

Intermediality and Exploration of Memory in *A New Old Play*

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Introduction

In 2021, the film *A New Old Play* was released. Directed, independently produced, and distributed by Qiu Jiongjiong, the film was screened in partnership with various projection organizations, hosting single-event screenings. After winning the Special Jury Prize at the Locarno Film Festival (2021), it was shown at several international film festivals, including in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Before focusing on the film itself, it is necessary to re-examine the life story of its director Qiu Jiongjiong, which in turn would help to better interpret the film. Generally speaking, Qiu's works reveal how he melds his personal family narrative with broader cultural histories. From the age of two, Qiu began to paint, and at three, he started performing Sichuan opera on stage with his grandfather. Growing up in a theatre troupe, Qiu Jiongjiong was able to be exposed to the rich culture of Sichuan opera. His early life in the troupe gave him a unique perception of the world, immersed in vibrant local culture. Although he originally planned to study at an art college in Beijing, he ultimately chose to forgo an academic education in favor of self-study and in-depth study of art and painting (Xiang, 2022). Since 2006, Qiu Jiongjiong has begun creating visual works, although this was not the beginning of his life in Beijing as a drifter (Zhang, 2023). As early as the 1990s, he was making his way in the art world as a freelance painter. This artistic trait also gives his cinematography a unique style.

A New Old Play uses the life story of Qiu Fu as a blueprint, spanning a century of family history, local chronicles, and oral history. It opens with the Sichuan opera clown, Qiu Fu, reflecting on his life's journey when he is invited, or forced, by two messengers from the nether world to perform for the king of hell, which is a magical-realistic euphemism for death. Starting from the warlord era in Sichuan, the narrative vividly recounts Qiu Fu's life as he joins the New-New Troupe and grows into a celebrated actor, facing the indescribable sorrows of his

times. The film begins with celestial enforcers, often depicted as ox-headed and horse-faced figures, coming to claim Qiu Fu, and ends with him calmly drinking the soup of oblivion in the nether world. From the early 20th century to the 1970s, Qiu Fu's life in opera unravels against the backdrop of a secular upheaval. Overall, the movie progresses chronologically, depicting how major events such as wars and regime transfer are reflected in the lives of individuals during turbulent times.

Generally speaking, it is precisely because he immerses himself in various artistic forms that Qiu Jiongjiong is able to fully exercise his agency in his films, breaking away from the traditional film-making styles that primarily rely on real locations or special effects. During the film production period, Qiu Jiongjiong intertwines various artistic genres, transcending a single narrative style in film by incorporating elements of theatre and painting. He incorporates symbolic imagery and color palettes to underscore thematic elements. The scattered sets and exaggerated props create a miniature world that blurs the line between reality and fantasy. Noted for its stunning cinematography, attention to detail in set design, and the way it captures the essence of Sichuan Opera (川剧) and the interaction between theatrical *mise-en-scene* and cinematic representation, its exploration into individual memories, oral history, and the enduring power of performance art made its narration complicated to be interpreted. Basically, the film was shot mainly in a four hundred square meter studio. Most of the sets and props in the film are handmade, and according to the director, "That hand-built state of the stage has to do with the fact that I grew up touring with my grandfather's Sichuan Opera troupe, as well as my background in painting and love of early silent films." (Xiang, 2022) During the filming of *A New Old Play*, the director aimed to create a lengthy, century-spanning epic. To achieve this, they utilized the characteristics of the film studio, opting for shallow depth of field in both the set design and cinematography. This approach visually resembles the altar paintings of churches or the niches of temple statues. To highlight the shallow depth of field, the camera movement was primarily horizontal, creating a sensation similar to slowly unrolling a scroll and appreciating a painting.

