

Mirroring Hou Hsiao-Hsien:

a creative practice research exploring communicating Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experiences through traditional Chinese aesthetics

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Exegesis

An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Communication Studies.

Abstract

‘Mirroring Hou Hsiao-Hsien explores a new aesthetic perspective in Chinese-Zealand diasporic films and filmmaking, through the application and interpretation of Chinese-Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s film aesthetics and techniques. Opening with an investigation of the creative strategy in Hou’s films, this research links Hou’s aesthetic style to traditional Chinese artistic concepts Xie-Shi (realism) and Yi-Jing (artistic conception), sourced from Chinese ancient landscape painting and poetry. Through theoretical investigations and practical filmmaking, this research explores ways to integrate traditional Chinese aesthetics into cinematic strategies used to represent a Chinese-New Zealander’s diasporic experiences on screen.

This creative practice research project offers a different perspective in diasporic filmmaking studies through the investigation of creative possibilities to represent a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience via a fusion of traditional Chinese aesthetics and New Zealand’s geographical and cultural context. It intends to propose a new cross-cultural aesthetic that challenges hegemonic Hollywood film language and narrative norms, aiming to inspire Asian New Zealand filmmakers to start their own investigation of their cultural roots and artistic exploration.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Lina Tianyue Hu
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1 Introduction

This research project contains two components:

- A) a written exegesis, and
- B) Three short film pieces:

1. A proof of concept film: *Belonging* (view at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDGIIIVf4BU>)
2. An experimental test shoot: *Test Shoot (a)* (view at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyDCrATByZ4>)

Final version of the short film: *My Daughter Is Coming* (view at: <https://youtu.be/nKATEEXU904>)

Chapter 1-2 of the exegesis should be read first to understand the methodological approaches and Chinese artistic expressions shown in director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's visual aesthetics.

The short film pieces should then be watched next. It is recommended to watch in the order of 1, 2, 3 stated above to best evaluate the development of the creative strategies.

Chapter 3 should be read after watching the short film pieces in order to examine the reflective analysis of the films.

1.1 Exegesis structure

Introduction:

An overview of the research initiatives, the researcher's position, research significance, and expectations that outline the project's main focus.

Research Methodology

Theoretical approaches are used to investigate and conceptualise Hou's visual aesthetics expressed in his films, the relevant filmmaking techniques to apply to a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic short film, and the justification of the design choices.

Analysis of Hou:

An overview of Hou's film aesthetics in relation to traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts.

Practical research: A reflective analysis of the attempts to apply Hou's artistic concepts in the creative process and the development of short film's production.

Conclusion: A self-reflective justification of the creative process and the final outcome.

Reference: Reference in APA 7th edition form for scholarships, films, and images used in the exegesis.

1.2 Background to this project

In New Zealand, although there is still a limited number of diasporic films in mainstream media representing diasporic subjects (Zalipour, 2019), over the years Asian-New Zealand filmmakers unquestionably exist and continue to emerge. From international award-winning director Roseanne Liang's autobiographical documentary *Banana in a Nutshell* (2005) – which evolved into the feature film *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (2011) to Steven Chow's award-winning MA thesis film *Munkie* (2021) and Nicole Chen's *Secret Places* (2021). Through these films and other New Zealand diasporic directors, I have discovered a shared common theme: a reflection of Asian families and migrant experiences.

Viewing these films through Naficy's (2001) concept of accented cinema, we find that they all express similar thematic concerns, emotions, and narrative structures to represent authentic diasporic experiences. However, in contrast to their thematic similarities, there is hardly a sense of shared visual aesthetics. Although the narrative richness of the diasporic experience is evident, an exploration of Chinese aesthetics in relation to story is less developed. The production model and audio-visual language of most films in New Zealand follow Hollywood filmmaking conventions. The ever-present influence of commercial Hollywood films promotes the dissemination and application of efficient and powerful cinematic language models. The commercial benefits brought on by such production methods are considerable, however, its cultural value has been weakened. To some extent, Hollywood-style film language prevents films from other countries from forming their own unique cultural connotations in art forms. Certainly, successful directors will form their own unique creative styles, however, it is very difficult for young filmmakers to develop their own artistic style and cinematic language in localised film creation. Although I am a first-generation migrant who is able to read and speak Chinese, I received my filmmaking education in New Zealand and the knowledge I received comes from a Western perspective. I have difficulties expressing my Chinese cultural perspectives in visual forms. Furthermore, artistic strategies such as film language and narrative structures tend to follow Hollywood commercial films.

Upon my first viewing of Taiwanese film director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film *Café Lumière* (2003), I discovered a level of emotional resonance and authenticity in his film language that could truly express the extent of my personal creative vision and experiences. His perspective on contemporary urban life seems to share a similar nature to the diaspora which I can easily relate to: rootless, confused, drifting but forging ahead. On the other hand, I deeply appreciate the artistic expressions Hou used to visualise his perspective on life in all his films. His visual story-telling techniques convey a sense of beauty sourced from traditional Chinese aesthetics which makes his cinematic style completely different from Hollywood commercial blockbusters. As a Chinese diasporic film director, I believe Hou's work may be the most representative cinematic style for a Chinese diasporic film.

It was only natural that I would choose to study Hou's film aesthetic for this research project. As a Chinese New Zealand filmmaker, I am eager to explore new ways to integrate traditional Chinese artistic expressions and philosophies with a New Zealand approach to filmmaking, in the hope that Aotearoa films can be produced with a unique Chinese New Zealand visual perspective. Hence, this project is both an academic research for me as a film student and a journey of personal discovery as a Chinese New Zealand filmmaker. Through investigating director Hou's films, the research process allows me to reconsider my creative foundations and philosophical positions.

Diasporic cinema is a very broad topic, and each culture has its own representations, aesthetic traditions, artistic philosophy and its unique way of cultural integration (Chinese and Western/ New Zealand). I believe in order to discuss non-Chinese diasporic films and literature, a thorough research on a diverse range of culture, history, traditions and aesthetics is needed. As a researcher and diasporic filmmaker, I see the great value in such research. However, considering the time and resources for my project, I decided to focus my research in particular on Chinese New Zealand diasporic films, filmmakers and related literature. I hope the exploration of my own cultural roots and the journey to form my own Chinese culture inspired film aesthetic can form the stepping stone of a further, longer study in the future.

1.3 Research Question

To what extent can Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film aesthetics be adapted to represent the Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience in short film form?

1.4 Research Overview

This creative practice research project explores a new aesthetic perspective in Chinese-New Zealand diasporic films and filmmaking, through the application and interpretation of Chinese-Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film aesthetics and techniques. The research starts with an investigation of Hou's films and links his use of poetic space and long-take aesthetic to traditional Chinese artistic concepts Xie-Shi (realism) and Yi-Jing (artistic conception) sourced from Chinese ancient landscape painting and poetry.

Through theoretical investigations and filmmaking practice, this research explores ways to integrate traditional Chinese aesthetics into cinematic strategies used to represent a Chinese-New Zealander's diasporic experience on screen. However, the screen work produced for the practical component in this research is not a visual resemblance of Hou's film, but an attempt to create a conceptual parallel with his film aesthetics in a New Zealand diasporic story.

This research offers a different angle in diasporic filmmaking studies as it investigates the creative possibilities to represent a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience with a fusion of traditional Chinese aesthetics with New Zealand's geographical and cultural context. It challenges the hegemonic Hollywood narrative norm and explores the possibility to celebrate cultural diversity not only through the plot of a diasporic film but also by its visual aesthetics and artistic expressions.

This research is conducted from a practitioner's perspective. As the screenwriter, director, producer, and a Chinese-New Zealander, I intend to adopt the aesthetics and artistic concepts rooted in my own cultural identity through the creative process of a short film that represents the diasporic experience of others like me. The insights I gain from the process shall reveal how sound and image can be used from the different

cultural perspective of a creator to generate meanings and emotions that are universally understandable for a wider audience.

By conducting this creative practice research and proposing a new cross-cultural aesthetic on the New Zealand screen, I hope to open a new diasporic filmmaking discourse and inspire my fellow Asian New Zealand filmmakers to start their own investigation of their cultural roots and artistic exploration.

2 Research Methodology

Research in screen production is by no means a homogenous activity but usually involves the production of a film (or other screen work), an iterative process of practice and reflection by a researcher who is also the screen practitioner, and a theoretical perspective that informs the overall research. (Batty & Kerrigan, 2018, p.106)

2.1.1 Filmmaking as research

Conventionally, film is regarded as entertainment and/or a medium to inform audiences. Regarded as the seventh form of art, Skains (2017) suggests we can use film to give insight into the culture and society in which the film was produced while also foreshadowing future developments of particular art forms over time. I would argue that there is another way to understand culture, society and to form new artistic perspectives: to engage in filmmaking practice as a means of gaining knowledge.

My research goal is to explore the possibility of making a short film to represent a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience using Hou's visual aesthetics. There are three aspects to be investigated:

1. Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film aesthetics
2. Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience
3. (Short) filmmaking

Although it is important to perform a theoretical investigation on Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien and his works to understand 'what' are his film aesthetics, the focus of this research lies on 'how' the short film is constructed, 'how' Hou's visual aesthetics are (not) being applied, and 'how' my creative vision and strategy are developed during the process of filmmaking as a Chinese diasporic director.

I believe such explorations can only be carried out through filmmaking practice. Niedderer (2007), Kerrigan (2018), and Greenhalgh (2018)'s studies motivate me to use screen production practice as research. As a researcher in screen production, I acknowledge the importance of researching through creative practice. According to these scholars, filmmaking practice provides the experiential part of knowledge from an insider's point of view. This is often being neglected as a theoretical study in verbal or textual form tends to be prioritised. (Kerrigan, 2018). Therefore, my research project is carried out by practising filmmaking, developing and reshaping then ultimately, reflecting up on my filmmaking practice.

Batty and Kerrigan's (2018)'s *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice As a Mode of Enquiry*, which offers various screen production research examples, has been used as my framework to explore

methodology and methods that can be used to support my research. I believe in discovering methodological approaches in screen production research, as it is always helpful to look at other filmmakers' practical production experiences and their reflection on the creative practice.

Screen Production Research: Creative Practice As a Mode of Enquiry (2018) makes the case for specific fields of exploration such as cinematography (Greenhalgh, 2018, p.143-159), ethnography (Berry, 2018, p.103-120), and camera and lighting (Berkeley, 2018, p.29-46). In this way the research journey can be clarified and streamlined. My exegesis adopted a similar method. My investigation of Hou's visual strategy mainly focused on the aspects of image and editing. Consequentially the discussion of *My Daughter Is Coming* in section three also focuses on these two elements. Practical research tends to oversupply in terms of conclusion. And an important part of writing the exegesis is to create a clear through line for the reader to understand the research finds and significance. In order to provide a specific, focused research finding, creative choice such as lighting, music and sound, narrative, character development, and production aspects such as budget, technology, location, and film duration will not be discussed.

2.1.2 Definition

The terminology 'practice-led research', 'research-led practice', 'practice-based research', and 'practice-as-research' are often used with research that involves screen production. Batty and Kerrigan (2018) explains the difference between these terms depends on how screen production practice is used to answer a research question. Is the screen production process and experience directly contributing to the answer the practitioner wants to know? Does the finished final screen work contain the answer? Or perhaps the approach sits in between these two positions? Such differences will affect both the way my research question frames the practice component and the methods I intend to utilise. It is important to define the nature of my research and its methodological implications in relation to the practical component.

