

# Intertextuality of “Triple Present”: on the Creation of Contemporary Chinese Art Film

## Taking the Film “Mr. No Problem” as an Example\*

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**Abstract**—This paper aims to make a comprehensive study on the “antecedents and consequences” of the Chinese contemporary art film creation with the film “Mr. No Problem” as a reference text, and to explore its implications on Chinese film style in the commercial context. Taking the film “Mr. No Problem” as an example, this paper analyzes the historical inheritance and innovation and the reflection on contemporary life embodied in the creation of Chinese contemporary art films, and the thinking on the future development of Chinese art films from the “triple present” perspective of the “past present, present present and future present”.

**Keywords**—triple present; intertextuality; Mr. No Problem; Chinese film; academism; commerce and art

### I. INTRODUCTION

Volker Schlöndorff said in the short film of “Enlightenment” shooting for “Ten Minutes Older: The Cello”, “If there is a time, there is only the present time, divided into the past present, the present present and the future present”, and tells the rich connotation of the present time through a concrete family story. However, as a historical existence, film works are never isolated, but are the “real consequences” of the “antecedents” of social development, historical progress, ideas of the times, ideology and aesthetic taste, all of which contain the past, present and future of film. The French critics once said that each film is full of “intertextuality” and is “a film about film” after the world film go through a hundred years’ history. The “intertextuality” is particularly evident among the film writers of the academician school who wrote under the influence and edification of the masterpieces in world’s film history.

The connection and dialogue among “past-present-future” can be found more or less, implicit or obvious in any excellent film without exception, especially in the film creation as the inheritance of the fine film tradition. A typical example is an

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American film “The Artist” in 2011 that was created in the “present” digital era with advanced film technology, however, it also employed the form of “silent film” of the “past” classical Hollywood film period from which the “past” of the film can be seen, and thus arouse the audience’s nostalgia complex. As the “triple present”, the creator did not want to make a real “silent film”, but to display an in-depth dialogue and fusion between the “past” and the “present”, which has been shown in the opening scene. The film started with silent films, but soon became the scenes on the theater screen that the audience watching the theatre, the accompanying band, and the attentive audience. The photography, editing and special effects of the film were all the “past present”. “The Artist” was a contemporary work that combined the multiple dialogues of “past and present”, “present and present” and “future and present”, not only expressed the recollection of the excellent tradition of the past film, promoting the looking back toward the current attitude towards film creation, but also displayed the deep concern for the future film.

Analyzing the well-received literary film “Mr. No Problem” from the perspective of “triple present” and putting it into the field of film history, we can find that it has rich connotation on the inheritance and reform of film history. As a work of the “New Academy” film project of Beijing Film Academy, the film’s creators are mainly teachers and students of Beijing Film Academy, the director Mei Feng, the painting Wang Tuo, the recording Zheng Jiaqing, the image designer Wang Zhan are the teachers, and the playwright Huang Shi and the director of photography Zhu Jinjing are graduated from the department of literature and photography of Beijing Film Academy. Therefore, the film “Mr. No Problem” is a typical academic film and literal art film, focusing on the inheritance and innovation of excellent film tradition and Chinese film aesthetics. With the solid literary foundation of Lao She’s original work, this film has a typical “Chinese flavor” in terms of expressing the content of the subject matter, the visual style of the picture and the aesthetic connotation, and also contains rich dialogue relations. In the film ecology that dominated by the Hollywood film model, gradually lose the fine tradition of Chinese films and blinded by the

entertainment of film, Mr. No Problem provides an analytical sample for contemporary Chinese film creation and development with these rich dialogues between the past and the present.

## II. THE PAST PRESENT: INHERITANCE AND INNOVATION OF THE AESTHETICS TRADITION OF CHINESE FILM

The texts of “Mr. No. Problem” reflect the development and innovation of traditional Chinese aesthetics. As a director with long-term teaching experience in the film academy and has rich creative experience, Mei Feng is familiar with film history and all kinds of aesthetic schools and classics in history, which has become a rich source of his creation. The director made the classic work in film history as the reference text and the source of inspiration for his film creation skillfully, so the dialogues between the past and the present, history and the present were displayed in the work naturally.

