

THE ANALYSIS OF STORYTELLING AND VISUAL LANGUAGE IN ZHANG YIMOU'S MARTIAL ARTS FILMS*

Lin Wu¹ and Chalongrat Chermanchonlamark²

¹⁻²College of Communication Arts, Rangsit University, Thailand

Corresponding Author's Email: wlinw50@gmail.com

Received 14 November 2025; Revised 3 December 2025; Accepted 5 December 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the narrative structure and audio-visual artistry of Zhang Yimou's wuxia films, addressing a research gap in existing scholarship that often focuses on visual spectacle while insufficiently analyzing the interplay between narrative strategies and cultural expression. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study analyzes three representative works *Hero*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, and *Full River Red* selected for their influence, stylistic diversity, and critical reception. The research investigates (1) the narrative paradigms and thematic constructions in Zhang's wuxia cinema, and (2) the visual aesthetics of color, composition, and symbolic design. The study finds that Zhang Yimou integrates multi-layered narrative structures and highly stylized color semantics to articulate themes of power, loyalty, and national identity, thereby expanding the expressive possibilities of the wuxia genre. These findings contribute new insights into the cultural functions of visual design in contemporary Chinese cinema and offer theoretical references for future genre film analysis.

Keywords: Wuxia cinema; Narrative structure; Visual aesthetics; Zhang Yimou

Citation:



* Lin Wu and Chalongrat Chermanchonlamark. (2026). The Analysis Of Storytelling And Visual Language In Zhang Yimou's Martial Arts Films. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Development*, 4(1), 275-295.;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.>

Website: <https://so12.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/JISDIADP/>

Introduction

As a quintessential genre in Chinese cinema, wuxia films consistently achieve commercial success while serving as a vital medium for disseminating Chinese culture, philosophical thought, and aesthetic values (Jiang, 2019). However, confronted with the dual pressures of globalization and commercialization, wuxia filmmaking has increasingly gravitated toward formulaic narratives and spectacle-driven visuals (Jin, 2019). Although existing scholarship provides foundational insights into individual films or general genre trends, it often overlooks how auteur directors like Zhang Yimou systematically reshape the wuxia tradition through integrated narrative and visual strategies. Specifically, there is a lack of research examining how Zhang's narrative paradigms and audiovisual aesthetics together convey cultural and philosophical meaning across multiple works.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does Zhang Yimou construct distinctive narrative structures and thematic expressions within the wuxia genre? (2) In what ways do his visual aesthetics—such as color symbolism, spatial composition, choreography, and sound design—enhance narrative meaning and cultural expression?

Guided by auteur theory and film semiotics, this research employs qualitative textual analysis of three representative films: *Hero* (2002), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), and *Full River Red* (2021). The study first deconstructs Zhang's narrative strategies, including the conflict between the individual and the collective and the relativity of truth. It then analyzes his expressionistic visual language, demonstrating how color, ritualized movement, and spatial composition function not merely as aesthetic choices but as integral drivers of narrative and cultural meaning.

By systematically linking narrative and audiovisual analysis, this paper argues that Zhang Yimou repeatedly innovates within the wuxia genre, elevating

it to a level of philosophical reflection and cultural sophistication. The anticipated contribution of this research is twofold: to offer a structured analytical framework for studying Zhang's cinematic language, and to provide theoretical and practical insights for understanding the evolution of Chinese genre cinema.

Objectives

This study objectives are as follows:

1. To analyze the narrative techniques in Zhang Yimou's martial arts films.
2. To investigate the visual language in Zhang Yimou's martial arts films.

Literature Review

This study, "Analysis of Narrative and Visual Language in Zhang Yimou's Martial Arts Films," is based on existing theoretical accomplishments and prior research. This chapter aims to systematically review and synthesize literature, focusing on the following key areas:

Visual Language: Jin Fangfang (2019) points out that visual elements serve as the primary sensory stimuli in cinematic language. Beyond acting, these elements include framing, composition, color, and montage. Specifically: 1) Framing defines spatial relationships; 2) Composition constructs visual expression; 3) Color evokes psychological resonance; 4) Montage enables logical organization of shots.

