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The Influence of the Color and Composition in Chinese Painting on the Animation "Cowboy's Flute"

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Abstract

This journal article examines the animation "Cowboy's Flute" produced in 1963 at the animation studio in Shanghai, focusing on its use of coloring and composition influenced by traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting. By analyzing specific elements within the animation, such as the overall composition, depiction of nature, and the portrayal of a shepherd boy riding a buffalo, this article explores how the film embodies authentic Chinese aesthetics. Drawing upon the symbolism and cultural significance associated with these artistic elements, this article sheds light on the theme and artistic choices made in "Cowboy's Flute." The findings reveal the strong influence of traditional Chinese painting on the animation and its contribution to the portrayal of Chinese cultural values and aesthetics.

Keywords: Animation, Chinese Watercolor and Ink Painting, Coloring, Composition, Cultural Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

The animation "Cowboy's Flute" produced in 1963 at the animation studio in Shanghai showcases a unique use of coloring and composition that resonates with traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting. This article aims to delve into the specific elements within the animation that reflect traditional Chinese aesthetics and examine the thematic relevance of the film in relation to authentic Chinese culture.

THE USE OF COLOR AND COMPOSITION IN "COWBOY'S FLUTE"

Emphasizing Color Extract of Each Element

The animation "Cowboy's Flute" is designed with a deliberate focus on the color extraction and emphasis of each element. By examining the color palette and treatment of various scenes, we can observe the influence of traditional Chinese painting techniques.

The use of colour in Chinese visual art is not lavish and excessive, but there is a kind of restraint in the use of colour that makes it a factor that creates creativity. The traditional Chinese colour palette is mostly limited to black, white, red, blue, green and brown, which is further reduced in landscape painting (Wu 2008). Wu claims that "only these natural colours were used in Chinese painting, suggesting that the Chinese attached importance to nature and their surroundings" (ibid). Despite this assumption that the painterly quality related to emotion rather than the rational was more common in the East than in the West, Arnold (Arnold, 1913) believed that in traditional Chinese painting colour was always a subordinate element and rather absent altogether. "To the extent that landscapes conveyed tranquillity or poetic melancholy and refinement, the tendency to use less colour or even only water and ink prevailed." (Barnhart 1997, p. 3). Two famous works of the golden era of Chinese animation are "Where is Mama" and its stylistic successor "The Cowboy's Flute". In these works, the essential aesthetic approaches of Chinese ink painting, its serene and pastel appearance, and bright splashes of colour, are clearly visible.

One aspect that stands out in "Cowboy's Flute" is the carefully selected color palette. Traditional Chinese paintings often employ a limited but harmonious range of colors, and this influence can be seen in the

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animation. Colour, of course, supports the whole idea being presented and completely controls the mood, leading the audience from one feeling to the next as surely as the music track (Thomas & Johnston, 1981).

In the classical Donghua⁴ we cannot see a generous use of the entire colour palette, instead we are confronted with an almost monochrome approach, but some projected colours can be found here and there in different episodes to accentuate the sense and feeling of that specific episode. This is quite in line with traditional Chinese aesthetic conventions, through which certain colours are personified in their own context, rather than just used decoratively.

Moreover, the treatment of color in different scenes further enhances the thematic elements of the story. For instance, in scenes depicting nature and landscapes, softer and more natural tones are used. This creates a sense of tranquility and harmony, aligning with the traditional Chinese concept of capturing the essence of nature in art. On the other hand, scenes portraying action or tension are characterized by the use of bold and contrasting colors. This creates a dynamic and energetic atmosphere, heightening the emotions conveyed in those scenes.(Figure 1)



Figure 1: Example of color extraction and emphasis in "Cowboy's Flute."

In "Cowboy's Flute," the animation utilizes color extraction and emphasis to create a visual impact and draw inspiration from traditional Chinese painting techniques.

Scene1: The protagonist playing the flute on a serene mountain top

Description: The protagonist sits on a peaceful stone, bathed in the serene ambiance of the surrounding environment. The backdrop is a picturesque blend of soft blue and green tones, reminiscent of a calm and tranquil oasis. Amidst this serene landscape, the flute-playing cowboy takes center stage. Clothed in pure white, he seamlessly blends into the tranquil surroundings, as if he is an integral part of the mountain itself. The pristine white attire symbolizes the cowboy's purity of heart and his deep connection with the natural world. It reflects his love and yearning for music and nature, as well as his quest for inner peace and harmony. The combination of the soothing blue and green tones of the background, along with the cowboy's pure white attire, creates a visually captivating and harmonious tableau.

