-key, resourceful, cautious, and immensely influential, favoring the path of social reform. But his fate—being tried by the state—is completely unexpected by everyone.

Kostia, a fellow student of Haldin and Razumov, has the nickname "the Madman." He comes from a family like nouveau riche, usually foolishly cheerful, rash, garrulous, and restless. However, when asked to escort Razumov away, he becomes "firm in tone," forming a sharp contrast with his usual behavior.

Through analysis, we find that most characters in the text are alienated, existing in a state where they confuse right and wrong, lose rationality and judgment, and thus their behaviors are full of paradoxes. Most of them are superficially closely related to the so-called revolutionary activities, but in fact, their true identities are pseudo-revolutionaries, assassins, and muddled individuals. The author's creation of such a group of revolutionaries is closely linked to his own attitude towards the Russian Revolution. In Conrad's view, revolutionaries in an autocratic, oppressive environment are themselves a motley crew; placing the burden of revolution on their shoulders is doomed to failure. Simultaneously, the novel's portrayal of other characters like the priest who holds multiple roles and related plot arrangements further imply the extensive reach and profound impact of Russian autocracy and its accompanying terror—it covers every inch of Russia, envelops everyone, and no one can escape it. Moreover, the eventual state trial of Mikulin, who served the autocratic regime, is equally meaningful—the barbaric Russian autocratic system has no stance, principle, or bottom line, sparing not even its own friends and servants.

In the self-preface of this book, Conrad states: "the most terrifying reflexion (I am speaking now for myself) is that all these people are not the product of the exceptional but of the general—of the normality of their place and time—and race……The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face to face with the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes nor the leopard his spots" (Conrad,2013). From this sentence , we can discern the author's basic judgement of Russia as a nation and Russians as a people: autocratic, ignorant, evil, and prone to fantasy; thus, the revolution occurring in this country holds no future or hope.

Connecting this to Conrad's life, we can easily understand why he portrays Russia with paradox and full of satire. Born in a Polish noble family, Conrad's ancestors were actively involved in political movements against Tsarist Russian autocracy, resulting in either execution or exile. The young Conrad lived with his parents in their place of exile—Vologda, Russia. Due to the harsh environment, both parents died of illness successively, and he was raised by his uncle. Poland, his motherland, due to it special situations and geographical location, became the focus of European politics in the 19th century and was ultimately partitioned by Russia, Germany, and Austria. If Poland brought him the bitterness of a lost nation, then for Tsarist Russia, the primary perpetrator of this tragedy, Conrad harbored enduring, deep-seated hatred. It can be said that this sense of loathing permeated his entire life and determined his impression of Russia.

THE PARADOX OF THE "ENGLISH TEACHER" AND THE QUESTIONING OF WESTERN CENTRISM

The "English teacher" in the text is a Westerner who understands Russian, has some contact with Russians, and has a relatively good understanding of Russian society. He is essentially the author's surrogate. On the one hand, he examines the Russian nation and its revolution from a Western perspective, believing that the self-contradictory Russians living under an autocratic regime are doomed to lead their nation towards light;meanwhile, through his boundless praise for Haldin's sister, indicating that he still has a glimmer of hope for the Russian nation. On the other hand, as a Westerner, he not only possesses obvious defects such as narrow horizon and limited cognitive abilities but also holds a skeptical attitude towards the so-called democratic system of which the West is so proud. The aforementioned paradoxes imply his questioning of Western centrism.

Typically, in the Western view, Westerners are the noblest, representing all positive attributes like rationality, justice, and enlightenment. The narrator of this text, the English teacher, is a Westerner, so he should presumably be presented in a very positive character. However, the text presents him as narrow-minded and

possessing a rather superficial understanding of external affairs and people, hence the paradox arises. That is, the Western narrator in this text has obvious flaws; he is not the perfect embodiment or incarnation of truth. This is manifested specifically in the following aspects.

First, as mentioned earlier, he is severely self-doubting, constantly admitting his own inadequacies. For example, at the novel's beginning, while stating that he has "considerable connections" in the Geneva district known as "Little Russia," meaning he is well-acquainted with various people and events, he simultaneously says he "has no comprehension of the Russian character" (Conrad,2013). A similar situation exists at the novel's end. That is, his cognitive abilities are relatively limited; he is far from the omnipotent being boasted of in Western narratives. Furthermore, in Chapter Four, the final chapter, when "I" witnesses the following: Razumov, having come to Geneva, meets the Haldin women, knowing the mother is tormented by the mystery of Haldin's death while he himself falls in love with Miss Haldin, suffering such mental anguish that he is nearly driven to break down, his "expression of a somnambulist"(Conrad,2013), the narrator vaguely feels that this state of the one person who could bring hope to the Haldin women might deal a greater blow to their already tragic lives. He subconsciously feels he should visit them, hoping to do something. But "at the last moment," he " hesitated as to going there at all" (Conrad,2013). That is, on one hand, he sympathizes with the Haldin women, believing he is "not yet callous enough to be incapable of sympathy," especially for Miss Haldin, thinking "there was almost all her youth before her……a terribly sombre youth given over to the hazards of a furious strife between equally ferocious antagonisms"; but on the other hand, he "felt so helpless" and even thinks her youth has nothing to do with him; he is a person who "lingered over (his)thoughts,more than (he)should have done" (Conrad,2013). Clearly, such a person, with low initiative and prone to hesitation, differs somewhat from the Westerner portrayed in Western narratives. Another example: near the end of the novel, when narrating Razumov going to the home of Laspara, the "editor of the Living Word, confidant of conspirators, inditer of sanguinary menaces and manifestos, suspected of being in the secret of every plot" (Conrad,2013), i.e., the place where the revolutionaries gather, to confess the truth about Haldin's arrest, the so-called "confession" event, he admits this event was "my Western eyes had failed to see" (Conrad,2013). That is, in fact, he does not possess an omniscient perspective; many events he knows only through Razumov's diary, or rather, he processes them based on Razumov's recorded accounts.

Second, as mentioned before, through the "English teacher"'s eyes and words, we see that all sorts of Russians, even everything Russian, are presented to the reader in a negative, dark, lifeless, and hopeless light. Besides the mean and contradictory behaviors of characters from different classes and ranks detailed earlier, the novel also repeatedly links the image of "snow and ice" with Russia. For instance, the assassination of Minister P that initiates the entire narrative, Razumov's search for Ziemianitch, and other plot points occur in icy, snowy landscapes. That is, through his "agent" the English teacher's eyes, the author presents readers the entire Russian nation and people as having no merits or aspects worthy of affirmation. Precisely because this judgment does not align with historical facts, many readers and critics view Conrad as a western-centered thinker, or believe the Russia in his writing is the Russia seen through Western eyes, that he examines and even disparages Russia from a view of western centralism , thus echo he work's title.

However, there are also exceptions in the text, mainly manifested in the "English teacher"'s unstinting praise for the revolutionary Haldin's sister. When first seeing her, he finds her gaze fearless yet non-aggressive, "a naive yet thoughtful assurance is a better definition" (Conrad,2013). When he meets her again after she has gone to the Château Borel to inquire about her brother—that is, after she has had contact with the so-called Russian revolutionaries—he finds "her voice ……fascinating with its masculine and bird-like quality, had the accent of spontaneous conviction"(Conrad,2013). After she meets Razumov, "Her walk was not that hybrid and uncertain gliding some women affect but a frank, strong, healthy movement forward" (Conrad,2013). Even when he sees Miss Haldin after she learns the truth about her brother's death and after Mrs. Haldin's death, he finds her "looked matured……smooth-browed ,with a resolute profile.She gave me a new view of herself ,and I marvelled at that something grave and measured in her voice ,in her movement ,in her manner.It was the perfection of collected independence " (Conrad,2013). That is, in the "English teacher"'s mind, Miss Haldin consistently appears in an extremely positive light, even after being influenced by that motley crew of Russian revolutionaries; she remains bright, resolute, and confident.

In summary, regarding Russians, or one could say so-called revolutionaries, the "English teacher"'s attitude is full of contradiction—when examining Russia from a Western perspective, he finds it utterly worthless, without any future or hope; but when facing the young woman Miss Haldin, he can discern her shining qualities. That is, he does not completely and utterly negate Russia.

Third is his perception of the Western world. For example, when he learns that Mikulin—the dedicated, loyal, resilient, gentle, and cultivated former Head of the Secret Police—has been tried by the state, he cannot help but exclaim: "It seems that the savage autocracy, no more than the divine democracy, does not limit its diet exclusively to the bodies of its enemies" (Conrad,2013). Superficially, he is criticizing that Russian autocratic system that devours people. But upon

reflection, one finds that he places Western so-called democracy on par with, and equates it to Russian autocracy, thereby indicating his own severe doubts about Western democratic systems. Moreover, another detail in the text hints the narrator's mockery and scorn for Western democracy: when Razumov is writing on a small island in Lake Geneva named Rousseau Island, he encounters a statue of Rousseau. We know that in the Western world, Rousseau is a key founder of modern democracy. But in the eyes of Razumov, the narrator's subject, it is presented as such an existence —"There was something of naive, odious and inane simplicity about that unfrequented tiny crumb of earth named after Jean Jacques Rousseau.Something pretentious and shabby too"(Conrad,2013). Clearly, through his evaluation of the island, he indirectly expresses his critique of the Western democratic system.