Narrative: Cai Xingshui (2019) emphasizes that exceptional cinematic storytelling must go beyond foundational elements such as historical context to delve deeply into characters' emotional, psychological, and moral dimensions. It should also establish complex antagonistic forces that test the characters' resolve, thereby enhancing both character development and narrative depth.

Martial Arts Films: Jiang Dan (2019) observes that Chinese martial arts films constitute a genre adapted from wuxia literature, blending stylized martial arts

performances with dramatic storytelling. This category encompasses various forms of action cinema characterized by martial arts as their external form and chivalric spirit as their core ethos.

Zhang Yimou's Films: Zhang Lijia and Hu Dan (2023) note that Zhang Yimou's films consistently integrate social critique, traditional elements, and artistic innovation. Through his distinctive use of color, opera aesthetics, and martial arts visuals, he explores themes such as feudal mentality and female awakening, leveraging traditional symbols to promote the international dissemination of Chinese narratives.

Existing research lacks a systematic analysis of the interconnection between narrative and visual style in Zhang Yimou's martial arts films. To address this gap, this paper examines how Zhang Yimou employs visual techniques such as color and composition to achieve narrative innovation, thereby exploring his contributions to the martial arts genre and his role in the modernization of Chinese cinematic language.

Methodology

This study employs literature review and textual analysis as its research methods. It begins by defining the concept of martial arts cinema, then proceeds to a comparative analysis of Zhang Yimou's wuxia films, examining the evolutionary trajectory and aesthetic value of their visual artistry.

Observational Analysis: This study analyzes viewing records of Zhang Yimou's films, supported by comparative literature to validate the research content. The three films selected *Hero* (2002), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), and *Full River Red* (2023) represent different periods of Zhang's career, enabling a study of stylistic evolution.

Literature Analysis: Existing research predominantly focuses on the interpretation of martial arts film connotations, analysis of audiovisual language,

exploration of cultural spirit, marketing strategies, and industrial impact. However, systematic studies on the audiovisual artistry and narrative techniques in Zhang Yimou's martial arts works remain relatively underdeveloped.

Textual Analysis: The study conducts a structured, multi-level textual analysis. Key audiovisual elements such as color palettes, framing, composition, camera movement, *mise-en-scène*, editing, narrative structure, character functions, and thematic motifs—are coded and interpreted as semiotic units. Comparative analysis across the three films identifies continuities, innovations, and shifts in Zhang Yimou's narrative and visual style.

This study innovatively centers on the audiovisual artistic style and narrative methods of Zhang Yimou's martial arts films. Grounded in film ontology, it explores how his works both inherit the traditions of the wuxia genre and innovate in form and content, thereby revealing their distinctive characteristics.

Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 1.

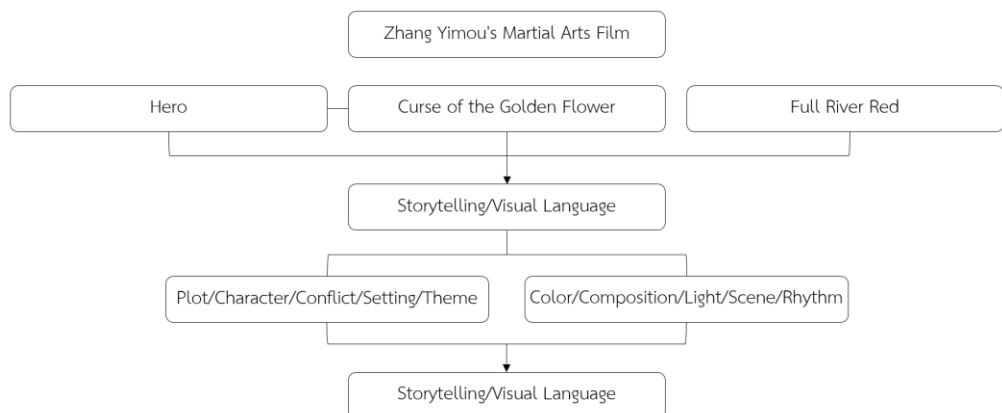


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

Results

Zhang Yimou's three martial arts films demonstrate a clear creative evolution: from philosophical narratives to dramatic genre expression, while consistently maintaining a critical examination of power structures and a humanistic concern for individual fate. Based on the research objectives of examining narrative mechanisms and visual strategies, the following sections present findings derived from textual analysis and close reading of representative scenes.