The color choice of the protagonist's clothes not only blends in with the environment but also highlights his affinity for music and nature. His attire becomes a visual representation of his passion and his desire to become one with his surroundings. The purity of his white clothing stands in stark contrast to the vibrant hues of the

⁴ A common term used to refer to Chinese animation.

natural world, symbolizing his devotion and unwavering connection to the beauty of his surroundings.

In this scene (Figure 2), the colors of the background and the cowboy's attire harmoniously work together to create a visual representation of peace, tranquility, and a profound love for music and nature. The soft blue and green tones of the backdrop symbolize the serene atmosphere of the mountain, while the cowboy's pure white clothing signifies his deep reverence for the natural world. Together, these colors enhance the overall aesthetic and emphasize the protagonist's profound connection with music and nature.



Figure 2: Example of color extraction and emphasis in "Cowboy's Flute."

The composition of the animation also plays a crucial role in its visual appeal. Traditional Chinese paintings often emphasize balance and harmony, and these principles are evident in "Cowboy's Flute." The scenes are composed with careful attention to the placement and arrangement of elements, creating a sense of equilibrium. This balanced composition contributes to the overall visual cohesion of the animation and enhances its artistic quality.

Overall, the use of color and composition in "Cowboy's Flute" showcases the influence of traditional Chinese painting techniques. The deliberate focus on color extraction and emphasis of each element, along with the careful selection of a harmonious color palette, creates a visually captivating experience. Additionally, the composition of the scenes reflects the principles of balance and harmony, further enhancing the artistic quality of the animation.

Overall Composition Influenced by Traditional Chinese Watercolor and Ink Painting

Traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting is characterized by its emphasis on capturing the essence of a subject through minimalistic yet expressive brushwork. It often utilizes empty spaces and a balanced arrangement of elements to create a harmonious visual experience. The composition of "Cowboy's Flute" demonstrates a strong influence from traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting. Through the arrangement of elements, the animation creates a visual experience reminiscent of a Chinese watercolor and ink painting.

Zettl shows the detailed differences between the general approach to balance in Western and Chinese painting (Zettl Fine Arts, 2020). He shows how in Chinese painting, unlike Western painting, the concept of balance is dynamic and how we can place different weights on the two ends of the scale and balance is only established by shifting the suspension (Ibid). He shows this difference in the following illustration (Figure 3), where the left part shows the concept of balance in Western painting and the image on the right shows that of Chinese painting.

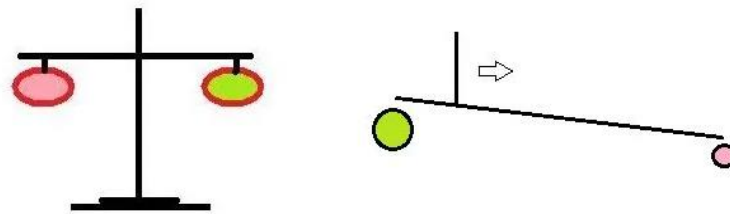


Figure 3: The difference between 'balance' in western and Chinese paintings

Using an example of a modern Chinese painting by Li Keran, inspired by traditional convention (Figure 4) and reminiscent of *Cowboy's Flue*, Zettl shows how the light boy pulls a heavy water buffalo to establish balance (Ibid).



Figure 4: Cowboy pulling down the buffalo, Li Karen

Based on the given content, it appears that the animation titled "Cowboy's Flute" has a composition that is heavily influenced by traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting.

In the case of "Cowboy's Flute," the composition seems to reflect these characteristics. The arrangement of elements in the animation creates a sense of balance and harmony. The use of empty spaces and the careful placement of characters or objects within the frame evoke a similar aesthetic found in traditional Chinese paintings. The arrangement of elements in the artwork or design may demonstrate a sense of balance and harmony, akin to the principles seen in traditional Chinese painting. The use of empty space within the composition can create a calm and serene atmosphere, allowing the viewer's focus to be drawn to the essential elements. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: the composition in "Cowboy's Flute".

In summary, the composition of "Cowboy's Flute" showcases a strong influence from traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting. It successfully captures the essence of this art style through its arrangement of elements, use of empty spaces, and visual aesthetic reminiscent of brushwork. This influence can be observed through the balanced arrangement of elements, the use of empty space, and the brushwork or line work reminiscent of this art form. Furthermore, the brushwork or line work employed in the artwork or design might mirror the fluid and expressive strokes seen in traditional Chinese paintings. This technique can evoke a sense of movement, energy, and spontaneity, enhancing the overall visual impact of the composition.