My goal is to explore the possibility of making a short film to represent a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience using Hou's visual aesthetics. Practice-based research and research-led practice demand the screen production work to be the result of the research process and to provide meaningful findings (Kerrigan, 2018, p.34-50). Practice-led research and practice-as-research require the creative process of developing the screen work to be used as the source to gather reflections and knowledge (Batty & Kerrigan, 2018, p.2-32). My experience of making a diasporic short film as a diasporic filmmaker with a multicultural film crew will provide insights into diasporic/intercultural filmmaking practice. In this sense, the nature of my research project is practice-led research. Nevertheless, the screen production outcome will also be used to justify the methodological and theoretical choices behind the production. The textual analysis of the finished short film will be an important part of answering the research question.

Niederer (2007) indicated the terminology used to label different forms of creative practice research is problematic because there are no clear guidelines for what these terms stand for, and in due course adds to the confusion. Batty and Kerrigan (2019) proposed the term 'creative practice research' is the most suitable term as it clearly underlines that "creative practice" is situated in the very centre of the research project regardless of how it is used. I believe that "creative practice research" is the most suitable term to label my research because I investigated my own creative journey of a short film in this research using a Practice-based enquiry approach. Although the finished short film *My Daughter Is Coming* needs to be

examined to discuss the application of director Hou's film aesthetic, the filmmaking practice is important to understand how and why these creative strategies were being adopted as well as the possibility to improve these cinematic strategies in other contexts.

2.1.3 Practice-based Enquiry and research POV

Reinforced by Skains (2017), McIntyre (2018) and Greenhalgh (2018)'s research, the methodological approach of practice-based inquiry suggested by Batty and Kerrigan (2018) is adopted as the foundation approach in my research project. PBE requires me as the practitioner-researcher to enquire into my own filmmaking practices in order to provide written reports and a short film. Lawrence and Murray (2000) believed that PBE directed him "towards the acquisition of intellectual autonomy, improved judgement making and enhanced technical competence" (p.71).

In *Using practitioner-based Enquiry (PBE) to Examine Screen Production as a Form of Creative Practice*, McIntyre (2018) describes the outsider/insider mode of creative practice study. In my project, both the short film *My Daughter Is Coming* and the process of filmmaking, will be sources of data to provide insights into how certain Chinese film aesthetics can be adopted in a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic short film with a multicultural film crew. Thus, my research project has an 'insider's point of view. However, it is worth mentioning that if I take an outsider's point of view, the finished short film will be investigated using textual analysis to discover which specific filmmaking practice was used. For example, Hou's visual aesthetics were a significant part of the film, then the way his visual aesthetics were applied using camera language will impact the short film. Therefore, how the camera is operated should be identified in the textual analysis. I would argue that this approach is not suitable for my project. Because even though I am the director and I know the creative strategies and techniques I intended to use, I did not have total control of the filmmaking practice. Other factors— such as my cinematographer's own visual style, technology and equipment we used to film the story, and the size of the film set also played a significant part in shaping the final look of the film. Thus, a purely textual analysis of the short film would neglect the reflection on the development of the filmmaking process, what occurs on set, and editing choices, which I considered to be valuable knowledge to contribute to the field.

As a director, through investigating Hou's film style and Chinese aesthetic philosophical perspectives, *My Daughter Is Coming* allowed me to rediscover my cultural roots and reform my own film style. As a member of the Chinese diaspora, it expresses my personal insight into the nature of diasporic life; and as a diasporic filmmaker, it granted me an opportunity to reintroduce Chinese film aesthetics and a new visual form for Chinese-New Zealand diasporic cinema. Although *My Daughter Is Coming* is a self-expressive art film, it is also a diasporic film that speaks to a wider audience who have experienced similar situations or emotions as the diaspora in this culturally entwined society in the era of globalisation. However, as a 'Chinese diasporic director', I have a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese artistic philosophy and expressions than a general, specifically Pākehā, audience. My own understanding and interpretation of director Hou's visual aesthetics may not make sense to them. And an outsider's perspective may provide a useful reflection on the way I present the final look of the short film. As a result, I decided to shoot two "film drafts" and a final version and use my supervisor Jim Marbrook—an experienced and respected filmmaker in the New Zealand context—to review and critique from an outsider's point of view. In this way, I was able to continuously modify, develop and reinvestigate my creative actions. As the outsider, Jim's film criticism and advice were based on the finished pieces. He was not on the film set to observe the filmmaking practice nor provide suggestions on how we shoot the scenes. His comments were given after the shoot of each short film.

As discussed above, it is critical to have a reflective analysis of my filmmaking practice. Skains (2018) pointed out the limitation of this method. He started his argument by quoting Ernest A. Edmond's note: "the investigation of creativity as it takes place in naturalistic settings has been difficult to achieve and most studies of creativity draw on retrospective accounts of the creative process" (2005, p.4). I am aware that my reflection of the filmmaking practice will have to be recorded after the creative act was conducted based on my memory. Complications are likely to occur due to my creative process of simultaneously taking on the director, screenwriter, and co-producer roles. In *Lights, Camera, Research: The Specificity of Research in Screen Production*, Berkeley (2018) adopted the method in which Skains (2018) referred to as the self-direct form of ethnomethodology during the making of his film. Berkeley proposed that because "the creative process and products, and the analytical process and products are deeply intertwined" (2018, p.51), documentation through a subjective record is necessary to provide insights into the filmmaking practice. Therefore, to deal with the complexity of the filmmaking process as a practitioner-researcher, I decided to document my insights, progress, difficulties, and developments such as draft materials and quick notes written on set in a research log.

2.2 Diasporic Films: thematic and stylistic concerns

In *Migrant and diasporic film and filmmaking in New Zealand*, Zalipour (2019) observed that there are limited on-screen representations of Asian diasporic experiences in New Zealand cinema. As part of my research I also investigated diasporic cinema and studies of diasporic cinema from other Western countries to better understand the characteristics of diasporic films.

In *A Study of Immigrant Films in France*, Cui (2017) found that French diasporic films mainly have two narrative styles: the first is to embed diasporic stories into the stories of French people of European descent (in other words, the "white" people), telling the story of mutual redemption between French and immigrants; the second is to describe diasporic life in French society from the perspective of immigrants, from survival problems to emotional conflict. The second type generally portrays immigrant life with a strong sense of realism resembling documentaries. In New Zealand, diasporic films such as *My Wedding And Other Secrets* (2011), and my own first film *Red Bean and Chocolate* (2019) fit in the first category. Films such as *Take 3* (2008) and *Munkie* (2021) relate to the second category as they expose social issues faced by second-generation Chinese New Zealanders.

My first diasporic short film *Red Bean and Chocolate* (Hu, 2019) depicts the emotional journey of a Chinese girl and a Pākehā boy who are struggling to protect their intercultural relationship while reinventing their identities when dealing with a different culture. Many Chinese-New Zealand diasporic filmmakers like myself have the desire to address issues stemming from societal and cultural differences of mainstream and diasporas on the screen based on our own experience. This is shown when considering films made by diasporic filmmakers such as *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Liang, 2011) and *Munkie* (Chow, 2021) both of which convey thematic concerns and cultural conflicts between Pakeha and Chinese ideologies. In *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Liang, 2011) such conflicts are explored in cultural and generational clashes between traditional Chinese and modern values embedded in New Zealand mainstream (Caucasian) society - similar to the themes and issues explored in *Munkie* (Chow, 2021). Hamid Naficy (2001) provided his explanation in *An Accented Cinema*, claiming diasporic films exhibit both stylistic and thematic similarities because of a shared 'diasporic experience'. These features include "nostalgic and memory-driven multilingual narratives", "identity concern" and "aesthetics". It is true that *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Liang, 2011), *Red Bean and Chocolate* (Hu, 2019), and *Munkie* (Chow, 2021) presented similar thematic concerns, however, our 'stylistic decisions were often related to mainstream film. Thinking of filmmakers as auteurs helps us situate a personal and philosophical vision. Their use of sound and images not only have artistic or aesthetic implications, but also reflect their

identities (Tregde, 2013). Reflecting upon *Red Bean and Chocolate* (Hu, 2019), I believe I was not able to express my personal experiences fully through the work.

In Eastern cinema, Chinese directors such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Jia Zhang-Ke, Japanese directors such as Yasujirō Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi are all well received by film scholars worldwide. Their work conveys the philosophical and artistic ideas in the traditional culture of their own country and forms a film language style that is completely different from Hollywood commercial blockbusters. The work that is emerging from Asian New Zealand filmmakers has provided essential views of the local diaspora. In positioning my own aesthetic concerns as a key exploratory element, I am attempting to anchor the narrative in a more Chinese inspired framework.

Zalipour (2019) proposed that the modern explanation of diaspora has become a neutral term; it simply refers to those who left their original homeland and settled in other countries. Accordingly, diasporic cinema refers to films made by or made for members of the diasporic community. In *A Study of German Immigrant Films in the New Century*, Li (2018) commented that in the past, the concepts of "diasporic cinema" and "dominant culture" seemed reliable in Europe. However, in the era of globalisation, the concepts of "marginal" and "mainstream" have been given new meanings, and sometimes even interchangeable. Li (2018) believed that the fate of the early migrants and the emerging issues of integration is now an unavoidable part of German history and an inseparable part of German Cinema. This is, as Li suggests: "the habit, or obligation, of continually integrating into a new language and cultural environment has become a common aspect of life for many young people in most parts of the world. Whoever wants to engage in the discourse has to learn to not divide people into foreigners and natives, minorities and majorities" (p. 36). Li (2018) believes that in the new form of diasporic cinema, everyone is drifting in a liquidated, globalised society, and shifting from different cultures. She believed that diasporic cinema in Germany is no longer just about Germany's few immigrants considering whether to return to their homeland or stay in Germany. Instead, diasporic directors such as Fatih Akin began to provide portraits of 21st-century German cities which by itself, reflects multiculturalism.

However, in the New Zealand context, such multiculturalism has not been reflected in its national cinema. Rather, the cultural connotations are diminishing. Galikowski (2019) investigated the relatively long history of Chinese immigrants in New Zealand and has concluded that "regardless of their place of birth, the Chinese diaspora share a common cultural ancestry that has its roots in China" (Galikowski, 2019, P52). With the development of globalisation, capitalism and the advancement of technology, the cultures of minorities in New Zealand face more challenges to survive (Galikowski, 2019, P52). She further explains that "the depth and modes of connection to this cultural homeland are not homogeneous" and cultural connection to their homeland is usually less pronounced amongst second or third-generation Chinese-New Zealanders. For example, many second generations of Chinese immigrants have lost their ability to read, write and speak their own language (Portes & Hao, 1998). In a way, films and Television can be a powerful medium used to reintroduce arts and culture for the minorities and ethnic groups. Similarly, I believe filmmaking practice which involves the exploration of cultural cognition or cultural aesthetics of a diasporic filmmaker's own culture can also be used as a way to rediscover a diasporic filmmaker's cultural identity.