1. The storytelling in Zhang Yimou's martial arts films

1.1 Plot: From the Epic of "Deconstruction-Reconstruction" to the Suspense of an "Escape Room"

1) "Hero": Dialectics of Rashōmon-Style Narrative and Historical Truth

Through the tripartite perspectives of Nameless, the King of Qin, and Can Jian, Hero employs a polyphonic narrative of "deconstruction-reconstruction" to explore the relativity of historical truth. As Zheng Dianhui (2014) notes, the film's narrative drive shifts from "how to assassinate" to "why abandon the assassination." This observation aligns with the study's objective of identifying how Zhang Yimou manipulates narrative layering to construct historical meaning. Scene-level analysis of the desert dialogue and the Poplar Forest duel suggests that perspective switching functions not only as a stylistic choice but as a structural inquiry into truth construction.

2) "Curse of the Golden Flower": The Tragedy of Family Politics Under a Rigid Framework

The film adheres to the classical "three unities," condensing the narrative into a single festive night. Within this confined setting, ethical betrayals and power struggles intensify. As Zhang Cui (2015) observes, this momentum produces a Shakespearean tragic force. The study finds that such structural compression highlights how ritualized time-space reinforces authoritarian control, directly

contributing to the research objective concerning the relationship between narrative constraint and power representation.

3) "Full River Red": Suspense Narrative and Spiritual Victory in Genre Fusion

Full River Red employs a confined-space narrative anchored in Zhang Da's perspective (Kang, 2007). The layered schemes culminate not in physical assassination but in ideological resistance through the preservation of "Man Jiang Hong." Through close examination of the climactic courtyard sequence, this study identifies how suspense structures serve as a mechanism for negotiating collective memory, supporting the research goal of linking narrative devices with thematic expression.

1.2 Characters: From Symbolic "Heroes" to Flesh-and-Blood "Common People"

1) Hero: Symbolic Characters as Vessels of Ideology

The character Wuming in Hero is highly symbolic. Characters primarily function as conceptual embodiments rather than psychological individuals (Zheng, 2014). This study's character analysis indicates that symbolic design is integral to Zhang Yimou's narrative strategy, reinforcing how personal agency is subordinated to collective logic one of the core research objectives.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: Tragic Puppets in the Vortex of Power

In this film, characters are consistently constrained by feudal hierarchy (Luo, 2008). Scene-level inspection of the queen's medication sequences reveals how bodily control becomes a visualized metaphor for systemic domination, thereby reinforcing the study's aim to connect character construction with power critique.

3) Full River Red: Righteous Commoners Igniting Patriotism from the Margins

Characters in Full River Red embody greater psychological complexity (Yan, 2023). The study finds, through analysis of Zhang Da's repeated corridor traversals, that character development is spatially externalized a contribution to understanding Zhang Yimou's shift toward people-centered patriotism.

1.3 Conflict: The Ultimate Showdown Between Individual Will and the Grand Order

1) Hero: The Ultimate Confrontation Between Personal Vengeance and the Righteousness of "All Under Heaven"

The core conflict contrasts individual revenge with collective rationality. This supports the research objective of assessing how ideological tension is constructed through narrative choices rather than rhetorical emphasis. The core conflict of the film lies in the confrontation between the individual's will for vengeance and the collective rationality of "ending war for all under heaven." Nameless's ultimate abandonment of the assassination and submission to the order of "all under heaven" exemplifies the Eastern utilitarian concept of "greater righteousness" the sacrifice of personal chivalry for a grander cause.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: The Brutal Collision Between Human Desire and Feudal Ritual Law