DEPICTION OF NATURE AND AESTHETIC FORMS

Representation of Birds in Chinese Flower and Bird Painting

In "Cowboy's Flute," even the depiction of a single bird follows the aesthetic forms of Chinese flower and bird painting. This adherence to traditional painting techniques highlights the film's connection to authentic Chinese aesthetics.

In "Cowboy's Flute," the representation of birds aligns with the aesthetic forms of Chinese flower and bird painting. For example, there is a scene where a majestic crane is depicted in a graceful and elegant manner, reminiscent of the traditional Chinese painting style. The bird's long, slender body and outstretched wings are depicted with meticulous attention to detail, capturing the essence of Chinese painting aesthetics. (Figure 6)



Figure 6: Depiction of bird in "Cowboy's Flute" following the aesthetic forms of Chinese painting

Furthermore, the use of vibrant colors and delicate brushstrokes in depicting the birds in "Cowboy's Flute"

also reflects the influence of Chinese flower and bird painting. Each feather of the birds is carefully rendered, creating a sense of texture and lifelikeness, similar to the techniques used in traditional Chinese paintings.(Figure 7).



Figure 7: Depiction of bird in "Cowboy's Flute" following the aesthetic forms of Chinese painting

By incorporating the aesthetic forms of Chinese flower and bird painting into the depiction of birds, "Cowboy's Flute" pays homage to the rich artistic traditions of China, while adding a layer of authenticity and cultural depth to the animation.

The influence of Chinese painting on the representation of birds in "Cowboy's Flute"

Cultural Connection

The inclusion of Chinese flower and bird painting techniques in the film "Cowboy's Flute" showcases a strong cultural connection to traditional Chinese aesthetics. By incorporating these techniques, the film not only pays homage to the artistic heritage of Chinese painting but also establishes a sense of authenticity and cultural identity.

In the film "Cowboy's Flute," the inclusion of Chinese flower and bird painting techniques serves as a powerful representation of a cultural connection to traditional Chinese aesthetics. These techniques are not merely used as decorative elements, but are integrated into the storytelling and visual language of the film. Chinese flower and bird painting has a long and esteemed history in Chinese art. It is a genre that focuses on depicting the natural world, with an emphasis on capturing the spirit and essence of the subjects. By incorporating these techniques, the filmmakers of "Cowboy's Flute" demonstrate their appreciation for and commitment to preserving this artistic heritage.

The film's use of Chinese flower and bird painting techniques goes beyond just paying homage to tradition. It serves to establish a sense of authenticity and cultural identity. By incorporating these elements into the film, the filmmakers create a connection between the story and the broader cultural context in which it is set. This connection enhances the audience's understanding and appreciation of the film's themes and messages.

Furthermore, the use of these techniques adds a layer of depth and richness to the visual experience of the film. The delicate brushwork, intricate details, and vibrant colors characteristic of Chinese flower and bird paintings bring a sense of beauty and elegance to the on-screen imagery. This aesthetic choice not only enhances the overall visual appeal of the film, but also adds to its emotional impact.

In conclusion, the inclusion of Chinese flower and bird painting techniques in "Cowboy's Flute" serves as a cultural connection to traditional Chinese aesthetics. It pays homage to the artistic heritage of Chinese painting, establishes a sense of authenticity and cultural identity, and adds depth and beauty to the visual experience of the film. This integration of cultural elements enriches the storytelling and enhances the audience's engagement

with the film.

Aesthetic Continuity

The content emphasizes that the film's adherence to traditional painting techniques highlights its connection to authentic Chinese aesthetics. This suggests that the filmmakers consciously chose to incorporate these aesthetic forms to maintain a sense of continuity between traditional Chinese art and the film's visual representation. By doing so, they create a visual language that resonates with Chinese audiences and adds depth to the film's artistic value.

The film's aesthetic continuity is a concept that emphasizes how the use of traditional painting techniques in the film enhances its connection to authentic Chinese aesthetics. This means that the filmmakers purposefully chose to incorporate these traditional aesthetic forms in order to create a sense of visual and cultural continuity between traditional Chinese art and the film's visual representation.

By integrating traditional painting techniques, such as brushwork, composition, and color harmony, the filmmakers consciously maintain a link to China's rich artistic heritage. This deliberate choice suggests that the filmmakers have a deep appreciation for Chinese culture and art, and they wanted to ensure that the film reflects this appreciation.

In doing so, the film not only resonates with Chinese audiences who are familiar with and have an affinity for these traditional artistic forms, but it also adds depth and richness to the film's artistic value. The use of traditional painting techniques brings a level of sophistication and elegance to the film's visuals, elevating it beyond just a regular movie.