Chaudhuri (2013) indicates filmmaking is often affected by various factors such as social, cultural, economic, and political elements. Therefore, it is important for me to consider what factors are the ones that caused a film's individuality - the context, the content, or the director itself. Auteur theory granted the authorship to the director (Tregde, 2013). The value of the film is determined by the director's worldview and artistic expression which reflect such a viewpoint. I chose to study Hou and his film aesthetics in my research because we share a similar philosophical perspective on life, and as a film director I deeply appreciate the artistic expressions he used to visualise such perspective. As a female director, I also feel related to his perspective on contemporary city women in his later film works. I felt through watching

Hou's films, my own vision and emotions are being expressed. Therefore, I decided to begin my research with an investigation of director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film aesthetics for the purpose of integrating his artistic expressions into my own film.

In an interview, Hou (2017) said, "The most important thing about making a film is how you find yourself. Can you express the vision you have accumulated through the experience of growth? Because you have such a childhood and such a process of growing up. The perspective and vision that you would focus on is the most important thing" (p.28). As a new director and a young person, my life experience and worldview are constantly developing, my aesthetic perspective and artistic intention may also change over time. However, similar to all Chinese film directors, I believe the influence of our own culture will always be there, explicitly or implicitly. In this research project, I focus on the cultural aspect as Chaudhuri (2013) stated: "where the richness relies on one's cultural knowledge and its following intellect, one cannot keep aside his/her cultural background while making a film." (p.331)

2.3 The method

This research project begins with the interpretation of Hou's films from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetic philosophy. Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien is critically regarded as the most representative director of Chinese aesthetics (Chen, 2008). The influence of traditional Chinese landscape painting and poetry can be explored and studied in his films. My research focused on the investigation of director Hou's cinematic strategies under the framework of a combination of film theories and Chinese aesthetics. The aim is to discover the cultural logic and aesthetic perspective behind his films and place them under the background of New Zealand to explore suitable creative strategies correspondingly.

The study of Hou was carried out by:

1. Collecting and reading relevant academic literature (including film critics, doctoral dissertations, master thesis, conference papers, journal papers, and interviews) to understand the existing knowledge about Hou. I categorised the findings into two groups:
 - a. Film critics: which analysis Hou's film strategies and techniques
 - b. Interview and commentaries: which investigates Hou's personal background and experience
2. Film Case studies: My investigation of Hou's visual strategy mainly focused on the aspects of image and editing. Hou's films are examined to understand his unique artistic expression and aesthetics. A comparative analysis of Hou's films with other Asian film directors with similar visual aesthetics and creative strategies is performed. Through investigating the similarities and differences, I intend to explore the cultural logic behind Hou's creative vision.

2.4 Investigating Hou Hsiao-Hsien

Both Gu (2013), Liu (2018) and Huang and Lou (2009) believe that Hou's films capture the essence of Chinese aesthetics and Chinese culture's 'artistic conception', forming a unique and engaging blend of openness and ambiguity. At the same time, they argue that in Hou's films, the opposition between nature and society, or between imaginary and symbolic domains, often forms the basic structure of his work. Udden (2009), Shuk (2011) and Huang and Lou (2009) examine Hou Hsiao-hsien's films from the perspectives of individual encounters and urban-rural contexts, and argue that the aesthetic ideas behind

his films are inextricably linked to his background of urban-rural transformation and cultural origins in Taiwan. Tregde (2013) suggested the integration of various factors of society, history, and culture with the artist's personality and ideology has enabled a filmmaker to develop her artistic concept and form her unique style. In order to understand Hou's visual aesthetics, it is important to investigate both Hou's films and Hou himself as a director.

2.4.1 Hou's diasporic nature

Hou was born in mainland China but moved to Taiwan with his family as a child. In order to live in Taiwan, he had to quickly adapt to Taiwanese dialect and customs. James Udden (2016) pointed out that Hou's personal experience should be taken into account when we try to understand his worldview and cultural roots. I would argue that his experience of moving from mainland China to Taiwan can be seen as a diasporic one. Naficy (2001) believes a sense of cultural displacement shared by diasporic filmmakers is the essence of diasporic films. Such a sense of displacement is well presented in his works such as his semi-autobiographical film *The Time To Live and The Time To Die* (1985), and from his early film *A City of Sadness* (1989) to later works *Cafe Lumiere* (2003) and *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007). Among these films, both *Cafe Lumiere* (2003), and *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007) presented a diasporic experience of the protagonist. Words such as "floating", "drifting" and "rootless" were used to describe these films. (Liu, 2018, p. 11) In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Zygmunt Bauman demonstrated that mobility has changed the status quo of human society. And the "rootlessness" and "uncertainty" expressed in Hou's films (Tang, 2020) as the result of the liquid nature of modern society can also be applied to a Chinese-New Zealand diasporic story.

2.4.2 East Asian aesthetics, Chinese aesthetics, and Hou's aesthetics

New Zealand is an immigrant country. Although there are constant debates about whether or not New Zealand is multicultural or bicultural (Zalipour, 2019), Auckland is one of the world's most culturally diverse cities. In 2016, according to Statistics NZ, 40% of the population in Auckland were born overseas. And the Chinese population remains the highest Asian population category. We cannot underestimate the influence that the Chinese community has on New Zealand society. A majority of my non-Chinese friends in Auckland can easily distinguish Chinese food from other Asian countries even if they are similar in style and ingredients, for example, Chinese soup noodles and Japanese Ramen, or Chinese spring rolls and Vietnamese spring rolls (dragon rolls). However, when talking about aesthetics of the East, it is common for people to use a general term of Asian aesthetics without being able to spot the differences in each specific culture. In some people's eyes, East Asian aesthetics equals Chinese aesthetics.

In his book *Oriental Aesthetics* (2008), Peng Xiu-Yin explained Oriental aesthetics as "the aesthetic thoughts formed by different geographical locations under the context of their own cultures." (p. 58). Like blood flowing along the blood vessels to the heart, the aesthetic thoughts of various Eastern countries formed the Eastern aesthetics. In addition, Eastern aesthetics not only adhere to the local aesthetic characteristics, but are also informed by the world to adopt and reform. It is debatable to conclude the foundations of Asian aesthetics consists of the Chinese philosophy of art and aesthetics as Huang and Luo (2009), and Shuk-Ting (2011) state. But I agree with them that many of the artistic expressions and concepts in East countries like China, Japan, and Korea are related to each other. I also agree with Wilson (2015) that the perception in aesthetics undertakes the fundamental role to encourage cultural reflexivity and reflection. As a Chinese filmmaker who wants to develop a visual style that adopts the aesthetic of my own culture, it is important to distinguish the difference between Chinese and Eastern aesthetics. This

investigation is not only a Chinese diasporic director's self-exploration process but will also provide opportunities for cross-cultural and comparative study in aesthetics.

Peng (2008) indicated that Chinese aesthetics is an open concept, and it has experienced inheritance, penetration, integration, and reconstruction. I would agree with Tang (2020) that despite the changes, what distinguishes Chinese aesthetics from other Eastern aesthetics is that the foundation of Chinese aesthetics is the artistic philosophy of traditional Chinese culture. Li Ze-Hou, one of the most influential Chinese scholars in Chinese aesthetics, made a similar argument in *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (2009) by explaining Chinese aesthetics through an exploration of traditional poetry, ancient painting, classical water-ink calligraphy, and the art of living. It is impossible to explain every aspect of traditional Chinese culture because of its complexity, large scope, and long history. This research project will only focus on two artistic concepts, Xie-Shi (realism) and Yi-Jing (artistic conception).

Chinese films and Western films are inextricably linked, but different. As a Western invention, the film will inevitably adapt and evolve when it meets the Chinese landscape, social-cultural ideology, and artistic philosophy. Although Chinese commercial films have been criticised as mass production without characteristics and originality (Rao, 2013), Chinese art films have formed their own unique style and aesthetic perspective. (Chen, 2012). Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (1994) argued the Fifth Generation (post-Cultural Revolution) Chinese directors such as Zhang Yi-Mou and Chen Kai-Ge have consciously adopted the aesthetic from Chinese traditional landscape painting in their films. They believed that this feature distinguished these Chinese films from Western forms. Although Udden (2009) claimed Hou's Taiwanese background has a larger influence on Hou's film work, I would argue that similar to other Fifth Generation Chinese directors like Zhang Yi-Mou and Chen Kai-Ge, Hou's film aesthetics was also heavily influenced by Chinese artistic traditions - Hou himself admitted this in his 2017 interview (Hou, 2017).

2.4.3 Traditional Chinese aesthetic concept: Xie-Shi and Yi-Jing

A review of the literature on Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films reveals that Chinese language studies on Hou Hsiao-Hsien have mostly analysed the ontological core of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film aesthetics from a cultural and historical perspective, and concluded that Hou's film aesthetic reflected the traditional Chinese aesthetic concept Yi-Jing (artistic conception)-- a concept often being expressed in traditional Chinese painting and poetry. (Gu, 2013) The artistic concept of Yi-Jing is often confused with a portrayal style called Xie-Yi in traditional Chinese painting. Xie-Yi's literal meaning is to "write down the meaning". (Feng, 2020) The counterpart of Xie-Yi is the Xie-Shi style which has a literal meaning of "write down the reality". (Li, 2002). It is true that Hou's films show certain characteristics of the Xie-Yi concept, however, I would argue that the most significant aesthetic achievement in his films is the creation of artistic conception.

Traditional Chinese paintings are the best demonstrations of the style of Xie-Shi (portrayal of realism) and Xie-Yi (portrayal of abstraction/meaning) (Liu, 2008). Figure 1.2 is a Xie-Shi-style painting. We can see a Xie-Shi style painting is more faithful to real flowers, while Figure 1.1, a Xie-Yi style painting tends to get rid of the physical shape and focus on expressing the artist's subjective ideas and capturing his feelings of the flowers and leaves. The main difference between Xie-Shi and Xie-Yi is the method of expression, but there is also a distinction on how the object is observed and perceived by the artist. The Xie-Shi painting focuses more on the delivery of the structure when observing the object, while the Xie-Yi painting focuses on the overall impression. Although the expression of artistic conception can be considered as one of the most recognizable features of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films (Chen, 2012), I would argue that at the same time his films are also a strong characteristic of Xie-Shi (realism).



Figure 1. 1 A Xie-Yi type traditional Chinese painting of water-lily



Figure 1. 2 A Xie-Shi type painting (or in traditional Chinese painting terminology Gong-Bi) of peony

2.4.4 Xie-Shi (portrayal of realism) in Hou's films

Hou's film shows a strong sense of Xie-Shi (realism) (Liu, 2018). It is achieved mostly by his iconic use of long takes (Li & Li, 2008). For example, Zhu Taiwan (2006) stated that Hou Hsiao-Hsien's long take "maintains the integrity of time and space" (p. 53) and therefore has a high degree of authenticity and realism that is close to a documentary. Rao (2013) argues that Chinese cinema, due to its promotion of traditional realism, has led scholars and audiences to focus more on the external aspects of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's cinematography, while neglecting the internal expression of the meaning of his films. I would argue that realism in Hou's films is expressed from two aspects. By utilising long takes, Hou's films created a visual "realism" which allows the audience to feel present as if they were an invisible character who are observing the film characters from a distance; on the other hand, his films also recorded Taiwan's "social reality" through the creation of characters, space, and stories. The visual reality he created is a visual aesthetic, the social reality revealed in his films is the situation and social relationship of Taiwan people's lives under a specific historical context. The former is created through visual images,

the latter is also done through image but the meaning of these images are implied, and symbolised in conjunction with the narrative; the former appeals to the audience. The latter highlights the audience's social position, providing what Jameson calls a cognitive mapping of society (Bizzell, 1996).