Defining Intermediality

In *Theatre Through the Camera Eye: The Poetics of an Intermedial Encounter*, Laura Sava (2019) argues that intermediality refers to a state or condition where more than one medium interacts in the creation, representation, and interpretation of an artwork. It is a concept involving the interaction between different media forms. It highlights a state of “in-between-ness” where multiple media contribute to the creation and interpretation of an artwork, influencing its meaning and perception (Sava, 2017, p. 7). This concept is particularly prominent in works that integrate elements from various media, such as film incorporating theatrical or operatic elements, or painting that visually evokes cinematic techniques. Intermediality explores how these cross-media influences enrich and complicate the artistic expression, often resulting in a surplus or excess in the represented media, which can transform the viewer's experience and interpretation of the artwork.

The distinction between formalism and cultural analysis in intermedial studies reflects differing methodological approaches to media analysis. Formalism focuses on the structural and aesthetic aspects of media interaction, such as the formal properties of the artwork and how these properties influence viewer perception. This approach can often seem introspective and disconnected from broader cultural or social contexts, leading to critiques of it being narcissistic or lacking relevance. Cultural analysis, on the other hand, considers the broader socio-cultural contexts in which intermedial works are produced and received. It looks at how cultural meanings and practices shape or are represented by intermedial processes, considering the impact of historical, social, and political factors on the media interactions. This approach helps prevent formalism from becoming overly insular and disconnected from the reality of how art impacts the real world and vice versa.

The film *A New Old Play* blends the theatrical and the cinematic, weaving together scenes of personal and political history with elements of Sichuan opera. Therefore, this essay will focus on the intermediality of *A New Old Play*, examining how Qiu Jiongjiong integrates multiple media into this cinematic form. As Qiu Jiongjiong himself claimed during an interview (2022),

“When we were making indie documentaries, we interviewed lots of individuals. We were trying to make these issues—their visibility blocked by the official discourse—available to posterity. In front of ordinary individuals and their life stories, I am always

in awe. My goal is to paint, to create portraits for these people. This is my own way to fight against amnesia.”

His film transcends artistic expression, aiming to convey his concerns about the history of everyday life through the form of artistic narration. Therefore, the following sessions would be discussing the aesthetic and ideological effects of film scenes.

Lens of Camera: Countering Optical Unconscious and Official Historiography

Before beginning our textual analysis of Qiu's film, it is necessary to bridge two concepts that should be interrelated in this paper's framework— optical unconscious and official historiography.

Inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, Walter Benjamin (1972) introduced the conception of “optical unconscious” in his theorization of the photographic technology emerging at that time. This concept is based on the fact that our brains do not distinguish every detail in the broad stream of perception received through our naked eyes, but instead filter out a lot of vague parts as information burdens. While a camera can, without discrimination, record all the objective details in its field of view. The belatedness of photographic viewing also suggests that camera is capable of bridging temporal gaps to allow people to revisit previously overlooked things; as such, camera functions as a tool to help rescue the forgotten from oblivion. Although film is a different medium from photography, it also utilizes the camera as the primary instrument and the motion picture still consists of a set of still images, which means film is another apparatus with the capacity to overcome our optical unconscious.

Official historiography should be examined in a critical view here. Historiography, i.e., the making of formal history, is not a neutral concept about the arrangement of facts that happened in the past, as we should ask who has the right to tell history and how the narrative is shaped. In order to provide a coherent macro picture of our past, historiography is usually formed as a linear chain of causes and effects (Dray, 1971). Official historiography belongs to the hegemony of the ruling class since it is constructed for the interests of the ruling class and applies a singular frame of reference to achieve a homogenized collective memory. Those perspectives and voices deviant from this frame are ruled out and the individuals who are deemed as irrelevant are overlooked. We can see there is a congruence between official historiography and optical unconscious, as they both include simultaneously recording and erasure, memory and amnesia. Therefore, the camera of film also has the potential to provide a dissent portrait of history to counter the historical amnesia and empower the silenced individuals.