Edward comments the narrators in Conrad's book in Culture and Imperialism: "Despite their European names and mannerisms, Conrad's narrators are not average unreflecting witnesses of European imperialism. They do not simply accept what goes on in the name of the imperial idea: they think about it a lot, they worry about it, they are actually quite anxious about whether they can make it seem like a routine thing" (Said,1994). Although this was said analysis regarding Heart of Darkness, it is quite apt here. That is, Conrad held serious doubts about Western centrism; he did not agree with the Western world's positioning and evaluation of itself and the Orient—namely, that everything about Western white people represented advancement, civilization, and rationality, while the non-West symbolized ignorance and backwardness, and only the West could guide the non-West towards enlightenment, reason, and the future. Specifically, in Under Western Eyes, although the English teacher is a Westerner, he possesses obvious flaws; he is a very real existence, not the idealized incarnation found in Western narratives. Simultaneously, he does not favor everything in Western; rather, his behaviors are full of contradictions and paradoxes, especially regarding the so-called democratic system of the West, about which he has many criticisms. Furthermore, he does not completely negate Russia, indirectly expressing hope for Russia's future through his discovery of Miss Haldin's virtues. It is through the above that we glimpse how the "English teacher," representing Conrad, questioned, negated, and reflected upon the concept of Western centrism and its specific manifestation in that era—colonial ideology. This was very ahead and commendable for its time.

CONCLUSION

Under Western Eyes is filled with contradictions, ambiguities, and polysemy due to the abundance of paradoxes existing from its structure to its characters and even the narrator, the "English teacher," laying the foundation for multiple interpretations in literary criticism. Furthermore, by breaking the dominant tradition of realist fiction and pioneering and developing a genre that intersperses narration with commentary, Conrad became a pivotal figure in the history of English literature, indeed in the entire tradition of realist literature and its modernist transformation, bridging the old and the new. Hence, the significance of exploring deeply the author and his text is self-evident.

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Mist-Shrouded Beauty: The Subversion and Reconstruction of Female Criminals in *She's Got No Name*

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KEYWORDS

She's Got No Name;
Female Criminals;
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ABSTRACT

Throughout the long history of crime films, the image of female criminals has remained shrouded in mystery. Their complex humanity and behavioral logic are often obscured by gender bias and narrative conventions, rendering them elusive flowers in the mist within traditional storytelling. Directed by Peter Chan, *She's Got No Name* employs a groundbreaking narrative strategy to subvert and rewrite this classic motif. Through three innovative approaches, a multi-perspective, jigsaw-like construction; symbolic expressions of bodily narratives; and an open-ended conclusion that leaves room for interpretation, the movie successfully deconstructs and reconstructs a complex individual embodying both perpetrator and victim. This subversion and reshaping of the character not only enriches the character arc dimension of crime genre films but also directly challenges the simplistic judgmental paradigm of traditional judicial narratives and social discourse toward female criminals. By advocating for the complexity of female offenders, it offers an enlightening narrative path for penetrating superficial appearances and exploring the human abyss and societal pathologies underlying female criminal behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The dissemination of the film She's Got No Name has undergone distinct phased transformations. From its 2024 premiere at Cannes to its June 2025 screening at the Shanghai International Film Festival, the film underwent significant content adjustments, accompanied by fluctuating critical reception. At the 2024 Cannes Film Festival, the initial 150-minute cut—produced in just six months—received polarized reviews, with particularly muted international reception. Criticism centered on narrative flaws: drawn-out plot exposition, sluggish pacing, and flat characterization that failed to convey the story's core to global audiences. The turning point came at the 2025 Shanghai International Film Festival. Director Peter Chan restructured the 150-minute Shana version into two parts. The first installment, She's Got No Name, was condensed to 96 minutes and premiered as the opening film on June 14th. The domestic version, enhanced with strengthened ensemble narrative threads and accelerated commercial pacing, was widely regarded as better aligned with market demands, significantly improving its reception. This narrative refinement precisely enhanced the core metaphor of "searching for flowers in the mist." By shedding redundant plot threads, the movie revealed intricate, multifaceted details of its female criminals—details previously obscured, now emerging with the complexity of flowers hidden within fog within a tighter narrative framework.

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The metaphor "searching for flowers in the mist" originates from Du Fu's Tang Dynasty poem "Composed on a Boat During the Minor Cold Festival": "Spring waters carry the boat like a seat in heaven; Old age views flowers as if through mist." Originally describing the act of viewing flowers through a hazy lens, it later came to symbolize the inability to perceive things clearly. Employing it as a methodological metaphor aptly captures the complexity and ambiguity of the female criminal figures in She's Got No Name. In traditional crime films, female criminals are often reduced to "wicked women," embodying society's collective anxiety and moral condemnation of female transgression. Yet under Peter Chan's lens, this figure is shrouded in historical mist, like viewing flowers through fog, where seemingly clear contours conceal complex truths. This article adopts a "searching for beauty through the mist" perspective to peel back the layers of fog shrouding the female criminal archetype. It explores the roots of its stigmatization and examines how the reconstructed first part of She's Got No Name subverts and redefines this image.

THE FLOWER IN THE MIST: THE COGNITIVE FOG SURROUNDING FEMALE CRIMINALS IN TRADITIONAL CRIME NARRATIVES

Throughout the long evolution of crime films, the image of female criminals has remained shrouded in mist, becoming a "flower in the mist" that remains elusive in traditional narratives. From early Hollywood films to crime-themed works across Asia, this figure has been reduced to a simplistic, stereotypical symbol, detached from her true humanity and the complex social factors that shape her. Early Hollywood crime films, such as The Postman Always Rings Twice (1981), portrayed female criminals like Cora as symbols of seduction and evil. Every glance and gesture was imbued with dangerous undertones, casting her as a femme fatale who provokes male crime and disrupts social order. This portrayal reflects contemporary societal biases against women, treating their normal emotions and desires as monstrous threats. Any deviation from traditional gender norms led to swift demonization. Through stark lighting contrasts and suggestive cinematography, directors painted Cora as a femme fatale, forcing audiences to focus solely on her superficial "evil" while obscuring her genuine struggles as a woman trapped in adversity. Sociologist Li Yinghe notes in her research that traditional societies imposed strict gender norms on women, subjecting those who deviated to harsh public condemnation.

In Asia, Naomi from the Japanese film The Daylight Demon (1966) similarly embodies a terrifying female criminal archetype. The film emphasizes her madness and cruelty, attributing her crimes solely to psychopathy while glossing over deeper causes like her upbringing and societal pressures. This narrative reflects Asian culture's avoidance and resistance toward female criminality, reluctant to explore the complex social and psychological factors behind it, instead simplistically defining such women as deviants who violate moral norms. Influenced by traditional Confucian thought, Asian cultures emphasize feminine docility and virtue. When women commit crimes or deviate from societal norms, they face severe social rejection and are often crudely labeled as "evil." Hong Kong cinema is no exception in this portrayal. For instance, in Daughter of Darkness 2 (1994), portrays the female criminal as driven by lust, simplistically attributing her motives to sexual desire and revenge against her husband, while ignoring the oppression and injustice she endured in a feudal rural society. The film satisfies audience curiosity by emphasizing bloody violence and the female criminal's twisted psyche, yet offers no reflection on the deeper causes of female crime. Research in mass media studies indicates that media outlets, in pursuit of sensationalism, frequently present exaggerated and one-dimensional portrayals of female criminals, reinforcing stereotypes.

Within these traditional narratives, the construction of female criminal characters often follows a fixed pattern. Their criminal acts are tightly linked to their gender characteristics, with excessive emphasis placed on the negative influence of emotions and desires, casting them as dangerous deviants who violate social norms. Narratively, the tragic fates of female offenders are used to reinforce moralistic lessons about "karma," rarely exploring the complex social, familial, or economic factors behind their crimes. Visually, exaggerated performances, jarring sound effects, and disturbing imagery are employed to highlight their "evil," further cementing these stereotypes in viewers' minds. As American journalist Walter Lippmann observed: "The system of stereotypical images of women may be central to our personal traditions and a safeguard of our social status, but it must never be confused with the real-life experiences of women." (Lippmann, 1922) This one-dimensional portrayal of female criminals is, in essence, a tangible manifestation of gender bias and an implicit operation of patriarchal mechanisms perpetuating gender inequality. As Friedrich Engels noted in The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State, the development of private property granted men economic dominance, gradually degrading and enslaving women (Engels,2021). Against this social backdrop, the one-dimensional portrayal of female offenders serves as a disciplinary and repressive tool within patriarchal society, burying the true image and complex inner worlds of female criminals beneath this fog of misperception.

MIST ENVELOPING FLORAL BEAUTY: THE SURVIVAL DILEMMA AND SYMBOLIC CAGE OF FEMALE CRIMINALS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

She's Got No Name sets its story in 1945 Shanghai, where this specific historical space becomes the pivotal backdrop for revealing the survival predicament of female criminals—as if layers of mist tightly shroud their true forms.

The Shackles of Feudal Marriage Systems

The tragedy of Mrs. Zhan Zhou seems foreshadowed from her very "namelessness." The movie's English title, She's Got No Name, pierces precisely the truth of women's existence in that era. Upon marriage, she took her husband's surname, becoming "Mrs. Zhan Zhou." She lost her own name, reduced to an appendage within her family and a blurred figure in society—even "selfhood" became a luxury. In the soy sauce factory's ledgers, she was "Mrs. Chan"; in official records, "the wife of a criminal"; among neighbors, merely "that woman." No one remembered her original name, Zhou Chunlan. This pain of name-deprivation cut deeper than any physical shackle. Behind this lay the shared predicament of women in that era. Their names were overshadowed by their husband's surname, their sense of self eroded by societal conditioning, their social identity perpetually tethered to a man's existence—rootless like floating duckweed.