Human desires clash with feudal restrictions, yet resistance fails. This study's micro-analysis of the palace's mechanical daily rituals identifies how recurrent temporal discipline intensifies this conflict, demonstrating Zhang Yimou's systemic critique. Human desires and feudal ethics collide intensely within the palace walls: the Queen resists through forbidden passions, while the princes challenge patriarchal authority through patricide and rebellion. Yet the feudal order has long woven an inescapable net the palace functions as a prison, rigid schedules enforce discipline, and the royal physician surveils desire (Luo Ting, 2008). Ultimately, all forms of resistance fail: human desires are crushed by power, and order maintains its facade of propriety at the cost of buried lives.

3) Full River Red: The Spiritual Duel Between a Common Man's Will and the Lies of Tyranny

The essence of the conflict lies in the opposition between the patriots' devotion and the surrenderist lies of the treacherous officials. The film elevates this confrontation to a higher struggle between "physical annihilation" and "spiritual legacy" (Zhang, 2024). The patriots' objective shifts from "killing Qin Hui" to "disseminating his spirit," culminating in the spectacle of the masses reciting "Man Jiang Hong" in unison thereby achieving the most powerful dismantling and counterblow to the tyranny of falsehood. The film reframes conflict as ideological resistance (Zhang, 2024). Scene-level analysis of the mass recitation indicates that collective performance becomes a narrative device to visualize spiritual inheritance, aligning with the study's thematic focus..

1.4 Scene: The Ultimate Narrative Space

1) Hero: Transcending the Conventional Function of Space as Mere Backdrop

The Qin Palace symbolizes autocratic power, the poplar forest represents natural emotion, the pavilion serves as a space for spiritual cultivation, and the library embodies cultural symbolism. These four settings align structurally with the narrative progression of "power confrontation-natural emotion-spiritual philosophy-cultural symbolism" (Zhang & Bao, 2021), collectively constructing a multi-layered system of signification that renders space a crucial vehicle for interpreting the film's core themes. Spaces symbolize power, emotion, spirituality, and culture (Zhang & Bao, 2021). Through close-reading of the Emerald Lake duel, the study shows how spatial aesthetics concretize philosophical intent, supporting the research objective on spatial semiotics.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: Space as an Instrument of Human Repression

In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, the enclosed palace is an elaborately constructed cage (Zhang & Bao, 2021). Its towering walls form dual shackles for both body and mind, while the endless staircases metaphorize the ladder of power and an inescapable fate, rendering the architecture a direct embodiment of constrained humanity. The palace functions as a metaphorical cage. The study's examination of the throne-room blocking reveals spatial compression as a visual correlate of psychological oppression.

3) Full River Red: The Labyrinthine Dramatic Stage

The film's narrative is confined to a sealed compound, where its crisscrossing alleyways form a labyrinth both physical and psychological rapping the characters in a vortex of power (Zhang, 2024). This space functions not merely as a backdrop, but as a "stage" for political maneuvering and human confrontation. Every corner carries narrative turns and suspense, progressively intensifying the dramatic tension and sense of inevitability. The sealed compound operates as a narrative "stage." Mapping the film's repeated use of alley intersections demonstrates how spatial disorientation structurally reinforces suspense.

1.5 Theme: Interrogating Power, Sacrifice, and Collectivism.

1) Hero: The Dialectical Dilemma of "Unification" and "Peace"

The film centers on the concept of "All-under-Heaven," using Nameless's sacrifice to pose a profound dilemma: can individual vengeance and life be justifiably sacrificed for the grand goal of universal unification? (Yao, 2003) This move not only deconstructs the traditional chivalric ethos of personal revenge but also pushes collectivist logic to its extreme. Rather than offering a definitive answer, the film lays bare the eternal paradox between historical ends and the justification of means, provoking deep reflection.