Qiu Jiongjiong is fully aware of the political potential of cinema. He doesn't just claim that he's going to fight against amnesia with his artifact, he even incorporates his political

consciousness into the diegesis of the film. In a scene that takes place at the end of the Kuomintang-Communist War, Pocky, as a division commander of the Kuomintang, gathered all the people of the opera troupe to celebrate the reopening of their theatre. However, while everyone is posing, Commander Pocky suddenly receives a message from his soldier and leaves. At this point, a magic clown figure capable of crossing the boundaries between different worlds, Crooky, breaks into the scene and fiddles with the camera when the photographer is busy organizing the troupe. With his aimless manipulation, the camera zooms in and captures Commander Pocky on the city wall in the far background— he is negotiating with a representative sent by the Communists. After their sneaky and brief discussion, the Communists recruit Pocky's army and take over the theater, turning the privately owned New-New troupe into a publicly owned People's Theater.

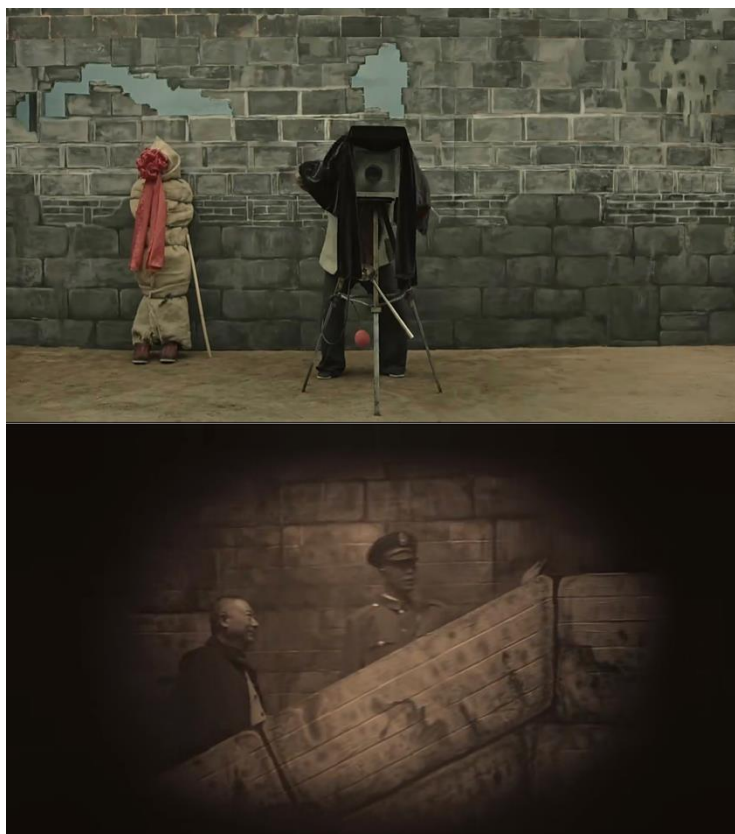


Figure 1 & 2. The camera accidentally captures a power transfer hidden in the shadow of history

This scene illustrates the function of the lens of camera as a memory machine, as this medium can capture and document what is forbidden to see or inaccessible to our naked eyes, such as a secret deal between a new regime and a local warlord at a turning point in history. Crooky's accidental discovery through the camera is not only a glance at the ruptures and

blanks hidden by the official historiography, but also offers a meta-fictional perspective on this film as a whole— *A New Old Play* aims to be a counter version of history. By linking different medialities with certain cultural contexts, the director tries to fathom the depth of individual memories oppressed by the hegemonic discourse.

It is worth noting that, Qiu himself does not have the ambition to achieve some grand goals such as reconstructing the entire history of the nation. He once claimed that, as an author, he couldn't solve problems, he could only ask questions (Kraicer, 2022). Therefore, the following parts of this paper will focus on how Qiu uses camera to incorporate, or deform, different medialities of theatre and painting, how he explores memory covered by the optical or historical unconscious, and through what approaches he problematizes the official narrative.

