

# The Dynamic Interaction Between Film Narration and Literary Field: Taking Chen Kaige's "The Legend of the Demon Cat" as an Instance\*

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**Abstract**—The film "The Legend of the Demon Cat" is an adaptation of the Japanese novel "The Grand Tang Dynasty Ghost Banquet of Konghai the Monk". It represents another fantastical-themed creation by Chen Kaige following "The Promise". With its sumptuous and dazzling scenes and elaborate plot arrangements, it not only recreates the opulent ambiance of the Tang Dynasty but also permeates classical literary connotations throughout the details, achieving an organic fusion of film and literature. Generally, the lens narration of "The Legend of the Demon Cat" is intertwined with Chen Kaige's literary construction of "poeticizing" the film. Whether it is the literary manifestation of shooting techniques, the three-dimensional portrayal of literati figures, or the visual presentation of literary undertones, all of these exemplify the complementarity between literary art and film art. This literarization of films and the infiltration of literature into film and television have, to a certain extent, enriched the aesthetic palette of domestic films and furnished certain shooting references for future films adapted from fantasy literature.

**Index Terms**—Chen Kaige, "Legend of the Demon Cat", film narrative, literary manifestation, dynamic interaction

## I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the preeminent representatives of China's fifth-generation directors, Chen Kaige has long been renowned both domestically and internationally as a "film poet". His oeuvre, ranging from early works such as "Yellow Earth", "Farewell My Concubine", and "The Emperor and the Assassin" to subsequent creations like "Together with You", "The Promise", "Forever Enthralled", and "Sacrifice", is pervaded with a potent humanistic aura and a "poetic" literary flavor. Consequently, there is an assessment that he is "enthusiastically engaged in forging a union between film and literature" (Wang, 2019, p. 73). "The Legend of the Demon Cat", released in 2017, even more vividly reflects Chen Kaige's visual amalgamation of literature and film and television within the framework of the film's multiple narratives. From the vantage point of shooting techniques, "The Legend of the Demon Cat" employs the "flashback" method and intersperses pictorial scenes with literary images to intensify the film's evocation of Tang poetry. In terms of the narrative configuration of literati figures, through the delineation of Tang Dynasty poets like Li Bai and Bai Juyi in the film, Chen Kaige not only faithfully restores the sincere and forthright literati persona of the Tang Dynasty poet cohort but also unfolds the complex and profound literati image against the backdrop of a prosperous era. From the perspective of the visual construction of literary connotations, Chen Kaige in the film transports viewers into the resplendent panorama of the Tang Dynasty via the orchestration of actors' costumes, the modulation of lighting scenes, the selection of stage props, and the capture of special effects images, thereby kindling the viewers' boundless reveries about Tang poetry. Although "a multitude of adaptations still adhere to the narrative structure of the original novels, with the most typical being those that amalgamate epic structure and epic quality. If the adaptation does not pivot around a specific story point from the original, it generally cleaves to the epic structure of the source material" (Xu, 2024, p. 134), "The Legend of the Demon Cat" is a film of a fantastical genre. Chen Kaige's integration of film and television and literature, especially the artistic congruence between film narrative and literary presentation, offers a certain degree of reference and inspiration for subsequent literary adaptation films.

## II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Presenting Literature Via Flashback

"Flashback" is a cinematographic shooting technique. Flashback "typically emerges when the plot or image in a movie transitions from the present to the past, rupturing time and space. It is a prevalent narrative and character memory device in film narration, unfurling the process of prior or other story content" (Pan, 2021, p. 4). The flashback technique in "The Legend of the Demon Cat" frequently showcases Li Bai's poem "Qingping Diao" in a direct and unadorned manner. This expressive modality is principally manifested in three segments within the film:

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The initial appearance occurs when the demon cat possesses Chunqin. When Chen Yunqiao witnesses the monk Konghai, played by Jiangtao Yanagiba, exorcising evil spirits for prostitutes, he implores Konghai to expel the demon cat on behalf of his wife Chunqin. Konghai and Bai Juyi, portrayed by Huang Xuan, arrive at the Chen residence and discover that Chunqin, transformed by the demon cat, is traversing the roof ridge and intoning the renowned line “Clouds think of clothes, flowers think of looks” from Li Bai’s “Qingping Diao”. Under the moonlight, she bears a resemblance to Yang Yuhuan. This sequence also prefigures the “Feast of Bliss” and the emergence of Yang Guifei three decades ago.

