

# The Cinematic Poetics of "Fifteen Strings of Coppers": Aesthetic Transformation and Cross-Media Expression from the Traditional Chinese Opera Stage to the Silver Screen

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## Abstract

"Fifteen Strings of Coppers" is a representative opera film that integrates the traditional art form of Kunqu opera with modern cinematic language, creating a distinctive aesthetic style. From the perspective of cinematic poetics, this paper explores how the film innovatively transforms operatic elements through the medium of cinema. It first analyzes how the stylized performance techniques of traditional opera are dynamically adapted through film editing and mise-en-scène, thereby overcoming the limitations of stage performance. It then examines how innovations in the film's audiovisual language reconstruct the symbolic imagery of opera within a cinematic framework. Finally, the paper discusses the modern interpretation and creative transformation of Chinese traditional culture in the film's cross-media expression. This study highlights the potential and value of opera films in contemporary cultural dissemination, emphasizing the significance of cross-media expression in cultural heritage and innovation.

**Keywords:** Opera Film; Cinematic Poetics; Aesthetic Transformation; Cross-Media Expression; Cultural Innovation.

## I. The Background and Development of Opera Films

### (1) The Origins and Development of Opera Films

As a unique genre in Chinese cinema, opera films originated in the early 20th century, a period when the Chinese film market was still in its exploratory phase. With the introduction of cinema and the deep-rooted traditions of opera art, Chinese filmmakers began experimenting with the fusion of these two artistic forms, giving birth to the creation of opera films. Opera films not only embody the essence of traditional Chinese culture but also incorporate innovative elements in cinematic language and expressive techniques.

In the early stages of opera films, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, filmmaking techniques were still underdeveloped. Many early works were direct adaptations of traditional opera stage

performances, simply transferring the performance styles and narratives of opera onto the silver screen. One of the most famous representative works of this period is "Dingjun Mountain" (1934), which is based on a classic Peking opera repertoire. This film narrates a story from the Three Kingdoms period and successfully integrates the stylized performance of opera with cinematic narrative structures, marking the inception of opera films. The success of "Dingjun Mountain" laid the foundation for the subsequent development of opera films and symbolized the transition of opera art onto the silver screen.

With the continuous advancement of filmmaking technology, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, the form of opera films became increasingly diverse, and creative concepts underwent significant transformations. Opera films were no longer merely stage performances transposed onto film; instead, they began to explore a deeper integration of opera and cinematic language. During this period, classic opera films such as "The Legend of the White Snake" (1951) and "Grand Dance Festival" (1957) emerged. These films not only preserved the artistic characteristics of traditional opera but also introduced innovations in cinematography, set design, and musical arrangement, leaving a profound impact on the history of Chinese cinema.

The development of opera films was not confined to the imitative stage of the early 20th century. With the evolution of Chinese society and culture, particularly after the reform and opening-up, opera films entered a new phase of development. Filmmakers began exploring more modern modes of expression, blending traditional opera performances with contemporary cinematic language to create new artistic styles. In this process, opera films have become more than just a reproduction of traditional art—they serve as a reflection on cultural heritage and innovation.

## **(2) The Aesthetic Characteristics of Opera Films**

The aesthetic characteristics of opera films are primarily reflected in the integration of the stylized performance of traditional opera with cinematic language. As a comprehensive art form, traditional Chinese opera exhibits distinct stage performance features, where singing, dancing, acting, and martial arts are intricately interwoven. Moreover, the spatial presentation of opera on stage is often highly abstract, emphasizing symbolism and iconography. The fusion of this unique artistic language with cinematic techniques such as camera movement, editing, and lighting represents a crucial creative challenge in the production of opera films.

In traditional opera, actors' movements, facial expressions, and vocal techniques adhere to strict conventions and standardized patterns, emphasizing formal unity and discipline. When adapting opera for the screen, filmmakers face the challenge of overcoming the limitations of the traditional stage and leveraging the unique attributes of film to present the aesthetics of opera. With advancements in filmmaking technology, the introduction of cinematic language has allowed for a more diversified representation of opera's stylized performance, enriching the visual space and adding depth to both emotion and narrative.