Sold as a child, Zhou Chunlan was betrothed to Zhan Yunying at seventeen, becoming known as Lady Zhan of the Zhou family. This feudal arranged marriage placed her in an unequal position from the start, stripping her of any autonomy within the union and reducing her to a mere appendage to a man. After marriage, Zhan Yunying's infidelity, gambling, alcoholism, and domestic violence plunged Lady Zhan into endless darkness. Her attempts to earn a living were systematically crushed, and she was even forced to deal with her husband's mistresses. These details reveal the dual torment—physical and psychological—endured by women under the feudal marriage system. Their bodily autonomy and even the right to express emotions were ruthlessly stripped away, making them victims of feudal ethics.

Oppression Under Colonial Economy

1940s Shanghai existed within a complex interplay of colonial rule and indigenous economy. During the city's "occupation" from 1941 to 1945, the entire metropolis fell under Japanese military control. Social production and material circulation were forcibly integrated into the Japanese invaders' war machine, with every major economic sector becoming an instrument of plunder. Normal economic ties between the city and the outside world were nearly severed, and the fundamental conditions necessary for economic operation collapsed. As the war progressed, Shanghai's industrial production capacity suffered unprecedented devastation, with output plummeting precipitously. The commercial system was shattered, and logistics channels descended into paralysis and chaos. The entire socioeconomic development stagnated in a quagmire, while citizens endured daily life amid scarcity and turmoil, living in constant displacement and struggling to survive. Although "Shanghai finally emerged from its status as an occupied zone after the end of the War of Resistance in 1945, multiple forces continued to intertwine within it." In the four years following the war, Shanghai coexisted with several starkly contrasting realities. On the surface, it presented a modern spectacle of revelry and prosperity, yet beneath lay rampant corruption, the suffering of the oppressed, and the surging undercurrent of leftist forces. These elements vied for dominance, rising and falling in a complex interplay that wove an intricate tapestry of coexistence within the city. Shanghai's colonial economy at this juncture exhibited a quintessential dual dependency. It was simultaneously anchored to the global division of labor system of Western colonial capital while also forming an economic dependency on the lower strata of society through control over local resources. As historian Poshek Fu noted, Shanghai's colonial economy had crystallized into a "three-tiered structure." At the apex were British, American, and French trading firms and multinational corporations, dominating critical sectors like finance, shipping, and industrial core technologies. The middle tier comprised comprador elites and local merchants dependent on colonial capital, responsible for resource transshipment and distribution. The base consisted of tens of thousands of laborers—particularly female workers—forming the "labor foundation" of the colonial economy. This structure was particularly acute in traditional handicraft sectors. The movie vividly illustrates colonial oppression through the experience of Zhan Zhouzhi, who worked in a factory to survive, inevitably becoming part of the colonial economic machinery. Colonial capital monopolized the means of production, transforming autonomous factory production into dependent processing, with all extracted profits divided among colonizers and the comprador class. A portion of the output was distributed to local poor at rock-bottom prices, yielding barely enough to sustain factory operations—a perpetual cycle of exploitation. This predatory system trapped factories in a survival squeeze of high investment and low returns, with female laborers at the bottom of the production chain suffering the most devastating losses. Their labor was exploited at every level, their fate as fragile as a candle flickering in the wind, teetering on the brink under the crushing weight of the colonial economy.

Symbolic Violence in Public Discourse

Following the incident, Ms. Zhan Zhou found herself engulfed in a torrential storm of public opinion, whose

intensity and destructive force were no less devastating than the physical violence itself. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of "symbolic violence" posits that this form of violence operates through symbolic channels, exerting non-physical force at an unconscious level via social power differentials (Bourdieu, 1991). It reinforces power relations through language, imagery, and symbols, compelling the subjugated to internalize inequality. In Zhan Zhou's case, the media and public opinion combined to inflict this covert yet devastating symbolic violence upon her.

She's Got No Name interweaves fragments of contemporary media coverage, such as reports from the Shen Bao newspaper, like multiple blades piercing Zhan Zhou's already shattered life. Newspaper headlines like "Poisonous Woman" and "Wicked Wife" stood out starkly. These highly derogatory terms simplistically and brutally defined Zhan Zhou as morally corrupt and malevolent, completely ignoring the long-term persecution she endured in her feudal marriage and the exploitation of colonial economics. The coverage was rife with bias, sensationalizing her act of killing and dismembering her husband while glossing over the complex social factors behind it. For instance, the reports employed exaggerated descriptions of the dismemberment scene to create a horrifying atmosphere, portraying her as a terrifying monster while ignoring the daily trauma of domestic violence and the desperate economic hardship she endured after marriage. Such one-sided and manipulative media coverage constructed a powerful public opinion field, dragging Zhan Zhou into the abyss of moral judgment. The neighbors' reactions were an extension of this symbolic violence. In the movie, neighbors whispered in the alleyway, their discussions about Zhan Zhou astonishingly uniform, filled with condemnation and contempt. Their gazes toward Zhan Zhou Shi carry cold contempt. This collective pressure embodies societal norms and prejudice. Traditional expectations demand women be docile and submissive; Zhan Zhou Shi's act of killing her husband gravely violated this so-called "norm." Thus, neighbors instinctively positioned themselves on moral high ground to condemn her. This verbal violence from her neighbors left Zhan Zhou with nowhere to hide within her own community. The once-familiar alleyways now felt like a trap of hidden arrows with every step she took.

The audience's behavior during the court hearing was equally chilling. They treated Zhan Zhou's case as a farce, a subject for casual judgment over tea and snacks. French philosopher Guy Debord noted in his theory of the "society of the spectacle" that the masses are easily shaped by media representations (Debord, 1967). In this trial spectacle, spectators were captivated by the case's sensationalism, completely overlooking the suffering and struggle of the woman behind it. They regarded Zhan Zhou with indifference, occasionally interjecting with mockery or gossip, as if she were not a victim of tragedy but a clown on stage for public amusement. This collective apathy and condemnation further deprived Zhan Zhou of any opportunity to defend herself. While enduring familial suffering, she also faced the judgment of society at large, plunging her into a desperate isolation with no one to turn to.

Within this historical context, every act of resistance by Mrs. Zhan Zhou appears feeble, each struggle ruthlessly suppressed. Trapped by the feudal marriage system, colonial economic oppression, and the symbolic violence of public opinion, she resembles a flower shrouded in thick fog—unable to reveal her true form. Her life distorted, her dignity trampled, she ultimately turned to crime. Her attempts to plead her case in court were drowned out by biased media coverage, neighbors' prejudices, and the indifference of spectators, her voice lost in the clamor. The symbolic violence of public opinion became the final straw that broke her spirit, plunging her deeper into darkness. This tragedy also laid bare the plight of women in that era—forced to endure not only economic and familial oppression but also the merciless judgment of society, leaving them trapped in the shackles of fate.

CLEARING THE FOG, REVEALING THE TRUTH: THE RECONSTRUCTION AND BREAKTHROUGH OF FEMALE CRIMINAL PORTRAYALS IN FILM NARRATIVES

In She's Got No Name, director Peter Chan employs ingenious narrative techniques and cinematographic language to dispel the fog shrouding female criminals, reconstructing and breaking through this stereotype to reveal their authentic selves.

The Fog-Dispelling Power of Multi-Perspective Narrative

The movie never fixes its spotlight on any single character. Within this ensemble narrative, Peter Chan employs a highly distinctive audiovisual language to excavate an extraordinary case from eighty years ago from the dust of history. The resilience of Lady Chan (Zhang Ziyi), the awakening of Xilin (Zhao Liying), and the defiance of Wang Xumei (Yang Mi)—this ensemble of diverse women profoundly reflects the survival struggles women face in the cracks of their era. As feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey observed, the true reconstruction of female representation begins when the camera ceases to treat women as mere "objects of the gaze" and instead allows them to participate in the narrative through multifaceted roles(Mulvey, 1975). Their destinies intertwine: Zhan Zhouzhi's still-water-like endurance and Xilin's concealed pregnancy form a spiritual relay through Wang Xumei's hoarse cries outside

the courtroom, collectively addressing how women affirm their identities in desperate circumstances.

The movie employs a multi-perspective narrative, centering on Xue Zhiwu—portrayed by Lei Jiayin—the deputy chief of the Shanghai Police Bureau under the puppet regime, investigating the Zhan Zhou case. Interspersed are viewpoints from Zhan Zhou herself, neighbors, lawyers, and others. Each perspective offers distinct information and insights, collectively piecing together the case's full picture. Within this shared narrative space, diverse consciousnesses and voices coexist equally, with no single figure established as an absolute authority. As Xue Zhiwu records "Zhan Zhou" as the perpetrator in the archives, her memory of her husband's fist shattering the frame's integrity flashes by. When a neighbor testifies with a wry remark, “She seemed pretty honest," a flashback reveals her witnessing Zhan Zhoushi being chased and beaten, only to turn away and shut the door—a starkly ironic use of the word "honest."

Zhan Zhou's own account bears the hallmark fragmentation of traumatic memory. When describing her husband's violence, the footage abruptly shifts into color dissonance—a water-stained, blurred effect reminiscent of old photographs—creating a profoundly jarring visual impact. As Judith Herman noted in Trauma and Recovery: "The expression of traumatic memory is often fragmented because the brain cannot integrate extremely painful experiences into a coherent narrative." Through this visual dissonance, the film precisely replicates Mrs. Zhan Zhou's inner turmoil, allowing viewers to glimpse the abyss of suffering beyond words. The neighbor's account is saturated with class prejudice. She repeatedly emphasizes the employer's generosity toward subordinates while downplaying her own witnessing of Zhan Zhou's beatings, revealing how social stratification shapes perception. Individuals in specific societal positions unconsciously interpret reality through lenses aligned with their class interests. As a low-income citizen dependent on her employer for survival, the neighbor upholds the narrative of the "benevolent boss" to preserve the order that secures her livelihood, unwittingly becoming an accomplice to oppression. The account of the lawyer, meanwhile, profoundly exposes the darkness and injustice within the judicial system. While reviewing case files, he discovers that Zhan Zhou had filed three reports with the police station, all dismissed as domestic disputes. This detail starkly exposes the judicial system's disregard for women at the time. During the trial, 198 of the 237 letters received from readers were written by women, many stating "I was beaten too" or "I want to escape." Yet judges routinely dismissed women's appeals as "domestic matters." When the judicial system refuses to provide women with protection, so-called self-defense becomes nothing more than an illusion.