2) *Curse of the Golden Flower*: Tearing Off the Hypocritical Veneer of the "Feudal Order"

The film offers a profound critique of the feudal order, exposing it not as a foundation of stability, but as shackles that consume humanity. Under absolute imperial power, human nature is distorted by authority, and kinship is alienated by self-interest. The resplendent palace is, in essence, a living hell, while its incessant emphasis on "rules" and "rituals" serves merely as a tool to perpetuate autocratic rule and conceal its inherent decay. Thus, the entire work stands as a poignant and resolute indictment of feudal autocratic culture.

3) Full River Red: The Summoning of National Spirit and Collective Memory

The film transcends superficial depictions of loyalty and cultural inheritance, elevating the assassination narrative into a ritual of cultural awakening. Its core thesis lies in the idea that ensuring the legacy of the poem "Full River Red" a vessel of national spirit holds greater significance than eliminating a treacherous official. This constitutes both a tribute to traditional loyalty and an evocative summoning of national cohesion in the contemporary context.

2. The visual language in Zhang Yimou's martial arts film

2.1 Color: As a Visual Semiotic of Narrative Power

1) Hero: The Poetics of Color and Its Narrative Architecture

The film constructs a symbolic color system of red, blue, white, green, and black (He, 2022), with each hue corresponding to distinct narrative versions and philosophical connotations, thereby serving as a key device for differentiating narrative layers. The "golden-yellow and red" palette in the Poplar Forest fight poeticizes violence, while the "cold blue" tones of the "Emerald Lake" duel evoke the highest realm of swordsmanship, accomplishing a sublimation of color from the physical to the psychological level. This study finds that the color system not only distinguishes narrative layers but also conveys emotional registers observable in the Poplar Forest and Emerald Lake sequences.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: The Chromatics of Power and the Cage of Desire

Scene-level analysis shows that the dominance of gold intensifies spatial suffocation, visually reinforcing the mechanisms of imperial control. The omnipresent gold in the film symbolizes not freedom, but a "gilded cage" forged by power. The symmetrically repeated golden scenes create a sense of suffocation, revealing how totalitarianism distorts human nature (Zhang, 2015). Against this golden backdrop, the queen's red representing rebellion and passion clashes intensely with the emperor's black signifying conspiracy and oppression visually manifesting the irreconcilable nature of power struggles. Ultimately, black engulfs red, foreshadowing the tragic fate of the rebels.

3) Full River Red: A Crimson Romance Within Claustrophobic Space

The research identifies a progressive semantic shift of red from violence to collective loyalty visible across key scenes. The narrative unfolds within the grey-walled confines of a sealed compound, where red emerges as the most potent visual focus. Its significance evolves from the bloodstains at the beginning (violence), through the official robes and lanterns (power and danger), culminating in the collective recitation scene where it transforms into a symbol of fervent loyalty and patriotic spirit (Niu & Ma, 2024). This progression accomplishes a thematic sublimation from the physical to the spiritual. Black establishes a tone of conspiracy and oppression, while the sparing use of white symbolizes hope and the lingering softness of humanity, creating a powerful moral and emotional contrast.

2.2 Composition: Visualizing Power Structures

1) Hero: The Individual and Power within Geometric Order

The study's analysis of palace compositions illustrates clear hierarchical contrast between Nameless and the King. The palace scenes employ strictly symmetrical composition, contrasting the centralized figure of the King with the diminutive Nameless to construct an imposing visual hierarchy of power. Door

and window frames create a boxed-in composition, visually imprisoning the characters. The infinite depth rendered through deep-focus shots further accentuates the remoteness of power and the powerlessness of the individual (Yu, 2018).

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: Extreme Discipline through Repetition and Symmetry

This research finds that repetitive formations function as a visual metaphor for authoritarian homogenization. Mechanically synchronized formations of golden-armored soldiers and palace maidens transform individuals into mere symbols of power, creating a despairingly homogenous collective. This visually articulates the disciplinary essence of totalitarianism (Li, 2007). The towering palace walls and claustrophobic compositions jointly construct an inescapable prison-world, foreshadowing how all characters are ultimately consumed by the machinery of power.