### A. *Dialogue Between the Past and the Present: Chinese Classical Aesthetics and Chinese Literati Films*

The pictures of “Mr. No Problem” convey a direct impression of the “ink” picture and the artistic conception of “harmony between people and scenery” created by the black-and-white image and the composition of a picture. Therefore, the whole film is full of a strong sense of classical Chinese aesthetics, and the dialogue between the past and the present Chinese classical aesthetics is realized, which reflects the inheritance and development of Chinese classical aesthetics. Mei Feng said in the director exposition that, “the overall aesthetics of a film should be balanced between realistic and freehand, between the classical and modern”. [1] One of the playwrights Huang Shi said, “we should find a middle way between realistic and freehand”[2], combining the effects displayed by the picture, that is, the film should convey a kind of “image” beauty, emphasize “scene blending” and “harmony between man and nature”. The film mainly adopts the expression technique of “one shot at one scene” that a scene is shot with long lens mostly composed by long-range and panorama shot and without bokeh telephoto lens basically, striving to display the relationship between the characters and the environment, and among the characters from the lens. Besides, the space of the film is Shuhua Farm surrounded by mountains and rivers, making the picture show the “image beauty” of traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Pursuing the “image beauty” that merging feeling with scene is the common characteristic of the traditional Chinese literati film, the typical representative is the “Springtime in a Small Town” directed by Fei Mu, a “poet director”. As said in the creation exposition of “Mr. No Problem” that the film “Springtime in a Small Town” had been seen several times during the preparation of “Mr. No Problem”, and starting with “Springtime in a Small Town”, they have a thorough research on things related to fine arts” [3], therefore, the pictures of “Mr. No Problem” pursues the beauty of “neat and orderly”, and “symmetry”, which is closely related to the Chinese classical architecture and the elegant furnish.

The dialogue relationship between the classic and the modern, the tradition and the present in “Mr. No Problem” is also reflected in the application of the “minimalist” technique.

Chinese classical aesthetics, such as Chinese ink and wash painting, calligraphy and architectural art, stresses the beauty of conciseness, blankness and simplicity, pursues the beauty of implication and profound charm, and pays no attention to complex artistic techniques. This kind of aesthetic pursuit has influenced the creation of Chinese film, and obscured the in-depth excavation of the film expression form and image of the early filmmakers. The concise and simple film techniques are reflected in the use of a large number of fixed lens and simple and straightforward scene scheduling, which is precisely the reason for the formation of the classical aesthetic pursuit of “beauty in image” in Chinese films. So “Mr. No Problem” completely “simplify what is complicated” and employ the shooting method of “one shot at one scene”, which is indeed something rare among all kind of dazzling “fancy photography” in film making, and is the inheritance of tradition and the rebellion of the impetuous movie form and skill. The film of “Mr. No Problem” is 144 minutes in length with only 146 lenses, almost one shot in one minute on average, and mostly are fixed shots. However, the single shot has great power. The creator makes full use of the richness and ambiguity of the content of the long lens and adapts it to the implicit and endless aesthetic pursuit of the Chinese classical. In the scene scheduling inside the lens, the director is also extremely restrained that everything return to simple and implicit, making it extremely rare and full of artistic courage in the “audio-visual logic” in cinema that pursuing “visual stimulation” and “visual spectacle”, and also make “Mr. No Problem” a unique and distinctive film in the film market in 2017, like a fresh breeze for the 2017 art film.

As the “past present”, “Mr. No Problem” is not a retrogressive copy of “Chinese Film Tradition”, but classical and modern in artistic treatment. It presents a dialogue relationship, the so-called “modern” in this film is mainly reflected in the in-depth excavation of the “film noumenon”, that is, the combination of lens performance and characterization, using different photographic styles according to the character’s personality and characteristics. For example, when shooting Ding Wuyuan, who is modest and deep, fixed lens are used and the picture is also steady and dignified; while hand held shaking lens are used in shooting Qin Miaozhai, a vulgar artists, corresponding to Qin Miaozhai’s impetuous and unstable character; in You Daxing’s part, the lens turn back to fixed one, the textbook like composition is consistent with the solemn style of You Daxing. The same is true of sound performance. The film uses some “symbolic sound elements” that correspond to the characters in the film, such as Ding Wuyuan and the owl’s sound, using the image of an owl, implies that Ding Wuyuan “acts independently, turn a blind eye to something, cunning and subtlety”; duck’s sound is corresponding with Qin Miaozhai, showing his idle, indulge in verbiage and do no decent work; using the clock sound to show You Daxing’s characteristic of stereotyped, observant of conventional standards and self-disciplined. The use of these sound elements is so ingenious.

