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## Restarting Plural Modernity: The Lyrical Tradition of the Hometown in Kaili Blues

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Restarting Plural Modernity: The Lyrical Tradition of the Hometown in *Kaili Blues*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts  
with a concentration in Film Studies  
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## ABSTRACT

The dichotomous paradigm constituted by the realist tradition of Chinese cinema has become the epic and inertial discourse for understanding Chinese modernity. However, I argue that some new filmmakers after the sixth generation of directors have used the narrative and aesthetics of the hometown to change this dominant logic of Chinese modernity. The revolutions and wars of the twentieth century transformed the hometown from a relatively stable agrarian civilization to a modern society in violent turmoil. Recent hometown films are no longer satisfied with this realist aesthetic duality and strive for a pluralistic discourse of Chinese modernity, releasing it from the former oppositional structures of rural/urban, traditional/modern, collective/individual, and Eastern/Western. Using theories from the lyrical tradition, I compare the new hometown film *Kaili Blues* (Bi Gan, 2015) with the sixth-generation hometown film *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke, 1998) and argue that the former invokes the classical aesthetics of the lyrical tradition to dissolve the oppositional nature of the latter's realist aesthetics, proposing a polysemy of time and space. The classical aesthetic in *Kaili Blues* draws on Chinese landscape painting and Chinese philosophy to show the renewable power of tradition, creating an open model of active dialogue with the Western modern in aesthetic and historical terms. By doing so, the lyrical tradition refutes the epic discourse dominated by realist aesthetics, which both challenges the grand national narrative and functions to expand Chinese modernity by exchanging the oppositional position of hometown for a multi-layered, multi-textual symbiotic understanding mode of contemporary Chinese society.

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a number of Chinese filmmakers returned to their hometowns to reflect on the urbanization and marketization of China. A recent Chinese art film, *Kaili Blues* (Bi Gan, 2015), has risen to international fame, focusing on the director's hometown as a spiritual home. Scholars notice that Bi Gan's obsession with his hometown is in line with his predecessor Jia Zhangke, who is considered one of the leading directors of the sixth-generation, the group immediately preceding Bi Gan and his contemporaries. Many film critics argue that both directors intend to reveal the conflict between the traditional hometown and modernity. This conflict has become the dominant interpretive frame, one which emphasizes the disintegration and collapse of human relationships, ethics and morality, and the environment in the hometown. Indeed, these historical encounters with the hometown are often inscribed in films, which have shaped the realist aesthetic tradition of Chinese cinema. However, this aesthetic has then also cemented a singular understanding of modern China and the hometown, which is always placed in a binary structure of traditional/modern, rural/urban, ignorant/civilized, Eastern/Western. While Bi does continue some of the patterns of realism, such as non-professional actors, long takes, and realistic geography, I argue that *Kaili Blues* borrows from classical Chinese aesthetics to transcend the duality of realist aesthetics and create a multifaceted combination of traditional and modern hometowns. In this combination, the film's classical aesthetic also evokes the lyrical tradition of the hometown, which serves as a critical discourse that stretches across Chinese cultural history and complicates the realist aesthetic-dominated view of the hometown and the ways in which Chinese modernity is identified.

Chinese cinema aesthetics and the hometown have been heavily influenced by the revolution and enlightenment movements of modern China. Prior to this time, ancient Chinese poetry and painting depicted the hometown and its people, and in addition to the personal feelings of the artists, these works also reproduced a relatively harmonious agrarian society. But the hometown of the twentieth century was subjected to the impact of Western modernity and took on a diametrically opposite and turbulent image. Since then, the traditional hometown has become a field of fierce debate with the Western modern consciousness, creating a political, cultural and individual identity of anxiety and crisis. In terms of cinema, artists followed the aesthetic trend of realism in order to strive for national self-awareness from the identity of their hometown. Chris Berry argues that “realism emerged as a political project” to help early twentieth-century China become “a strong modern nation-state at a time of national peril” (107).

As a result, films based on the hometown are also placed within a realist aesthetic framework and lead to a “dualist discourse of life and death, new and old, progress and extinction, oppressed and oppressors” (Berry & Farquhar 78). Disappointingly, in service of its strong national discourse, the realist aesthetic of dichotomy has become “the hegemonic mode of the Chinese cinema” (Berry & Farquhar 107). This aesthetic has taken over from left-wing films of the revolutionary period to contemporary Chinese cinema after the end of the Cultural Revolution. As Jason McGrath argues, the realist impulse in contemporary Chinese cinema formed a more radical wave of realism after the 1990s (84). One of the landmarks of this wave of realism was the New Documentary Movement, which began in the early 1990s. These documentaries often became symbols of authenticity through “the use of on-camera, in-person interviews, synchronized sound, and long takes,” and these filming methods subsequently became a collective feature of the sixth-generation directors (Lu 24). Many scholars agree that

the rise of Jia Zhangke and his peers benefited from this realist documentary movement. Lu Xinyu points out that Jia's films reflect “the influence of documentary filmmaking themes, style, and aesthetics” as a way to demonstrate social inequality in contemporary China (27). However, Chris Berry argues that this realist documentary movement had a broader impact, not only in relation to the fourth, fifth, and sixth generations of filmmakers, but also as a starting point for “understand China’s visual culture today” (5). This represents the entry of realist aesthetics into contemporary Chinese film practice in general after Jia. As Zhang Yingjin points out in “Directors, Aesthetics, Genres: Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979–2010,” such documentary realism, replete with shaky footage, depressing subject matter, and existential angst, remains a staple of China's vibrant documentary and feature film production (65).

However, the critical consciousness of binary opposition proposed by realism has also limited the development of Chinese films. Shelly Kraicer admits that the work of the sixth-generation directors and their followers reflects a tendency toward formulaic creation, which he calls “East Asian art film attributes” (Kraicer). This aesthetic has sometimes trapped them in the labyrinth of cinematic language and historical representation, and has become increasingly difficult under the pressures of multiple domestic political economies. On the one hand, this realism always exposes the hypocrisy of the state in a negative manner, which is often restricted by the film censors. On the other hand, this kind of revelation has also been criticized for catering to western political views. As film scholar Dai Jinhua puts,

Just as the films of Zhang Yimou and his imitators satisfied the West’s old Orientalist mirror image, the West again privileged the Sixth Generation as the Other.... Created as a mirror image, it again validated Western intellectuals’ mapping of China’s democracy, progress, resistance, civil society, and the marginal figure. (90)

It is evident that the realist aesthetic of Chinese cinema has continued to serve the presentation of the hometown for more than a century and that in the globalized era of the 21st century, this way of identifying hometown is still limited to the tumultuous historical structure and the mode of discovering subjectivity in the other. However, this is why it is prudent to treat the realist aesthetics as continuing to be a strong logic for analyzing the new Chinese art cinema. It generally views the issue of China's modern transformation as a competition between Western capitalism and Chinese socialism, an opposition which can contribute to the political establishment's use of it to spread extreme nationalist antagonisms. If we commit ourselves to a different attempt of hometown aesthetics, we may be able to more smoothly lift these historical mists and westernized perspectives to re-view the characteristics of hometown itself, which is not only conducive to the innovation of film aesthetics, but also to challenge this hegemony.

Bi Gan is clearly such a challenger who aspires to find a new way to establish a modern hometown identity outside the dominant logic of realism. Only this challenge has not yet been fully recognized by the scholarship. Many scholars have put Bi's films under the theory of magical realism. To understand post-socialist China, Eddie Bertozzi even uses magical realism as a variant of 1990s realism to study Chinese films after 2000 (153). All these academic views have a tendency to regard Bi's hometown aesthetics as the inheritance and extension of Jia Zhangke's aesthetics, so they all have the same base in realism aesthetics. For example, Hong Kong scholar Mei Gao argues that *Kaili Blues* provided “a more concrete and realistic portrayal that is aligned with the film’s overall realist aesthetic” (48). Even Western scholars such as Kraicer have argued that *Kaili Blues* is “a realer sort of realism” (Kraicer). While they are aware of the more complex reference to reality in *Kaili Blues*, they do not turn to the plurality and openness presented by the hometown aesthetics, which challenges the realist aesthetics of binary

oppositions. The result is a way of identifying with the hometown that continues to fall into anxiety-filled emotions of backwardness and progress, countryside and city, ruins and skyscrapers, the dead and the living.

Although the use of realism to pursue a modern identity of the hometown is effective, this inertial discourse overlooks *Kaili Blues'* intention to transform realist aesthetics with classical Chinese aesthetics. I argue that *Kaili Blues'* hometown aesthetics involves an open model of hometown tradition and modernity, which reflects Bi Gan's attempt to mix classical aesthetics and realism and thus open up a pluralistic understanding of Chinese modernity. To divorce the connection between *Kaili Blues'* hometown and modernity identity from a dualistic realist aesthetic, I turn my attention to the classical Chinese aesthetics and philosophy that the film invokes. I examine the connections between *Kaili Blues* and the aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting, namely the intertwining of the aesthetics and thoughts of landscape painting with the film's complex spatial practices and narrative structures, including the notions of camera movement and multiple perspectives and the philosophical notions of Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism that they collectively contain. Focusing on these religious, spiritual and artistic historical dimensions allows us a different perspective on how modernity interacts with Chinese aesthetics and how artists subtly shift their dependence on realism. It is worth noting that a number of scholars have already linked some common styles in Chinese art cinema to the aesthetics of landscape painting, but they have limited themselves to the form of the film, for example, like An Jinfu who discusses the Taoist spirit and the compositional approach of landscape painting in fifth-generation director Chen Kaige's *King of the Children*, unfortunately still leaving the framework of interpretation to realism.

However, I argue that *Kaili Blues'* appropriation of the aesthetics and philosophy of landscape painting balances form and content. In terms of form, the film's pans and long takes mimic the parallel perspective and multiple point of view found in landscape painting. This approach differs from the linear perspective in the pursuit of accuracy of real things, which divides the world into parts with a limited frame of view arranged around a singular vanishing point; instead, Chinese landscape painting sees the world as a coherent whole. It is expressed in cinema as a subtle shift between time and space and an experience that allows the audience to both immerse themselves in and look over the entire space. The latter avoids a contrasting and divided image of the world, but rather brings together a complex world into one. In terms of content, the opening of the film quotes the Zen classic *Diamond Sutra*, and practices the Zen concept of the reincarnation of time and space and the realm of spiritual travel throughout the narrative. Memories and dreams in the film mix with reality to break the realist linear view of time. In the film's famous 42-minute long take, time is both instantaneous and eternal, as Zen would have it. Miranda Shaw claims that the artistic expression of landscape painting is the focus of Buddhist meditation (194). This aesthetic transcends the phenomenal world and liberates all things by achieving a spiritual roaming in the real world (Shaw 198). The main character Chen Sheng also achieves a kind of detachment through a natural journey inside his hometown. It is unlike realist narratives that ultimately highlight problems as oppositions and contradictions that cannot be bridged by society in its linear development.