3) Full River Red: Dynamic Tension within Claustrophobic Space

Through frame-by-frame analysis of alleyway chases, the study observes that dynamic composition enhances narrative urgency. The film extensively uses tracking shots and tight compositions, focusing on the narrow alleyways and secret rooms of the residence. The characters' frantic pacing, combined with rapid editing, generates a powerful sense of movement and a taut rhythm within the severely limited space. The compositional strategy abandons static grandeur, instead serving the suspenseful narrative and facilitating an epic-scale psychological battle within a confined arena.

2.3 Light: Shaping Atmosphere and Depicting Psychology

1) Hero: Chiaroscuro for a Historical Allegory

The film employs intense natural lighting, where the blinding desert sunlight contrasts with the dim, shadowed interiors of the palace (Yu, 2018). Rather than functioning merely as dramatic embellishment, this chiaroscuro

establishes a visual system that distinguishes spaces of political power from those of individual action. For example, in the scene where Nameless approaches the King, the deep shadows behind the throne visually reinforce the asymmetry of authority. This finding directly supports the research objective of identifying how visual language constructs ideological hierarchies in Zhang Yimou's martial arts films.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: Opulent Shadows and Contested Light

The lighting design retains large shadowed areas (Li, 2007), yet these shadows primarily serve to map internal political tension rather than simply enhance atmosphere. Characters' faces being half-lit in key dialogue scenes such as the Queen's confrontation with the Emperor visually index the instability of their moral and emotional positions. This analytical observation aligns with the research objective of examining how lighting contributes to the representation of systemic repression and individual entrapment.

3) Full River Red: A Tenebrous Palette and Punctums of Suspense

The film adopts a low-key, cool lighting scheme that establishes suspense, but more importantly, this lighting organizes narrative information. For instance, the sudden illumination of Zhang Da's face by a lantern in the interrogation corridor scene highlights shifts in his psychological state, marking turning points in his agency. This scene-level interpretation contributes to the research goal of explaining how visual strategies support the film's suspense-driven narrative architecture.

2.4 Scene and Space: The Locus of Narrative Imagery

1) Hero: Evocative Spaces that Embody Emotion

The vast desert, emerald lake, and red Populus ekphratic forest function as extensions of character psychology rather than ornamental landscapes (Yu, 2018). In particular, the lake duel's empty horizon visually reflects the characters' ideological clarity, supporting the film's thematic abstraction. Such spatial-

emotional correspondence advances the research objective of analyzing how Zhang Yimou employs natural spaces to externalize narrative meaning.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: The Symbolic Cage of Power
The palace operates as a metaphor for the “family-nation,” yet its spatial confinement also structures the film’s narrative logic (Li, 2007). Scenes such as the Queen’s restricted movement across the palace corridors demonstrate how architecture enforces discipline. This spatial reading directly informs the research objective concerning cinematic representations of feudal authority and embodied constraint.

3) Full River Red: The Claustrophobic Arena of Psychological Combat

The grey-walled compound functions simultaneously as a labyrinth and a narrative pressure cooker. The confined layout causes characters especially Zhang Da to repeatedly traverse the same alleys, creating spatial loops that mirror the story’s web of deception. This contributes to the research objective of analyzing how restricted spatial design heightens psychological and political tension in the film.

2.5 Imagery and Rhythm: The Visual Orchestration of Emotion and Cadence

1) Hero: The Binary Symphony of Lyricism and Violence

The film combines rapid-edited combat sequences with slowed visual moments such as drifting leaves or suspended water droplets. Rather than functioning solely as aesthetic choices, these rhythmic contrasts articulate the duality between action and contemplation embedded in the narrative structure. This observation strengthens the research objective related to identifying how visual rhythm conveys philosophical dimensions of martial arts storytelling.

2) Curse of the Golden Flower: Visual Discipline and Emotional Repression

The film’s heavy, regulated rhythm reinforced by symmetrical compositions even during violent scenes constructs a visual regime consistent

with the themes of discipline and suppression. For example, the uniform movements of palace attendants maintain rhythmic rigidity despite intensifying narrative turmoil. This directly relates to the study's objective of explaining how visual rhythm reflects systemic oppression within Zhang Yimou's martial-arts aesthetics.