Theatre through the Camera Eye: Memory Behind the Scene, Illusion on Stage

In line with Qiu's previous documentary works, *A New Old Play* also stems from Qiu's urge to chart the life stories of people he is acquainted with. Faced with the sad truth that theatricality is becoming more and more thinner in the atmosphere of our era (Zhang, 2011), this time the director decides to use his grandfather Qiu Fu, a veteran of Sichuan opera, as the model for the main character of his first feature film. Focusing on the ups and downs of his family in modern Chinese history, most of the events in *A New Old Play* take place in or around the theatre, making the film an intermedial artifact. Ever since McLuhan (1964) declared that "the medium is the message", scholars could no longer consider naively any medium as a transparent container. Once a medium is embedded or represented in another, its initial mediality can hardly be maintained intact. Though sharing some common denominators, drama theatre and cinema are two different media, which means that the former will undergo a certain degree of deformation when it is mediated by the latter. Being a film auteur who always deliberately allows different medialities to clash in his works, Qiu not only explores the cultural complexity of the theatre as a diegetic motif in an off-stage layer that is usually tucked away from the audiences, but also use this heterogeneous medial form to create a chemical reaction with the camera eye. This section will delve into how theatre is related to memory and what is the politics of signification behind the film's nested structure.

Theatre off Stage: Relational Self and Historical Inheritance

Due to his father's untimely death caused by overwork, Qiu Fu is sent by his remarried mother to Commander Pocky's opera troupe, where his father worked during his lifetime. As one of the traditional forms of Chinese opera, Sichuan Opera requires actors to go through a long-term apprenticeship before they can officially perform on stage. Apprentices not only learn the basic skills and techniques of opera performance but are also led by masters to learn the rules and grow up in the troupe. Meanwhile, masters take on the role of both teacher and parent, fostering young apprentices to adulthood, hence forming an inter-subjective circle. Some scholars believe that the notion of the individual "self" in the traditional Chinese context is different from that in the Western framework because it is not equivalent to an essential self, which is rooted in internal consciousness, but a "relational self" constructed around a social network (Hirsch, 1990). In the film, theatre is indeed described as a civilization machine to produce such a relational subjectivity: when masters agree that all the apprentices have qualifications to be professional actors, the troupe holds a ceremony to give each one a stage name based on their performance characters and a same suffix attached to their original names to mark their inherited mantle. Thus, "Qiu Fu" becomes "Qiu Fu-xin", indicating that the protagonist belongs to the New-New (Xin You Xin) troupe.



Figure 3. The naming ceremony of the New-New troupe

The naming ceremony demonstrates that the actors' identities are determined by their quasi-familial kinship, while the "inherited mantle" means something more than mere names. In the days when the New-New troupe was founded, there was almost no written script, and all the actors listened and learned by ear from an early age. The repertoire of performance was fixed, so that the lines that were taught orally and memorized repeatedly became a shared memory passing between different generations. After the young Qiu Fu expresses his desire to

learn opera, the master only teaches him one line, “My father found glory in Langzhong”, for him to practice. This line is taken from an old script, but it also refers to the sudden death of Qiu Fu’s father. The following sequence displays that Qiu Fu recites it repeatedly, implying that this sentence inscribes permanently the memory of loss in the boy’s mind. One day, a few years later, when Qiu Fu-xin has married an actress in the troupe and had a child, he says to his daughter, who is playing with other children, “Ah Gui, who’s your papa then?” “You!” Ah Gui replies. Then he asks her to prove it, and Ah Gui, without hesitation, recites the first line Qiu Fu-xin has learned. This sequence starts with a young father’s silly joke with his daughter, but it further reveals that in a family network featuring theatre as its axis, an individual’s identity is inseparable from the historical inheritance.



Figure 4 &5. The same line passing through different generations

Besides, due to the central position of audition in its teaching, learning, and practice, the inheritance of Sichuan opera inside the troupe can be seen as a mediation of oral history with a performative nature. Ronald J. Grele (1991), a Marxist historian, especially values oral history as it can be utilized as a political act to democratize history and counter the hegemony of the ruling class. By using the camera to uncover the theatre off stage that is always tucked

away behind the scene, Qiu Jiongjiong confirms the revolutionary potential of oral history as individual memory, at least in the Chinese context here, is situated in a social network of inter-subjectivity. It is this bondage formed by oral history and memory, which is now in danger of disappearing, that prompts Qiu to make the film, to take it as partly a tribute to his ancestors and family history, and to manifest a refusal to historical amnesia.