For example, *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983) and most of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films show visual reality through long shots, presenting everyday life without complicating, re-shaping, creating suspense, or committing to a narrative arc, but simply recording the world we usually ignore with the mechanical eye of the camera (Sun, 2020). Figure 2.1-2.3 shows the opening scene in *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983). The film opens with a group of young men playing billiards, but the subjects hardly ever face the camera, creating a deep sense of distance between the audience and the characters. Hou Hsiao-Hsien has no intention of exaggerating the characters' personalities, nor does he try to emphasise or highlight any particular character. The people in front of the camera are as ordinary as we are in the real world. Even when dealing with some of the more conflicting sequences, such as the fight and subsequent chase by the punks, Hou does not use rapid and violent camera changes to show the dramatic situation, but rather just long, muted shots to document the process.

The importance of examining the concept of Xie-Shi (realism) from the perspective of my project is because it allows my project to create a sense of reality. Cinema is a particular mode of thinking. The same object has different levels of resonance between the person's perspective in reality and on screen. A sense of reality, combined with the intensity of the presentation of the film images themselves, allows the fictional world created by the film to interact with the real world, thus allowing the audience to see an authentic diasporic experience of Chinese migrants in New Zealand from an unbiased perspective. Hou's long take aesthetic not only created a sense of reality, but also constructed a poetic space which yielded philosophical interpretations and the mood sought by classical Chinese art aesthetics. So I will now move on to discuss the second concept Yi-Jing (artistic conception).



Figure 2. 1 a scene from *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), a very realistic portrayal of a group of young men playing billiards while an old man is watching



Figure 2. 2 a scene from The Boys from Fengkuei (1983), a very realistic portrayal of a group of young men playing billiards while an old man is watching



Figure 2. 3 a scene from The Boys from Fengkuei (1983), a very realistic portrayal of a group of young men playing billiards while an old man is watching

2.4.5 Yi Jing (artistic conception) in Hou's films

It seems like Hou's films formed a Xie-Yi (portrayal of the abstract meaning) style because he focuses on providing visual expressions of the character's emotions and psychological developments over the plot

(Wang, 2011). However, the meaning of Hou's films is often ambiguous and requires the audiences to use their imagination and personal experience, and memories to fill up the blank and make meaning (Chen, 2012). In other words, the meanings of the visual representation in Hou's films are given by both the director and the audience. Similarly, artistic conception is the culmination of emotion, mood, and scenery, to form an artistic or aesthetic realm between the interplay of the artist's subjective emotions and objective objects (Li, 2002). 'Yi-Jing' or 'Artistic Conception' is an important aspect of classical Chinese artistic philosophy. Liu (2008) explained that lyrical tradition in Chinese poetry not only provides a unique literary characteristic but has also profoundly influenced the entire world of Chinese art. Classical Chinese poetry, painting, literature, calligraphy, music, architecture, and opera all place great importance on Yi-Jing. It is the unity of emotion and scenery, of meaning and context. (Liu, 2008).

Yi-Jing can be found in the scene in *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), in which four young people play on the beach, which is almost a minute long, but there is not much in terms of narrative progression. In the long shot, the audience can see the happy, pure smiles on the faces of the people in the frame, but when the camera pulls away and the four boys are placed in a larger setting of sea and sand, a bleak sense of the smallness of life and the fleeting nature of happiness emerges. In fact, a great deal of the film has this tension between the exuberance of life and the eternity of the universe, a sense of sadness that time is passing and life is irrevocable. The source of this mood and tension is the extensive use of long takes. However, as Rao (2013) states: although long takes can be considered as one of the most well-known features of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films when analysing Hou Hsiao-Hsien's cinematic aesthetics, it is not only the long takes that should be considered but also the techniques used together with them. Distanced camera placement, static shot, and wide shot combined with the use of long takes are more conducive to the complete reproduction of the state of life, giving the image an inner tension, and as a result, providing the audience a poetic mood and aftertaste.

The importance of examining the concept of Yi-Jing (artistic conception) from the perspective of my project is because despite the weakened storytelling and reduced dramatic conflict, Hou's films form a deep contemplation of life through his unique temporal expression in the pursuit of Yi-Jing (artistic conception), reflecting a traditional philosophical perspective and aesthetic that I intend to adopt in my own film project.



Figure 2. 4 A long take portrays the boys playing by the ocean in The Boys from Fengkuei (1983)



Figure 2. 5 A wider long take portrays the boys playing by the ocean in The Boys from Fengkuei (1983)

2.5 Practical Component

2.5.1 Filmmaking Practice: a developing process

In consideration of the complexity of Hou's film aesthetics and the long and complex histories of Chinese philosophical aesthetics, the filmmaking practice in this research project was not designed to be a one-off action but a continuing experimental development. In this way, it allowed me to test different ways of adopting Hou's film aesthetic, examine the outcomes, and make strategic changes accordingly.

Before the making of *My Daughter Is Coming* (MDIC), a proof of concept video *Belonging* was first filmed in an early stage of my Master's study. As the director, I have focused on the pursuit of realism in this short piece because it is one of the most significant aesthetic characteristics of Hou's film style. Through the use of Hou's long-take aesthetic, I aimed to tell this diasporic story without focusing on the dramatic plot but to capture a mood of nostalgic, memory-like bitter-sweetness that echoes the unspoken emotions in the mother and the daughter's hearts.

Then, an experimental test shoot (test shoot A) was filmed based on my supervisor's film critique of *Belonging* and the experience I have gained from making *Belonging*. The test shoot follows the same storyline but added in more elements both visual and story-wise. Besides Hou's long-take aesthetic, the test shoot tries to find a subtle balance between the use of long take and montage. More close-up shots were intentionally filmed in comparison to *Belonging*. The reason was to test the ways to use/not use the concept of de-dramatization which was regarded as the essence of Hou's film aesthetic by Chinese scholars such as Li and Li (2008), Chen (2008), Wang (2011), and Tang (2020).

A comparative analysis method has been used to compare *Belonging* and the experimental test shoot in terms of visual style, narrative structure and filmmaking experience from the director's (my own) point of view. Discussions of the success and failure of the creative strategies used in these two short pieces have been carried out in class with my supervisors. Based on their film criticism, the script of *My Daughter Is Coming* (MDIC) was finalised. Hou's long-take aesthetic, de-dramatization, and poetic space were selected to be adopted in MDIC.

Test shoot (b) is the real test shoot for MDIC. It was mostly shot by myself during location recce and rehearsals. The filming of test shoot (b) was not planned. The idea popped into mind when I saw my friend showing off his new camera on the way to location recce with me. He was not part of my crew and has ended up as my model in the exterior shots in test shoot (b). Test shoot (b) is a rough model of MDIC. I decided to include it in the analysis firstly due to the existence of Test Shoot (b) which caused several issues within the film crew; and secondly, the cinematic style of MDIC is very different from test shoot (b) when a New Zealand-born Chinese cinematographer operated the camera. I believe a comparison of the visual style between test shoot (b) and MDIC will offer interesting insights into my filmmaking experience with a multicultural crew.

2.5.2 Making MDIC

In *Method in Madness* (2018), Knudsen described the making process of a film as an act of madness. Filmmaking is a complicated and difficult task, especially when the crew members have different nationalities and speak different languages. I am aware that during the filming of MDIC, I was not only the director but also a researcher. My goal is not only to make fast responses, correct decisions, and effective communications on set, but also to offer new knowledge, insights, and perspectives which can be applied to future filmmaking practice for others. As a result, detailed documentation of the making process of MDIC is necessary.

Two journals were being created for this research project.

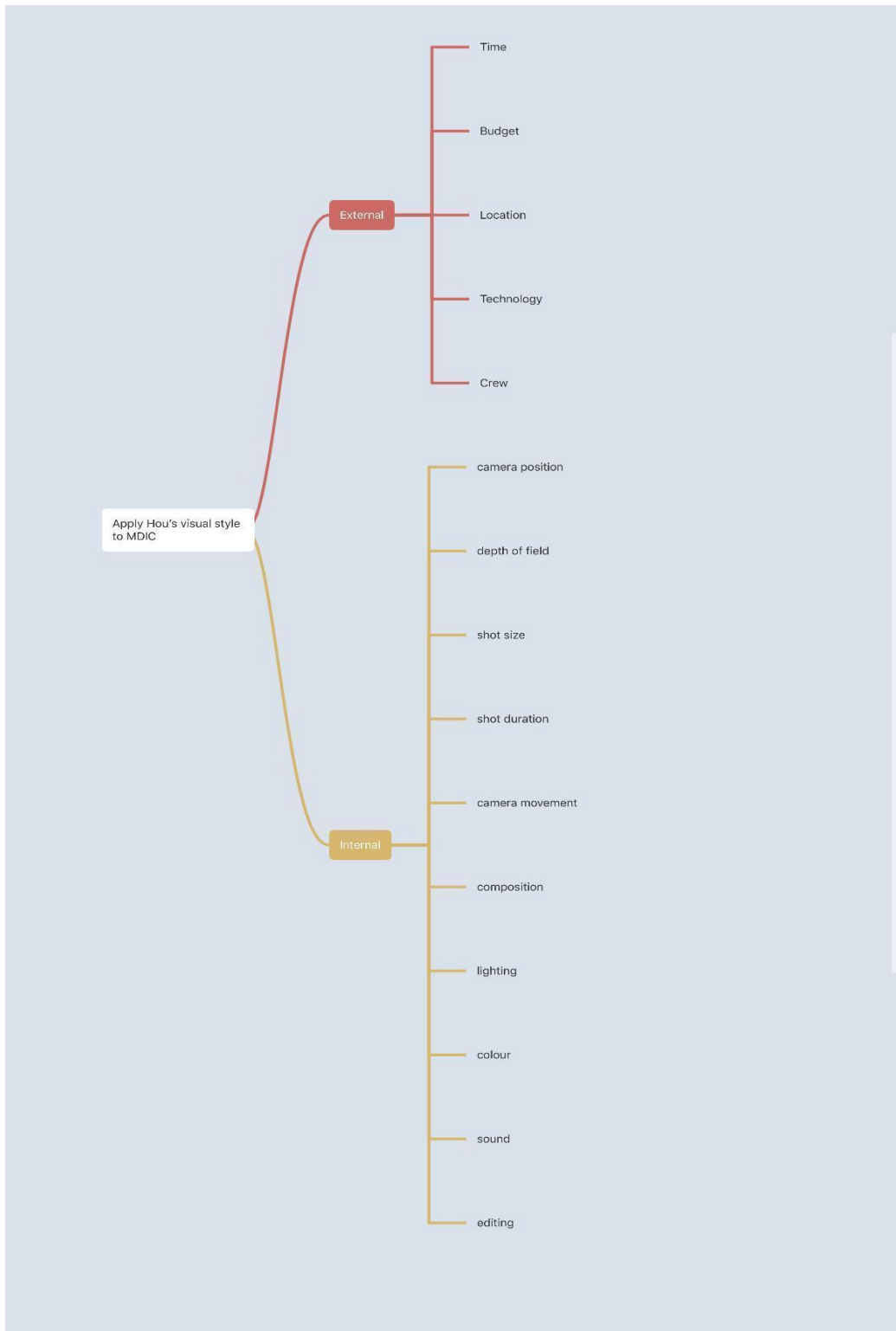
- a. A research journal consists of the research notes I have written during the study of the relevant academic literature, in class, and watching films. My creative ideas, my supervisor's comments and questions, and all relevant ideas, images, photos, inspirations, and information that I thought may be useful later are recorded in the research journal.
- b. A director's journal is a record of my thoughts, insights, feelings, and observations on the film set during the filming of MDIC.