In addition to dismantling the duality of realism, the more profound effect of this classical aesthetics is the lyrical tradition it arouses. I seek an interpretation of *Kaili Blues'* hometown aesthetic for Chinese modernity identity from the theory of the lyrical tradition advocated by David Der-wei Wang. Previously, scholars such as Chen Shih-hsiang, Kao Yu-

Kung, and Chi Xiao have theorized the lyrical tradition. Their study moves from the literary tradition of lyric poetry to the artistic tradition that culminated in painting, demonstrating in the evidence of poetry, calligraphy, music, and painting that the lyrical tradition is an enduring feature of ancient Chinese literature and art throughout history. By focusing on the aesthetic, the viewpoint of time, and self/identity of the lyrical tradition, these scholars have helped me arrive at what I call *Kaili Blues*' invocation of classical Chinese aesthetics and philosophy as conforming to the framework of the lyrical tradition, extending the aesthetics of realism, and allowing the modern mode of hometown identity to move away from competing ideologies and towards a more open understanding of the hometown and the Chinese modernity it represents in historical interaction.

In fact, the lyrical tradition has never lost its power in modern times, but the “epic discourse” generated by realist aesthetics has suppressed the expression of lyricism and the multiple paths of identification with Chinese modernity. This epic discourse, which emerged from the two major cultural paradigms of “revolution” and “enlightenment” in early twentieth century China, full of “historical relevance and political urgency,” and portrayed Chinese modernity as an epic pattern of Western impact and internal upheaval (Wang xi). In this historical context, the realist tradition of Chinese cinema as an aesthetic genre also helped construct the nation-state through epic discourse. Countless intellectuals abandoned the traditional lyricism and turned to the grand epic narrative as a call to national crisis and historical responsibility. Thus, the depth of the influence of epic discourse on society, politics, and the consciousness of ordinary people has made it an inertial discourse that has spread over the past hundred years. Even from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, this epic discourse has not weakened at all. According to official statements, China has finally

regained its rightful place in the world after its so-called “Century of Humiliation” (*bainian guochi*), as one of the leading powers and increasingly as the center of global politics (Carrai 1). However, the lyrical tradition is not a weak discourse that escapes criticism but an active reflection on modernity, and it even contains the historical tasks that epic discourse requires. As Wang points out, lyrical discourses are also pervasive in revolutionary sentiments that are historically and politically evoked, only they are overshadowed by a generally strong epic discourse (xii). Therefore, my project emphasizes the classical aesthetics of *Kaili Blues* as displacing the context of realism as a rebuttal to the official grand narrative as well as the epic discourse, and the lyrical tradition it evokes so that our identification with our hometown is no longer trapped in a victim mentality of historical disconnection and cultural shock.

I believe that revisiting the lyrical tradition in the present is conducive to seeing a pluralistic Chinese modernity that effectively combines and interacts with Western modernity, rather than a monolithic modernity that always emphasizes an either/or, antagonistic and contradictory approach. Since the twentieth century, film technology from the West has become a more popular medium for engaging with the visualization of Chinese hometowns. I argue that the cinematic hometown also demonstrates an aesthetic modernity that influences and alters the traditional aesthetics previously constructed only by poetry and painting. As Wang says, once artists summon lyricism, their claims often take on both “modern and premodern references” (3). Thus *Kaili Blues'* hometown aesthetic constructs a lyrical discourse by invoking classical Chinese aesthetics and philosophical thought, expanding the aesthetic scope of Chinese art cinema and confronting the ideology of the great nation. More importantly, the film no longer falls into an epic depiction of a violently turbulent modernity, nor does it use the discourse of Western ideological invasion and challenge to construct its subjectivity. It captures the

primitiveness and authenticity of the hometown but also embraces the fluidity of global culture. It emphasizes the interactivity and continuity of history and time in a lyrical way and proposes the permanence of emotion and national self/subject.

In what follows, I focus on the relationships between form and narrative in *Kaili Blues* and compare these relationships to Chinese classical aesthetics, philosophy, and realist aesthetics in order to investigate the film's viability in expanding the aesthetics of Chinese cinema and the discourse of Chinese modernity. In the first part, I unpack the connections between *Kaili Blues'* spatial presentation and Chinese landscape painting in terms of landscape, composition, photography, and point of view. I argue that the film's hometown aesthetic merges the spatial creation methods of landscape painting with classical philosophy on a narrative level, proposing a circular, interactive and cosmic view of space and time as one. In the second part, I use *Kaili Blues* and *Xiao Wu*, a masterpiece of realist aesthetics, to compare the differences between the two hometown aesthetics. I argue that the former eliminates the dualistic realist aesthetics in terms of space, time, and sound. Then through Svetlana Boym's theory of nostalgia, I argue that *Kaili Blues'* hometown aesthetic replaces *Xiao Wu's* “reflective nostalgia” by transforming the characters' zeitgeist anxiety in the contrast of past/present, collective and individual, into a benign interaction that can be relieved (40). In the third part, I dismiss the epic discourse of realistic aesthetics by linking the three directions of aesthetics, time and self in the theory of lyrical tradition with *Kaili Blues'* hometown aesthetics. I propose that the film's lyrical tradition creates a pluralistic combination of the classical and the modern in film aesthetics, and also offers an emotionally-mediated, multi-layered reflective, non-linear view of history for hometown and Chinese modernity identity, one that focuses on the constant interaction and dialogue between ancient and modern, China and the West.

## CLASSICAL CHINESE AESTHETICS IN *KAILI BLUES'* HOMETOWN

The connection between *Kali Blues* and traditional Chinese art is multifaceted. As Bi Gan once said the film's editing logic follows the arrangement of the words of ancient Chinese poetry (News98radio 34"). The film's use of Buddhist texts, landscapes, poetry, Miao music and batik all show that the traditional culture of the hometown brings something different from a realist approach. Viewed from the space, *Kaili Blues'* natural landscape features are easily reminiscent of the Chinese landscape painting tradition. The connection with landscape painting is very strong and manifests itself in aesthetic forms and philosophical ideas. In this section, I will show that the aesthetic principles of landscape painting modify the way that films create real space, forming a coordinated and unified space-time with multiple interactions. In addition to form in Bi's poetics, I argue that the film inherits the philosophical ideas of landscape painting, which are all related to cosmology, the human mind, and the relationship between human and nature. This is because the aesthetic core of landscape painting is related to Chinese Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Through the combination of the painting form and Chinese philosophy, the film suggests a circular view of space-time replacing the linear view of space-time in realism, one which emphasizes a disconnection with historical disconnection between tradition and modernity.

In Chinese words, the landscape painting (*shanshui hua*) is a painting of mountains (*shan*) and water (*shui*). The film also makes use of the natural environment of mountains and water as the main landscape of the hometown aesthetic. The landscape of mountains and water suggests that Bi Gan's hometown is different from other Chinese cities, as the influence of

modernization in Kaili City seems to have come too late to change the traditional look of the entire hometown. Art historian François Jullien claims that landscape painting emphasizes the fact that mountains and water are the basis of the ancient Chinese landscape, and even of the worldview (122). Thus we realize that the living environment and culture of the hometown also influences the aesthetic quality of a director. As mentioned in the introduction, literature and art on the theme of hometown have a long and respected history in China.

Bi Gan's ties between landscape imagery and the hometown recall some of the narratives of the reclusive literati of old, making another connection to classical Chinese aesthetics. The film's famous 42-minute long take creates an imaginary space, a village called Dangmai, which recalls the utopian fable of the Peach Blossom Spring written by Tao Qian (365-427), a famous reclusive poet of the Sixth Dynasty, who lived in seclusion in his hometown. The story of Peach Blossom Spring depicts a fisherman who, on a fishing trip, comes across a poetic idyllic dwelling where people live a happy life without any worries. To some extent, the story structure of Peach Blossom Spring is similar to that of *Kaili Blues*. In that story, Tao Qian narrates the story with the fisherman's experience of discovering, entering, and leaving the peach blossom land, while in the film, Bi follows Chen Sheng's journey in the same three-part structure. The mysterious village is presented after passing through a cave, and the time and space in the village are inconsistent with the outside world.

More importantly, this imaginary space was not just incidentally cited by Bi Gan; Tao Qian's literary works had an important influence on the later development of Chinese poetry and painting (Zhang 366). Li Zehou also defines Tao Qian as an important figure in the Six Dynasties period who influenced the later development of Chinese aesthetics, especially the nature-based landscape (*shan shui*) culture (232). The spatial theme in the Peach Blossom Spring

is a recurring theme in Chinese landscape painting (Nelson 24). Chinese art historian Shi Shouqian even wrote a monograph on the subject, *The Moving Peach Blossom Land*, which expands the spread and expression of this cultural symbol in East Asian art. He emphasized that the image of Peach Blossom Spring was actively spread in East Asian culture, and was widely accepted as the ultimate representation of the ideal relationship between humans and nature, establishing an ideal world image in East Asian landscape paintings (26). Shi argues that the main credit for the continuous expansion and dissemination of the image of Peach Blossoms Spring lies in the consolidation and shaping of visual art, especially landscape painting (19). Therefore, when the spatial imagery of Peach Blossom Spring enters Chinese art cinema from landscape painting, it makes the continuity of the hometown aesthetic in history, especially since the hometown of *Kaili Blues* is marked as a natural, quiet, and harmonious space, which is extremely similar to the traditional landscape in which landscape painting is rooted.

It is not the first time that the aesthetic characteristics of landscape painting have been included in the study of film aesthetics. In *Nonindifferent Nature*, Eisenstein talks about the foggy scenes in his film *Battleship Potemkin* as coinciding with the aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting (229). However, he only noticed the symbolic elements of landscape painting but did not explore its spatial forms. Later scholars recognized the use of landscape painting's spatial creation techniques in terms of point of view and layout in Chinese cinema. In general, Chinese landscape painting is abstract art based on the concept of movable and multiple perspectives. They do not use perspective and vanishing points to capture the viewer's immediate reality as Western painting does, but rather tend to capture the spiritual reality and obscure the objective one. More importantly, both the aesthetic and formal features of landscape painting were influenced by the overall philosophy of Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Although scholars have suggested these forms, they have all only analyzed Chinese art cinema's formal imitation of classical aesthetics; no one has yet touched on the deeper embedding and integration of landscape painting and its philosophical ideas in cinematic narratives. In the book *Cinematic Landscapes: Observations on the Visual Arts and Cinema of China and Japan*, scholars such as Hao Dazheng, Ni Zhen, and An Jinfu only compare the relationship between partial formal features in cinema and classical aesthetics. Ni Zhen, for example, analyzes the relationship between the sense of space in *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984) and Taoism in landscape painting only in terms of camera movement and composition, without discussing the significance of this form over the film narrative. However, I argue that the connection between *Kaili Blues* and landscape painting is intertwined with the film's complex spatial practices and narrative structure. It is this combination that makes the hometown aesthetic an effective whole, combining the culture, aesthetics and history of the hometown beyond the realist view of space and time. My goal is to contrast the form of *Kaili Blues* with that of Chinese landscape painting, and then to examine how it puts that form at the service of non-linear narrative and Chinese philosophical thought in order to understand the view of space and time created by the film.