### B. *Dialogue with Foreign Classics*

As an academic film creation, the creation vision of “Mr. No Problem” is rather broad, based on the rich and in-depth professional film research and learning, making the film full of

artistic film quality. In addition to the Chinese film classics mentioned above, some foreign classical films have also become the source of inspiration for the film creation, and have affected the choice of the creator, scene scheduling and shooting scheduling intentionally or unintentionally.

First of all, the film adopts the “three-act” structure in Lao She’s original work, with three main characters “Ding Wuyuan, Qin Miaozhai, You Daxing” constitute the film’s three parts, but intertwined and influenced with each other at the same time. Ding Wuyuan acts throughout the whole film, but has different status in different parts. The style of centering on character structure in “Mr. No Problem” also has a dialogue relationship in film history, such as the film “Rocco e i suoi fratelli” directed by Visconti, the representative of Italy’s Neo realism, in 1960, employed character structure to display the individual choice and fate of five brothers in the special era. The whole film was composed by “Simon”, “Locco” and “Heague”, showed the different characters and fates of the five brothers, and expressed the reasons for the characters’ personalities and personal fates thoroughly. It can be said to be a model film in displaying characters and families. Mei Feng, the director, did not mention the film “Rocco e i suoi fratelli” in his creation exposition and interviews, but the two formed a dialogue that spanned 56 years in structure, and perhaps it was the unconscious influence brought about by profound film history accomplishment.

Secondly, in reference to the style of the picture, the director Mei Feng mentioned Jean-Renoir, Godar, Bresson and other master directors in film history. The influence of these masters’ works have laid a high tone for the artistic pursuit of “Mr. No Problem”, for example, Renoir’s “Toni” and “Journal d’un curé de campagne” provide a direct reference for the film’s picture style and scene selection, and Godard’s painting skills have a direct impact on the creation of picture composition.

### III. THE PRESENT OF PRESENT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FILMS TO THE PRESENT

From the return of the nature of film entertainment in the 1980s to the rise of popular culture in the 1990s, to the development of digital technology in the 21st century, and into the second decade of the 21st century, the visual spectacle and entertainment of movies have been unprecedentedly publicized, and the vulgar, accessory and blindly mischievous works catering to the market have also sprung up in large numbers in China, a large amount of capital injection and huge economic benefits make art logic into business logic. The aesthetic fatigue caused by the bombing of fresh young boys and visual wonders cannot help but make people emptying himself and think for a moment in impetuous and complicated environment, what is the significance of movies in the present era? Is it just a laugh or a surprise?

The emergence of “Mr. No Problem” and other art films like “Twenty Two”, “Paths of the Soul” and “Angels Wear White” that aroused heated discussions have provided another answer to this question. Films are not only visual and surface entertainment satisfaction for the contemporary audience, but increasingly tend to trigger the contemporary living, contemporary life, social problems. This has to remind people

of the early Chinese film when Zheng Zhengqiu, Hong Shen, Hou Quan and other film predecessors advocated the film enlightenment function and the artistic proposition “for life”. As the “present present”, films should be directed at the present society.

From the theme connotation, “Mr. No Problem” is a fable film directly referring to the present. Although the characters, events and environment are all set in the period of the Republic of China, when the director Mei Feng chooses Lao She’s original work of the same name as the edited material, what touches him is the realistic significance of this work for the contemporary era. Director Mei Feng mentioned in the interview that he noticed that Lao She’s novel is not only fresh, but also is “a reflection of reality and Chinese culture.....the novel “Mr. No Problem” tells the story of capitalists, hooligans, intellectuals and returnees whom are the elements we are familiar with, and the concepts of identity, class and gender are also very easy to be picked up in modern films.” The theme of “Mr. No Problem” is profound, expressing the survival laws in Chinese style society of human relationship, some people call it “workplace textbook” after watching, “learning how to be a man” is much more important than “doing thing well” in Chinese style society. Ding Wuyuan managed the farm at a disadvantageous loss but was able to stand firm in the position of director, relying on the interpersonal communication skills of both sides, while You Daxing has strong professional ability but low EQ, fail to handle interpersonal relationship and ultimately achieve nothing. The insight into the relationship between Chinese people has an in-depth reveal to the essence of contemporary Chinese society.