The second manifestation transpires when Bai Juyi and others peruse the diary of Abe Nakamaro, the Japanese envoy to the Tang Dynasty. Through Abe’s diary recollections, the director shifts the visual tableau to the magnificent panorama of the “Feast of Bliss” thirty years prior. Li Bai composed the celebrated poem “Qingping Diao” beside the wine pool: “Clouds think of clothes, flowers think of looks. The spring breeze caresses the railing, and the dew is thick. If not seen on the top of Qunyu Mountain, one would meet under the moon by Yaotai”. Amidst the hazy inebriation, Li Bai’s literary prowess and unrestrained spirit are in perfect harmony, and the poetic imagery is thereby unfurled.

The third occurrence takes place when Bai Juyi and Konghai arrive at the derelict wine pool. When Bai Juyi stumbles upon the writing brush once utilized by Li Bai, the movie camera reverts to the “Feast of Bliss” in Chang’an thirty years ago. Yang Guifei erroneously presumes that Li Bai’s “Qingping Diao” was bespoke for her, thus deliberately approaching Li Bai to express her gratitude. She even directly recites the line “Clouds think of clothes, flowers think of looks”. At this moment, Yang Yuhuai, attired in resplendent garments, corresponds to the poem, and her peerless allure is exquisitely exhibited against the backdrop of poetry.

Although “The Legend of the Demon Cat” principally recounts a series of vengeful acts perpetrated by the demon cat in retaliation for Yang Yuhuai’s demise, “Clouds think of clothes, flowers think of looks” pervades the entire film. This not only serves as the crowning touch of this cinematic work but also constitutes an essential nexus between this film and “Song of Everlasting Sorrow”. This poem naturally metamorphoses into the guiding thread for the development of the story plot and subsequently propels the progression of the film’s narrative.

### *B. Narrative Shaping of Literati Figures*

“The Legend of the Demon Cat” fashions the literati figures such as Bai Juyi and Li Bai through means like restoring the original plot and artistic transmutation. The film as a whole engenders an aesthetic tableau of “poetic sentimentality”. In general, the literati image represents a significant artistic display element, whether in traditional literary depictions or in modern film shootings. The literati image presented based on the shooting tonality of “literati painting” possesses more pronounced personalities and more fully fleshed-out characters, which, to a certain extent, accentuates the aesthetic assimilation of the literati image into film images. In ancient times, the so-called “literati” denoted “members of the intellectual stratum who boasted a relatively elevated cultural level and epitomized social morality” (Chen, 2014, p. 81). In “The Legend of the Demon Cat”, Bai Juyi and Li Bai, who make an appearance, not only perpetuate their historical authenticity but are also endowed with the positive image of traditional scholars by director Chen Kaige. The overarching narrative backdrop of the film plays an irreplaceable role in sculpting the literati image:

#### *(a). The Film Depicts Li Bai as a Poet Endowed With an Unyielding Spirit in the Face of the Powerful and an Unfettered Personality*

Historically, Li Bai is a preeminent romantic poet. He is characterized by a bold and magnanimous disposition, is open-hearted and chivalrous, is proficient in drinking and versifying. His works are “imbued with intense emotions, are forthright and audacious. In terms of artistic expression, they accentuate the articulation of inner sentiments” (Guo, 2006, p. 95). In “The Legend of the Demon Cat”, Chen Kaige principally showcases Li Bai’s literati image in the “Feast of Bliss” through brief shots. Although Li Bai only graces the screen for a few minutes in the film, the actor Xin Baiqing vividly incarnates Li Bai’s unrestrained and haughty persona. For instance, when Gao Lishi, a favored courtier of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty, commanded Li Bai to compose a poem and even menaced him with the emperor’s decree, Li Bai not only remained unperturbed and intrepid but also instructed Gao Lishi to remove his boots prior to penning a poem. After Gao Lishi spurned his request, Li Bai retaliated with Yang Guifei’s words and declared, “Your Majesty averred that there is no disparity between superiority and inferiority at the Feast of Bliss. I tested it with someone of a lofty official position. As anticipated, it turns out to be spurious. Gao Lishi, you are deceiving the emperor and the empress”. After Gao Lishi doffed his boots for him, Li Bai tilted his head skyward and guffawed heartily, swigging from the wine pool. At this juncture, a close-up shot of Li Bai materialized in the movie, and his literati image of defying the powerful was vividly manifested.