The first connection between *Kaili Blues* and landscape painting is about perspective, which unfolds in a single shot as an experimental manipulation of space and time. Chinese landscape paintings generally use multiple and parallel perspectives to represent the scale and size of space, as their viewing style changes the distance between the audiences and the painting at all times. The parallel perspective of landscape painting is shown in the film's opening pans, which start with a simple wall and turn the camera counterclockwise to present the three-dimensional interior as a horizontal perspective. This method is similar to the scroll form in landscape painting, where the viewer must unroll the long scroll from the right and then move

the gaze to the left to view the entire painting. Unlike the linear perspective of Renaissance, which uses distinct horizons and vanishing points to make the image appear concrete and requires the viewer to have an accurate identification with reality, the parallel perspective is similar to the "flat *mise-en-scène*" of cinema, which makes use of the film frame's horizontal orientation, which weakens the sense of depth (Hao 47). Through this technique, the film's space-time can be heterogeneous in terms of the slow movement of the camera, as the continuous movement makes it difficult for the audience to recognize the space as fixed. This effect is more concrete in two other panning shots. One is in the small house near the waterfall, which is also Wei Wei's home. This panning shot slowly pans from the doorway to the bed on the inside of the room along with Monk who walks into the room, while an upside down train is superimposed on the white curtain. Parallel perspective can expand a fixed space, so it can extend the space of the film or graft different spaces. This panning shot leads the real scene to a heterogeneous and dreamy space.

Another panning shot creates a heterogeneous sense of time, which connects the past and present. The right side of the scene shows a past Chen Sheng helping his friend to commit revenge in a chess room, and when the camera pans to the left side, the same space is presented with a fight scene between the present Chen Sheng and his brother Crazy Face. Although these two pans focus on altering the reality of space and time respectively, they actually show that the concepts of space-time in parallel perspective can shape and influence each other, that is, time can distort space and space can overlap time. As Chae Youn-Jeong argues that the scroll form is a distinctive feature of traditional Chinese landscape painting, especially the long horizontal hand scroll, it not only provides a completely different way of viewing experience, but

also allows for “an expansion of the spatial and temporal modes of painting directly related to cinematic representation” (25).

The film's 42-minute long take shows more clearly the ability of this reel form of landscape painting to shape in time and space, as it presents more complex movement and multiple perspectives. This interactive way of viewing the paintings with its multiple perspectives often provides an immersive yet transcendent experience for the audience. When the main character Chen Sheng enters the village Dangmai on his way to look for Weiwei, the director uses a single long take to create a complete space. In this space, the camera follows Chen Sheng for a while, but then shifts to follow other characters, including Pisshead, the barber, and Yang Yang. The camera shifts its perspective several times, even blurring the line between the subjective point of view shot and third-person tracking shot. For example, when the camera leaves to track the barber who is drying clothes on the balcony, this perspective does not serve any character's movement or point of view. At the same time, when the camera arrives at the balcony, it becomes the barber's point of view following the two band members. However, just when the audience thinks this is the barber's point of view, the camera enters the tailor's store again and captures everyone, including the barber. This single long take is made up of multiple alternations and shifts of perspective everywhere are consistent with the flowing perspective of landscape painting.

Therefore, the sense of movement immerses the viewer in the space, and the multiple perspectives allow the viewer to step out of the space and reach a height, to look down on the space and become “a point of view which transcended that of the individual” (Hao 46). In describing the multiple perspectives of landscape painting, François Cheng explains that, in general, the painter stands on a high point and thus appreciates the whole landscape, but at the

same time he seems to move across the painting, embracing “the rhythm of dynamic space” and “contemplating things from afar, from nearby, and from different sides” (91). The point of view in this long take is not bound by any linear perspective, and the audience follows these characters as they move and observe in various directions, including horizontal and vertical.

Lin Niantong, in his study of the relationship between the aesthetics of early Chinese cinema and ancient art, points out how changes in the landscape brought about by the camera movement are close to the spatial organization and dynamic layout of landscape painting (187). He sees the technique of landscape painting in the phrases “A new step introduces a new scene” (*yi bu huan jing*) and “A tilt of the peak causes a turn in the road” (*feng hui lu zhuan*) appropriated by art director Han Shangyi and Jiang Jin's “A-focal pictorial composition.” This compositional structure is unified as a manifestation of the notion of “*you*” (“touring and roaming”) in Taoist philosophy. He explains the aesthetics of “*you*” as follows:

The secret of designing any sequence of successive space arrangements lies in the art of regulating them so that they are ‘separated’ but not exactly ‘isolated’ from one another.

The audience should be tempted to let their imagination ‘roam’ and ‘tour’ therein, as anyone watching the horizontal handscroll paintings *Landscape of a Thousand Leagues* (by the Northern-Song painter Wang Ximeng) and *The Long River Runs for Ten-*

*Thousand Leagues* (by the Southern-Song painter Zhao Ba) would be tempted to (188).

Bi Gan’s 42-minute long take undoubtedly overlaps with the concept of “*you*,” a shared journey between Chen Sheng and the audience. The moving perspective leads to the flow of time, and the flow of time leads to the extension of space, and the mutual influence and shaping of space and time become indispensable. The space under this movement and multiple perspectives becomes an imaginary space similar to a Chinese landscape painting. Bi pointed out that many of the

circular movements of the camera in the film are to indicate the concept of time (95). In 42 minutes, the circular trajectory of this long take constructs a continuous space, offering the possibility to represent the Buddhist concept of reincarnation through time. In turn, this crossover time also makes this space more fantastic. It is worth mentioning that the tour involves the overlapping of multiple space-time, which is not only an excursion into reality but also a kind of excursion into history. This notion of roaming space and time gives a sense of overall situation across the geographical changes of the hometown, creating an intensive historicity, and the interplay of space and time becomes a kind of parallel dialogue between history and reality, suggesting the possibility of a multi-perspective view of Chinese modernity.

Thus multiple perspectives also extend a second connection between *Kaili Blues* and landscape painting, and that is about framing, which involves the composition of the film and the grasp of the sense of space. In the moving perspective, the frame of the film seems to be eliminated just like the landscape painting. The scale of Chinese painting clearly shows that the frame is seen as a hindrance to expressing the infinity of nature. These paintings often have a horizontal or vertical extension beyond any momentary view. Hao argues that the frame plays a crucial role in the appreciation of Western painting, delineating a clear area of spatial expansion, but Chinese painters deliberately avoid such boundaries, expecting the viewer to ignore boundaries and enter a world of infinity, just as they enter the world of nature (50). Similar to this concept, Chinese landscape paintings are framed on a larger scale than Western paintings to create open scenes. In other words, the reason for the much smaller proportion of space occupied by figures in Chinese paintings is that the dominant theme of landscape painting is nature. As a result, film frames using this visual logic also generally opt for wider shots and panoramas and fewer close-ups, mainly to reflect the openness of space. Even in some shots where the

foreground of the characters is dominant, we can see elements of nature become the background to unfold the space. In short, the flat, open scenes in landscape painting are the compositional characteristics of *Kaili Blues*.

In addition, just as Eisenstein discusses the symbolic elements in landscape painting, the film makes extensive use of these elements. As mentioned earlier, landscape painting in Chinese means to include mountains and water, followed by clouds, fog and smoke, elements commonly used by painters. The scenes in *Kaili Blues* are filled with clouds and water vapor, with the exception of a few sequences at the end that show the sunny atmosphere. François Cheng points out that Chinese painting uses these elements to create a subtle connection between mountains and water, between human and nature, in order to fill in the blank in space (37). Such blank areas in landscape painting are sometimes filled in with written poetry, and in film they take the form of a combination of empty shots and verses. The Song poet Su Dongpo once said “one finds poetry in painting and painting in poetry” (qtd in Lin 190). On the one hand, this refers to the formal embodiment, where the viewer stops to read the poem in the process of looking at the painting will change the time of looking at the painting. On the other hand, it means that the poem and the painting play an interactive and complementary role, suggesting that the poetic meaning is sometimes the meaning of the painting, and the painting can also become the poetic meaning. The poetry in *Kaili Blues* also plays this role. In the previously mentioned panning shot of the chess room, when the camera pans to the red table in the raindrops, Bi Gan uses a poem to pause the narrative and change the time, but the sound of the poem also plays a role in the transition of the scene, and it suggests a narrative that is not expressed in the picture, connecting the two conflicts of the past and the present.

However, *Kaili Blues*' borrowing of landscape painting does not simply rely on these forms, it conveys the Chinese philosophical ideas that influenced landscape painting through a combination of narrative and form. In other words, the notion of a continuum of mutually shaping and interacting space and time created by these forms above is the embodiment of Chinese philosophy. Current studies have interpreted classical Chinese landscape painting as a joint influence of the three philosophical concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Miranda Shaw argues that Chinese landscape painting is the creative result of religious fusion in China during the Six Dynasties (201). In this regard, *Kaili Blues* also shows the fusion of these three philosophical ideas in terms of form and content. First, landscape painting is about painting nature, and the theme of nature as subject matter reflects a consistent view of Zen and Taoism. Bi Gan also makes nature an important part of the painting to highlight the spatial characteristics of his hometown, and the story unfolds with Chen Sheng traveling through a natural village. Second, the multiple perspectives and panoramic compositions of the landscape paintings analyzed above are permeated with Taoist and Buddhist ideas (Ni 65). Both Zen and Taoist views of the universe are vast, that is, the world contains infinite space and all time (Ni 66). Such a view of the universe creates a free point of view and an open spatial expression in landscape painting. Third, the creation of landscape painting relies in many cases on the author's imagination, and Miranda Shaw reminds us that the artistic expression of landscape painting is the focus of Buddhist meditation (194). She goes on to explain the intent of landscape painting: there is mystery in the landscape, and through imaginative wandering through the mountains, one can achieve inner satisfaction in understanding the true meaning of the Buddha and resonating with his spiritual power (201). It "transcends the phenomenal world," but it is through it that all things can be nourished and liberated in a circular way (Shaw 198). This circular

relation to time recalls the film's opening reference to the classic Zen text, the *Diamond Sutra*, and the film itself practices the Zen concept of the cycle of time and space and the realm of spiritual travel throughout the narrative. In the 42-minute long take, time is both instantaneous and eternal, as Zen says. This space-time of wandering in the mountains is also like a meditation of Chen Sheng on the train. In the midst of guilt for his mother and wife and concern for Weiwei, his search seems to lead nowhere, yet a release is achieved. *Kaili Blues* does not intend to be explicit about whether this is an authentic journey, but it empowers Chen Sheng to engage in a spiritual experience of religious enlightenment. In perceiving the complexity of space and time, this quest for the transcendence of all things in the world also calls forth the desire to transcend concrete reality and singular modernity.