The interweaving of these diverse perspectives breaks the limitations of traditional single-lens narratives, allowing audiences to understand the case from multiple angles and grasp the complex causes behind Zhan Zhou's crime, gradually dispelling the fog shrouding her. Amidst these narrative fissures, She's Got No Name refuses to passively accept the "wicked woman" label. Instead, it actively reconstructs the complete image of a victim of humiliation and harm—this is precisely the most powerful force for dispelling the fog in Peter Chan's lens.

The Emergence of Bodily Narrative

Within traditional crime narratives, the female body is often stripped of agency, reduced to a symbolic tool serving plot conflict or the male gaze. Yet in The Case of Mrs. Chan, Mrs. Chan's body becomes the most devout vessel of narrative. This "devotion" signifies a fidelity to individual experience. As French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault incisively revealed in Discipline and Punish: "The body is the battlefield of power discourse." (Foucault, 1977) Those scars, tremors, and resolute bodily performances speak more plainly than any dialogue about her life trajectory. The subtlety of this bodily narrative lies in its circumvention of language tainted by power, allowing the audience to directly feel the authentic pulse of a woman pushed to the brink.

The film's persistent close-ups of Zhan Zhouzhi's hands form a hidden emotional thread. During factory labor, her knuckles turn as white as dried bones, thick calluses form where her palms meet the wooden handles, and each exertion carries a mechanical numbness. Under the dual discipline of feudal marriage and colonial economy, physical labor in survival's abyss had become an unconscious bodily instinct, as if even pain were suppressed into muscle memory. Yet when her husband violently shoved her to the ground late one night, the trembling of her fingertips suddenly shattered this numbness. Her nails carefully avoided the wound's edges, her fingertips gently rubbing the bruised area. Beneath that restrained tenderness lay a surging tide of pain. This juxtaposition revealed the dual contradictions within her body—both an object of oppression and a vessel for maternal instinct. This sense of dissonance foreshadowed the impending eruption.

The most impactful physical narrative unfolds in the instant she grips the knife handle. The cold glint of the blade contrasts sharply with the sweat beading on her palm. Veins bulge from the intense pressure in her fingers, and even her wrist trembles slightly. This isn't the decisive resolve of a "femme fatale" in traditional crime films, but the final, desperate struggle of a woman driven to the edge, using her body's last ounce of strength to resist annihilation. The bodily resistance of the oppressed is itself an act of speech. Zhan Zhouzhi's grip on the knife embodies this practice. When words fail to plead and the law offers no shelter, the body becomes the final weapon—declaring unyielding defiance through trembling yet resolute posture.

The courtroom scene where she rolls up her sleeve to reveal her scars elevates this bodily narrative to its climax. On Zhan Zhouzhi's exposed forearm, overlapping bruises and scars spread like a map. There were blocky, dark-blue marks from blunt blows, linear indentations from rope restraints, and even circular burns from cigarette butts. These wounds transcended personal suffering, becoming a shared bodily memory for women of that era. Significantly, Peter Chan does not linger on the grotesque wounds. Instead, his camera slowly pans across the reactions of female spectators in the gallery. A woman in a qipao instinctively presses her own arm—perhaps concealing similar scars. A maid arranging her hair quietly tears up, recalling the fear of her employer's scolding. "The narrative of female bodily suffering can spark cross-class empathy among female viewers." At this moment, Mrs. Chan's physical scars transcend individuality, becoming an anchor that awakens collective memory. The grievances concealed by taking their husbands' surnames, the silent cries suppressed by the admonition that "family shame must not be aired outside," all burst through the long silence in this instant.

From numb wrists to trembling fingertips gripping a knife in the dark, to wounds suddenly exposed in court, Zhan Zhou's body undergoes a metamorphosis from "enforced discipline" to "active narration." By capturing these bodily details through his lens, Peter Chan also reclaims the voice for those "nameless" women. Their suffering need not be relayed through a male lens; their resistance requires no moral judgment. The tremors and scars on their bodies alone suffice to accuse the oppression of power, rendering words superfluous.

An Awakening That Rejects Simplistic Moral Judgment

Perhaps those years were like the sunless corners of Shanghai's alleys, where damp mold seeps into the bones. Each breath Zhan Zhou Shi took carried this suffocating weight. At the film's conclusion, it deliberately avoids black-and-white moral judgments, instead employing a restrained tenderness to return her fate to the historical context itself. Here, there are no simplistic labels of "criminal" or "hero." As the camera lingers on the empty workshop, morning light filtering through windowpanes onto dust-covered stone steps, unspoken words dissolve into the play of light and shadow. The moment Zhan Zhou-shi raised her knife was never a dividing line between good and evil.

The film's courage in rejecting simplistic moral judgments lies in shattering the stereotype that female crime stems from innate wickedness. When viewers see the old scars on her wrists and the fresh marks on her knife, they understand how the judicial indifference that dismissed her three reports pushed her to the brink. So-called "morality" pales in the face of structural violence. This narrative choice liberates Zhan Zhouzhi's character from symbolic confinement. She possesses cowardice, fear, and, above all, the solitary courage of one driven to the edge of a cliff. Like a wildflower struggling to grow through a crack in the wall, even if stained with mud, its very bloom is the most powerful rebuttal to darkness. Ultimately, as the fog lifts, the audience sees not a defined "criminal," but a "human being" desperately gasping for breath in the cracks of an era. This awakening narrative finally liberates the female criminal from the altar of moral judgment, granting her the complexity and authenticity she deserves within the folds of history. This may well be the most precious tenderness captured through Peter Chan's lens.

CONCLUSION

She's Got No Name never intended to be a simple crime story; its true purpose lies in posing profound questions about the fate of women. Where historical fog distorts female criminals into toxic flowers, Peter Chan's lens pierces the mist like a ray of light, revealing the struggling "precious flower"—a life stripped bare by adversity. Beginning with "Nameless," the movie unfolds the shackles of feudal marriage, the crushing weight of colonial economics, and the siege of social opinion, peeling back layer by layer the systemic oppression behind the female criminal. Simultaneously, through the transformation of her identity—from "Zhou Chunlan" to "Zhan Zhou Shi"—and the progression from numb wrists to the raw exposure of her scars, the movie subverts the flat label of "wicked woman." Through the triple breakthroughs of multi-perspective narration, bodily storytelling, and an open ending, the "female criminal" finally emerges from historical shadows. Shedding her symbolic shell, she becomes a flesh-and-blood human being—capable of love and pain—achieving the arduous return from a defined 'other' to a self-voicing "subject." The value of this narrative choice lies in refusing to reduce history to a black-and-white moral fable. When feudal ethics stripped women of their right to names, colonial economies plundered the value of their labor, judicial systems ignored their survival demands, and public discourse turned their suffering into sensationalist gossip, so-called "crime" might have been merely the final cry from the depths of despair. The female portraits formed by Zhan Zhouzhi, Xilin, and Wang Xumei in the movie reflect multiple possibilities of resistance. Some gather strength through endurance, some pass on faint glimmers of light through awakening, and some tear through darkness through struggle. Their stories clearly demonstrate that women's liberation is never an isolated breakthrough, but a fundamental questioning and structural reconstruction of the entire oppressive system.

When the fog finally lifts, that once-stigmatized "poisonous flower" ultimately reveals its oppressed essence. The narrative of She's Got No Name declares that perceptions of female criminals should never stop

at moral judgment. Instead, they must be placed within specific historical contexts, revealing the desperate circumstances of women whose names were stripped, bodies disciplined, and voices silenced. Much like the process of "identifying the flower in the mist," what matters is not defining the flower's virtue or vice, but understanding the storms that shaped its form. As the figure of Lady Zhan Zhou overlaps with the countless nameless women of history, the audience finally realizes: Peter Chan's lens does more than reconstruct a cold case. It forces us to see that behind every woman who has been insulted and harmed stands a history in desperate need of reconstruction, buried beneath a past that must be confronted. This subversion and reshaping of the female image ultimately reveals a profound truth: only by dispelling the shadows of prejudice can women truly break free from invisible shackles and blossom with the resilient, fiery light of life.

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From Guo Xi to Shi Tao: A Study on the Inheritance and Evolution of the "Four Seasons View" in Landscape Painting

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, the "Four Seasons" has been a common theme in traditional Chinese landscape painting. The changes of spring, summer, autumn, and winter embody people's different emotions. From material images to "the creation of artistic conception", and from reality to emptiness, painters use specific natural scenes to arouse viewers' different feelings towards the four seasons.The "Four Seasons View" has been discussed in many poems and treatises. Focusing on the classic painting theories of Guo Xi's *Notes on Landscape Painting from the Lofty Message of Forests and Streams* and Shi Tao's *Bitter Gourd Monk's Painting Manual·Four Seasons Chapter*, this study explores Shi Tao's inheritance and development of Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View". Finally, it reveals that the inheritance and evolution of this concept not only reflects the deepening of the traditional landscape painting's essence of expressing the "mind of forests and streams", but also mirrors the historical transformation of painting in the early Qing Dynasty from representing nature to expressing one's inner thoughts. Shi Tao's theory not only pushed landscape painting into a brand-new poetic realm, but also provided an important reference for understanding the aesthetic connotation of Chinese painting.