3) Full River Red: Spatial Constriction and Temporal Imminence

The film's brisk pacing, marked by continuous movement and rapid transitions, is not only stylistic but also structural. The constant running within cramped alleys produces a visual rhythm of urgency that mirrors the narrative countdown. This supports the research objective of examining how temporal rhythm interacts with spatial confinement to construct suspense in contemporary martial arts cinema.

Discussion

The results of research objective 1 found that Zhang Yimou's wuxia films contribute significantly to the modernization of Chinese cinematic language by transforming traditional jianghu narratives into structured national allegories. This is because Zhang's works consistently reconstruct the heroic paradigm through symbolic visual systems and ideological reinterpretation, revealing a shift from chivalric storytelling to nation-centered discourses. This finding is consistent with Yao (2003) argument that *Hero* marks a conceptual transition from individual heroism to collective national consciousness, as well as Jiang (2019) observation that contemporary wuxia cinema increasingly integrates political-cultural meaning with genre conventions. It also aligns with discussion of the "integration of literary and martial arts" narrative strategy in *Hero*. Extending these insights, the present study demonstrates that the evolution evident in *Hero* continues through *Curse of the Golden Flower* and *Full River Red*, forming a coherent trajectory of allegorical intensification across Zhang's filmmaking career.

The results of research objective 2 found that Zhang Yimou establishes a distinctive “Chinese aesthetic” through systematic innovations in color, spatial composition, and martial arts choreography, creating a symbolic visual grammar that deepens narrative meaning. This is because color—treated as metaphor and ideological code—functions as the core of Zhang’s expressive system. This observation is consistent with analyses by He (2022), who emphasize that Zhang deploys color as a narrative logic closely tied to emotional and political tensions. Similarly, Zhang S. J. (2015) identify *Curse of the Golden Flower* as a representative model of color-driven symbolic expression. Meanwhile, the centrality of audiovisual integration in Zhang’s films is supported by Yu (2018), while Luo (2008) highlights the metaphorical power of spatial design and character positioning. Taken together, these studies support this research’s conclusion that Zhang’s visual system constitutes a form of “visual philosophy,” integrating semiotic meaning, narrative tension, and cultural metaphor into an aesthetically coherent whole.

The results of research objective 3 found that Zhang Yimou achieves a dynamic balance between artistic ambition and commercial appeal, enabling his wuxia films to transcend genre entertainment and contribute to the aesthetic transformation of Chinese cinema. This is because Zhang combines spectacle with cultural depth, creating films that are accessible to mass audiences while maintaining a strong authorial signature. This finding aligns with Li’s (2007) assessment that the spectacle aesthetics in *Curse of the Golden Flower* reflect both the advantages and limitations of visually driven commercial filmmaking, as well as Kang’s (2007) argument that *Full River Red* represents a mature convergence of cultural intention and market strategy. Yan (2023) likewise emphasize the narrative complexity and character construction in *Full River Red*, which demonstrates that commercial success and sophisticated narrative design can coexist. In addition, Zhang and Hu (2023) show that Zhang’s strategic use of

traditional cultural elements enhances both marketability and cultural resonance. Synthesizing these perspectives, this study identifies a consistent pattern in Zhang's filmmaking: the progressive refinement of a balance between aesthetic innovation and broad audience engagement.

Importantly, these interpretations do not replicate the research results but instead synthesize the main insights in accordance with the established objectives, theoretical implications, and related scholarly discussions. Collectively, the findings affirm that Zhang Yimou's wuxia films stand at the forefront of the modernization of Chinese cinematic aesthetics, advancing a unified system of national allegory, symbolic visual language, and commercially viable artistic expression.