3 My Daughter Is Coming

A Chinese New Zealand diasporic short film *My Daughter Is Coming* (MDIC) was produced as the practical component of this research project in order to answer the research question. MDIC follows the standard filmmaking production workflow in terms of pre-production, production, and post-production. As a short film, the operating pattern is simpler than a feature film. The crew members are all experienced filmmakers. Their skill and proficiency enabled the filming process to run smoothly and efficiently. However, several problems occurred and affected the creative strategy of MDIC. There were not only creative challenges but also other factors such as time, budget, and location constraints as well as the managerial decisions within a multicultural film crew. This chapter investigates the success and failures of applying Hou's film aesthetics in MDIC and the possible improvement that can be made in the future diasporic film production of a similar attempt to adopt Asian aesthetics.

3.1 Introduction

Table 1 Some factors which affect the adoption of Hou's film aesthetics in MDIC



In order to answer the research question, we need to determine the factors that will affect the effectiveness of Hou's film aesthetic in MDIC. The tacit experience gained through the filming of MDIC allowed me to discover the internal factors and external factors that affected the adoption of Hou's film aesthetics in MDIC. Diagram 1 indicates some major factors which affected the adoption of Hou's film aesthetics in MDIC. Although the importance of factors such as lighting, colour, and sound is noted, because of the word limit of this exegesis, my reflective analysis will not cover these factors in this section.

3.2 Hou's visual style in representing the Chinese-New Zealand diasporic experience

MDIC revolves around Chang-Li, a mother who immigrated to New Zealand, and her daughter, Lanlan (Xiao-hai in other versions) who grew up in China. The pregnant young woman experiences a day with her mother while passing through Auckland, deepening her understanding of their relationship. Through their interaction, Lanlan gains a deeper appreciation of 'motherhood' and achieves personal psychological growth. As a Chinese diasporic director, my aim is not to present a dramatic or emotional fictional story but to show an experience that I have witnessed from my own family and other Chinese migrants I know on-screen. The experience of Chang-Li in my personal view represents a generation of Chinese diaspora who faced the same dilemma of choosing between personal dreams and family duty. They struggle between individuality promoted by the host (western) country and the family/parental duty which is deeply embedded in their own culture. Although the story is fictional, the dilemma that the characters faced in the story is inarguably true. A collective unconsciousness of an era behind the diasporic experience is recognized by the film.

Two experimental test shoots *Belonging*, and Test shoot (a) were produced before MDIC. These two short pieces were designed to test the effectiveness of different visual strategies used to represent this Chinese diasporic experience. *Belonging*, Test shoot (a) and MDIC followed a similar narrative structure. They all have five main scenes in the story: the arrival of the daughter, chatting in the kitchen during the daytime, making dumplings for dinner, a night walk, and a morning wake-up scene. The changes made from *Belonging*, to test shoot (a), then to MDIC can be used to investigate the development of the director's creative thinking.

3.2.1 Shot duration, camera distance, editing

In *Film Art: an introduction*, Bordwell (2004) regarded long takes as an "alternative to a series of shots." (p. 211) Using the dumpling scene as an example, this scene was presented in long takes in *Belonging*, and in Test shoot (a) it was presented in several shorter shots edited together.

In *Belonging* (figure 3), rather than focusing on a particular character, the distanced long take allows the audience to see a picture of two worried, preoccupied women sitting in the kitchen on a slow, quiet night. A clip of this scene can be viewed at https://youtu.be/hi_mVPeHmFE.



Figure 3. 1 the dumpling scene in *Belonging*

In Test shoot (a), the mother and the daughter were shot in a series of close-up shots. (Figure 4.1-4.3) As a result, the pace of the scene is a lot faster to express the urgency of the situation. Close-up shots forced the audience to look at the character's faces and hands. (Figure 5.1-5.3) Chang-Li and Lanlan's facial expressions and intensive hand movements were emphasised. A clip of this scene can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-g-GS8N44iY>.



Figure 4. 1 the dumpling scene in *Test Shoot (a)*



Figure 4. 2 the dumpling scene in Test Shoot (a)



Figure 4. 3 the dumpling scene in Test Shoot (a)

Sound effects such as sizzling pan, the sound of whisking eggs, and knife chopping are also used to accompany the use of close-up shots and fast editing pace. These techniques were used to make the scene more engaging and make the audiences follow the film's rhythm closely. Even though it is clear that the film is a fictional story, their mental state will be one of high tension akin to the characters in the film.



Figure 5. 1 close up of Chang-Li's hands in the dumpling scene in Test Shoot (a)



Figure 5. 2 close up of Lanlan's hands in the dumpling scene in Test Shoot (a)



Figure 5. 3 close up of Chang-Li's hands in the dumpling scene in *Test Shoot* (a)

Deleuze, Tomlinson, and Habberjam (2005) propose that Hollywood-style films actually dismantle time and space for the sake of cause-and-effect storytelling and logic continuity. Through a combination of framing and editing, the dumpling scene in test shoot (a) produced a strong dramatic effect. On the other hand, *Belonging* depicts an unbiased, third-person point of view. The static-long take gazes at the mother and daughter from a distance. The camera itself does not actively direct the viewer to see what the filmmaker is showing but leaves the viewer to freely choose and contemplate. The long take maintained the integrity of time and space. Here, the scene is less dramatic, but more realistic because, without the interference of editing, audiences were able to observe the event as if it happened in real-time (Bazin, 2004).

I would argue that a sense of reality is more important than dramatic quality when representing a Chinese New Zealand diasporic experience in this film. One of the advantages of the long take is that it shows details of Chang-Li's diasporic life. For example, the interior design of her living space and the Chinese cookware in her kitchen. The specific details of various aspects of Chang-Li's life allow the audience to have a deeper and richer understanding of the character.

Rao (2013) believes that the long take is a key element in establishing this point of view. Its main function is to construct the perspective of the film's narrative. Point of view is a Western art term that refers mainly to the creator's position of observation. The term is borrowed here to illustrate Hou Hsiao-Hsien's use of it as a creative intent, thus reflecting his calm, dispassionate observation of characters and events. Rather than seeing and feeling things from any character's perspective, a distanced, third-person point of view provided an objective perspective in MDIC, allowing the audience to witness the whole event and form a relatively unbiased opinion. Although audiences will always have their own interpretations and likings, as a director, my intention is to depict a life experience of a diasporic Chinese mother and her daughter, rather than initiate moral debates about family responsibility, or focus on ideological conflict of East and West.

The long take, as a point of view in MDIC, functions as a kind of gaze; the camera always adopts a fixed camera position, akin to the height of a gaze by someone standing or sitting behind the characters from a distance. This point of view resembles someone standing behind and quietly observing the sorrows and joys of these two women in the corner. The observer is both the director behind the camera, and the daughter Lanlan at a future time, looking back at this day.

Rao (2013) argues that point of view is a powerful way to convey the mood and the atmosphere of the film. MDIC is a story about two women, Chang-Li and her daughter Lanlan (who is pregnant and is becoming a mother). It adopts a restrained attitude, pursuing in the visual images an awareness that stems from the mother's (as well as the daughter's) past. The tone of MDIC is therefore nostalgic, coming from lived experiences. This choice is not just an aesthetic one, but also personal attitude and vision in observing life, an unique aesthetic in which I interpret my own true feelings and experiences.

3.2.2 Shot duration and shot size

Long takes were largely used in *Belonging* to create a sense of reality. In MDIC, I intended to utilise the same long take strategy and deliberately minimise the trace of editing. As a result, a long period of the character's actions and movements were filmed and presented in the film. The pace of the film became very slow. My test audience Jim criticised that he started to lose focus when the long take became too long. As my supervisor, Jim suggested instead of showing Chang-Li's life, ie. her every action in a real time frame, the nature of her life should be reflected and emphasised. Jim pointed out that regardless of documentaries or films, every story is a recreation. Unlike surveillance cameras, the film camera shows a certain perspective when presenting an event and thus the reality it shows cannot be the whole and accurate truth.

Upon reflection, I began to realise that I should not focus on the form of reality but the nature of reality. It is more important to visually communicate what Chang-Li's life experience reflects than to show how she lives a day in her life. Similarly, although a long take is a great way to create a sense of reality, other visual techniques such as close-up shots can also help to emphasise the nature of the reality that a director wanted to reflect. Bordwell (2004) expressed a similar opinion, suggesting that filmmakers can use both long takes and edited scenes in their films to "bring out specific values in particular scenes, or to associate certain aspects of narrative or non-narrative form with the different stylistic options" (p. 211). As a result, I began to explore ways to utilise different shot sizes in representing Chang-Li's diasporic experience.

In MDIC, home represents first and foremost a sense of belonging for immigrants. Chang-Li's home is decorated with the classic Chinese "Gong Xi Fa Cai" (Wish you prosperity and wealth) hangings on the windows (Figure 6.1), traditional calendars with the character 福 (fortune) on the walls (see figure 6.2), and Chinese kitchen knives, soy sauce, black vinegar, and sesame oil (see figure 6.3). These items are either shot in close-ups or seen being touched by and used by Chang-Li in long takes. These details serve to emphasise Chang-Li's identity to the viewer, while the close-ups reaffirm that for Chang-Li, these are the objects she's familiar with and cares for. In contrast, the living room itself features strong Western design characteristics (see figure 6.4). As the living room is the space where Chang-Li welcomes her guests, the furnishings in this space reflect her desire to prove her New Zealand identity to outsiders, despite being more accustomed to her Chinese culture, expressing the desire of Chinese immigrants to be accepted in New Zealand. However, the fireplace in the living room, the Kiwi bird display plate, the dried flowers on the table all appear only vaguely in the wide shot, without any close-ups or shots of Chang-Li touching them. I tried to convey through the narration of these shots that Chang-Li, as a Chinese immigrant to New Zealand, has in fact not really embraced a culture that is still foreign to her. The decorations in the living room are merely for guests to view and have not truly become part of her daily

life. Nor does her gaze ever really dwell on them. Thus, in the living room, a westernised space, as a Chinese migrant, Chang-Li is lonely and melancholic.