Finally, *Kaili Blues'* blend of formal and philosophical landscape painting reveals the core concept of Chinese aesthetics, "artistic conception" (*yijing*). This term has a complex definition and generally refers to the state of "combination of the void and solid" (*xu shi jie he*) in the environment in order to effect a form of spiritual perception, which is an aesthetic consciousness combining religious consciousness, personal cultivation and spirit. The artistic conception of this film is mainly reflected in the "combination of the void and solid." Although the combination of the void and solid is a Taoist idea, it has entered Chinese literature and art and has been united with the Confucian idea of the unity of human and heaven and the Zen idea of mind and matter. It is an aesthetic development of the Taoist philosophical foundation of the concept of "Yin-Yang," where void refers to nothingness/emptiness/imaginary and solid refers to existence/fullness/concrete. The concept of "Yin-Yang," a traditional Chinese duality of thought that is both opposed and harmonious, is best expressed in the aesthetics of landscape painting (Yeh 17). The fixed mountain and the flowing water in landscape painting are opposites, but they

unify to form nature as a whole (Yeh 17). In landscape painting, the vast nature and the small figures, the ethereal mist and the standing mountains are the combination of the void and solid.

The formal features of the landscape paintings that *Kaili Blues* draws on are all examples of the idea of void and solid, such as the panning camera that creates a non-real temporal variation in reality, allowing the memories and dreams of the film to infiltrate reality to create a combination of void and solid in time and space. The clouds and mist are used as the void part to fill the gaps in the solid scenery of the landscape. In the combination of poetry and empty shot, the former is abstract, the latter is concrete picture. The most prominent realization of this relationship is in the 42-minute long take that creates not only void and solid of time internally, but also creates a nonexistent space (Dangmai) between the other two real places (Kaili and Zhenyuan). However, these means of combination of the void and solid are ultimately linked to the narrative, creating the lyricism of this film, which is the “fusion of feeling/emotion and scenes” (Zong 372). Chinese aesthetician Zong Baihua explains this lyrical approach commonly used in traditional Chinese literature and art:

In every form of artistic expression, emotion and scenery form an osmotic blend. One is enabled to explore one’s deepest feelings, to reach ever deeper and bring to light layer after layer of one’s emotions. At the same time one is enabled to penetrate ever deeper into the scenery, to discover layer upon layer of sparkling, crystal-clear scenery. The scenery becomes suffused with emotion, and the emotions are concretized and become scenery. As a result, a unique universe and a brand-new imagery emerge. Mankind’s imagination is replenished, and new vistas are opened up for the world (373).

The fusion of feeling and scenes is an indirect lyrical way of combining the void and solid.

Scenery represents the objective nature and the world, which is solid, while emotion represents

the subjective individual and mind, which is void. The fusion of emotion and scenes allows time and space to become abstract and imaginary due to emotion, and emotion to become concrete, deep and eternal due to time and space. As in the movie Chen Sheng in Dangmai wears a shirt that Guanglian sends him with, in hopes of giving it to Lin Airen, who had left her during the Cultural Revolution. This symbolizes Chen Sheng playing the identity of the dead Lin, fulfilling Guanglian's promise, as she had promised to buy him a shirt. She also gives Chen Sheng the music tape, which he in turn gives to the barber. This romantic moment restores the past of Lin and Guanglian, and also overlaps the love between the two couples under the original different time. Then, finally, after leaving Dangmai, Chen Sheng looks at the teenage Weiwei with the telescope of the adult Weiwei. It represents Chen Sheng's constant care for Weiwei, suggesting a kind of kinship that remains the same when looking back from the future to the past.

There are many other indirect lyrical ways in the film, such as flashlights and children's songs implicitly expressing adult love, and the chorus of the tour guide's words suggesting the ambiguous mood between Weiwei and Yang Yang. The emotions of everyone in the film overlap and intertwine in this way. Love, affection and friendship are the driving forces that propel the time-space cycle, and Chen Sheng travels from the space-time within his hometown into the multi-layered realm of life and nature that conveys dynamics, achieving emotional release and spiritual transcendence. In short, the combination of the void and solid disrupts a single privileged perspective and changes the objectivity of space, allowing for free transformation or blurring between the spaces of dream, memory, and reality, while also disrupting the linear view of time, allowing the past, present, and future to interact with each other and be mutually causal. *Kaili Blues* draws on the aesthetic forms and philosophies of

landscape painting to express this narrative structure of repeated historical intersections and continuous interactions.

Indeed, the modernity of *Kaili Blues*' hometown aesthetic is revealed when Bi Gan combines a dialectical view of the void and solid with the long take technique. Bi has said that he deliberately used a real long take to capture the unreal Dangmai, but at the same time, he believes that the long take is the most direct way for the film to capture reality (News98radio 15"). The poetics of the long take in modern cinema are sourced in André Bazin's film theories, which developed a realist mode based on the ontology of the photographic image. Bazin's realism does not simply mean capturing real objects and space, but rather "the experience of space" or the embodiment of "a sense of the ambiguity of reality" (Morgan 457, Bazin 37). As Dudley Andrew points out, Bazin's aesthetic is oriented toward a "deep feeling for the integral unity of a universe in flux" (21). The two concepts involved here, universe and emotion, somehow echo the artistic conception of classical Chinese aesthetics. From these perspectives, Bi's long takes preserve the integrity of space, and the multiple space-time created by their integration into the narrative moments of the film emphasize "the openness of realism," as does Bazin's theory (Morgan 470).

The dialectical view of classical Chinese aesthetics and the dialectical relationship between "reality and abstraction, concrete and the ideal" proposed by Bazin in long take theory have a striking overlap effect or at least a mutual shaping result (Bazin 84). Film entered China as a Western realistic technique, and the current Chinese art cinema has long blended local and Western cultural characteristics. In this sense, cinema did initially participate in a cultural duality, but today the film emphasizes an aesthetic openness. As art historian Jerome Silbergeld says, Chinese art reflected a very diverse and sophisticated cultural history and many "early

modernities” long before the arrival of Western modernity (403). After that, however, a more general realist aesthetic suppressed the diverse expression of Chinese film aesthetics. Moreover, Bi Gan was inspired by international directors Andrei Tarkovsky and Hou Hsiao-hsien, and *Kaili Blues'* Dangmai seems to mimic the concept of the zone in *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), as well as similar train and motorcycle scenes to those in *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1996). This speaks volumes about how *Kaili Blues'* hometown aesthetic embodies the desire to break through the hegemonic paradigm of realism in Chinese cinema in the context of the interaction between the aesthetic histories of East and West. It builds on the inclusiveness of classical aesthetics to open up a pluralistic space-time dialogue for the hometown, reclaiming these repressed multiple modernities.

## A COMPARISON OF TWO HOMETOWN AESTHETICS:

### *KAILI BLUES AND XIAO WU*

Near the beginning of *Kaili Blues*, a black-and-white television set is playing in a dimly lit cave, the sound of which introduces Chen Sheng as a poet and then lists out the film's production crew. Ancient rocks and a modern television are combined to construct a space that is anomalous to reality. Indeed, Bi Gan emphasizes the intertextual relationship between reality and fiction in the documentary material of the television and the film images. This relationship relates to the exalted status of the medium of television in the minds of the Chinese people and the ideological function it plays. Lu points out that the transformation of China's official television programs also benefited from the new documentary movement of the early 1990s (32). Many local TV stations have changed the “special topic series” that promotes the image of the country into a social documentary of “ordinary people’s stories” in order to win the love and trust of more people (Lu 31). The state-dominated television media has made it natural for people to believe what is on television is real, and this sense of belief also makes people believe that television reflects reality. In a similar way, Jia Zhangke in *Xiao Wu* makes television a tool for presenting reality, using it to show the real life and social conditions of people during that period, and also reveals the state's manipulation of the television medium. He uses television both to consolidate the realist aesthetic and to confront the hypocrisy of social reality.

However, Bi’s purpose in dealing with television is more complex. He says that precisely because most Chinese people think of cinema as fictitious and television is real, he deliberately uses television to create a passage from reality into fiction for his stories (News98radio 3"). He

presents the film's opening credits over documentary footage of the streets of Kaili, broadcasting a list of production crew as if constantly hinting at the manipulability of the images. Meanwhile, he inserts the medium of television, which is treated as real, into this fantastic cinematic space, shaping a disorienting effect that repeatedly superimposes reality and fiction. This intentional play on the relationship between reality and fiction has been shown to be the effect of *Kaili Blues*' borrowing from classical Chinese aesthetics, namely the combination of the void and solid. More importantly, this borrowing is then indicative of Bi's intention to transform realist aesthetics.

Both *Kaili Blues* and *Xiao Wu* were created by directors who used their respective hometowns as a backdrop. Although both hometowns are relatively lagging behind the best developed regions of China, the films' representations of hometowns and the attitudes they adopt are different. Jia Zhangke is considered the master of Chinese realism, and *Xiao Wu* is representative of this style. He directed his camera at his hometown Fenyang and shot the marginalized people of his hometown, accurately portraying their state of existence amidst the dramatic changes of China's 1990s era. At the time of *Xiao Wu*'s filming, Jia's hometown faced the disintegration and collapse of "relationships, moral codes, ways of life and even physical structures" in the midst of China's modernization (Berry 13). This general social condition, which occurred in the late 1990s as a result of the shift from the communal economic system of the Cultural Revolution to the privatized economy of the post-reform and opening-up period, resonated widely. However, Bi Gan has no such desire to offer a stereotypical Chinese modernity. He does not believe that films can accurately reflect an era. As he says, if you want to understand the changes of the times, talking to old people is a better way than watching movies

(Bi). Although cinema is necessarily a product of its time, this at least reveals that Bi does not want his films to return to a single interpretation and presentation of the times.