INTRODUCTION

The "Four Seasons", referring to spring, summer, autumn, and winter, is a way people use to describe time. Its interpretation has been quite clear in some ancient books and historical documents. The Book of Rites·Confucius at Leisure states, "Heaven has four seasons: spring, autumn, winter, and summer" [1], tracing the division of seasons back to the pre-Qin period. Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals·The Twelve Months divides a year into four seasons, each further split into three phases: the first, middle, and last months of the season. [2] Guanzi notes, "Orders should align with the seasons" [3], implying that the state should issue decrees based on the characteristics of the Four Seasons. Understanding the Four Seasons allows one to grasp the laws of grain growth—from this point on, people's understanding of the "Four Seasons" extended beyond its surface and reached a deeper level.

Dong Zhongshu elaborated on the close connections between the four seasons in Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals, transforming the "Four Seasons" from what was initially regarded as a fixed cognitive model into a carrier of painters' emotions. De-

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scriptions of works themed on the Four Seasons have long been recorded in historical documents. For example, Records of Paintings Seen and Heard mentions that Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, and Dong Yuan—the three great landscape painters of the Northern Song Dynasty—all created works titled Landscapes of the Four Seasons. Guo Xi's Early Spring has been passed down to posterity, and Liu Songnian's Scroll of Landscapes of the Four Seasons is even more classic.In Notes on Landscape Painting, Guo Xi wrote, "Spring mountains are gentle and smiling, summer mountains are lush and dewy, autumn mountains are clear and adorned, winter mountains are bleak and slumbering" [4]. Mountains in the four seasons exhibit different atmospheres, and these varying atmospheres create distinct artistic conceptions. Shi Tao began The Bitter Gourd Monk's Painting Manual·The Chapter on the Four Seasons by describing the scenery of the Four Seasons: "Four Seasons" refers to time, while "scenery" describes spatial objects. Thus, time and space have always been key focuses for painters. Starting from the classic painting theories of Guo Xi and Shi Tao, this study focuses on exploring Guo Xi's thoughts on the "Four Seasons View" in landscape painting, as well as Shi Tao's inheritance and development of this view.

THE DISCUSSIONS ON THE "FOUR SEASONS" IN NOTES ON LANDSCAPE PAINTING

In Notes on Landscape Painting, Guo Xi revealed the original purpose of painting landscapes based on intuitive perceptions, and on this foundation, he explored the expression of the four seasons in landscape painting. He used a question-and-answer format to clearly expound the core purpose of landscape painting from the very beginning:

Why do virtuous gentlemen love landscapes? What is the essence of this love? It lies in their aspiration for forests and streams, their desire to be companions of mists and clouds—this longing resides in their dreams, yet remains beyond the reach of their eyes and ears. Now, when a skilled painter vividly brings such scenes to life, one can sit within the hall and fully experience valleys and streams: the cries of apes and songs of birds seem to linger in the ears, and the light of mountains and colors of water glow brilliantly before the eyes. Is this not delightful, and does it not truly resonate with one's heart? This is the fundamental reason why landscape painting is valued in the world. [5]

In this passage, Guo Xi clearly explained that the reason virtuous gentlemen love landscapes lies in their "aspiration for forests and streams". In his view, yearning for natural landscapes is a universal human sentiment. For people trapped in the "chaos and constraints of mundane life," the chance to personally visit landscapes and behold mists, clouds, and celestial-like scenes is a rare spiritual longing—this is precisely what is meant by "aspiration for forests and streams." The original purpose of landscape painting is to convey the true appearance of natural landscapes. Thus, Guo Xi further noted later in the text:

For valleys and gorges in real landscapes, view them from a distance to capture their depth; examine them up close to perceive their shallowness. For rocks in real landscapes, gaze from afar to grasp their momentum; observe them closely to discern their texture. The clouds and mists in real landscapes differ with the four seasons: soft and warm in spring, dense and lush in summer, sparse and thin in autumn, and dim and dull in winter. If a painting captures their overall essence rather than rigidly detailing their form, the demeanor of the clouds and mists will come alive. The mists and hazes in real landscapes also vary with the four seasons: spring mountains are gentle and smiling, summer mountains are lush and dewy, autumn mountains are clear and adorned, winter mountains are bleak and slumbering. If a painting conveys their general idea rather than leaving traces of over-detail, the scene of mists and hazes will be true to life. The wind and rain in real landscapes can be appreciated from a distance, but when observed up close, one's limited perspective fails to comprehend the full momentum of a valley's paths and their starts and ends. The sunshine and shade in real landscapes can be fully seen from afar, but when viewed closely, one's narrow field of vision cannot capture the traces of a mountain's brightness, darkness, concealment, and revelation. [6]

In Guo Xi's opinion, conveying the true appearance of natural landscapes was impossible without observing and experiencing the four seasons. Drawing on his own experience, he first listed the following:

Human figures in mountains mark paths; pavilions and towers in mountains highlight scenic spots; forests and trees in mountains, with their screening and concealment, distinguish distance; valleys and streams in mountains, with their breaks and continuities, differentiate depth. Ferries, rafts, bridges, and planks in water fulfill human needs; fishing boats and fishing rods in water satisfy human aspirations.[7]

For valleys in real landscapes, the focus of observation should differ between distant viewing and close examination; clouds, mists, and hazes in real landscapes each have unique features across spring, summer, autumn, and winter; wind, rain, sunshine, and shade in real landscapes can only be fully appreciated and grasped from a distance; human figures, pavilions, forests, valleys, ferries, bridges, fishing boats, and fishing rods in real landscapes all have their own characteristics. For landscape painters, it is necessary to grasp the overall traits of seasonal landscapes while attending to details—combining the temporal principle of "viewing mountains step by step as one walks" and the spatial principle of "observing mountains from all angles" [8] to transcend the limitations of "time" and "space".In Guo

Xi's eyes, the authenticity of scenery did not lie in a "single moment," but rather was rooted in the endless changes of all things in heaven and earth. Through the painter's inner reflection, an "artistic conception" that originates from reality yet transcends it is created. The refinement of landscape painting depends on the painter's grasp of the temporal and spatial relationships of scenery. Specifically, the "authenticity" of landscape painting should manifest as "distinct scenes in the four seasons." The changes of the four seasons are not only the alternation of natural seasons, but also the reflection of the painter's inner perspective. As the famous Tang Dynasty poet and painter Wang Wei stated:"When painting landscapes, one must follow the four seasons—sometimes depicting mists enshrouding peaks, sometimes clouds returning to Chu's hills, sometimes clear dawns in autumn, sometimes spring scenery of Dongting Lake.....…" Liu Xie, a renowned literary critic of the Southern Liang Dynasty, noted in The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons: "Spring and autumn alternate; yin and yang bring gloom and cheer. As the appearance of things moves, the heart also stirs." [9] Therefore, only when "scenery" and "heart" complement each other can the true connotation of landscape painting be formed.Notes on Landscape Painting mentions the changes in mountain and river scenes across the four seasons—comparing them to smiling, sleeping, dewy, and adorned. Though the entire passage contains no first-person pronoun "I" ,it is infused with the painter's personal perspective. This is precisely the subtlety and brilliance of Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View."

THE INHERITANCE OF GUO XI'S "FOUR SEASONS VIEW" IN THE CHAPTER ON THE FOUR SEASONS

Shi Tao was praised by the world as a "master of three excellences in troubled times"—excellences in "painting", "calligraphy", and "poetry". Moreover, Painting Manual, which he wrote in his later years, is a profound and influential masterpiece of aesthetic theory. The Chapter on the Four Seasons opens with the following discussion:

When depicting scenes of the four seasons, their flavors differ, and their sunshine and shade vary—one must examine the season and gauge the climate to paint them. Ancient people expressed scenes through poetry: for spring, they wrote, "Often sprouting with sand grasses, always stretching to connect with water and clouds"; for summer, "Beneath trees, the ground is always shaded; by the water, the wind is coolest"; for autumn, "Gazing from a cold city, the flat woodlands are lush green"; for winter, "The road is distant, but the brush reaches it first; the pond is cold, yet the ink grows rounder." There are also poems about winter not conforming to its typical character, such as "Snow is scarce, the sky lacks cold; the year nears its end, days grow longer." Even when winter seems to have no cold, there are poems like "In the remaining days of the year, dawn comes easily; snow mixes with rain, then the sky clears." Using these two poems to discuss painting: "lacking cold", "growing longer", "coming easily", and "mixing with snow"—these are not only to be depicted for winter, but can also be extended to the other three seasons, each following its own climate. [10]

This passage explains that when painting landscape scenes, one must convey the distinctive features of the four seasons on the canvas. Different seasons bring different climates and different flavors of natural phenomena—this implies that the relationship between landscape painting and seasonal phenomena is a crucial theme no landscape painter can avoid. Zhan Ziqian of the Sui Dynasty excelled at depicting the pleasant beauty of spring; Fan Kuanof the Northern Song Dynasty was skilled at painting winter snow and ice; Li Cheng specialized in distant cold forests; Zhao Mengfu was adept at portraying the autumn scenery of Que and Hua Mountains; Mi Youren was famous for painting the misty rain of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers... All these masters paid attention to the seasons, using natural landscapes as material and Chinese philosophy and aesthetics as the foundation, and conveyed their true feelings and emotions towards nature through brush and ink.This idea is also discussed in Guo Xi's Notes on Landscape Painting from the Lofty Message of Forests and Streams.Guo Xi wrote: "Mountains in spring are like celebration, in summer like competition, in autumn like illness, in winter like calm" [11], and "Spring mountains, with continuous mists and clouds, make people joyful; summer mountains, with lush trees and dense shade, make people serene; autumn mountains, clear and with falling leaves, make people solemn; winter mountains, dim and blocked by haze, make people lonely" [12]. These share the same core emotion as Shi Tao's statement that "when depicting scenes of the four seasons, their flavors differ, and their sunshine and shade vary" [13]—both believed that seasons are crucial for the expression of Chinese painting. Landscape painting is a combination of the scenes of the objective world and the emotional imagery of the subjective world; changes in seasonal phenomena and seasons themselves must be fully reflected in landscape painting.Shi Tao inherited this theory from Guo Xi and clearly stated that creators must "examine the season and gauge the climate." On this basis, he further required that painters should not only be satisfied with the general laws of the four seasons, but also reflect the four stages of natural life's development in their paintings. They should use natural scenes with seasonal characteristics as objects to express the features of the four seasons and their inner emotions; through observation, they should form certain formal principles and thus transform these scenes into their own artistic language.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GUO XI'S "FOUR SEASONS VIEW" IN THE CHAPTER ON THE FOUR SEASONS