Figure 6. 1 Close up of the Hangings in MDIC

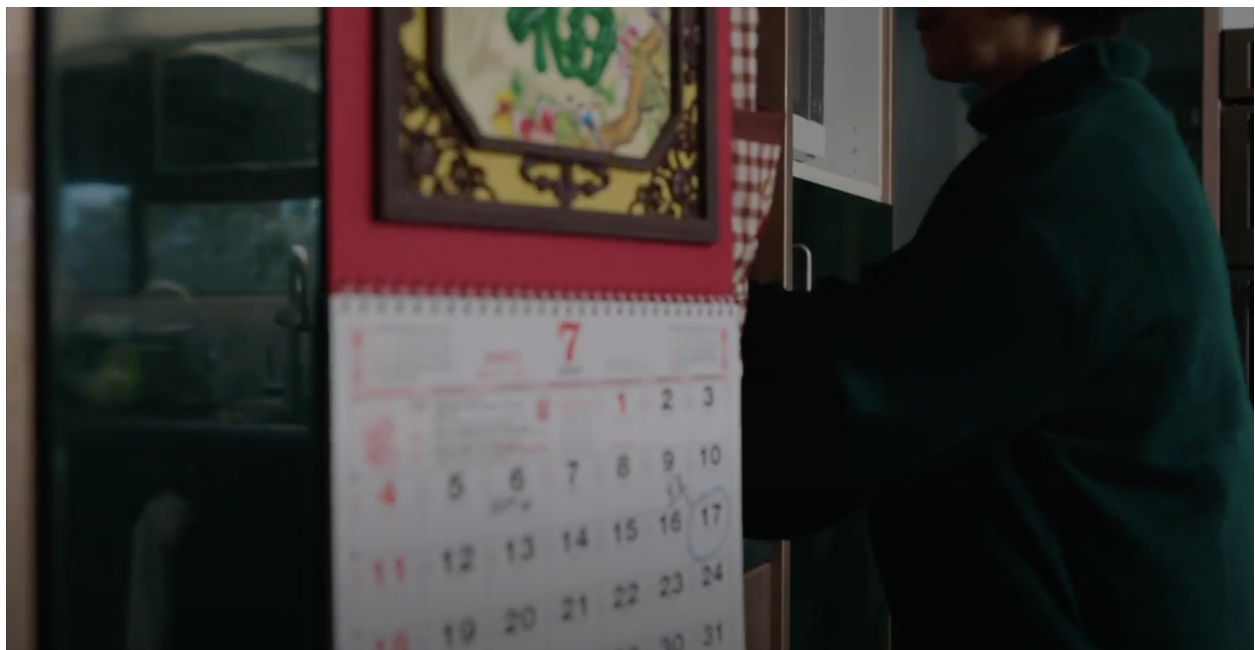


Figure 6. 2 Close up of calendar in MDIC



Figure 6. 3 Chinese cooking ware and sauces in MDIC



Figure 6. 4 Chang-Li in the living room in MDIC

3.2.3 Camera movement

In *Belonging*, the dolly long-take at the end of the story portrayed the wake-up moment of the daughter, the searching process, and the decision to face up to the unpredictable and unavoidable nature of life. A clip of this scene can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qzBq88I2uM.

According to Jim's film criticism, the movement brings mother and daughter together and it is a perspective change in the storytelling. The long take serves the narrative function of the move in a very static film. As the director, my goal is to create Yi-Jing (artistic conception) in this scene. With the camera moving subtly through the door and revealing Chang-Li playing violin by the window, the bitter-sweet, dream-like scene seems even longer, like an unfolding memory of the past that connects the long-distance between mother and daughter. The use of long-take not only ensures a certain degree of narrative authenticity and consistency, maintaining the temporal continuity of the narrative but also has an idealised quality that contributes to the creation of artistic conception and mood. The expression of Yi-Jing in this scene was successful and the same scene in MDIC has been presented in the same way.



Figure 7. 1 A long take of Lanlan wakes up in the morning and follows the music to find her mother



Figure 7. 2 A long take of Lanlan wakes up in the morning and follows the music to find her mother

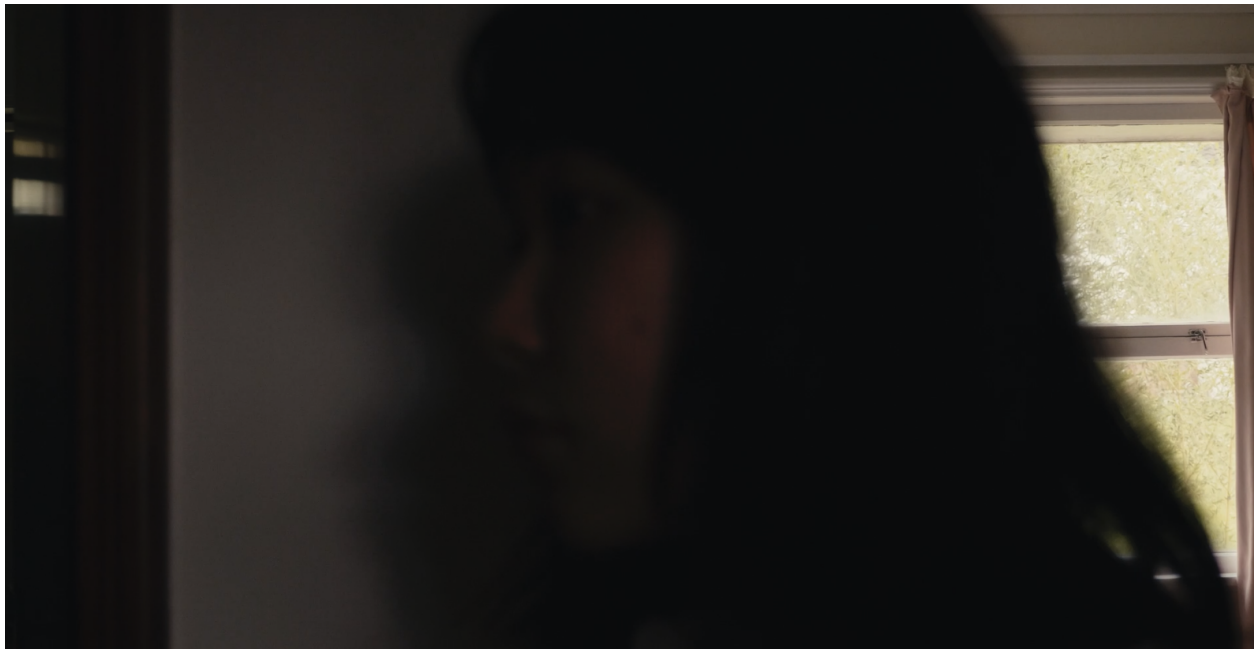


Figure 7. 3 A long take of Lanlan wakes up in the morning and follows the music to find her mother



Figure 7. 4 A long take of Lanlan wakes up in the morning and follows the music to find her mother



Figure 7. 5 A long take of Lanlan wakes up in the morning and follows the music to find her mother



Figure 7. 6 A long take of Lanlan wakes up in the morning and follows the music to find her mother

3.2.4 Repetitive composition

The ending scene of Hou's *A City of Sadness* (1989) uses a repetitive composition. The grandfather and grandson, along with the only remaining, mentally disturbed son, sit at the edge of the bed to eat, in a composition that is almost identical to the scene at the beginning of the film when the new casino opens for Lin's family. This contrasts the liveliness of earlier shots with the bleakness of the final scene, which, as Udden (2009) suggests, is the consequence of history placing its toll upon the family. The living room furnishings that once witnessed the bustling scenes of the family's prosperity remain virtually unchanged, yet history has silently changed the fate of the family. The trials and tribulations of history that have affected people's lives, relationships, and destinies, and the lamentation of such ordeals, are embedded in the repetitive composition of this shot. In MDIC, the tunnel itself forms a frame that further compounds the impression of this repetitive composition. Through the contrasting nature of this repetitive composition, the viewer is able to become more intensely aware of the changes in the other elements. When Lanlan and Chang-Li later revisit the tunnel once more, although the location, characters, and attire remain the same, the relationship between mother and daughter has undergone a dramatic change.



Figure 8. 1 Chang-Li and Lanlan at the tunnel for the first time



Figure 8. 2 Chang-Li and Lanlan at the tunnel for the first time for the second time

Similarly, the same composition has been used when Chang-Li and Lanlan sit by the table.



Figure 8. 3 Chang-Li sits by the table at daytime



Figure 8. 4 Lanlan sits by the table at night with the same composition

In using this technique, I wanted to explore how visual language could place Lanlan literally in her mother's position, implying the impending motherhood, similarity of cross generational experiences. Similar to Hou's use of repetitive composition, this repetitive composition expresses a specific state of time. Rather than a “present time”, the frame shows a time zone consisting of “past, present and future”, which echoes the mood of the film and expresses a sense of continuity and circularity in the identity of the mother. In addition, the repetitive composition creates a sense of déjà vu, underscoring the nostalgic, retrospective mood of the film.

3.2.5 Empty shot

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film characters often live mundane and busy lives. Cinematographically, the still shot is an important ‘static’ element, which acts as a pure and direct representation of time.

Dust in the Wind (1986) tells the story of a young couple, Yuan and Yun, who grew up together in a small village, but drifted apart when Yuan joined the army and Yun eventually married another. One key aspect of the film worth discussing is the presence of two almost identical still shots in the film featuring the signal light beside the only railway leading out of the village where Yuan and Yun live. The signal light first appears at the beginning of the film as Yuan and Yun catch a train home after their exams. As they walk along the railway track Yuan naturally takes the bag from Yun's hand. At this point, the shot of a signal light appears, with a green rolling mountain ridge in the background and clutter of power poles and train signals standing in front of them. It is an unassuming view of their hometown. By the end of the film, when Yuan returns from military service, this signal light appears again, and the view of his hometown remains as it always was. A few short years will not change the appearance of the mountains, nor the sky or the clouds, but the trajectory of Yuan and Yun's lives has been altered.



Figure 9. 1 Signal light at the beginning of Dust in the Wind (1986)



Figure 9. 2 Signal light in the end of Dust in the Wind (1986)

These two scenes are both empty shots and still shots. Here, they represent a transition from the present to the past, as "still life has an unchanging temporality" (Zhou, 2021). Neither the mountains nor the lights have changed, but youth has come to an end. These two ordinary, everyday still shots convey the infinite capacity as detailed in Deleuze's (2005) philosophical writings. The regret of unrequited young love, a dream-like state of being, things remaining the same as ever - yet the individual has changed, are extended indefinitely in these images.

In MDIC, although it is not an empty shot, the beginning and ending shot of Lanlan standing on the bridge follow the same strategy. The main function of still and empty shots in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films is to instill the power for emotions to extend and resonate beyond the frame. They become vehicles for meaning in their own right. At the beginning of the film, Lanlan stands alone on a bridge, observing his mother's choice of place to live. At the end of the film, Chang-Li and Lanlan walk together on the bridge for a while, but life is long, and while the daughter continues on her journey, the mother has to stop and

watch her walk further and further into the distance. Deleuze (2005) argues that landscape shots and still life images represent time itself, in which change occurs, but time itself does not change. Landscape shots swallow up the characters and the action, leaving only a depiction of the environment. Expansive landscapes and the realistic reproduction of everyday life in the film embody a dimension of time in which "past, present and future are fundamentally intertwined", revealing the impermanence of individual destiny and the invisible trauma, confusion, and sadness of seeking answers to the question of life's unknown.