As mentioned in the introduction, Chinese cinema has long been dominated by a realist aesthetic that associates China's recent history and reality with nationalism, engaging in “debates over the home, family, and nation” and inevitably produces competing binary discourses (Berry & Farquhar 78). *Xiao Wu* still relies on establishing a dualism from the personal sphere to the national level, expanding the critical capacity for national policies and modernization blueprints by exposing oppositions that are concealed and hidden in social reality. But this dualism of realist aesthetics maintains this single framework of progress and elimination in modernity. Thus, Bi Gan aims to distance himself from this realist aesthetic that reflects the singularity of the times. Here, I do not mean to belittle the value of *Xiao Wu*'s realism, my aim is to present *Kaili Blues*' reflection on Chinese cinema which has long been dominated by realist aesthetics. By comparing the two, I argue that *Kaili Blues*' hometown aesthetic blurs the dualistic realist narrative in *Xiao Wu* in terms of space, time, and sound, just as Bi blurs the authenticity between television and film at the beginning of *Kaili Blues*. As we will see, this rejection of realist binaries allows for Bi to reflect a complex relation to modernity in *Kaili Blues*. If realist aesthetics attempt to consolidate a singular linear historical process in Jia's work, then in *Kaili Blues* we see an attempt to blend space-times, to connect the hometown with a broader world picture informed by cinema.

I think Jia Zhangke and Bi Gan's selection of hometown space shows a great difference, the former deliberately pursuing social collective places, the latter obsessed with more private spaces and trajectories. Jia utilizes public spaces that represent collective memory to document the spatial experience prevalent throughout the country at the time. *Xiao Wu* focuses on public

space in Fenyang, such as noisy streets, courtyards, buses, restaurants, dance halls, and public bathhouses. Establishing a relationship with widely known public spaces expresses Jia's pursuit for realism and its accompanying dualisms. The film is narrated in the fragmented space of Xiaowu wandering around Fenyang City, which suggests a sense of fragmentation in a scattered, demolishing city. The demolished buildings in public space symbolize the disintegration of an old collective society, as a new economic revolution attempts to rebuild the old collective spaces. Characters in the film are filled with anxiety between the old and the new, as Xiaowu's friend complains, "The old is going, but where is the new?" *Xiao Wu's* public space is the strong space that dominates the characters and society, and it conveys the discomfort and crisis of the hometown in these dualistic patterns of demolition and construction, new and old, tradition and modernity.

However, *Kaili Blues*, also set in a real hometown, does not emphasize the public scene of social life. It instead moves the camera to the hidden corners of its hometown, keen to capture empty, mysterious spaces, including neon-lit houses by waterfalls, bomb shelters left over from the war, foggy mountain roads and secluded traditional villages. Although these still seem to be scattered spaces, Bi Gan borrows classical aesthetics and long takes to combine them into a complete and harmonious space. The spaces of *Kaili Blues* and the psychological consciousness of the characters are intertwined to form an interaction, where the space of reality is not the absolute space that supports the characters' actions, but the spaces of reality, memory and dreams, as well as the fictional village Dangmai and the real city Kaili, are equal and co-operative spaces.

Furthermore, *Xiao Wu's* presentation of the hometown space and the dualistic thinking it embodies is further reinforced through the relationship between TV and reality mentioned above.

The main character Xiaowu takes a red envelope to congratulate his former best friend Xiaoyong on his wedding, and after the two of them break up in discord, Xiaowu goes to a restaurant and eats alone. In this sequence, Jia Zhangke uses a television set to connect the two spaces in which Xiaowu and Xiaoyong live. Television was still an unaffordable commodity for ordinary families in poor areas of China in the 1990s, when it was almost the preserve of the rich, and ordinary families always watched other people's televisions in groups (Wang & Hu 115). Here, the two spaces bridged by the television form a binary contradiction. Obviously, Xiaoyong is watching TV in his own home, while Xiaowu is in the restaurant to watch it; Xiaowu is watching Xiaoyong on TV, and the TV has magnified Xiaoyong's image, but also distanced them. Jason McGrath argues that “formulaic and superficial media” also creates a contrast between the televised coverage of Xiaoyong's wedding and the film's realist aesthetic, which simultaneously suggests a class gap and an emotional interval between the two people (91). The two simultaneous spaces reflect the fact that their friendship is damaged. From Xiaowu's visit to Xiaoyong's home to the two juxtaposed spaces, Jia uses the physical distance of space to show the psychological distance, so as to reflect the unbridgeable conflict between personal feelings and materialistic society. In all cases, binaries dominate the formal and narrative structures of the film.

*Kaili Blues* has a similar personal conflict, but it blurs the opposites in space and proposes polysemy. When Chen Sheng first asks his brother Crazy Face to take care of Weiwei, Crazy Face refuses. Chen Sheng sits on the left side of the screen in opposition to Crazy Face on the right side of the screen, and a vertical pillar divides their space suggesting that the two are at odds. Still, the film's narrative does not perpetuate this opposition, replacing it with a dream of Chen Sheng. Bi Gan suspends the narrative through the sound of the Lusheng pipe and poetry,

shifting the space of conflict. As stated in the first section, the combination of poetry and empty shot, dream and reality are the combination of the void and solid in classical aesthetics, where it disintegrates the antagonism of real space, thus transitioning Chen Sheng from real space to a multi-layered space of consciousness. Similarly, in the fight scene between Chen Sheng and Crazy Face, the panning camera creates heterogeneous time in continuous space, which in turn, changes the reality of the space, thus mitigating the violent overtones of this conflict. *Xiao Wu's* realist aesthetic continually reinforces the conflict of interpersonal and social relationships represented by the space. By contrast *Kaili Blues'* utilization of classical aesthetics modifies the reality of the space by transforming the tense oppositional space into an imaginative and emotional polysemic space.

In fragmenting space to elaborate the old/new binaries, *Xiao Wu* actually suggests the linear history of the hometown, implying that time, like space, is centered on a binary between tradition/modernity. When Xiaowu returns from the village to the Fenyang City, he feels the rapid change of time, as all the houses on the street are going to be demolished overnight. The demolition and reconstruction of the city represents the linear process of Chinese modernity. This macro-level social transformation is also presented through the characters' conflicts between the past and the present, the most prominent of these being Xiaoyong's betrayal of Xiaowu's friendship. In the film, Jia uses a wall inscribed with the change in their height to highlight their once inextinguishable friendship. This wall represents the emotional memories of the past, and the times are dismantling these emotions. Both characters show a brief pause when the two face the wall, but it is clear that Xiaowu stays longer than Xiaoyong. Chris Berry argues that this is Xiaowu's "contemplative gaze" to question the progressiveness of post-socialism (254). In the scene where Xiaowu faces the wall, Jia Zhangke first uses a POV and then turns to a third

perspective, as if pulling Xiaowu, who is drowning in the subjective emotions of the past, back to the harsh reality of the present, which suggests the doomed split between the past and the present. *Xiao Wu* not only uses such an obvious time span between the present and the past to represent the dichotomy of society, but also emphasizes that time in the present is also extremely unstable. As in the film, Xiaowu and Meimei's relationship improves slightly, but reality changes rapidly, causing their love to fade quickly. At the end of the film, Xiaowu repeatedly asks the police to show him his pager because he is persistently waiting for Meimei's text message, but Meimei has already left with a rich businessman. All these show that when the times push people forward, Xiao Wu is still a person stuck in the past, facing him only the break of time and emotional separation. As Tony Rayns says, the society changes almost too fast to be grasped, in which "few old certainties and absolute Confucian morals remain intact" (Rayns).

If *Xiao Wu* is defined by a linear historical shape, *Kaili Blues* seems instead to collapse time periods into each other, suggesting a unity and balance between past, present, and future. Like the figures in *Xiao Wu*, Chen Sheng is also plagued by memories and feelings. When Chen Sheng learns that his mother and wife have died during his prison sentence, the pain of reality plunges him into memories and dreams, but when he arrives at Dangmai, he meets a hairdresser who looks like his dead wife. If this is indeed a dream, it means that the past also compensates for the present regret of Chen Sheng, because he can finally say goodbye to his wife in Dangmai and sing her the nursery rhymes he learned in prison. Thus, *Kaili Blues* does not establish an emotional conflict between forgetting/remembering, betrayal/loyalty between the past and the present, as *Xiao Wu* does, nor does it reflect through emotion the impact of a progressive modernity of time on the relatively stagnant time of traditional society. Instead of letting time split in a linear logic into the opposition of past and present, Bi Gan presents the interaction and

circulation of time through its classical aesthetics, abandoning the absolute reality of time and establishing a life experience and perception where time and emotion interpenetrate.

*Xiao Wu's* realist aesthetic reveals a linear and progressive process of modern development, expressing the duality of the hometown consistently over space and time. In fact, this consistency of temporal and spatial contradictions is better reflected in the sound of the film. For example, when Jia Zhangke deals with the relationship between television and reality, he uses the visual information of television to deepen the spatial contradiction, and more interestingly, he also uses the sound message of television to satirize the absurdity of reality. At the beginning of the narrative of Xiaowu and Meimei, Jia uses the same song as in Xiaoyong's television, which appears in the passage where friendship ends but where love begins. In a sense, it continues the sadness in Xiaowu's heart and hints at his possible failed love. The sound of the television foreshadows an uneasy reality, even in the various other sounds of the film. Michael Berry argues that *Xiao Wu's* sound design also emphasizes a realist aesthetic (23). Jia uses a variety of noisy background sounds such as television, radio, vehicles, and crowds to highlight the hometown that is in transition between old and new, destruction and reconstruction. In addition, *Xiao Wu's* soundscape is divided into two main types: lyrical pop music representing memories and feelings, and television broadcasts and ambient noise representing the current political society. The former emphasizes Xiaowu's sentimental qualities, conveying his steadfastness to friendship and his expectation of love, which is a symbol of the past and alludes that Xiaowu possesses a slow pace that cannot keep up with the new era. The latter is a symbol of the present because television broadcasting itself is a commodity of its time, and ambient noise is the sound of rapid modernization. Sheldon Lu explains that “the soft, sentimental, private, and humane melodies” found in popular culture contrast with the official language of

ideology (151). Therefore, they then constitute a binary contradiction. The scene where Xiaowu and Meimei are talking in bed, the most romantic moment in the film, uses music to warm up their feelings for each other, but this still long take retains a kind of instability. Because the noise from outside constantly invades this cozy duo's world, the scene foreshadows the fragility of this relationship as Meimei will be drawn away by the new world outside the room. Jia's pop music thus creates a space for the audience to “contemplate themselves and their relation to the state” (Szeto 96).