When Shi Tao discussed the "Four Seasons," he was also expounding on the fusion of sentiment and scene and the integration of poetic spirit and painterly intent. Taking poetry as an example, he explained painterly conception through poetic conception—this idea is evident in the subsequent text of The Chapter on the Four Seasons:

There are also scenes that are half sunny and half cloudy, such as the line [from poetry]: "A wisp of cloud dims the bright moon; the slanting sun shines beside the rain." There are also scenes that seem both sunny and cloudy, like:"No need to worry about the sun setting; light clouds hang on the horizon." I draw on poetic intent to shape painterly intent—there is no scene that does not change with time. The mountains and clouds that fill the eyes change with the seasons. Pondering this, one realizes: Is not painterly conception the intent within poetry, and poetry the profound wisdom hidden in painting? [14]

In this passage, Shi Tao drew on the intent of ancient poetry to define painterly intent, arguing that no scene remains unchanged by time—mountains and clouds visible everywhere alter with the seasons. He concluded with a question: Painterly conception is the intent in poetry, so is not poetry the "chan wisdom" concealed in painting?The first half of The Chapter on the Four Seasons reveals that landscape painting must depict seasonal phenomena, inheriting Guo Xi's view that "scenes differ with the four seasons." The second half elaborates on the relationship between poetry and painting—specifically, the visual representation of poetic conception—thus developing Guo Xi's theory and forming Shi Tao's own "Four Seasons View." Shi Tao believed that the expression of the four seasons must touch upon the conception of poetry and painting, as the two are interconnected: both poetry and painting possess imagery—poetry is a visual experience in the imagination, while painting is a tangible work that directly appeals to the eye; they complement each other as outer form and inner essence. For instance, Guo Xi wrote in Lofty Message of Forests and Streams·Painterly Intent: "Poetry is formless painting; painting is tangible poetry" [15]. Su Shi commented on Wang Wei: "There is painting in his poetry, and poetry in his painting" [16]. However, poetry and painting differ in their modes of expression: poetry uses words as its language, while painting uses brush and ink; their ways of thinking also differ—poetry is flowing thought, while painting is frozen imagery. Nevertheless, thought contains imagery, and imagery embodies thought. Only when they merge and interpenetrate can they be mutually utilized and enhanced, leading to three scenarios: "using poetry as the basis for painting," "using painting as the basis for poetry," and "the unity of poetry and painting."

Representative works of "using poetry as the basis for painting" include: Gu Kaizhi's Nymph of the Luo River, based on the poet Cao Zhi's The Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River; Qi Baishi's freehand brushwork painting created at Lao She's request, inspired by the Qing Dynasty poetic line "Frog calls echo ten li from the mountain spring"; and the horizontal scroll Such a Splendid Rivers and Mountains by Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue, based on the meaning of Mao Zedong's poem Qinyuanchun—Snow.

"Using painting as the basis for poetry" refers to composing poetry after completing a painting, either inscribing it on the painting or not. Literary figures such as Du Fu and Su Shi engaged in this type of creation. Shi Tao was not only a literati painter but also a poet—he inherently advocated the unity of poetry and painting. Shi Tao's Poetry Anthology, compiled by Mr.Wang Shiqing, collects 465 poems by Shi Tao, many of which were inscribed on his paintings. These poems and paintings blended seamlessly, complementing each other and reaching a high level of artistic achievement. The organic integration of poetry and painting greatly promoted the expansion and enrichment of Chinese painting in terms of subject matter, expressive techniques, and aesthetic scope—this was also a triumph of literati painting. Shi Tao concluded this chapter with the line "Painterly conception is the intent within poetry; poetry is the wisdom hidden in painting," expressing his stance and view: Scenes change with time, and the four seasons' transformations in landscape painting must touch poetic intent to reveal the profound "chan wisdom."

CONCLUSION

In the developmental history of the "Four Seasons View" in landscape painting, Shi Tao's inheritance of Guo Xi's theory is reflected in his recognition of the importance of depicting seasons in landscape painting. Guo Xi put forward the theory that "scenes differ with the four seasons" in Lofty Message of Forests and Streams, regarding the expression of seasons as the essence of landscape painting creation and revealing the profound connection between natural laws and artistic expression.Although Shi Tao did not directly quote Guo Xi's discussions in The Bitter Gourd Monk's Painting Manual, he continued and strengthened this concept through The Chapter on the Four Seasons. He argued that in nature, "scenes differ with the four seasons," "scenes differ between morning and evening," and the "brightness and darkness" of clouds, clear skies, mists, and rosy clouds also vary. Only by thoroughly comprehending the subtle changes inherent in mountains and rivers can one gain clarity of mind and create superior works of art.Shi Tao's development of

Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View" mainly focused on integrating seasonal changes with the unity of poetry and painting. He stated: "If the painting within poetry originates from one's temperament, then painting does not require imitating Zhang or Li before composing poetry. If the poetry within painting emerges from the scene's charm and the moment, then poetry does not require mechanical copying before creating painting. True principles interact like a mirror reflecting a shadow—no deliberate effort is needed. Today's people inevitably treat poetry and painting without due respect."He elevated the expression of the four seasons to the realm of poetic expression, arguing that the four seasons, poetry, and painting should mutually permeate and reflect each other. They all belong to a broad temporal-spatial system and are the results of "learning from nature externally and drawing from one's inner resources internally" [17]. This development not only enriched the expressive connotation of landscape painting but also elevated the "Four Seasons View" from the technical level to an aesthetic height.To summarize, Shi Tao's inheritance and development of Guo Xi's "Four Seasons View" not only deepened the traditional concept that landscape painting should express the "mind of forests and streams" but also reflected the historical transformation of painting in the early Qing Dynasty—from representing nature to using nature to express one's inner temperament. It provided an important reference for later painters to understand the aesthetic connotation of Chinese landscape painting.

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A Study on the Schematic Features of Giuseppe Castiglione's "Grand Review of the Qianlong Emperor"

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KEYWORDS

Giuseppe Castiglione; Emperor Qianlong's Grand Review Painting; Imperial Equestrian Portrait; Schematic Features

ABSTRACT

The Grand Review of the Emperor Qianlong, painted by the Qing dynasty court artist Giuseppe Castiglione, is a quintessential equestrian portrait of an emperor, adhering to the Western traditional iconography of imperial horsemen. Research confirms that Lang Shining created two highly similar versions of The Grand Review of the Emperor Qianlong in the fourth year of Qianlong's reign (1739) and the twenty-third year (1758). Analysis reveals that both works adhere to fixed conventions derived from Western classical traditions in aspects such as the emperor's posture and the depiction of warhorses. Comparisons between Lang Shining's Grand Review of the Emperor Qianlong and works such as the ancient Roman Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius, Leonardo da Vinci's related sketches, and Van Dyck's "Portrait of Charles I on Horseback" confirm the transmission lineage and core elements of this Schema in Europe—from the Classical period through the Renaissance to Lang Shining's era. Langgeng, drawing upon his Western artistic background, successfully introduced this archetypal Western imperial equestrian portraiture into 18th-century Chinese court painting, reflecting the profound depth of Sino-Western artistic exchange.

BACKGROUND OF THE "GRAND REVIEW OF THE QIANLONG EMPEROR" PAINTING

Lang Shining, originally named Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), was an Italian painter from Milan. He received a solid education in Western painting techniques early in his career and primarily focused on religious subjects during his formative years. In May of the 53rd year of the Kangxi reign (1714), Lang Shining was dispatched by the Church to China as a missionary. In the 59th year of Kangxi (1720), he was summoned to the capital and received by Emperor Kangxi.[1(p1-p16)] From this point onward, he served as a court painter in the Qing imperial court until his death. Regarding the authorship of *The Grand Review of the Qianlong Emperor* (hereafter referred to as *The Grand Review*) (**Figure 1**), the late Mr. Zhu Jiashui maintained that it was painted by Lang Shining.[2] The author shares this view. Regarding the painting's creation date, *the Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty* records Emperor Qianlong's first grand military review ceremony as having taken place on the third day of the eleventh month of the fourth year of his reign (1739) at Nanyuan. The records state: "The Emperor arrived at Nanyuan, ascended the Imperial Falconry Platform, and entered the circular pavilion. He personally donned armor, fastened his sword, emerged, took up his quiver and bow,