Furthermore, Chen Kaige molds Li Bai’s unrestrained literati image through the narrative vantage point. When Li Bai was inscribing a poem on Gao Lishi’s back, he was at times lost in contemplation, at times staring fixedly, and at times laughing boisterously. He was wholly immersed in the creative process, heedless of the bemused stares of those in his vicinity. Upon completing the final line of the poem, Li Bai bluntly avowed that this poem “could not be altered by a single word”. Simultaneously, he directly flung the writing brush in his hand into the wine pool and reclined supine, sound asleep. At this moment, the movie camera zoomed in from afar to near, and Li Bai’s carefree mien was vividly presented on the screen, endowing viewers with a profound sense of Li Bai’s unfettered and free-spirited nature. After Yang Guifei finished perusing “Qingping Diao”, she deliberately advanced in front of Li Bai to convey her gratitude. Li Bai not only refrained from flattering her but also candidly stated that this poem was not composed for Yang Guifei. Although Gao

Lishi, standing by, endeavored to persuade Li Bai to admit that “Clouds think of clothes, flowers think of looks” was a poem “custom-made” for Yang Yuhuan, Li Bai tenaciously adhered to his principle and said, “But I cannot deceive Your Majesty, can I?” At this juncture, Li Bai’s image of arrogance, forthrightness, and free-spiritedness was impeccably displayed. Therefore, what Yang Guifei subsequently uttered, “the Great Tang is truly remarkable on account of you”, is not merely dictated by the exigencies of the movie’s plot development. It rather seems as if Chen Kaige is leveraging Yang Guifei’s words to convey the director’s personal admiration and plaudits for Li Bai’s literati image. Especially when Li Bai gazed at Yang Guifei’s retreating figure and murmured, “It’s just ‘Clouds think of clothes, flowers think of looks’”, it enabled the audience to sense the guileless and romantic sensibilities of a poet.

*(b). The Film Portrays Bai Juyi as a Poet of Integrity and Straightforwardness*

Bai Juyi, played by Huang Xuan, is the protagonist of “The Legend of the Demon Cat”. He not only harbors the conviction of “forsaking officialdom for the sake of poetry” but is also imbued with the positive image of integrity and straightforwardness characteristic of traditional literati. At the commencement of the film, Emperor Dezong of the Tang Dynasty succumbed to the bewitchment of the demon cat. When the attendants in his proximity beheld this, they enjoined Bai Juyi, the recorder of daily affairs, to record that “the emperor expired suddenly due to a wind-borne pathogen” without awaiting a meticulous investigation. However, Bai Juyi declined to concede that the emperor died of a wind-borne pathogen and was consequently dismissed from office by the court on the grounds that “the emperor had not slept for seven days and it could not have been induced by a wind-borne pathogen”. If being dismissed from office for querying the cause of the emperor’s death betrays Bai Juyi’s upright character of refusing to follow the herd and seeking truth from facts, then the act of relinquishing a high-ranking official position for the sake of composing poetry further accentuates his “pure and sincere” image as a poet. In a conversation with Master Konghai, Bai Juyi frankly avowed that he resigned “merely to finalize the composition of the poem”. While underscoring his identity as a poet, Bai Juyi also conceded that “he was a successful candidate in the imperial examinations at two levels and could have ascended to a lofty official position”, yet in order to amass materials for writing “Song of Everlasting Sorrow”, he was willing to serve as a “six-rank recorder of daily affairs”. This characterization of a character who “solely adores writing poetry and eschews officialdom” to a certain extent resurrects Bai Juyi’s literati image of “acknowledging only poetry and disregarding individuals” in the original novel.