In contrast, the sound of *Kaili Blues* is much quieter. Like *Xiao Wu*, Bi Gan also uses some lyrical pop music, but he does not use any sounds that clearly refer to the era. Instead, the sounds of *Kaili Blues* always serve to blur the reality of time and space. For example, the film features the traditional Miao songs of the Lusheng pipe, a traditional music used by the locals to mourn the dead. In the sequence where Chen Sheng first dreams and wakes up to recite a poem, the Lusheng pipe becomes a coherent sound effect that spans dream and reality. In the dream world, Bi superimposes the figure playing the Lusheng pipe on Chen Sheng's bed, so the audience can assume that it is emanating from the dream world, but when Chen Sheng wakes up and hears the sound on the balcony, the sound is revealed to emanate also from reality. The sound crosses between subjective and objective, making the space elusive. This sound design to create temporal multiplicity also occurs in the 42-minute long take. When Chen Sheng first arrives at Dangmai, he was told by Weiwei that there was no train here, but later in the sequence, when Yang Yang takes a boat to the other side of the river, the sound of a train can be heard on the soundtrack. Though faintly discernible, it is consistent with the real or unreal space-time of Dangmai, creating a combination of the void and solid. Even traditional Miao music and modern pop music do not become a dichotomy, but rather show that the sounds can cooperate and

express the same emotional themes with the change of time and space. This blending of sounds is embodied by the band we see in the film, who play both the traditional Lusheng pipe as well as modern pop music. As both involve nostalgia and lyricism for the dead, Chen Sheng misses his mother in the sound of the Lusheng pipe and expresses his love for his wife by singing pop music, while Guanglian misses his boyfriend Lin Airen through pop music tapes.

Therefore, the contrast between these two films in terms of space, time and sound shows that Bi Gan's hometown aesthetic does not establish a binary realist structure similar to Jia Zhangke's. *Xiao Wu's* style is heavily influenced by Italian neorealism, which follows many of the characteristics of realist aesthetics. In terms of content, Jia uses the social experience of a thief who happens to reflect the real-life conditions of the underclass of China's urbanization movement in the 1990s. In terms of form, he uses long takes, simultaneous recording and live sound sources, and handheld shooting to create a world of images that are extremely close to lived reality. Jia's realistic aesthetic is also unified in form and content. As Michael Berry points out, documentary-style rough images strengthen the gritty nature of the story itself and the dark reality in which the protagonist is trapped (22). Xiaowu's experience reflects the great changes and pains of an era, and the hometown in the film faces destruction in parallel with the disintegration of Xiaowu's friendship and love and family ties. The realist aesthetic critiques the grand narrative of China's reform and opening-up heyday, revealing the tension between rural and urban, collective and individual, traditional and modern. It was an economically significant revolution in China that shook up everyone's "spiritual, moral and even physical foundation" (Berry 45).

However, *Kaili Blues* borrows the combination of the void and solid from the artistic conception of Chinese classical aesthetics to blur the social anxiety, political unease, moral

disorder, and emotional repression caused by the absolute historical contrasts in realist aesthetics. Bi Gan does not expect Chen Sheng to represent millions of Chinese youths which can be seen in the setting of characters' identities. Chen Sheng is a killer, a doctor and a poet, and this complex combination is more dramatic than the documentary-style underclass characters in *Xiao Wu*, blurring the relationship between the characters and social reality. In terms of form, although Bi also utilizes real scenes of his hometown, long takes, and non-professional actors, the mobile camera reshapes the space into a personal spiritual zone of mysterious dreams. By constructing multiple meanings of the characters' fates, the boundaries of imagination/reality and past/future are blurred. The contradictions of reality in the film are often interrupted and dissolved by dreams, memories, and poetry. Rather than producing contradictory space and linear time through images as *Xiao Wu* does, *Kaili Blues* dissolves any possible mode of establishing oppositions through combination of the void and solid. This allows the film's presentation of the hometown to leave the monolithic competition between tradition and modernity, suggesting a recurring self-reconciliation and negotiation of the values of the hometown in the course of historical evolution.

Finally, the emotional themes of these two films also go in the same direction as their hometown aesthetics. As film critics have recognized, nostalgia is an emotional theme shared by both films. It is not only the director's nostalgia for his hometown but also the protagonists' entanglement with their memories. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym introduces two types of nostalgia: “restorative nostalgia” and “reflective nostalgia” (40). The former emphasizes the reconstruction of a lost hometown and the filling of memory gaps, with the political implication of restoring national myths (Boym 40). The latter focuses on exposing the contradictions of modernity such as people's pain and suffering, wandering on the ruins of the past and the present

(Boym 41). I believe that the dualistic critique established by *Xiao Wu* on time, space and sound belongs to reflective nostalgia. This nostalgia stems from the binary of realist aesthetics, such as the loss and melancholy triggered by the urban/rural in space and the traditional/modern in time. Xiaowu is facing his hometown, but it is facing reconstruction, where he can no longer find a sense of home, so it also causes a kind of rupture within the self. *Kaili Blues*, however, presents a hybrid nostalgic mode by reflecting on history and the present yet insisting on valuable parts of the past as a remedy. On the one hand, unlike restorative nostalgia, which works to evoke mythical nationalism and a descent into conservative fantasy, *Kaili Blues* simply acknowledges the abundant and continuity of a social emotion that pervades historical culture in order to emphasize a personalized nostalgia that is distinct from the political collective center. On the other hand, while *Kaili Blues* does not emphasize the binary between past and present, it draws on the timelessness of emotion to offer a free way of reflection, of meditating and feeling at will between past, present and future, without falling into a single kind of suffering. Bi Gan's spatial presentation of his hometown makes the two worlds in historical time parallel, as Kaili City has no strong contrast between the past and the present. The structure of *Kaili Blues* presents an infinite traversal in the binary framework of city/countryside, past/present, tradition/modern, etc., characterizing the eternal space-time between the characters. *Xiao Wu*, on the other hand, presents a rupture in time and space. For example, the distance between Xiaowu and Xiaoyong symbolizes the distance in time and space, one is stuck in the past, while the other is a symbol of the new power and wealth in Chinese society. It can be said that *Xiao Wu's* temporal opposition essentially reflects an emotional rupture, while *Kaili Blues* actually uses this hybrid nostalgia to emphasize the timelessness of emotions so that it can engage in reflection and critique between

the past, present and future, while at the same time suturing the historical rupture associated with emotions.

In any case Bi Gan's hometown aesthetic transcends the aesthetics of realism. As Jiwei Xiao asks Bi how he defines himself in relation to the sixth generation of Chinese directors, he emphasizes his intention to depart from the collective identity of Chinese cinema (21). Clearly, as the introduction suggests this collective identity is the realist aesthetic. Despite *Xiao Wu's* fierce satire and critique of the political, economic, and social aspects of China at the end of the 20th century, which unveiled the loss and confusion of hometowns in the process of modernization, the binary shaped by the realist aesthetic consolidates the structure of historical upheaval and the singularity of social change since the May Fourth Movement. Realist aesthetics attempt to summarize the individual encounters of Chinese society into collective and national discourses in order to emphasize the grand sense of the times in the individual and the linear process of Chinese modernity. As Chris Berry notes, *Xiao Wu* engages in a struggle against the “grand narrative of socialist modernity,” presenting a radical stance of realist aesthetics (254). This aesthetically constructed reflexive nostalgia often leaves the protagonist torn between national tradition and Western modernity, between the “contemplative time” of the individual and the “progressive time” of the nation, placing his or her identity in competition with these national discourses. In contrast, *Kaili Blues'* appropriation of classical aesthetics blurs the boundaries between humans and nature (the environment), life and aesthetics, the “past” of memory and the “present” in which the subject remembering is present, and seeks to expand the stability and continuity of the spatio-temporal cycle. Bi exploits the potential of classical aesthetics, cutting through the “the cadence and the music” of poetry, the spatial and temporal forms of landscape painting, and traditional and modern sounds to capture a finite and endless

world, lost and regained, beyond the stagnation of time/history (Xiao 18). I argue that *Kaili Blues'* focus on dynamic perspectives engages discussions of space-time and history, stepping outside of the monolithic nostalgic paradigm and pioneering a Chinese cinema no longer dominated by a realist aesthetic. The hybrid nostalgic mode pushes investments in reality and history, subjectivity and ambiguity in unexpected directions, and combines them with local traditions and popular culture to move us beyond an easy understanding of realism. The artistic conception of classical Chinese aesthetics allows emotion to become a tool for a mixture of reflection, critique and transcendence, making the identification with the hometown encompass a complex of dialectical and unifying ideas. As Jiwei Xiao & Dudley Andrew write, Chen Sheng and Guanglian were originally two lost souls, two halves of a loving relationship, but their combination allows the absence to be compounded into a whole (Xiao & Andrew). Bi's hometown aesthetics certainly mediates the dichotomous model of realist aesthetics by not stopping at the condition of dissonance caused by absence, but by expanding it to a larger, holistic world to understand the complexity of hometown and Chinese modernity.

## THE LYRICAL TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The previous two sections combed through *Kaili Blues*' use of classical Chinese aesthetics in terms of formal features and philosophical ideas, focusing on how the film combines void and solid to produce the fusion of feeling and scenes, which dismantles the critical framework of binary oppositions in realist aesthetics. In this section, I situate *Kaili Blues*' hometown aesthetics and narrative within the theory of Chinese lyrical tradition as a challenge to the epic structure of realist aesthetics. *Kaili Blues* provides a litany of historical references. Its symbols and scenes run through the imprints of a region in time, from the ancient Miao batik and Lusheng pipe to the remnants of war in China a hundred years ago, to the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, private property, health care, the one-child policy and the crackdowns of the 1990s after the reform and opening up, and even the remote areas of China that it focuses on in the backwardness of 21st century globalization, but the film no longer imposes these epic structures and historical propositions on the narrative of the modern hometown. I argue that *Kaili Blues* ultimately evokes the lyrical tradition, bringing various voices outside of the epic discourse into hometown identity. The different ways in which the lyrical tradition represents the hometown also reflect a pluralistic Chinese modernity, one which mediates modernity's problems and dynamics through classical aesthetics and spiritual qualities.

The adaptability of *Kaili Blues* and the lyrical tradition theory is mainly reflected in two aspects of classical Chinese poetry and landscape painting. The lyrical tradition is currently recognized by the scholarship as a Chinese literary and artistic tradition that is dominated by "lyric poetry." Unlike Western literature, which has its origins in epic and drama, Chinese

literature has its origins in poetry (Chen 18). In his article “On Chinese Lyrical Tradition,” Chen Shih-hsiang, the first scholar to propose the concept of lyrical tradition in the field of comparative literature, mentions that although China does not have epic works such as Homer's epics and Greek tragedies, it has a lyrical tradition with the *The Classic of Poetry* and *The Songs of the South* as its sources, which has been continued and developed in narrative genres such as opera and novels, in addition to lyric poetry (18). Many scholars have also noticed the poetic atmosphere of *Kaili Blues*, such as Jiwei Xiao & Dudley Andrew, who refer to traditional Chinese lyric poetry in their comments on the film. They argue that the “meta-rhyme” of images and sounds in this film is similar to the rhythm of classical Chinese poetry (Xiao & Andrew). In the film, such things as the Weiwei's train and the adult train, the water drops and the waterfall, the sound of the train and the Lusheng pipe all create a “dense effect of multiple interacting elements” similar to that of Chinese poetry (Xiao & Andrew). Bi Gan has also repeatedly emphasized the strong influence of Tang poetry and Song lyrics, which is reflected in his editing logic and the poetry recited by Chen Sheng in the film. In addition, Yu-kung Kao notes that the lyrical tradition encompasses a variety of arts such as ancient music, poetry, and painting. In his essay on “Chinese Lyrical Aesthetics,” he suggests that landscape painting is “the culmination of lyrical aesthetics” (82). Thus, no matter what perspective one considers, the film's poetic style and the aesthetic characteristics of landscape painting evoke the Chinese lyrical tradition.