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Figure 1 | Lang Shining, The Grand Review of the Qianlong Emperor
1739, Hanging Scroll, Colored Ink on Silk, 322.5 x 232 cm, Collection of the Palace Museum

mounted his horse, and tested his marksmanship. He fired five arrows in succession, all hitting the target."[3] Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that The Grand Review was painted by Lang Shining in the fourth year of Qianlong (1739). This painting realistically depicts the imposing figure of the twenty-nine-year-old Qianlong Emperor reviewing the Eight Banners troops at Nanyuan. Compositionally, Emperor Qianlong and his horse occupy the central position, dominating nearly three-fifths of the entire canvas and thus becoming the primary subjects of analysis. In the painting, Hongli wears bright yellow armor adorned with golden dragons, his imperial status evident through the lacquered helmet he wears. A red quiver hangs at his right waist, holding over ten arrows. Holding the reins in his left hand and a whip in his right, Qianlong sits upright on his horse with a straight back and a heroic bearing. Beneath him, the steed possesses a well-proportioned, spirited build, its form falling between the robust Tang-style and more slender Song-style depictions of horses. The horse bears a richly ornamented saddle. Its coat is a blend of white and brown, with the back, tail, and lower sections of all four hooves appearing snow-white, while the tip of the tail is a deep brown. The steed's left hind leg is thrust forward, its right hind leg taut, its right front leg braced upright, and its left front leg poised to leap. The artist clearly depicts the horse in motion. Both Qianlong's upper body and the horse's face are rendered in a three-quarter right profile. On the third day of the third month in the eighth year of Qianlong's reign (1743), the Archives of *the Imperial Household Department* recorded: “Treasurer Lang Zhengpei received an imperial edict: Lang Shining is to paint ten large paintings of the Ten Steeds. No scenery is required. Submit the draft for review. So ordered.”[4] This refers to Lang Shining's imperial commission for the Ten Horses Paintings. Through comparison with Lang Shining's *Ten Hors*es, the horse depicted in *the Grand Review Painting* should be the “Red Flower Eagle,” one of the Ten Horses (**Figure 2**).

A COMPARISON OF TWO QING EMPEROR QIANLONG “GRAND REVIEW” PAINTINGS

The Palace Museum currently holds two versions of *Emperor Qianlong's Grand Review Painting*. The first, created in the fourth year of Qianlong's reign (1739), is *the Grand Review Painting* previously discussed by the author (hereafter referred to as the *“Unannotated Version of the Grand Review Painting”*). The second Grand Review Painting (hereafter referred to as the *“Inscription Version”*) (**Figure 3**) can be definitively dated to the

Figure 2 l Giuseppe Castiglione's Ten Horses
Red-flowered Eagle National Palace Museum, Taipei

Figure 3 l Lang Shining, *Emperor Qianlong's Grand Review*
1758, Hanging Scroll, 430 x 288 cm, Collection of the Palace Museum

23rd year of Qianlong's reign (1758). This is because the upper left corner of the latter painting bears an imperial poem by Emperor Qianlong, followed by the inscription "Imperial Brushwork, Mid-Winter of the Year of the Tiger" (Wuyin), corresponding to the 23rd year of Qianlong (1758). Professor Zhu Jiashui concurs with this dating based on references in *The Third Collection of Poems Imperially Composed by the Qing Emperor Gaozong*.[5(p. 40)] Regarding the artist of the *"Inscription Version," the Archives of the Imperial Household Department of the Qing Palace* records for the ninth month of Qianlong 23 state: "Eunuch Hu Shijie conveyed the imperial decree: On the rear gold-lacquered wall of the Painting Pavilion, Lang Shining is to paint a large version of the *Grand Review* on white silk. So ordered."[6] However, the version with inscriptions depicts the scene of the military review held on the fifth day of the eleventh month of the twenty-third year of Qianlong's reign, when Hongli used the recent submission of the Kazakhs to the Qing court as an occasion for the ceremony. In terms of timing, Lang Shining's imperial commission to create the "version with inscriptions" predated the actual review by approximately two months. Li Shi, referencing records in *the Veritable Records of the Qing*, posits that the emperor had already ordered ministries to prepare for this grand review in the ninth month of that year, issuing an edict demanding: "All preparatory matters must be urgently addressed."[3] Based on this, it is inferred that the "version with inscriptions" of *the Grand Review Painting* was likely painted in advance by Lang Shining.

In the illustrated version of *The Grand Review*, the proportions and positioning of Emperor Qianlong and his steed within the painting are largely consistent with those in the non-illustrated version. Judging by his facial features, the 48-year-old Hongli appeared more composed than he did nineteen years prior, yet his heroic bearing remained undiminished. The artist rendered the emperor's likeness in a realistic style. Regarding the emperor's armor, Zhang Qiong contends that both versions depict him wearing bright yellow armor adorned with golden dragons. However, the following differences exist between the two paintings: First, the armor in the Qianlong 23rd year painting features a breastplate, absent in the Qianlong 4th year version. Second, the helmet in the Qianlong 23rd year painting is depicted as "made of leather," while the Qianlong 4th year helmet appears metallic in the portrait, with slight variations in the arrangement of Sanskrit inscriptions and ornaments. Third, the 'quiver' worn by the Emperor in the Qianlong 23rd year portrait was made of silver-threaded satin, while the 'quiver' in the Qianlong 4th year portrait was of plain red leather. Furthermore, the pointed-toe boots worn by the Emperor also differed."[7] In the illustration, Emperor Qianlong still holds the reins in his left hand, while his right hand remains hidden behind the horse and is thus unseen. Comparing this with the "unlabeled version" of t*he Grand Review Painting*, it

Figure 4 l Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius
Height: 2.4 meters, Collection of the Capitoline MuseumsThe image of the foal

Figure 5 l Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata
Height: 3 meters, Located in front of the main entrance of the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua

is highly probable that the object held in Qianlong's right hand in this image is still a riding crop. The Qianlong Emperor has a bow slung over his left hip and a quiver attached to his right hip containing over ten arrows with ornate feathers. His steed is pure white, with its right hind leg stepping forward, left hind leg tensed, right front leg supporting vertically, and left front leg suspended in the air. Both the figure's upper body and the horse's face are depicted in a three-quarter left profile. Comparative analysis reveals numerous commonalities between the two *Grand Review Paintings*—from the figures' postures, armor, and held objects to the horses' head and limb positions. The similarity in armor primarily stems from the constraints of Qing imperial ceremonial dress protocols. The many other shared characteristics further confirm that both *Grand Review Paintings* were created by the same artist: Lang Shining.

In the two *Grand Review paintings* created by Lang Shining, the numerous similarities in the forms of the horses and the emperor likely stem from the artist's early experience with Western painting. During his early studies of Western art, he encountered and emulated the Western paradigm for depicting emperors on horseback, resulting in the consistent appearance seen in his subsequent two *Grand Review paintings*. This equestrian portrait style traces back to ancient Greek and Roman depictions of Western monarchs on horseback. This raises the following questions: What similarities and differences exist between Lang Shining's *Grand Review paintings* and ancient Greco-Roman equestrian portraits? Were there contemporary painters of his era who also depicted emperors on horseback? What connections and distinctions exist between them?

COMPARISON BETWEEN THE "GRAND REVIEW OF THE QIANLONG EMPEROR" AND WESTERN EQUESTRIAN PORTRAITS OF MONARCHS

The earliest extant Western equestrian statues of monarchs date back to the Roman Empire, with the most representative example being *the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* (**Figure 4**) created in the latter half of the 2nd century AD .[8(p103)] This Stoic philosopher sits firmly atop his sturdy steed, his right hand extended forward as if summoning something or issuing a command. The raised right hand clearly follows the formal conventions of ancient Roman imperial portraiture, a convention confirmed in the earlier sculpture of

Figure 6 l Leonardo da Vinci,
The Adoration of the Magi (detail)
The image of the foal

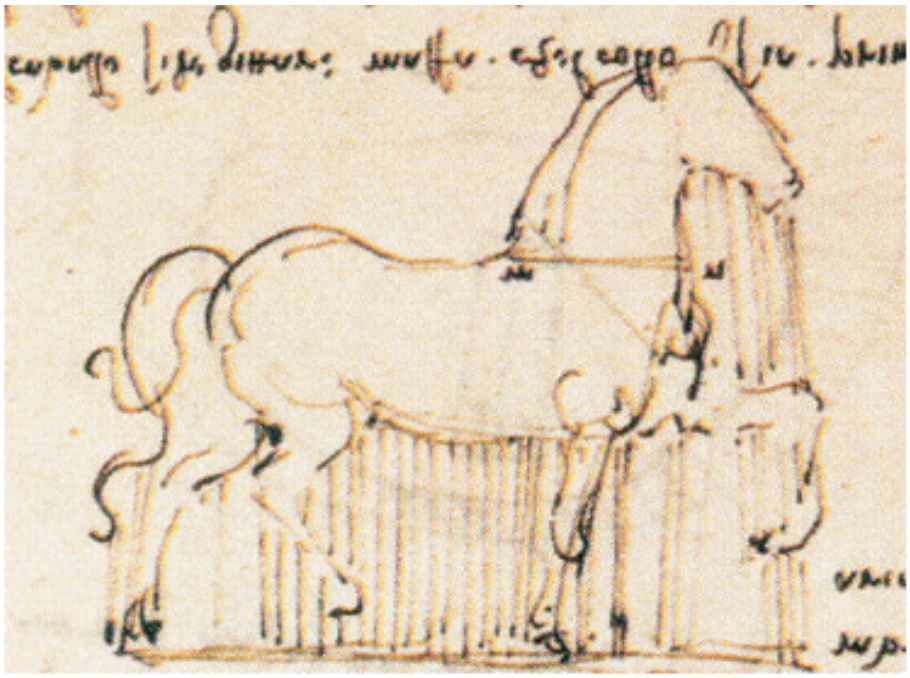

Figure 7 l Leonardo da Vinci,
Detail from Sketch for the Casting of the Equestrian Statue of Sforza Manuscript II,
Royal Library of Madrid, 1490 The image of the foal

Augustus. Aurelius's left hand grasps the reins, though the horse's bridle is no longer visible today. The horse's left hind leg is stepped forward, while its right hind leg is tensed. Unlike the *Great Review*, the front legs are positioned with the right hoof suspended in midair and the left front hoof bearing weight. Both the figure's upper body and the horse's face are turned to the right. This equestrian statue clearly shares numerous similarities with the imagery in the "Great Review," particularly in the depiction of the steed. *The Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* is one of the few fully preserved bronze equestrian sculptures from ancient Rome. "Pagans" mistakenly identified the sculpture's subject as a depiction of the Roman Emperor Constantine. This work stood before the Porta del Leto in Rome until 1536, when it was relocated to the Capitoline Hill within Rome's city limits .[8(p103)] For Renaissance artists eager to revive classical art, it was only natural that this sculpture became a model for equestrian statues. Donatello's *Gattamelata* (**Figure 5**) may serve as an example.