Traditional opera stage design is typically characterized by simplicity and symbolic scenery, while film, through techniques such as camera movement, editing, and composition, can create a heightened sense of space and visual depth. The vocal elements of opera—including singing styles, melodies, and instrumental accompaniment—are often carefully integrated with filmic sound design and musical scoring to complement the visual narrative. The application of film sound technology further enhances the intricate soundscapes of opera, intensifying dramatic tension and deepening the aesthetic appeal of opera films. This fusion also provides audiences with an immersive audiovisual experience that differs from traditional stage performances.

Overall, the aesthetic characteristics of opera films are not only reflected in their faithful presentation of traditional operatic performance but also in their ability to transcend the boundaries between stage and cinematic media. This integration enables opera and film to harmoniously merge both visually and aurally, creating an artistic form that preserves the essence of traditional culture while incorporating the expressive potential of modern cinematic language.

### **(3) The Status of "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" in Opera Films**

On May 18, 1956, People's Daily published an editorial on its front page, declaring that "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" had "revived an entire opera genre"[1]. In two speeches that same year, Premier Zhou Enlai highly praised the film, calling it "a model of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom and discarding the old to bring forth the new.'" As an opera film rooted in Kunqu opera, "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" not only holds a significant place in the history of Chinese opera films but also made outstanding contributions to the preservation and innovation of Kunqu art. Directed by Tao Jin, the film was officially released in 1958. It is based on traditional Kunqu opera while incorporating modern cinematic storytelling techniques, resulting in an artistic style that transcends time and space.

The success of "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" can first be attributed to its unique cultural background and historical significance. The film is adapted from the classic Kunqu opera "Fifteen Strings of Coppers", which tells a story of money and morality, greed and conscience, embodying strong social themes and humanistic concerns. While reflecting traditional culture, the film also engages with modern societal reflections, preserving the essence of Kunqu opera while carrying the imprint of its era.

From an aesthetic perspective, "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" goes beyond a mere stage performance recording. Through meticulous set design, composition, and refined use of light and shadow, it successfully transforms the stylized stage performances of Kunqu opera into a cinematic visual language that aligns with the aesthetics of film audiences. This achieves a seamless fusion of traditional and modern artistic expressions.

"Fifteen Strings of Coppers" is not only a landmark work in Kunqu opera films but also a

milestone in the history of Chinese opera films. It modernized the traditional art form of Kunqu opera and provided valuable insights into how Chinese cinema can both inherit and innovate traditional culture. Through the production of "Fifteen Strings of Coppers", opera films found a new balance between cultural heritage and artistic expression, further advancing the development of Chinese film art.

## II. Cinematic Poetics and Opera Films

Cinematic poetics originates from literature, art, and philosophy, emphasizing the aesthetic value of imagery and the construction of visual symbolism. It is closely related to film language, narrative techniques, and the symbolic and imagistic nature of cinema. Under the profound influence of Aristotle's poetics, for over a century, research on film narrative and expression has often been framed within poetics. The poetic nature of cinema has been widely explored by film theorists, and the concept of "film poetics" has naturally emerged as a field of study.

In the past two decades, Chinese scholars have also published a series of monographs that examine film creation and theoretical discourse from a poetic perspective. Concepts such as "film poetics," "art poetics," and "cultural poetics" have been introduced into film studies, enriching the theoretical framework of cinematic poetics from various dimensions. Poetics can be closely integrated with film art, and as a research method and cognitive approach, the poetic perspective can also be applied to the study of photography, television, and multimedia. Thus, research on the poetics of various visual forms, originating from "film poetics," should continue to expand, further developing into the broader field of "cinematic poetics" while encompassing diverse visual media[2].

Cinematic poetics refers to the artistic integration of visual, sound, and symbolic elements into film expression, striving for poetic, philosophical, and aesthetic resonance through imagery. This theory not only focuses on the visual expressiveness of cinema but also emphasizes its narrative and emotional transmission. Cinematic poetics is not merely a depiction of the surface phenomena of images; more importantly, it involves a deep interpretation of the ideas, emotions, and cultural symbols embedded within them. In film studies, cinematic poetics uniquely endows films with philosophical and symbolic dimensions, making cinema not just a sensory experience but also an interplay of thought and emotion.