The expression of farm in the film is also quite ingenious, being an in-depth response to the theme and the behavior of the characters. Ding Wuyuan, the main character of the film, is the director of Shuhua Farm, but the expression of farm animals, plants and their ecology are only displayed in the section of You Daxing as a special paragraph, there is no special “farm environment description” in the section of Ding Wuyuan. This undoubtedly corresponds to Ding Wuyuan’s mentality and behavior that he does not care much about the main business and the management of the farm, but put most of his efforts in how to curry favor with shareholders, please people around him to win more interests for himself. Moreover, the demonstration of the vigorous ecology of the farm in the You Daxing section clearly displays the strong and professional business ability of You Daxing. He can manage the farm well and make a profit for the farm, but it is a great pity he cannot do a great job because he cannot handle the human relationship well. This montage farm ecology contrasts sharply with the first half of Ding Wuyuan’s section and reveals the critical irony in Lao She’s original work: the seemingly “no problem” Ding Wuyuan actually is a big problem, and the “problem” You Daxing has “no problem” in particular. However, the problems expressed in “Mr. No Problem” are not limited to these, China’s human relation law can be said to permeate in all aspects of Chinese society, for example, the two major shareholders of the farm, Boss Xu (and his third mistress) and Boss Tong (and Miss Tong), in fact, reflect the delicate relationship between “Chinese partners”. With regard to Ding Wuyuan’s attitude, Boss Xu’s

“no problem” and Boss Tong’s “problem” are all made on their own interests.

In short, as the “present present”, “Mr. No Problem” is a social fable, which has enlightening significance for contemporary Chinese to think about China’s current society.

#### IV. THE FUTURE PRESENT: THE GAME AND INTEGRATION OF COMMERCE AND ART

As an academic art film, “Mr. No Problem” has a certain guiding significance to the current film creation.

First of all, the film provides a textbook for the artistic accomplishment and accumulation of a film director or filmmaker. Film creation is always a two-way process facing history and the present. How to absorb abundant nutrition from tradition, improve the quality of works, and affect the present at the same time, “inspire the people’s wisdom” are the questions that every filmmaker should think about.

At present, the Chinese film market also has the problems like in “Mr. No Problem” to a certain extent. In recent years, China’s film industry has witnessed an explosive development, with a box office breakthrough of 50 billion Yuan in 2017. At present, China’s film market has become the second largest in the world. A large amount of capital and production resources have been injected into the Chinese market, and the enthusiasm of the whole people for watching films have soared, which seems to be “no problem”. In fact, a careful examination of the market composition will reveal that there are still many problems: “Wolf Warriors II” has won a box office of over 5.6 billion Yuan that break a record in 2017, accounting for nearly 1/10 of the box office in the whole year. However, there were hundreds of films produced in 2017, which fully illustrated the imbalance of the Chinese film market. The simplification of audience appreciation tastes, and the prevalence of “pan-entertainment”, “capital-based” and commercial thinking in the film creation, make people have to worry about entertainment until the death.

However, the phenomenon of some art films being well received in 2017 is quite comforting, such as documentaries “Twenty Two”, “Paths of the Soul”, “Angels Wear White” and “Mr. No Problem”, and even some art films have made more than 100 million box office, indicating that although Chinese film audiences are still dominated by commercial blockbusters, there is a trend of “viewing taste” diversification. This trend is the beginning of the benign development of Chinese films. The art films represented by “Mr. No Problem” have certain practical significance in correcting the “art standard” and aesthetic quality of Chinese films.

#### V. CONCLUSION

With the advent of the all-media era and the rapid development of China’s commercial films, along with the blindly pursuing the commercial interests of the film, the creators will also experience the ups and downs of the market, and survival of the fittest. Therefore, in the future, the quality of Chinese films, whether commercial or artistic, will become an important magic weapon for the survival in the market, and the boundaries between the two will become increasingly blurred. Undoubtedly, the academic art films represented by

“Mr. No Problem” provide valuable texts for contemporary film creation on how to absorb the traditional nutrition of Chinese film and create the unique “Chinese style” film works characterized by a new era.

As a kind of “future”, the creation of Chinese “art” films is still promising.

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