Recommendations

Zhang Yimou's practice as an auteur director within the commercial genre framework provides a paradigmatic case for understanding the dialectical relationship between art and commerce in contemporary Chinese cinema. Based on this, the study proposes the following recommendations from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

1. Theoretical Recommendations

The findings of this study show that Zhang Yimou's films achieve a balance between aesthetic innovation and commercial appeal, demonstrating how auteurist expression can be sustained within a highly market-oriented film industry. Therefore, theoretical discussions should more explicitly consider how the identity of the "commercial auteur" is constructed through stylistic continuity within genre frameworks, aligning with the study's conclusion that Zhang's visual philosophy and narrative strategies operate effectively inside commercial constraints.

Zhang Yimou's success also illustrates the importance of encouraging directors to pursue artistic experimentation while operating within popular genres. This supports the study's findings that genre fusion and value-driven narratives can produce works that possess both market viability and cultural depth. Strengthening this direction in Chinese film theory will help promote a localized model of auteurism that integrates artistic ambition with industrial realities.

2. Future Research Directions

A comparative analysis of Zhang Yimou's wuxia filmmaking and his predecessors (e.g., King Hu): Such research would clarify how the relationship between auteur directors and the film industry has evolved over time, providing historical context for the study's finding that Zhang modernizes wuxia aesthetics within a national-allegorical framework.

Placing Zhang Yimou in dialogue with domestic contemporaries and international figures (e.g., Christopher Nolan): This would help identify the shared traits and divergences within global auteur models, supporting the study's conclusion that Zhang represents a distinctive form of the "commercial auteur" shaped by local cultural and industrial conditions.

An examination of the diffusion and industrial value of Zhang Yimou's visual aesthetics in the multi-media era: Given the study's emphasis on Zhang's symbolic visual system, future research could investigate how his aesthetic style circulates across short-video platforms, promotional posters, and gaming, thus revealing its broader cultural and commercial impact.

References

Cai, X. S. (2019). The hardcore story concept in Robert McKee's film screenwriting theory. *New Films*, (5), J904.

- He, M. X. (2022). Analysis of color application from Hero to Shadow. *Daguan (Forum)*, (5), 65–67.
- Jiang, D. (2019). A review of the creation of martial arts films in the 70 years since the founding of New China. *Film Review*, (20), 85-86.
- Jin, F. F. (2019). Analysis of the audiovisual integration in film language. *Communication Power Research*, 3(2), J905.
- Kang, Y. (2007). Review of Full River Red and Zhang Yimou's cultural view. *Film Literature*, (10), 45–47.
- Li, Y. (2007). Determined to carry the aestheticism to the end: Gains and losses of Zhang Yimou's spectacle film from Curse of the Golden Flower. *Movie Review*, (17), 32–34.
- Luo, T. (2008). A visual feast for open-minded thinking: Analysis of character design in Curse of the Golden Flower. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, (4), 78–82.
- Niu, J. L., & Ma, Z. B. (2024). Color application strategies in film: Taking Zhang Yimou's work Full River Red as an example. *News Writing*, (3), 155–157.
- Yan, Z. X. (2023). Character shaping: The core of reversal in the film Full River Red—A narrative analysis based on Greimas's semiotic square. *West China Broadcasting TV*, 44(18), 112–114.
- Yao, X. L. (2003). The chivalry, world and heroes in art: Also starting from Zhang Yimou's Hero. *Comparative Literature in China*, (4), 120–130.
- Yu, H. Y. (2018). Audio-visual language analysis of Hero. *Journal of News Research*, (10), 140–141.
- Zhang, C. (2015). The aesthetic characteristics of Zhang Yimou's films from the perspective of Curse of the Golden Flower. *Film Literature*, (12), 88–90.
- Zhang, L., & Hu, D. (2023). An analysis of the application of traditional cultural elements in Zhang Yimou's films. *The Artists*, (02), 118-120.
- Zhang, S. J. (2015). Analysis of the application of color imagery in the film Curse of the Golden Flower. *Art Education Research*, (16), 80–81.

- Zhang, T. (2024). An analysis of the narrative characteristics of the film Full River Red. *Journal of Xinjiang Arts University*, 22(1), 95–100.
- Zheng, D. H. (2014). A study on the narrative strategy of “integration of literary and martial arts” in the film Hero. *Movie Review*, (24), 15–17.