Theatre on Stage: Performativity and Alienation Effect

But opera as oral history is very fragile even from the very beginning because its authenticity or autonomy is always threatened by those who control or direct what can be put on stage. The Chinese title of the film is *Jiaoma Tanghui* (椒麻堂会). Tanghui is a private party or banquet for an event like a wedding or a funeral, which was only affordable for rich or powerful people in old society. The actors of the troupe were often entertainers who provided customized services for social ceremonies, rather than independent artists, since, for example, it would be inappropriate to launch an elaborate comedy at a funeral. Those who performed badly on stage or ran away without notice would be subjected to physical punishment by the rules of the troupe.

While in the new society, the actors must repent and self-criticize according to the demands of the new ideology, show that they have gotten rid of the bad habits of the old society, and express their gratitude to the new regime. Qiu deliberately uses a montage to show the change of people in the director's position as a metaphor for the transition and continuity of different times: Commander Pocky who used to straddle on a tiny wooden stool is superseded by Communist supervisors—the old ones are gone, but the off-stage censorship remains. When Qiu Fu-xin first participates in the public self-inspection meeting and hears that his colleagues are all trying to glorify their past, he can't help but declare that everyone in the theatre has smoked opium. But his wife immediately stops him from the side, as what he tries to say is not what the new regime wants to hear even though it's genuine memory in his perspective. Qiu Jiongjiong sets up the actors' self-inspection meeting on the stage and thus slashes a cleft between the quotidian and theatrical space—the audiences in the auditorium is watching, while the actors are being watched. He also interpolates habitual peng-gen (stooge lines) between the actors into their confessions, implying that their pretentious retelling of personal histories is also a kind of performance and inevitably distortion of their individual memories.



Figure 6. *The retelling of personal histories is staged as a performance*

Theatre as a medium is in fact integrated with the actor's performance on stage. Some scholars argue that theatricality is emanating from the actor (Sava, 2019). The Communist Party also privileges acting as the main tool to absorb the audiences into educational plays. After becoming the people's artists to satisfy the needs of the masses in the new society, the actors of the New-New troupe have to study Stanislavsky's method of acting, which requires the performer to create an illusion of truth and make the audiences take a leap of faith into the narrative. But before the communist drama theory was imported from the Soviet Union, the leap of faith had long been accustomed in China's theatres. As shown in the film, traditional audiences often can not distinguish the actors from the roles they play. When an actor plays a villain so convincingly that he irritates the audiences, the audiences throw stuff like eggs and cabbage at the actor or even literally leap onto the stage to hit the villain.



Figure 7. *The leap of faith of the audience*

But Qiu himself has always stressed that he is a Brecht admirer. In *A New Old Play*, Qiu tries to place the film's audience in a spectatorship that is different from the conventional one. Throughout the film, every time a play is to be staged, the director will let the camera pan

across the entire auditorium in advance. The exposure of the auditorium does not allow the viewers in front of the screen to identify themselves with the audiences in the theater, because no matter whether it is the villagers at the end of feudal society, the troops of local warlords, or the proletarian workers led by the Communist Party that appear in front of the camera, their dressings and behaviors are very different from those in our time. Since the seats in the theatre on the screen are occupied by people from other eras, the director wants the spectators of the film to observe, rather than to believe without a second thought.

In addition, the depth of the composition shown in the self-inspection meeting sequence reveals a nested structure featuring a recursive embedment of three-leveled frames (see Figure 6). The lens of the camera confines the first level which delimits everything we can see on the screen. The second frame is constrained by the stage floor and curtains aside, in which the actors' confession/performance is watched. The innermost layer is the backdrop onto which a portrait of Chairman Mao is projected. Given that movie projectors were far from prevalent in China in the 50s and technology at that time could not provide colored images with such a high resolution, the last one is like an anachronistic jest, showing that this film doesn't seek to achieve complete temporal authenticity.