Figure 9. 3 Opening shot of MDIC



Figure 9. 4 Ending shot of MDIC

3.2.6 Depth of Field



Figure 10. 1 Dumpling making scene in *Test Shoot* (b)



Figure 10. 2 Dumpling making scene in *MDIC*

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's use of the long take coincides with the emphasis on 'cavalier perspective' (Hao, 1994) or multi-vanishing point perspective in Chinese painting. The poetic focus of Hou's long takes echoes the expression of nature in traditional Chinese art theory. The concept of cavalier perspective is a recent concept termed in juxtaposition to spatial perspective methods found commonly in Western art. (Erlich &

Desser, 1994) In contrast to foreshortening, objects in cavalier perspective are often “transformed into flattened forms” (Hao, 1994), where one horizon line becomes many points of view with multiple vanishing points. Due to the needs of the Chinese aesthetic consciousness, strictly scientific methods of fixed point of view perspectives cannot fully fulfil the needs of visual representation in Chinese art (Ni,1994). Thus, the use of cavalier perspective allows artists to subtly manipulate time and space to condense subjects into a visually rich image. Likewise, audiences are able to appreciate Hou’s use of long takes, which also fuse different time periods into one continuous shot, interweaving different characters and events in a similar manner.

In Test shoot (b) (Figure 10.1), Chang-Li was in the middle of the frame but at the same time, the space she occupied was covered up by the door frame and the wall of the living room. In the foreground, Lanlan sits by the table and drinks lemon water while talking about Chang-Li’s violin practice in the past. In the background, Chang-Li stands in the kitchen, preparing dinner. A static long shot is used in this scene with deep focus. Chang-Li walks in and out of the frame while cooking, and sometimes back to the audience. When Lanlan asks if Chang-Li wants to show off her violin skills to Tanaka, Chang-Li’s hands slow down. The audience cannot see her facial expressions clearly, but the sudden silence and pause of the body give the scene emotional meaning. The remembrance of the past, the bitterness of and the responsibilities of being a mother, and her love for her daughter, these unspeakable feelings linger in this shot. I believe that this scene could not be present using any other shooting strategy. Because firstly, both characters need to be visible in the shot; and secondly, there should not be any interruptions of an audience’s deliberate observation process. As we discussed before, the whole aesthetic experience of Yi-Jing needs not only the aesthetic expression of the artist but also the emotional response and imagination of the viewer. A long, static, wide shot with deep focus is the only way to provide all details and also enough space for the audience to fill with their imaginations. However, in MDIC, my cinematographer was unable to give me a deep focus. (Figure 10.2)

3.3 External Factors which affected the adoption of Hou’s visual aesthetics

Deep focus is a significant element in Hou’s visual style (Rao,2013). In the dumpling scene in MDIC it was impossible to achieve this effect and use this shooting strategy. “The idea of a ‘director’s vision’ may exist at different levels, but the complexity of how this is enacted would reveal different realities.” (Greenhalgh, 2018, p.164) In the case of MDIC, the adoption of Hou’s film aesthetics does not solely relate to internal factors stated in diagram 1, but also external factors such as budget, time, location, technology, and the film crew’s working relationship. Taking the dumpling-making scene as an example, this section discusses the reasons that Hou’s film aesthetics cannot be fully applied in MDIC.

3.3.1 A multicultural crew

With the help and support of PASC (Pan-Asian Screen Collective), I was fortunate to assemble a crew of 14 professional filmmakers to make the short film MDIC. My crew was consisting of a Director/co-producer (myself), a DA, a Co-producer, two Production Assistants, a Cinematographer/DOP, a Camera Assistant, a Sound Operator, a Continuity checker, a Gaffer, a Best boy, an Editor, a Makeup Artist, a Runner, and a Set Designer. Filmmaking is a collaborative activity. Greenhalgh (2018) claimed, “it is not simply working in a group or a crew with one leader.” Greenhalgh used John-Steiner’s notion of ‘collaborative dynamics’ to explain “mutual appreciation, emotional scaffolding, and felt knowledge” (Greenhalgh 2018, p. 145) is essential for the performance of a film crew. Because mutual appreciation,

trust, and a profound understanding of each other's artistic vision and working habits will influence creative decisions and promote efficiency.

Director's journal:

As the director, I mainly communicated with the actresses, my cinematographer, and AD, and all our calls and suggestions were given in English, and all responses were also received in English (except with Chang-Li's performer who cannot speak English). Although all Chinese migrants in my crew have a New Zealand university degree and are able to speak English, they feel more comfortable communicating in their native language on set, especially within their own team. For example, the gaffer, the best boy, and the lighting assistant in the lighting team spoke their own language throughout the shoot. So did the runner, assistants, and makeup artist. Even though they respected the cinematographer's decisions, and did their best to assist him, there was minimal communication between the lighting crew and the cinematographer. Neither party tried to engage in conversations with each other during lunch breaks. I know they are all chatty people; I've seen the cinematographer chatting with the Camera Assistant and the actress for 20 minutes after the rehearsal. While trust was quickly built between the members who have the same mother tongue, trust between native English speakers and Chinese speakers formed very slowly. In a way, I feel my crew is not 'a' crew but two crews working together.

The community of active Chinese filmmakers in New Zealand is relatively small. Most of the crew members in my team know each other by name or have worked briefly in the same film sets or television shoots of larger scales in the past. But they have never collaborated on a short film project. Working practice in a low-budget short film is different from a feature film or a documentary. I agree with Greenhalgh (2018) that filmmaking practice should be examined under a wider context of the social-cultural and industry spheres because a filmmaker being studied "will have cultural, gendered, and environmental situations, which may provide a specific underlying research dynamic." (p. 45). In our first crew meeting, I realised the crew members soon formed subgroups based on one thing: the language they speak.

Director's journal:

The cinematographer was a little uncomfortable when the lighting team discussed the lighting strategy with me in Chinese and was annoyed when one member talked to me while pointing at the camera screen. Traditionally lighting crews work under the cinematographer. However, the gaffer team was more familiar with Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film style because they had participated in a Chinese New Zealand TV mini-drama project which has a similar style. The mix of Chinese language and English on set was a challenge especially when the gaffer and the lighting team were examining the monitor and expressing doubts about the amount of fill light on set and the DP was excluded from these conversations as he did not speak Chinese. As I was busy directing the actress these discussions went on without my knowledge. As a less experienced filmmaker I lacked an in-depth knowledge of lighting and also a schedule that didn't allow for full and frank creative discussions during preproduction. So the lack of fill light, the time and gear constraints that made it difficult to reset lighting and the realisation that the Arri Amira was not sensitive enough resulted in shots could not mimic the deep focus approach I desired. At this point, I had two options: give up the look I want and incorporate my cinematographer's aesthetic strategy, or reshoot the scene.

I mentioned to my supervisor Jim that what I wanted was a traditional Chinese painting, and what my cinematographer provided, was an oil painting. Jim pointed out that regardless of my preferred aesthetic, there is a bigger problem with the scene. He pointed out that audiences could barely see Chang-Li in the background. (Figure 11.2). He suggested the deep focus needed for the shot can be achieved with a wider

lens, a higher iso, to shoot at smaller f stop. Or, move Lanlan closer to the kitchen. Therefore, a reshoot had to be done.

3.3.2 Reshoot



Figure 11. 1 Reshoot of the dumpling scene for MDIC



Figure 11. 2 Reshoot of the dumpling scene for MDIC

In the reshoot of the scene, the deep focus was still unable to be achieved due to five reasons.

1. The cinematographer was not used to seeing a flat image through the lens. Somehow, he felt uncomfortable with this deep focus shot.

2. Technological constraints, we did not have lights that are powerful enough to light the kitchen effectively.
3. Time constraint, we did not have time to have a new lighting plan
4. Budget constraint, we were not able to reshoot the scene again
5. Location constraint, because of the structure of the house, camera positioning is extremely limited

Directors like Hou and Wong Kar-Wai have established strong personal aesthetics in their films. In order to achieve their vision, the choice of the cinematographer is especially important. They tend to work with the same cinematographer who understands their aesthetics and ways of production. Hou and his cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-Bing; Wong and his cinematographer Christopher Doyle are famous examples in the Chinese film industry. MDIC is the first collaboration between the cinematographer and myself.

As a cinematographer-director, Greenhalgh (2018) believed cinematographers should be aesthetic leaders. However, my cinematographer is a New Zealand-born Hong Kong man who speaks only English and is unfamiliar with Hou Hsiao-Hsian before our collaboration. Under the influence of COVID-19, both the pre-production schedule and shooting schedule were interrupted, and opportunities for key creative conversations between the director and the cinematographer were largely reduced. As Greenhalgh (2018) indicated, although the degree of influence varies depending on the needs of a story, the impact of a cinematographer's own style on the final output cannot be underestimated. In his 1995 interview, Polish cinematographer Witold Sobocinski commented that filmmakers will reflect the places they were born in their works. In Sobocinski's case, his use of light in films came from his childhood memory of the light he witnessed in his homeland. He described it as greyer and dense. As a result, he always felt the light used in American films is brighter and airy. Greenhalgh (2018) cited Sobocinski's interview as an example to explain the influence of a cinematographer's cultural background on his work. Growing up with a New Zealand cultural background, it is possible that my cinematographer produced a different meaning when we look at a shot. This "different" meaning is not a meaning that is different from its true and original meaning if there is any, but different from the meaning that I produced. Similarly, based on the same aesthetic philosophy, it is possible that he offers me a different shot from the one that I pictured in my head.

A deep-focus shot requires bright lighting or long exposure. In Test shoot (b), the scene was shot with a SONY A7S3, a relatively small camera, and it is suitable for low light shooting. MDIC was shot with an ARRI Amira. It is a relatively big camera compared to the size of the shooting location. Camera movement and camera position were extremely restricted. I was not able to move Lanlan's sitting position in the blocking, nor to move the camera further away from them. On top of that, the lighting in the film set was not bright enough for a deep focus. Furthermore, our AD reminded us on set that we did not have time to rearrange the lights. Because of the budget constraint, we were also not able to reshoot the same scene for another time.

As a result, a rack focus shot is filmed instead. In *Cinematic Storytelling*, Sijll (2005) explained that when the camera shifts focus, it moves the focus from one focal plane to another. And the viewer's attention shifts from an object at one focal plane to an object at another focal plane. Shifting focus allows the filmmaker to direct the viewer's attention from one object to another. Sijll (2005) pointed out that a rack focus shot often has two main functions:

- 1) Introducing/revealing a character without mentioning her name in the dialogue
- 2) Separation of space

In this scene (Figure 11.1-11.2) the cinematographer shifted focus to direct the audience's attention to the talking character. However, it is unnecessary because there are only two characters and we already know who is talking. In *Lessons with Kiarostami*, Kiarostami (2015) believed there should be room for the audience to reflect and respond. He pointed out the director sometimes has to step back because audiences should be given the freedom to look at the event or character they are interested in and they should also be given the opportunity to use their imagination. In this scene in MDIC, a rack focus shot erased the audience's opportunity to observe the other character and investigate her reactions and inner emotions during the conversation. However, it can be argued that the rack focus shot separated the daughter's space and the mother's space and created an interesting visual division. When Lanlan is talking about Chang-Li's past, Chang-Li in the kitchen was out of focus, as if she is a blurred figure in Lanlan's memory.

In Test shoot (b), Lanlan and Chang-Li's eye lines formed a visual diagonal and the space Lanlan occupied in the frame was less than in MDIC. The distance between them was closer compared to the image in the reshoot of the same scene in MDIC. By looking at the composition, it seems like the mother and the daughter are somehow connected in the space in Test Shoot (b), but in the reshoot of the same scene in MDIC, a wider lens was used by the cinematographer in the attempt to achieve deep focus without changing the lighting plan. However, the visual representation of the relationship between the mother and the daughter and the Yi-Jing created in this scene was interrupted.