In fact, the lyrical tradition is also related to the emotional themes of *Kaili Blues*, which relate to the meaning of lyricism in Chinese culture. The “lyrical” is divided into two characters in Chinese: *shu* and *qing*. The former means weaving and synthesizing, as well as relieving and soothing. The latter generally refers to emotion, sentiment, affect, or feeling and implies sex, desire, state of mind, and situation. The meaning of “lyrical” in Chinese emphasizes the fact that

ancient Chinese poetry and painting were primarily concerned with expressing the author's emotions. Bi Gan also tends to draw on real-life emotions to create his films. He made *Kaili Blues* because of an emotional experience, one that involved helping his grandmother deliver a dress to a relative who died in another city (92). At the same time, *Kaili Blues* is a film based on the director's attachment to his hometown. Bi expresses the artist's nostalgia by making his childhood memories, along with the space of his hometown, the creative source of the film. More importantly, the film's narrative revolves around emotions. Chen Sheng and his mother, Weiwei, his wife, his partner, and the old doctor Guanglian are projections of family, love and friendship respectively. Blending the subjective psychological *qing* and objective action of *shu*, *Kaili Blues* weaves these emotions together, ultimately allowing the characters to be emotionally released and transcended in the narrative.

However, this lyricism, which seems to be steeped in personal emotion, is often seen as an excuse for artists to escape from reality or simply to indulge in personal feelings. How then can the ancient Chinese lyrical tradition have a voice of its own in modern times? Indeed, the core of the Chinese lyrical tradition has never been purely personal expression, it can talk about “one's ambitions, one's emotions,” but it has never been about “private or internal dialogue” (Wang 72). The lyrical tradition has encompassed a complex dialogue of “politics, values, and aesthetics” (Wang 72). In *The Lyrical in The Epic Time*, David Der-wei Wang follows in the footsteps of previous scholars such as Chen Shih-hsiang and Yu-kung Kao, and for the first time applies the theory of the lyrical tradition to modern Chinese literature and art in the twentieth century on the basis of Michel Foucault's theory of discourse. For Wang, foreign cultures since the nineteenth century have served as a new resource for the tradition to reflect on itself, and the Chinese lyrical tradition became a modern expression that led “the poetics and politics of

Chinese interiority” to a different realm, from an isolated field of Chinese lyricism to a field reconfigured in interaction with external stimuli (52). However, the lyrical tradition has been overlooked as anachronistic in its participation in the articulation of Chinese modernity due to the influence of the modern Chinese revolution. In the hundred years of intellectual discussions on how China is modern, the history of Chinese culture has long been characterized by two major tones: “enlightenment” and “revolution,” and such discourses have pervaded all aspects of literature and art, which are eager to reflect a close relationship with the historical reality (Wang xi). This discourse has become an inertial discourse that has even influenced the direction of scholarship. This discourse has also been filled with the epic of Western impact and internal turbulence. Nonetheless, Wang believes that lyricism is no different from revolution and enlightenment in that it has participated in the task of constructing the modern China, and has even developed in parallel with epic discourse, except that the latter's call to history and reality has suppressed traditional lyrical values (xii). As he explains:

This ‘strong’ mode of thinking originated in the late Qing and May Fourth era and reached its apex during the Maoist regime, as illustrated by the mandate of nation building and the demands of volition, reason, collectivity, virility, and revolution. Rhetorically, it manifested in macroscopic (*hongguan*) imagery, the ‘sublime figure,’ and the ‘epic’ representational system such as *daguo* (great nation) and *tianxia* (under heaven). By contrast, the lyrical comes across simply as too weak and trivial to carry the weight of modernity's demands. (xii)

Therefore, the road to the beginning of Chinese modernity inherently encompassed multiple forms, but the grand narrative of the rise of the May Fourth Movement treated the complex pre-modern China as a simple, monolithic system, and a preference for revolutionary history led to a

plurality of lyrical ways of thinking giving way to epic. Based on this theory, Wang highlights lyrical aspects of modern literature and art that have been overshadowed by epic discourse, works that were not valued in the history of their time, but that are now outstanding representatives of Chinese literature and art, for example, *Spring in a Small Town* (Fei Mu, 1948), which is generally considered the most outstanding work in the history of Chinese cinema. Read this way, the lyrical has proved a significant way to articulate Chinese modernity beyond revolution and enlightenment.

In contrast to the epic narratives of the 20th century, China in the 21st century is writing a new national narrative because of its overall economic rise. The many official discourses such as “Chinese Dream,” “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” and “China Model” are all political slogans that aspire to the epic re-emergence of the Chinese nation (Breslin 1323). Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* was birthed during this transitional period of economic change, and through a realist aesthetic presents a hometown in the grip of an epic era that is in shock and in turmoil. In such an epic post-socialist era, I argue that while Chinese art cinema reveals the dilemmas and concealed realities of a prosperous era, the realist aesthetic it adopts also becomes an epic discourse for reflecting on this era. That is to say, realism acknowledges the grand structure officially erected over history and reality, conforming to this linear and progressive Chinese modernity, and constituting an unconscious complicity. While criticizing official discourse, *Xiao Wu*'s realist aesthetic invariably shapes various dichotomous narratives, which ties the film to the contradiction in the epic tradition. As Rey Chow puts it, Chinese writers and filmmakers tend to use desolate and backward natural landscapes and vulnerable groups to embody the love-hate mentality of China in the face of modernity's impact (38). In *Xiao Wu*, this personal emotional opposition of love and hate is also elevated to a popular mood that highlights the excitement and

melancholy of the epic era. Clearly, in the globalized context of post-socialist China, realist aesthetics pursue this singular logic to comment on, penetrate, and solve all domestic, social, and personal problems, and like the revolutionary discourse of the early twentieth century, similarly ignore the ability of the lyrical tradition to construct a pluralistic modernity.

Thus, I argue that the historical and emotional complexity of *Kaili Blues*' lyrical tradition provides a perspective on the modern hometown that goes beyond the epic. It is not only a skepticism of epic discourse, but more importantly, a proposal to portray Chinese modernity in a pluralistic perspective. In *The Rediscovery of Chinese Lyrical Tradition*, Chi Xiao also brings together the theories of Chen Shih-hsiang and Yu-kung Kao and summarizes the three core elements of the lyrical tradition: aesthetics, time, and self. In engaging these three elements in its film style, *Kaili Blues* demonstrates that the ancient lyrical tradition has developed a diverse vein in modern times. This lyrical structure is both “sensory influx and conceptual rumination,” responding to “historical circumstance” and pointing to “behavioral protocol, and it unfolds in *Kaili Blues* in these three primary ways (Wang 354).

First, *Kaili Blues* places emotion at the center of its aesthetics to see through the complexity of multiple historical and practical intersections. In his book *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, Li Zehou emphasizes “Chinese beauty (aesthetic) in deep emotion” (117). The key concept of lyrical aesthetics is the “artistic conception” characterized by the combination of the void and solid & the fusion of feeling (*qing*) and scenes, which is similar to the phenomenon of empathy in recent Western aesthetics (Li 152). Yu-kung Kao, in proposing lyrical aesthetics, also takes artistic conception as a starting point. Both scholars see the subject's inner emotions as the source of beauty, and the perception of the external material (time and space) lies entirely in the impressions formed within. Kao argues that the main object of lyrical aesthetics is the “state of

mind” rather than the external reality (120). Thus lyrical aesthetics internalizes all external phenomena and makes experience part of introspection (Kao 112). Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are central to the creation of the artistic conception through which the character's perception of nature, meditation on time, and transcendence of the heart all revolve around *qing*. However, this aesthetic does not emphasize inner emotions at the expense of outer reality, rather, it is a state of mutual integration and close connection. Just as *Kaili Blues* integrates the psychology of the characters with the environment, it achieves an inner emotional experience through the spatial-temporal phenomenon of the external world, turning reality into illusion and creating an “imaginary reality” through *qing* (Li 156).

Wang points out that the *qing* in lyrical works refers not only to “emotional faculties” but also to “a state or situation as it is or happens” (7). Therefore, the lyrical aesthetics contain both emotions and facts, and the emotions of multiple characters in the film overlap and map onto each other, with each emotion corresponding to a relevant historical or practical issue. For example, the love between Guanglian and Lin Airen is linked to the Cultural Revolution, the love between Chen Sheng and his wife is linked to the severe crackdown policy, Chen Sheng's affection for Weiwei is linked to the one-child policy, and the love between Weiwei and Yang Yang is linked to the unbalanced economic development. These emotions and facts are not individually related but mixed with each other, and lyrical aesthetics constitute an effect that complicates reality. The result of this mixture is that emotion becomes the foreground and history becomes the background. Thus the lyrical aesthetic displaces the historical issues that might appear as epic, and instead highlights a human emotion at the intersection of history, society and culture.

Second, *Kaili Blues* juxtaposes a modern, linear progressive time with and traditional, cyclical repetitive time, enacting the multiplicity and ambiguity of time. The viewpoint of time in the lyrical tradition is a personal subjective time vision, with a sense of unstoppable fate, it is a contrast between “the one-time linear life time and the cyclic cosmic time” (Xiao 10). This film uses instruments such as clocks and trains to emphasize the linear laws of modern time, but a series of long takes refutes the impression of linearity and creates an alternative way of thinking about time. They present a sense of timelessness in naturalistic scenes, overlapping time in panning shots, and a sense of cyclical time or transcendence in the 42-minute moving long take.

The lyrical tradition merges “poetic/emotional time” and “historical time” with each other (Xiao 10). Focusing on emotional time, the poet sighs for the passage of time and expresses the possibility of transcending time (Wang 9). In the film, Chen Sheng transcends the laws of real time and juxtaposes the time of memories and dreams with reality, reflecting on the course of his life. He roams in the infinite time of nature, transcending the finiteness of his personal life. In such a view of time, the lyrical subject takes his personal life as an allegory for the fate of humanity as a whole, and issues a kind of cosmic lament in the finite time of life and the infinite time of nature. The lyrical aesthetics constructs a kind of co-temporal space-time within the hometown, indicating the historical continuity that exists between the tradition and modernity of the hometown, and even showing a suspended state of modernity slipping into pre-modernity or pre-modernity transforming into modernity, refuting the epic sense of historical rupture and linear space-time.