The poetic expression in film is often conveyed through cinematographic techniques, color usage, spatial composition, and narrative strategies. For example, the movement of the camera and the rhythm of editing are frequently employed to convey emotional tension or cognitive leaps. Through nonlinear narrative structures, films can break the boundaries of time and space, creating a poetic effect that transcends conventional logic. This effect is achieved through the texture of the imagery, the interplay of symbols, and the control of rhythm. The poetic nature of imagery reflects cinema's pursuit of beauty and its ability to convey emotions, making it an

indispensable artistic characteristic of film.

Against this backdrop, opera films, as a cross-media art form, further highlight the uniqueness of cinematic poetics. In traditional opera, stylized movements and dialogue are inherently poetic, and when adapted into film, these formalized elements merge with cinematic techniques. Through the language of the camera and the narrative methods unique to film, the dramatic expressions of opera are imbued with a deeper poetic essence.

### **III. The Aesthetic Transformation and Cross-Media Expression of "Fifteen Strings of Coppers"**

#### **(1) Innovation in the Film Medium and the Transformation of Operatic Conventions**

The performance techniques of traditional opera rely on vocal delivery, stylized movements, and stage sets. However, as a cinematic medium, film transcends the limitations of these performance methods, granting opera new visual space and expressive possibilities. The fundamental characteristics of Chinese opera—"stage scene division," "stage narrative time and space," and "stylized performance movements"[3]—require deconstruction, reorganization, and recreation to be effectively integrated into cinematic imagery. This transformation is primarily achieved through the rhetorical manipulation of editing techniques. In using film editing, the director must ensure coherence and natural continuity between shots while also emphasizing the narrative and emotional expression within each frame[4], thereby reconstructing and reshaping the "screen image" in opera films.

Taking the scene of You Hulu's drunken return home in "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" as an example, the traditional opera stage employs the "er dao mu" (secondary curtain) technique to achieve scene transitions—each time the character speaks, the stage scenery changes accordingly. In the film adaptation, however, the director uses various camera transitions to seamlessly depict this transformation. First, a panning shot establishes the spatial environment of the town, followed by a long take that captures You Hulu's movement trajectory. A wide shot then showcases the transition of his stylized operatic movements. Meanwhile, close-ups and mid-range shots provide contextual details about the character's interactions with his surroundings, visually narrating his journey home while also establishing spatial relationships between locations—such as the proximity of Qin Guxin's house and You Hulu's residence within the town, governed by Jia Bao's authority. The use of real-life settings enhances the film's realism, replacing the conventionally abstract and symbolic stage space with a tangible environment. Additionally, the positioning of the butcher's knife inside You Hulu's house foreshadows Lou Ashu's crime later in the film. This transition from the implied spatial conventions of the opera stage to a fully realized cinematic space strengthens the film's sense of realism and facilitates the

successful integration of stage scene division with filmic narrative time and space.

The strategic camera transitions not only preserve the artistic essence of "stylized performance movements" in opera films but also merge the "abstract expressiveness" of traditional opera with the "realistic imagery" of cinema, breaking through the constraints of stage-bound time and space. This allows the parallel development of two narrative threads—You Hulu and Su Xujuan—where the "imaginary space" of opera intertwines with the "realistic visuals" of cinema. As a result, the filmic adaptation of opera retains the artistic sensibility of the stage while simultaneously infusing it with the dynamism and dramatic tension unique to cinema.

## **(2) Cross-Media Adaptation of Audiovisual Language**

In "Fifteen Strings of Coppers", the stylized movements and vocal techniques of traditional opera are effectively transformed and reinterpreted through the audiovisual language of cinema. This adaptation not only preserves the aesthetic formalism of opera but also enhances the emotional intensity and artistic expressiveness unique to film. The director skillfully employs detailed close-ups and emotional portrayals to capture the subtle emotional fluctuations inherent in opera performances, allowing the film to retain the distinct charm of opera while advancing its narrative.