Furthermore, the incorporation of traditional Chinese aesthetics in the film's visuals serves to create a visual language that speaks directly to Chinese audiences. This visual language evokes a sense of familiarity and cultural identity, allowing the viewers to connect more deeply with the film on a personal and emotional level.

In summary, the concept of aesthetic continuity in the film emphasizes the intentional use of traditional painting techniques to highlight the film's connection to authentic Chinese aesthetics. By doing so, the filmmakers create a visual language that resonates with Chinese audiences, adds depth to the film's artistic value, and maintains a sense of cultural continuity between traditional Chinese art and the film's visual representation.

Symbolism and Meaning

The representation of birds in Chinese flower and bird painting often carries symbolic meaning. Birds, such as the phoenix or the crane, are commonly depicted to symbolize grace, beauty, and good fortune. By incorporating these symbolic representations of birds, the filmmakers in "Cowboy's Flute" may be aiming to convey deeper thematic messages or evoke specific emotions within the audience.

In Chinese flower and bird painting, the representation of birds holds significant symbolic meaning. Birds like the swallow or the crane are often depicted to symbolize certain qualities or ideas, such as grace, beauty, and good fortune. By incorporating these symbolic representations of birds in "Cowboy's Flute," the filmmakers may be aiming to convey deeper thematic messages or evoke specific emotions within the audience.

The use of symbolic birds in the film adds a layer of metaphor and hidden meaning to the storytelling. For example, the presence of swallows in a particular scene may represent rebirth, renewal, or transformation. This symbolism can be used to convey themes of resilience, overcoming challenges, or the cyclical nature of life. Similarly, the inclusion of a crane may symbolize longevity, wisdom, or a sense of peace. These symbolic representations of birds can be used to explore themes of wisdom, inner strength, or finding peace in difficult circumstances. (Figure 8)



Figure 8: Depiction of bird in "Cowboy's Flute" following the aesthetic forms of Chinese flower and bird painting

By incorporating these symbolic representations, the filmmakers invite the audience to interpret the film on a deeper level. The presence of these birds can evoke specific emotions or resonate with the viewers on a subconscious level. For example, the graceful flight of a flock of egrets may evoke a sense of freedom or inspire a sense of awe and wonder.(Figure 9)



Figure 9: Depiction of bird in "Cowboy's Flute" following the aesthetic forms of Chinese flower and bird painting

Furthermore, the symbolic birds can also serve as cultural references, connecting the film to traditional Chinese art and folklore. By using these symbols, the filmmakers pay homage to Chinese cultural heritage and engage with the audience's familiarity and appreciation of these symbolic representations.

In summary, the representation of birds in "Cowboy's Flute" carries symbolic meaning rooted in traditional Chinese art. These symbolic representations may be used by the filmmakers to convey deeper thematic messages, evoke specific emotions, or connect the film to Chinese cultural heritage. By incorporating these symbols, the filmmakers create a multi-layered storytelling experience that invites the audience to interpret the film's meaning on a deeper level.

Cultural Preservation

The inclusion of traditional painting techniques and the representation of birds in Chinese flower and bird painting can be seen as a form of cultural preservation. By showcasing these art forms in a contemporary film, the filmmakers contribute to the preservation and promotion of traditional Chinese aesthetics, ensuring that they are not forgotten or overshadowed by modern artistic trends.

Overall, the depiction of birds in "Cowboy's Flute" following the aesthetic forms of Chinese flower and bird painting serves multiple purposes. It establishes a cultural connection, maintains aesthetic continuity, conveys symbolic meanings, and contributes to the preservation of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Through these artistic choices, the filmmakers enhance the visual appeal of the film while also adding depth and cultural significance to the storytelling.

THE THEME OF "COWBOY'S FLUTE" AND CHINESE AESTHETICS

The Symbolism of the Shepherd Boy Riding a Buffalo

In Chinese tradition, a shepherd boy riding a buffalo symbolizes man's control over his turbulent nature in search of enlightenment or tranquillity. By incorporating this theme into "Cowboy's Flute," the animation aligns itself with the grounding principles of authentic Chinese aesthetics.

The analysis suggests that by incorporating this theme into the animation, "Cowboy's Flute" aligns itself with the grounding principles of authentic Chinese aesthetics. This aligns with Chinese cultural traditions and values, reflecting the idea of finding balance and harmony within oneself.

The symbolism of the shepherd boy riding a buffalo carries deep meaning in Chinese tradition. The buffalo represents the untamed, instinctive nature of humans, while the shepherd boy symbolizes the individual's attempt to gain control over these primal instincts. This concept resonates with Chinese philosophy, which emphasizes the pursuit of inner peace, self-awareness, and the ability to overcome one's inner struggles.