*(c). Bai Juyi’s “Affinity for Poetry” Is not Only Mirrored in His Own Versification But Also in His “Loving One Thing and Extending the Same Sentiment to All Related Aspects” With Respect to the Works of Other Poets*

In order to probe into the case of the demon cat, Bai Juyi and Konghai repaired to the “imperial library” to consult relevant materials. When they espied the sentence “Emperor Xuanzong commanded the poet Li Bai to compose a poem for the imperial concubine”, Bai Juyi could not help but introduce Li Bai to Konghai: “This individual Li Bai is arrogant by virtue of his talent. With his pen, he would rather extol the common folk than the powerful. He has never bequeathed a complimentary word to the nobles and princes throughout his lifetime.” Bai Juyi was unable to contain his admiration for Li Bai. In every gesture and expression, he fully manifested “the profound esteem of one great poet for another great poet”. This tableau of “heroes esteeming heroes” amply discloses Bai Juyi’s literati image of straightforwardness. Although some scholars have pointed out that “while the film is assiduously endeavoring to fabricate a rich and opulent ambiance of the prosperous Tang Dynasty and strange and lethal secret illusory arts, it fails to etch one or two particularly memorable character images” (Wang, 2018, p. 26). Nevertheless, Chen Kaige’s delineation of the two literati, Li Bai and Bai Juyi, not only resurrects the authentic visages of historical figures but also endows them with forthright and unfettered literati images and the poetic qualities of poets. This can be regarded as a major highlight of “The Legend of the Demon Cat”.

*C. The Construction of Film Narrative With Literary Connotations*

Bai Juyi’s “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” serves as the latent thread that propels the narrative progression of “Legend of the Demon Cat” and weaves through the entire cinematic fabric. Put differently, the movie’s storyline, to a certain degree, germinates from “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” and likewise concludes due to it. “Song of Everlasting Sorrow”, crafted in the first year of Yuanhe during the Tang Dynasty (806 AD), is an extensive narrative poem. This composition vividly recreates the heartrending and poignant tragic love between Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei. “With the evocation of ‘everlasting sorrow’, it conveys the abiding essence of love and announces the overarching theme of the entire poem” (Yan, 2009, p. 82). It is precisely because “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” extols Yang Yuhuan’s quest for love and her yearning for genuine amorous connection between the sexes from a positive vantage that the demon cat in the movie steers Bai Juyi and Master Konghai, incrementally, to unearth the veracity regarding the cause of Yang Guifei’s demise through illusionary means.

Although the entirety of “Legend of the Demon Cat” does not overtly allude to the specific content within “Song of Everlasting Sorrow”, Chen Kaige, via resplendent lens special effects and shooting artifices, to a certain extent, manifests the poetic delineations of “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” in the guise of visual construction. Thereby, a reciprocal reflection is established between the movie visuals and literary connotations, augmenting and enriching the further evolution of the plot. For instance, on Yang Guifei’s birthday, with the intention of enabling the populace of Chang’an to behold the resplendent allure of the imperial concubine, Emperor Xuanzong arranged for the imperial concubine to sway on a lofty

swing. Yang Guifei, attired in white and possessing a fair countenance, harmoniously contrasted with the white clouds in the firmament, engendering a visual expanse that transcended the circumscriptions of the literary domain. Beneath the afternoon sun's irradiation, the "golden phoenix hair ornament" gracing Yang Yuhuai's head scintillated. At this juncture, viewers cannot help but be reminded of the line "Cloudy hair and flowery face, with golden steps swaying" from "Song of Everlasting Sorrow". The movie's narration and literary description, to a certain extent, converge within the lens. At the "Feast of Bliss" in the Huagai Xianghui Tower, the movie deploys a series of special effects technologies to exhibit the scintillating visual panorama of the banquet: blossoms unfurling in the wine pool, figures seemingly traversing the air. Amidst the mellifluous strains of bamboo flute melodies, a duo of dancers, through illusion, ceaselessly transmute their forms and perform song and dance within the wine pool. This scene unavoidably conjures in the audience's minds the line "Soft songs and graceful dances are in perfect harmony, and the melodies of orchestral music are vividly expressive" from "Song of Everlasting Sorrow". The kinetic aesthetics of the dancers, at this moment, coalesce at the conscious stratum with the spirit of dancers as depicted in literature. And when Bai Juyi and Konghai arrive at the Yanqiu Gate of the former palace to further probe the demon cat's clues, the movie camera transitions to the tableau where Emperor Xuanzong and a hundred thousand troops flee Chang'an subsequent to An Lushan's rebellion. In the movie, plumes of gunpowder smoke ascend ubiquitously in Chang'an, every countenance is fraught with panic, and the emperor absconds in a disheveled and beleaguered state. Spectators instinctively associate this with the two lines in "Song of Everlasting Sorrow": "Smoke of gunpowder rises in the nine-tiered city gates. Thousands of chariots and ten thousand horsemen head southwest. The imperial carriage sways as it proceeds and halts. It has traversed more than a hundred miles beyond the western capital gate". The wretched condition of the panicked and harried mass exodus in the movie fuses with the realistic narrative of "Song of Everlasting Sorrow", which not only manifests Bai Juyi's "sense of helplessness" and "powerlessness" when recollecting the An-Shi Rebellion and his lamentation over the Great Tang Dynasty's precipitous decline from prosperity but also delineates, in an exaggerated fashion, the irresolution and anguish of all sentient beings during a "tumultuous epoch".