The receding nested structure enlarges the distance between real-life spectators and the actors' bodily facticity, hence the camera becomes an instrument to expose the performativity of performed conventions. The hand-painted and sometimes anachronistic mise-en-scene manufactures an atmosphere of allegorical satire. Altogether, mediating theatre through the camera eye leads to a strong alienation effect, preventing the spectators from leaping into the narrative.

We can infer that Qiu is very disdainful of the idea of abusing drama or film as an ideological state apparatus to provide the audience with an illusion that the fake or at least distorted memory made by the narrative of official historiography equals absolute reality. That's why he intentionally dismantles theatre's default mediality of make-believe in his film whose artificiality is also explicitly revealed. Quoting Qiu's own words, "an unfamiliar cinematic world could allow more objective and deeper contemplation and thoughts (from the viewers mostly)" (Qiu, 2018, as cited in Liu, 2022). In *A New Old Play*, Qiu wants us the audiences to take a step back and examine critically whatever is shown on stage, on screen, or

told by the official historiography. This mode of spectatorship is more likely to stimulate the repressed multiple historical perspectives and revolutionary consciousness.

Scroll Painting Unfolding through Heterogeneous Time-Space

Painting is another salient form of medium incorporated in *A New Old Play*. In an interview, Qiu Jiongjiong admitted that “much of my inspiration comes from Italian frescos, or Chinese long scroll paintings, which we appreciate most naturally and elegantly by unrolling them horizontally...” (Kraicer, 2022, para. 56). Before starting his career as an independent filmmaker, he has worked as a professional painter for several years. In his first feature film, Qiu strives to merge his two identities, painter and director, in one piece.

Indeed, the movement of the camera in this film frequently resembles the unrolling of a scroll painting. Adapting the scattered perspective which features ancient Chinese visual arts, Qiu uses a lot of lateral shots that pan horizontally to show group portraits in different eras. When the camera moves, there is no fixed vanishing point but rather a dynamic viewing pattern, inviting the spectator to step into the frame and witness how individuals in an opera troupe survive the volatile changes in China’s modern history.

But if we scrutinize the film in a broader view, it’s distinct that its lens language is different from the visual grammar preferred by the traditional scroll painting. Referencing Benedict Anderson’s (2006) creative reading of two print media, newspaper and novel, Chinese paintings on hand scroll, especially the narrative ones, are designed to depict landscape, characters, and events in a homogeneous time-space as well. Take “Along the River During the Qingming Festival”, the most representative narrative scroll painting made in Song Dynasty, as an example, it describes the pomp of thousands of people attending gatherings and events on a special festival from the countryside to the commercial district outside the capital’s city walls. By integrating different geographies spanning several kilometers into a two-dimensional horizontal scroll about five meters long, it arouses the imagination of a community by uniting a large number of figures sharing the same customs into a social entity ruled by a single central government.

While Qiu is not interested in shaping an imagined community in his film. Besides the artificial and anachronistic part of the settings, there is a clown figure called Crooky who can

traverse between different worlds and even skip the flow of time. Following his involuntary role as the archetypal witness of marginal history traces, the camera applies vertical shots tilting up and down to provide a chiasmic portrayal of the mortal world and the nether world. The nether world has its temporality contrary to that of the world of the living, which is symbolized by a clock whose dial has a circle of chronograph numerals starting from thirteen to twenty-four.