In *the Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata*, Gattamelata wears military attire with a sword at his side, holding the reins in his left hand and a horse-control device in his right. The horse's left hind leg is stepped forward, its right hind leg braced taut, its right front leg supporting its weight, and its left front leg suspended in midair. The rear hooves' posture largely mirrors that of the horse in *the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius*, while the front hooves adopt an opposite stance—though consistent with the front hooves in the Grand Review. The horse's head is turned three-quarters to the left, while the figure gazes straight ahead. *The Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata* stands as Italy's first bronze equestrian sculpture. This work revived the classical Greco-Roman model for imperial equestrian portraits and established a paradigm for subsequent artists depicting rulers on horseback.

The depiction of horses in Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci's work *The Adoration of the Magi* (**Figure 6**) and his analysis of a *Sforza Equestrian Portrait* (manuscript) (**Figure 7**) helps clarify why Western imperial equestrian statues consistently adopt the three-hoof-standing, one-hoof-forward stance. It also reveals the continued inheritance of this motif from ancient Greek and Roman imperial equestrian imagery. The horse in *The Adoration of the Magi* (detail) has both its left front and right rear hooves raised. This depiction of a horse in motion, with two hooves elevated, conveys an air of leisurely striding because the horse bears no load. This explains why historical depictions of emperors on horseback in motion typically show three hooves on the ground. Examining *the Sforza Equestrian Statue* (manuscript), the horse's four-hoofed stance aligns with that in The Grand Review. To prepare for the Sforza statue, Leonardo specifically studied the Roman equestrian statue Regisole (destroyed in 1796) during his 1490 mission to Pavia. This statue depicted a horse in a walking posture on the road .[9] Leonardo also documented this experience in his notebooks and commented on the *Regisole*: "Just as with the statue in Pavia, movement is more valuable than anything else. Imitating ancient works is more valuable than imitating mod-

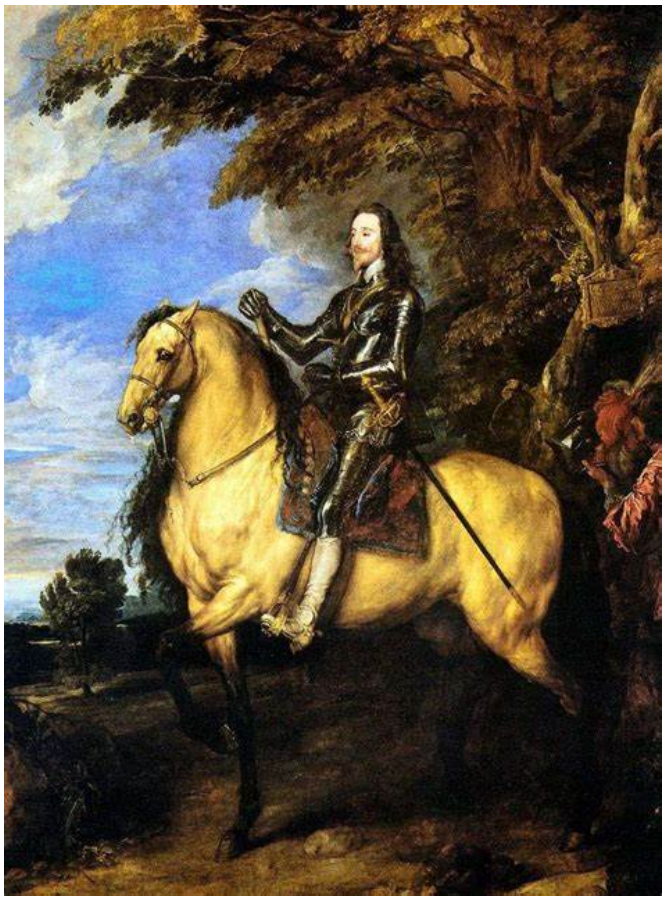

Figure 9 | Jean-Baptiste Tiepolo, The Conquest of the Moors by Saint James the Greater
317 x 163 cm, Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

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Figure 8 | Anthony van Dyck, Equestrian Portrait of Charles I
367 x 262.1 cm, Collection of the Louvre Museum, Paris, France

ern ones... (This horse's) trot approaches the posture of a free horse. Where natural vitality is lacking, artificial means must be employed to compensate."[10(p203-p204)]

The equestrian portrait of a monarch closest in style to those of Lang Shining's era is *the Portrait of Charles I on Horseback* (**Figure 8**), completed around 1638. In this painting, Charles I also holds the reins in his left hand. The front legs of the horse are positioned identically to those in *the Grand Review*, while the hind legs are reversed. Both the figure and the horse are slightly turned. The composition of the work is also remarkably similar to that of *the Grand Review*. According to Anthony van Dyck's biography, the artist spent six years studying in Italy (1621-1627), residing and painting in cities including Genoa, Rome, Venice, and Milan .[11(p466-p475)] During his time in Italy, the artist likely encountered the classical model of equestrian portraits from ancient Greece and Rome, subsequently incorporating this tradition into his later works.

The 18th-century Venetian painter Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1682–1754) created a historical painting titled *The Conquest of the Moors by Saint James the Greater* (**Figure 9**). Completed around 1750, the work depicts the Battle of Clavijo, portraying Saint James the Just vanquishing the Moors. In the scene, Saint James, clad in a flowing white robe, charges valiantly across the battlefield atop a snow-white steed. His left arm embraces the tricolor flag, while his right hand wields a

sword that has just struck down a Moorish soldier. The halo above his head and the angel in the upper right corner signify divine support for the battle, hinting at the underlying religious conflict. In this work, the central figures of the protagonist and his horse remain positioned near the lower center of the composition, occupying a significant portion of the space—a consistent approach seen in both versions of *The Grand Review* and *The Equestrian Portrait of Charles I*. However, due to the vertical format of this painting, the sky occupies a larger proportion of the upper portion of the canvas. Unlike previous equestrian portraits of monarchs, which typically employed a side view, the artist here adopts a frontal perspective. The horse's left front hoof is poised to strike, while its right front hoof provides vertical support. The left hind hoof steps forward, and the right hind hoof is obscured by the body of a soldier about to fall. However, considering the horse's movement characteristics and the depiction of hooves in the aforementioned works, it can be reasonably inferred that the horse's right hind hoof is likely positioned backward and tense. The horse's head is turned three-quarters to the right, while the figure's upper body leans slightly leftward, his face tilted upward and to the right. Compared to the *"Unwritten Version" of the Grand Review Painting*, the only differences between the two works lie in the opposite positioning of the horse's front hooves and the differing orientation of the figure's body. All other morphological characteristics remain fundamentally consistent.

Comparative analysis reveals that from ancient Greece and Rome through to the era of Giuseppe Castiglione, a standardized iconographic formula for depicting imperial equestrian portraits existed and circulated in the West. This formula generally comprised the following elements: 1. The figure's upper body remains upright, with the left hand holding the reins and the right hand either grasping a weapon, holding a horse-control device, or raised. 2. Among the horse's front hooves, one serves as the supporting hoof while the other is suspended in mid-air; among the rear hooves, one is tensed while the other is positioned forward. 3. The figure is turned either to the left or right. 4. The horse either gazes straight ahead or turns its head to one side. These characteristics provided a reference for depicting imperial equestrian statues in a slow-moving state. This formula possessed considerable flexibility, allowing artists to introduce subjective interpretations that resulted in various variations within their works. The formula can be traced back to *the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* from the Roman Empire period. Following the Renaissance, Italian sculptors were the first to emulate this model, which subsequently spread to painting. Centered in Italy, this model radiated to contemporary regions including the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Spain. For instance, the equestrian portrait of *Philip II* and *the Equestrian Portrait of King Francis I of France* both exhibit the quintessential characteristics of this pictorial scheme. However, this style is by no means the only form, as many extant Western equestrian portraits depict horses with their front legs raised high. Representative examples include *The Equestrian Portrait of Charles V*, *The Equestrian Portrait of Philip III*, and *Napoleon Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass in the Alps*.

CONCLUSION

As a foreign painter who journeyed to China, Lang Shining devoted nearly his entire life to the Qing court. Simultaneously, he introduced Western religion, culture, and artistic techniques to China during the first half of the 18th century, enabling the Chinese upper classes of that era to gain a deeper understanding of the West. Artistic techniques and subjects commonplace in Western art circles at the time undoubtedly gained expanded significance in China through the eastward transmission of Western learning by Lang Shining and other Western painters. Just as the Western imperial equestrian portrait format was merely a common template for depicting monarchs among Western artists, this format inevitably exerted a powerful influence on contemporary Chinese court painters. Lang Shining's contribution lay in introducing this equestrian portrait style to early 18th-century China, likely shaping imperial equestrian portraiture not only during his own era but also throughout the subsequent Qing dynasty.

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