Third, *Kaili Blues* presents an identity path of self-examination and self-reflection, an identity that bases the self on the dimension of continuity between past, present, and future, and pursues the integrity of the self. The self in the lyrical tradition originally refers to the

autobiographical tendencies of poets, who often reflect their own life situations in their works, which usually contain “self-confession, self-revelation, self-discovery, self-identity” and other purposes (Zhang 278). In *Kaili Blues*, Weiwei's lonely childhood, his parents' divorce, Chen Sheng's triad experience, and the old doctor's behavior are all reflections of Bi Gan's own experiences, which he brings together to form a lyrical theme that reveals his own state of mind (Bi 92). In addition, the film's lyricism is based on human relationships, as Chen Sheng searches for his nephew Weiwei out of family affection, and has been in jail for his friend out of friendship, and repeatedly enters memories and dreams out of love. It can be said that this care for emotional objects is the character's search for the self-subject. This pursuit creates entanglements with others and connects emotions to the external world, so that this self emerges as a result of mutual regulation and co-shaping between subjective emotions and objective reality.

One of Chen Sheng's identities in *Kaili Blues* is also a poet. In the scene where the radio plays the car accident nine years ago, Chen Sheng reads a poem, “Yet I have lived without a heart for nine years,” a metaphor for his own self, suggesting the loneliness of prison life and the guilt of losing loved ones. In terms of the experiences of the characters in the film, the historical encounters and traumas make the self lost, but the lyrical expressions are the driving force to rediscover the self. *Kaili Blues* reflects the characters' affirmation and identification with themselves despite the changes in history. Through the persistence and search for emotions, the self emerges from the silent depths of repression, gaining a release and eternal existence. This self-construction is formed by various “individual and collective motivations” (Wang 3). Thus, *Kaili Blues* is filled with a tone of many subjects navigating through complex emotions and histories, which cannot be reduced to an either/or option.

In short, the aesthetics, time and self of the lyrical tradition reflect the complexity of internal and external gestures with emotion. It is with this inner emotion that *Kaili Blues* refines the outer reality and thus dissolves the epic of the times, but the result is that reality becomes more complex, showing the intertwined, interactive and cyclical nature of emotion and nature, history and reality, time and space. In this context, lyrical both shapes the aesthetic genre of *Kaili Blues* and becomes a sentiment for Bi Gan, even forming “an ideology that is as much emotionally motivated as historically occasioned” (Wang 354). This ideology differs from realism in pointing the finger at an overly conspicuous historical encounter, but uses emotional diversity and decentering to critique politics in a hidden way, unnoticed and manipulated by state ideology, and to challenges the discourse of Chinese modernity in which the hometown identity is lost, historically fractured, and emotionally fragmented.

In fact, Wang points out that without lyricism as a foundation, the passionate presentation of revolution and enlightenment would lose their infectious power, just as the nostalgic sense of hometown is also a proposition of the lyrical tradition. But we can see that Jia Zhangke's nostalgia highlights the collective nature and history of the nation, and is more massive and epic in nature. Bi Gan's nostalgia, on the other hand, highlights the lyricism of emotional eternity, and is separated from historical reality by a distance, not presenting a collective center. On the contrary, his references to some cultural forms in Kaili City, a province in southwest China with minority traditions, imply that he leaves the center of this great national narrative and naturalizes it as a personal, mysterious and rare phenomenon. Boym sees nostalgia not merely about attachment to local, but also as “a new understanding of time and space” (10). We have already said that Bi's lyrical aesthetics eliminates the dichotomy of realism in time and space, and it is evident that this reunderstanding of the hometown suggests a different way of identification.

In recent Chinese literary and cultural representations, the hometown is not only a geographic and emotional space, but also a cultural and meaningful space, a complex discursive field. Jia-Yan Mi points out hometown is a dynamic concept always subject to “reinvention, relocation and reinscription,” shaping the “imagined community” of the nation through its re-creation in social, cultural and political interactions at different stages of history (4). In presenting this community, the subjective consciousness of realist aesthetics becomes subordinate to the group apparatus, and its epic discourse becomes the only way to understand the entire nation and culture. The lyrical tradition of *Kaili Blues*, however, does not have a strong sense of community, it is a search for a return to a multitude of subjects. *Xiao Wu* uses the wandering of an individual in his hometown as a metaphor for a lost macro-subject. This identification with the hometown is not through affirmation, but through negation and criticism. So Xiaowu is painful, ambivalent and self-doubting, and embodies the uncertainty of the self. *Kaili Blues*, on the other hand, expresses the identification with the hometown in an affirmative way. The lyrical tradition affirms the historical experience of the hometown and establishes a pattern of temporal dialogue in which the continuity of images, the continuity of time and the continuity of emotions all emphasize the hometown's active reconciliation and adaptation despite the dilemmas of tradition and modernity, rather than a forced and mournful emanation of anger and pathos of historical disconnection. The many characters all have the definite goal of pursuing their emotions, constituting a film about the emotional experiences of ordinary people in China's underclass society. These emotional experiences include brotherly love, mother-son love, father-son love, husband-wife love, friend love, uncle-nephew love, etc. They present a multitude of historical discourses and emotional dialogues. *Kaili Blues'* hometown does not become a generalized subject, but a complex subject with many self-manifestations, and what *Kaili Blues*

ultimately emits is a lament on the impermanence of the human world and the cosmic cycle in the long roll of history, this lament that encompasses political, social and cultural reflections.

Starting from the identity and reflection of the hometown, *Kaili Blues*' lyrical tradition is this way of fusing cultures in an ongoing and pluralistic Chinese modernity. In contrast, the long collaboration between Chinese realist cinema and the task of constructing a nation has developed a fallacy that the artist's historical commitment and social responsibility necessitates a close connection to reality, while the further the distance from reality the more it is seen as useless art. This notion has narrowed down the originally multiple Chinese modernity and abandoned other orientations. So the grandiose modernity in cinema is like a tacit agreement between artists and politicians to the extent that it imposes itself on the aesthetic practice of other Chinese films. The aesthetics of realism and its epic discourse constitute an absolute modernity. *Kaili Blues* identifies the risks of this epic modernity and instead demonstrates the ambiguity of Chinese modernity, which indicates the complex interactions between individuals, nations, histories, regions, and cultures.

I think the Chinese modernity that Bi Gan shows us is one that shares and interacts with itself and the other, that travels in space and time, and that walks with an ambivalent attitude of uncertainty or doubt. The uncertainty here is more a process of finding balance rather than a sense of loss from which one cannot extricate oneself. We see that the hometown Kaili City, although inevitably suffering from the impact of modernity, seems to maintain its own unique fixed rhythm. This rhythm does not ebb and flow with strong external changes, but rather adjusts and adapts in a calm and gradual manner, often in an ensemble of the past and the present together. In contrast, the imaginary beginning of China as a great power, the beginning of the concept as a nation-state, always with historical stereotypes and an exoticism deliberately

displayed to the West, makes the country in Chinese cinema into an image consistent with the official historical discourse. The construction of an epic discourse also makes us often ignore another inherent gesture of multiple modernities, which do not negate history nor reinforce this epic pattern of history. Thus, the lyrical tradition is rare for modern China. Just at a time when the world is facing polarization, political confrontation, and intensified ideological charge, Bi's film not only pushes for aesthetic innovation in Chinese cinema, but also offers the most nuanced questioning, reflection, and criticism with a unique and complete hometown aesthetic as a resistance to the grand and monolithic Chinese modernity. Even as the official narrative of the rise of the epic nation continues to intensify, Bi evokes a lyrical tradition that counters the grand national narrative and may also provide resources to mitigate extreme nationalism. In the epic pattern of the rise of great nations in the twenty-first century, the lyrical tradition shapes a subjectivity that is not abducted by beliefs and dogmas, a dimension that uses emotions to see through history and criticize politics.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has highlighted the way that the Chinese hometown film *Kaili Blues* borrows from the classical aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting to transcend realist aesthetics, revealing that the cinematic repositioning of the hometown presents some of the possibilities of multiple Chinese modernities. The hometown has always been the center of Chinese emotions and culture, but the anti-traditional radicalism of the May Fourth Movement brought the hometown into competition with Western modernity. Thus the hometown constructs “narratives and discourses in search of the soul of modern China” (Mi 35). However, Chinese art cinema has always adopted a realist aesthetic to depict the hometown, composing a narrative of feudal/anti-feudal, colonial/anti-colonial, Chinese/Western, socialist/capitalist, traditional/modern, collective/individual dichotomies, presenting an obsession with epic discourse to construct modern China. In my project, however, I endeavor to emphasize the contribution of this new Chinese art film's intention to deviate from a realist aesthetic to the development of Chinese cinema and its ability to shape the discourse of Chinese modernity. I argue that *Kaili Blues*, in turn, dismantles the epic modernity of the country's progress, and that the film's lyrical tradition cautiously treats the dualistic paradigm of realist aesthetics, not as a weak discourse that avoids criticism and reflection, but as a global, multifaceted discussion that juxtaposes the real location of the hometown with historical issues, thus proposing the revelation of the destiny that the past and present of the hometown opens up for people, as well as the concern for the historical repetition of encounters that they may have to bear in the future.

On the road to modernity, Bi Gan's hometown still seems to be connected to all the changes and roots. Mi argues that the production of hometown not only is a social imaginary that repositions itself as a social collective, but also something fundamental that holds the promise of uncovering the ultimate redemption of the China's modern dilemma (4). Bi acknowledges that *Kaili Blues*'s hometown is a “new way of looking at the interior of China” (Wong). But his description about his hometown is not intended to offer an eager cure or redemption. As the old doctor muses in the film, “Sooner or later, the patients we treat just get ill again. What is the point in doctors like us busying about all the time?”. The phrase also seems to allude to the historic event of Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature, abandoning medicine for literature. Chow believes that Lu Xun's shift from medical treatment of the Chinese people to the enlightenment of the Chinese mind through literature, an important event in modern Chinese history, was also stimulated by a film clip (4). Coincidentally, Bi uses the film to continue Lu Xun's way of looking at modern China in terms of his hometown. In modern China, where the traditional world of values has collapsed and religion and faith are generally absent, it is clear that the political slogans that are constantly subject to state propaganda and collective mobilization are unable to rely on the spirit of the Chinese themselves. Today, the question of spirituality and value attachment has become more prevalent and prominent as the most profound manifestation of the dilemma of modernity. This leads us to consider what discourses should be relied upon to reflect on and heal the traumas and diseases of a nation or an era? I argue that *Kaili Blues*' invocation of the lyrical tradition rewrites the connotation of the modern hometown, one that retains its authenticity while embracing the diversity of modern culture. It gives meaning and value to the hometown in terms of individual creation and salvation, broadens the frontiers of aesthetics, makes it relevant to the existential experience and ultimate concern of

the modern Chinese self, overcomes the creation of an epic national crisis, and gives the hometown a religious transcendence.

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