By incorporating this symbolism, "Cowboy's Flute" not only showcases the beauty of Chinese aesthetics but also imparts a cultural message to the audience. It highlights the importance of self-control, personal growth, and the journey towards enlightenment. The theme of this animated film is basically based on the ground of authentic Chinese aesthetics. In Chinese tradition, a shepherd boy riding a buffalo represents man in control of his turbulent nature in search of enlightenment or tranquillity (Stunkel 2015).

The choice of this theme also demonstrates the animation's commitment to preserving and promoting Chinese cultural heritage. By incorporating traditional symbols and themes, "Cowboy's Flute" contributes to the preservation and dissemination of Chinese aesthetics in a contemporary medium.

In conclusion, the incorporation of the shepherd boy riding a buffalo as a theme in "Cowboy's Flute" aligns the animation with Chinese aesthetics and cultural traditions. This symbolism conveys the message of man's control over his turbulent nature in the pursuit of enlightenment and tranquillity. By showcasing these principles, the animation not only reflects Chinese cultural values but also promotes the preservation and dissemination of Chinese aesthetics.

Misty mountains: The animation captures the serene atmosphere of misty mountains, a common motif in Chinese landscape paintings. As the shepherd boy and the buffalo ascend higher, the landscape becomes increasingly shrouded in mist, creating a sense of mystery and tranquility. The artist's skillful brushwork and attention to detail bring the scene to life, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the beauty and elegance of this traditional Chinese painting. The ambiance of the scene is further enhanced by the surrounding countryside. Rolling hills provide a gentle backdrop, while a meandering stream adds a sense of serenity and tranquility. The soft, warm sunlight filtering through the branches of the plum blossom trees casts a dream-like glow on the landscape, creating a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. The surrounding scenery plays a crucial role in establishing the aesthetic of the piece. Majestic mountains rise in the distance, their peaks reaching towards the heavens. The artist's use of colors and brushstrokes create a sense of depth and scale, transporting the viewer into a world of awe-inspiring nature.

The combination of the shepherd boy, the buffalo, and the surrounding scenery creates a harmonious and visually stunning artwork. The stylized manner in which they are depicted, with brushstroke-like lines and vibrant colors, elevates the overall aesthetic appeal of the piece. The artist's careful attention to detail and artistic choices immerse the viewer in a world of wonder and beauty. (Figure 10)



Figure 10: The shepherd boy and the buffalo in misty mountains of "Cowboy's Flute"

Sunset over the river: Towards the end of the animation, the shepherd boy and the buffalo reach a peaceful riverside. The setting sun casts a warm golden glow over the water, reflecting the traditional Chinese appreciation for the beauty of nature and the harmony between humans and their surroundings. Lush trees dot the landscape, their leaves depicted with a flurry of delicate brushstrokes, giving them a sense of movement and vitality. The winding river, meandering through the composition, adds a sense of tranquility and harmony to the scene. The artist's skilled use of colors brings the water to life, evoking a feeling of serenity and peacefulness. (Figure 11)

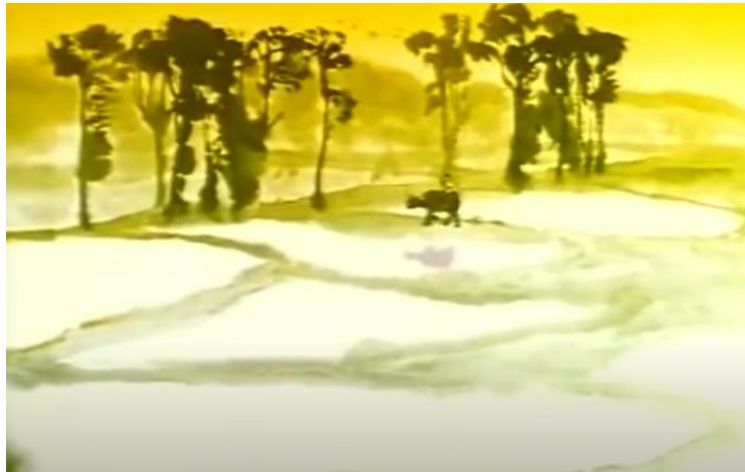


Figure 11: Sunset over the river in "Cowboy's Flute"

CONCLUSION

The animation "Cowboy's Flute" produced in 1963 at the animation studio in Shanghai successfully integrates traditional Chinese painting techniques into its coloring and composition. By adhering to the principles of authentic Chinese aesthetics, the film showcases a visual experience reminiscent of traditional Chinese watercolor and ink painting. The thematic connection to traditional symbolism further enhances the cultural significance of "Cowboy's Flute" as a representation of Chinese artistic values.

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