For example, in the scene where Su Xujuan anxiously sings her soliloquy inside her home, the film not only conveys her emotions through traditional operatic gestures but also intensifies them by using zoom-ins and close-ups to highlight the delicate changes in her facial expressions, thereby amplifying the depth of her inner turmoil. Similarly, the sequence where Lou Ashu sneaks into You Hulu's house intending to steal is depicted through precise shot transitions and close-up details of him rolling under the table, vividly portraying his deceitful nature. This meticulous cinematographic approach allows the "formalized beauty" of opera to be exquisitely translated into the cinematic medium.

Film editing techniques such as entry and exit framing, ellipsis, and other methods transform operatic stylized movements into "edited imagery", retaining the structured formalism of the movements while utilizing camera angles and dynamic framing to enrich the emotional depth and three-dimensionality of the film. Through the rhetorical manipulation of "editing shots", the director transforms the originally static nature of operatic performance into fluid, dynamic imagery, achieving a more poetic visual effect.

This approach is particularly evident in key scenes such as Su Xujuan's departure from home to seek refuge with her aunt in Gaoqiao and her encounter with Xiong Youlan along the way. In these moments, the director blends the frozen gestures of opera with the fluid motion of cinematic shots, ensuring that the formalized movements are seamlessly carried over into the film while also vividly depicting the characters' inner conflicts and emotional fluctuations. This

continuation of formalized aesthetics transcends the limitations of the operatic stage, transforming static performances into sequences imbued with rhythm and motion, thereby creating a unique poetic atmosphere.

Additionally, gong and drum beats, which serve as symbolic expressions of emotion in opera, guide audience emotions through rhythmic variations. In the film, changes in sound design complement the camera's movements, ensuring that at critical plot junctures, the carefully orchestrated interplay between sound effects, visual pacing, and emotional tension is fully realized. For instance, in scenes where Su Xujuan faces crucial decisions, the integration of background music with punctuated drumbeats not only sustains the operatic formalized movements but also deepens the internal conflict and emotional struggles of the character. This synchronization intensifies the film's emotional tension, fully showcasing the unique artistic allure of opera and cinema combined.

### **(3) Set Design and the Continuation of the Operatic Stage**

Traditional Chinese opera stages rely on bright color contrasts and minimalist set designs, using symbolic elements to convey character identity and emotions. In film, however, lighting and spatial variations are employed to further enhance this visual effect. In "Fifteen Strings of Coppers", the director integrates on-location shooting with constructed virtual settings, preserving the symbolic and emblematic elements of the operatic stage while using cinematic spatial depth to create a richer visual experience.

Opera set designs are traditionally simplistic, relying on symbolic backdrops and conventionalized virtual spaces that audiences understand implicitly. However, in the film, the director meticulously reconstructs realistic settings, such as the town's streets, You Hulu's home, Gaoqiao, and the government office, crafting a detailed spatial environment. The film's numerous nighttime scenes, featuring breathtaking natural landscapes, are particularly poetic. These scenes, such as You Hulu returning home after borrowing money and Su Xujuan lamenting under the moonlight, establish a strong visual atmosphere and deepen the film's aesthetic appeal. Through three-dimensional on-location shooting, the virtual spaces of the opera stage are transformed into tangible, immersive environments, lending the film a heightened sense of realism and everyday life.

The film's color palette and lighting design also pay homage to the traditional opera stage. In Chinese opera, character identity and personality traits are often distinguished through makeup and costume colors. The film retains this symbolic design. For instance, the corrupt official, who disregards human life, wears a black robe, accompanied by dim lighting to emphasize the oppressive power hierarchy and the suffering of common people. In contrast, Kuang Zhong, portrayed as the people's just and virtuous magistrate, is frequently dressed in a red robe, symbolizing loyalty and righteousness. His courtroom scenes are designed with bright and



spacious settings to reflect his upright nature. This interplay of color and lighting not only enhances the film's visual expressiveness but also deepens its emotional resonance.

#### **(4) Temporal and Spatial Manipulation and Multi-Line Narrative**

On the opera stage, spatial representation is often confined by the "one table, two chairs" convention, which limits scene transitions. However, in "Fifteen Strings of Coppers", the director overcomes these constraints through temporal and spatial manipulation and multi-line narrative techniques. By skillfully interweaving different timelines and parallel storylines, the segmented structure of traditional opera is transformed into a fluid cinematic narrative.