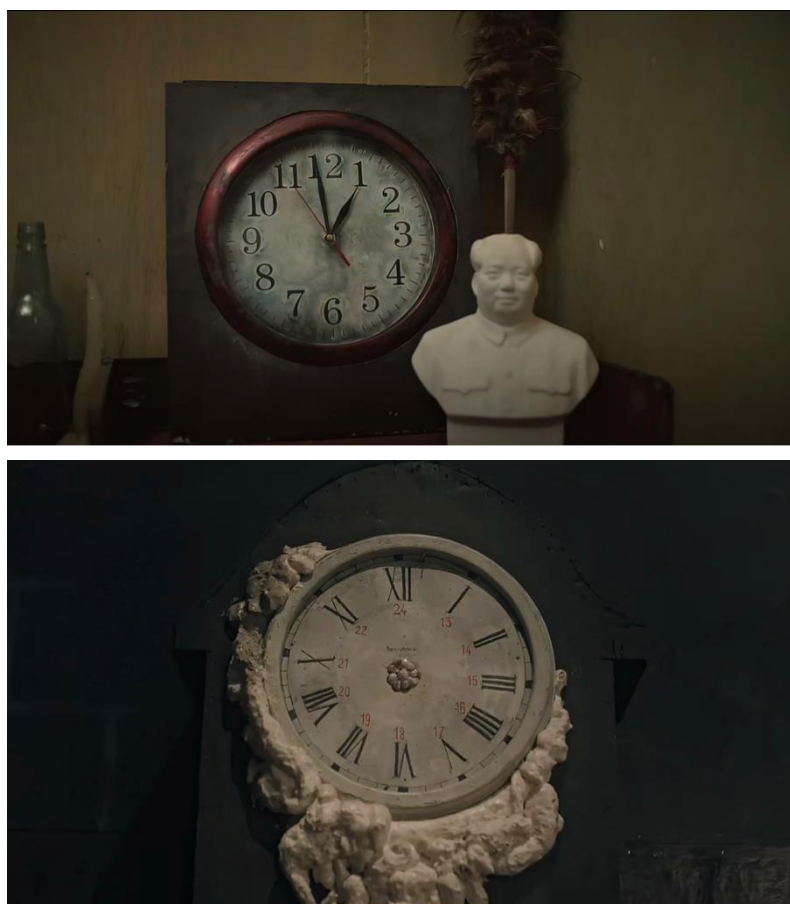


Figure 8 & 9. The heterogeneous temporalities of the two worlds

The contrast between the heterogeneous temporalities of the two worlds implies there is another type of community lying under our accustomed one — the world of the dead, the oppressed, and the forgotten. The two worlds are not completely separated but intertwine with each other, as Qiu Fu-xin can still hear the sound of his apprentice singing at his funeral after his death, and receives the ancestor money burned by his family. Qiu Fu-xin also argues with the messengers of hell about whether the Anti-Japanese War lasted eight or fourteen years, pointing to the ambiguity and ruptures in the official historiography as the chronicle of the war has been changed in our real world.

Qiu Jiongjiong's design of the camera movement is not only a subversion of conventional viewing dynamics but also expresses a revolt against the hegemonic discourse, as the one that is problematized in his chiasmic portrayal is the mortal world: we the living cannot hear the voice of the forgotten and constantly neglect the ambiguity of our world knowledge. By appropriating and simultaneously rebelling the mediality of scroll painting, Qiu manages to shed light on the memory of the oppressed hidden in the shadows of our seemingly homogeneous history. If we still metonymically refer to *A New Old Play* as a scroll painting, it is one that unfolds through heterogeneous time-space and is designed to salvage individual memories from historical amnesia.

Conclusion: To Forget or To Remember?

Focusing on the intermediality in *A New Old Play*, this paper has analyzed several scenes to discuss how the lens of camera is utilized to overcome optical unconscious, how heterogeneous medialities of theatre and scroll painting, two media imbued with memorial and historical connotations, are incorporated and distorted in his cinematic work.

Throughout this whole paper, it becomes quite clear that the director has indeed positioned the political potential of cinema and the depth of individual memory as the central concern of his visual representation. However, due to the long time span of the diegesis and the complexity of the film's fabric, this paper can only choose small fragments of this elaborate tapestry as the samples for the textual analysis. There are more nuanced sequences related to the theoretical framework that can not be fully examined in the paper's limited space. After Qiu Fu-xin has finally decided to cease to be a wandering soul and cross the River of Forgetfulness, the bald, bulbous-headed director Qiu Jiongjiong breaks into the frame and fills in the position left by his grandfather and also eats a bowl of soup. Does he also eat the soup of oblivion given to the deceased or is his appearance just to show a kind of family lineage? This film leaves an open ending to us the spectators, and the question is for us— do we choose to remember or to forget to better live our lives?



Figure 10. The director Qiu Jiongjiong fills in the position left by his grandfather

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