In general, the entirety of "Legend of the Demon Cat" deliberately corresponds to the poetic substance of "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" in the minutiae of its lensing. The overarching story development of the movie hinges upon Bai Juyi's composition of "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" as an implicit cue. Consequently, in terms of visual design, Chen Kaige also accentuates the construction of the literary connotations of "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" at the movie's visual plane, thereby fortifying the intertextual nexus between "poetic movie visuals" and "literary images within movies".

### III. CONCLUSIONS

Some scholars have pertinently pointed out that "for this particular intertextual rapport in film adaptations of novels, the crucial and ubiquitously significant critical appraisal especially mandates a meticulous scrutiny of the dialectics of identity and difference" (Jeon, 2011, p. 190). For visual art forms such as film, the modality in which intertextuality is molded or further appraised within a movie assumes a paramount significance. There exist innumerable instances of films adapted from novels both domestically and internationally, yet it is comparatively rare to encounter works like "Legend of the Demon Cat" that assimilate literary connotations and a poetic ethos into their creative process. This, in turn, reflects the contemporary domestic films' pursuit of a dynamic equipoise among "literariness", "aesthetic allure", and "entertainment". Chen Kaige adeptly wields cinematographic techniques and special effects to unfurl literary significances through multiple narrative strata and to fabricate the image of literati. This interaction between film and literature, to a certain extent, proffers a referential paradigm for future affiliated film and television productions and also lays a certain groundwork for the exploration of filming adaptations of literary works.

The triumph of the film "Legend of the Demon Cat" has furnished a novel perspective and *modus operandi* for adapting fantasy novels into films, rendering the dynamic interaction between literature and cinema especially salient. "With the diversification of media, the expression of emotions need not invariably be committed to writing; presenting them on the screen also constitutes a significant means of expression, which is the emotional mechanism of films. The so-called emotional mechanism pertains to the attributes that empower films to resonate with the audience, such as plot design, character idiosyncrasies, and filming techniques. Literature springs from emotion, yet for literary works to fulfill the objective of eliciting emotion, certain artifices are essential. In ancient China, whether it was poetry or historical biographical literature, there were copious reservoirs of creative experiences, and these have also been appropriated by biographical films" (Zhao, 2024, p. 53). Director Chen Kaige, through his preeminent directorial acumen and peerless visual effects, has presented us with a film wherein literature and art are flawlessly integrated. This also attests to the profound influence of literary works on the molding of films, especially in terms of the cardinal value they confer upon the characterization within movies. Therefore, through Chen Kaige's "Legend of the Demon Cat", we can also fathom that film art not only dynamically represents literary works but also reconfigures them on an aesthetic plane. As an outstanding film, "Legend of the Demon Cat" profoundly mirrors Chen Kaige's elevated degree of integration of cinematic art and literary aesthetics, and the inimitable temperament of Tang Dynasty poets is further incarnated in the film. Thus, Director Chen Kaige not only showcases the opulent cultural heritage of China's Tang Dynasty and its indelible poetry to the global audience but also contributes, to a certain extent, to the progression of Chinese cinema, proffering novel approaches for adapting literary works into films.

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