The intertwining narrative threads of *You Hulu* and *Su Xujuan* exemplify the fusion of "imaginary space" from opera and "realistic imagery" in cinema, enhancing the film's narrative depth and layering. The optimization of pacing allows for a seamless transition of the traditionally segmented opera structure into the film's storytelling. Through adjustments in shot rhythm and the interweaving of plotlines, the film successfully integrates the formal aesthetics of opera with the narrative fluidity of cinema. This approach preserves the artistic essence of opera while simultaneously creating the distinct sense of rhythm and dynamism unique to film.

### **IV. Cultural Transmission and Innovation in Cross-Media Expression**

"Fifteen Strings of Coppers" is not merely a reproduction and transformation of traditional opera but also an innovative expression of Chinese cultural heritage within a modern media environment. As a crucial medium for cultural dissemination, cinema deepens the cultural expression and artistic function of opera through its manipulation of time and space, emotional tension, and visual aesthetics. In "Fifteen Strings of Coppers", the fusion of traditional operatic elements with cinematic techniques not only enhances the fluidity of stylized opera movements but also conveys a greater depth of emotion and artistic tension through dynamic imagery. This transformation enables opera to transcend the limitations of the stage, evolving into a cultural transmission tool that spans across time and media, thereby amplifying its cultural influence and artistic significance.

Opera films exhibit a set of common principles in cross-media expression. First, the stylized movements of opera undergo a dynamic transformation in film. Traditional operatic gestures are typically rich in symbolism and ritualistic significance, yet through camera movement and editing techniques, these movements are no longer static but instead become fluid, layered, and narratively functional visual elements. Second, the cross-boundary application of spatial visuals is a key feature of opera films. Traditional opera stages rely on minimalist backgrounds and symbolic scenery, where audiences interpret character identities and emotions through these



elements. However, film enriches the visual experience by constructing three-dimensional spatial environments. Third, the integration of sound and image serves as a crucial artistic strategy in opera films. In opera, percussive cues and vocal melodies function as emotional signposts and narrative guides, whereas in cinema, sound effects and background music work in tandem to intensify emotional depth and dramatic tension. At critical plot junctures, the interplay between sound design and cinematography not only preserves the formalized movements of opera but also deepens character conflicts and emotional fluctuations.

In terms of modernizing thematic expression, film endows traditional operatic themes with new interpretations. Themes such as loyalty, justice, and political intrigue are rendered with greater nuance through the cinematic language and emotional techniques employed in "Fifteen Strings of Coppers". By reconstructing the aesthetic formalism of opera, the film allows these themes to transcend temporal boundaries, resonating with contemporary audiences and fostering a deeper understanding of their significance.

In summary, "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" successfully bridges tradition and modernity by reinterpreting and reinventing operatic elements through cinematic language. It not only provides a new platform for the dissemination of opera but also offers modern audiences a richer aesthetic experience and a stronger sense of cultural identity. The film's modernized articulation of aesthetic themes and ideological depth not only extends the vitality of traditional culture but also infuses it with new artistic tension and contemporary relevance.

## V. Conclusion

As a unique form of expression within Chinese traditional culture, opera films have undergone a journey of innovation and transformation. From early stage adaptations to modern cinematic creations, opera films have not only evolved in artistic form but have also established a new balance between cultural inheritance and innovation.

As a classic opera film, "Fifteen Strings of Coppers" exemplifies the close relationship between cinema and traditional performing arts within the framework of cinematic poetics. By leveraging camera language and the distinctive attributes of the film medium, the movie successfully translates the formalized aesthetics of opera into cinematic expression while serving as an important case study for the development of film poetics. The application of cinematic poetics not only enhances the artistic depth of the film but also allows cinema to emerge as a new mode of operatic expression, flourishing uniquely within a contemporary media landscape.

Looking ahead, in the context of global cultural diversity, it is essential to further explore the intrinsic potential of opera films and deepen the integration of traditional performing arts with modern cinematic language. By combining traditional culture with contemporary technology and artistic forms, we can achieve a leap forward in cultural dissemination, ensuring that the legacy of

opera continues to thrive in new media environments.

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