4 Evaluation

4.1 Xie-Shi

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's long takes are intended to maintain the integrity of time and space, deliberately avoiding any subjective cuts to interfere with the purity of his expression. The aesthetic characteristic of Hou's long takes is his unique pursuit of realism. To a certain extent, it can be said that Hou Hsiao-Hsien is committed to using the long take to create another form of reality (Zhu, 2006). *From The Boys from Fengkuei (1983) to The Time to Live and the Time to die (1985), Dust in the Wind (1986), A City of Sadness (1989), Good Men, Good Women (1995), and many more, most of his filmography is embedded in his use of long takes as an aesthetic and storytelling framework. The long take, according to Hou, allows the actors to "perform within their given environment", and his job is simply to "try to capture as much as possible", with the aim of "capturing reality, reconstructing reality" (Bai, 2015).*

In addition to being realistic in aesthetic style, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films also cannot be ignored for their realistic presentation of Taiwanese society. The attention to everyday life and personal experiences of the characters are one of the main themes of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films. For example, in *The Time To Live and The Time To Die* (1985), Hou used the ordinary life of an ordinary family to express the psychological process of mainland immigrants integrating into Taiwan society. Through the growth of the protagonist from childhood to adolescence, on the one hand, the film presents the family's sorrowful experience of

integrating into Taiwan society; and on the other hand, it depicts the historical process of Taiwan's transition from farming civilization to the modern industrial civilization, revealing the political, economic and social changes in Taiwan over the past 20 years.

In Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films, the normality of life and real experience contained in the images are not simply attached to the passage of time inside the long take, but the movement of the long take brings their spatial aesthetics—the regional culture expressed in images, and historical depth.

As Michel Foucault said, space should not be a silent, rigid, non-dialectical thing, but an enlightening and vital concept (Foucault, 2008). Regional space involves things such as dialects, slang, folk customs, special geographical environment, historical traditions, cultural experiences, and ways of thinking, and is the main object of expression in national films of various countries (Dwyer, Ahmed., & Beinart, 2019). It can be said that the awareness of regional space and the perspective of the filmmaker to observe things are the prototypes of the artistic reproduction of regional culture (Li, 2018), and also the entry point for Hou Hsiao-Hsien to balance personal experience and historical representation.

In terms of representation and reproduction, the audio-visual images created by film languages, colours, sounds, and other elements of Hou's films, are firstly the expression of regional space, and then the generation of historical depth. The rural towns in Taiwan in his films are rich in regional colours, with relatively traditional customs and characteristics. Long takes can preserve and restore people's memories to the greatest extent possible (Gibbs & Pye, 2017).

In MDIC, the events and characters inside the home space can be seen as some kind of historical evidence. It reflected a Chinese New Zealand diasporic experience in two different ways. From a personal sense, the interior decoration of Chang-Li's house, the dumpling-making process, living habits, language, and ways of thinking are an authentic representation of a Chinese migrant in New Zealand. Compared to MDIC, *Belonging* and *Test Shoot (a)* reflected more details of New Zealand's geographical environment and cultural experience. For example, the symbolic sky tower and harbour bridge shown in *Belonging* and the step-by-step dumpling-making process shown in *Test Shoot (a)*. There are even more dialogues in these two films to reflect the conflict between traditional parental thinking and the rebellion of the young generation.

However, MDIC reflected a historical depth that is absent in both *Belonging* and *Test Shoot (a)*. From a historical sense, MDIC reflects the historical topics of two generations: one is the nostalgia of the parents who migrated from China to a foreign country, and the other is the comparison between the first immigrant generation and the next generation who grew up in China. The first Chinese New Zealand migrant is attracted to a Western ideology of individuality and personal freedom but is still holding the traditional perspective of family responsibility and scarification. And the next generation who grew up in China was able to embrace and practice such a notion more quickly. Although MDIC did not emphasise a diasporic experience in a New Zealand geographical setting especially, it reflected the reality of a Chinese migrant's personal experience, her loneliness, her struggle to balance her old and new (cultural and historical) identity, the conflict of the traditional and modern influence, which can be seen as a collective memory of Chinese migrants as a whole. In conclusion, the adoption of Hou's Xie-Shi style is successful in MDIC.

4.2 Yi-Jing

4.2.1 Deep focus

Feedback from my supervisor for MDIC included comments on pacing, story structure/scene orders, shot size, and duration. In short, Jim suggested there should be an emphasis on dramatic moments. He suggested that the story needs a little more drive so the tension of the story carries over the long shots.

Deleuze, Tomlinson and Habberjam (2005) believe that for the purpose of narrative and pace, classic Hollywood films use a montage to disassemble the complete time and space, pursue logical order and dramatic effect. The film's narrative revolves around a certain new development and turning points to attract the audience. Hou's films remove drama and plot, they neither initiate dramatic action nor stimulate the audience's emotion using film language and special effects (Chen 2012). For example, *A City Of Sadness* (1989) does not contain a grand narrative, dramatic conflict, or story structure more commonly found in films produced in the West, and instead stands out for its lyrical tone and poetic quality. According to screenwriter Tianwen Zhu, Hou's films take "the approach of classical Chinese poetry - placing emphasis is not neither on dramatic conflicts to depict suffering, nor use of redemption at the end of a tragedy as a form of narrative resolution. Instead, the film is a reflection of the realities of human existence against the flow of infinite time and space. Unlike a story, a poem cannot be resolved by personal redemption; it expresses a lifetime of endless contemplation and meditation" (Zhu, 2006, p.56).

Wilkerson (1994) claimed that some Chinese films "have attenuated the narrative interest in favour of some aspect more closely associated with the Chinese painting tradition: non-narrative space and time, colour, or the contemplation of nature" (p. 42). Wilkerson (1994), Hao (1994), and Ni (1994) referred to these films as "lyrical" or "art films" which according to Wilkerson (1994) "are able to draw most directly on the refined classical Chinese traditions of landscape painting and poetry because, like them and in contrast to many dominant Western art forms, they stress lyrical evocation over narrative development." (p. 42)

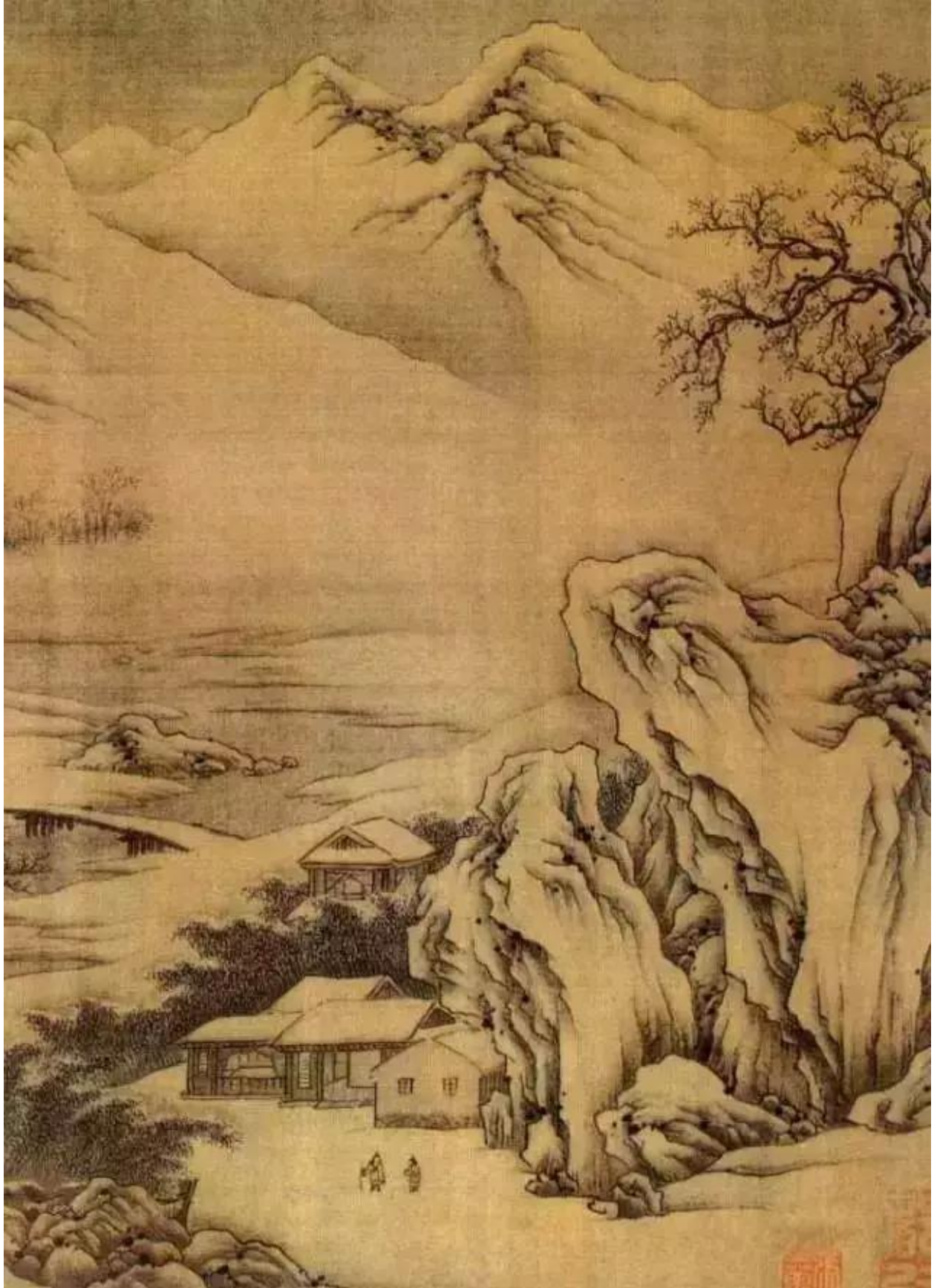


Figure 12. 1 Traditional Chinese Landscape painting



Figure 12. 2 A wide shot of Hou's award-winning film *Assassin* (2015)

Multiple perspectives are one of the unique features of traditional Chinese landscape painting (Ye, 1985). The buildings and human figures were often painted on a smaller scale and represented in parallel perspectives. Hao (1994) stated that the purpose of adopting such perspectives is not to make a hologram or aimed to provide true dimensions of the buildings and objects in the painting. "What was desired was rather a point of view which transcended that of the individual." (p. 46) It is because traditional Chinese painting adopted the idea of "timeless, communal impression" (Hao, p.46). It is both present and continuing. It can be viewed by anyone, but it was not a scene viewed from anyone's point of view. "Each painting had its own intellectual and philosophical world to which the viewer gained access by means of the imagination." (Hao, p. 46). Ni (1994) also mentioned the depth of space in Chinese visual representation. She stated that "the Chinese in their classical paintings did not employ perspective relations which effectively express a sense of depth" (p, 52). The flatness in Hou's film can be seen as an example of such a notion. Shallow depth of field was rarely seen in any of the films Hou has made.

From a mother-daughter reunion to the revelation of an unexpected pregnancy and a failed dinner, MDIC could have been a film filled with dramatic conflict. However, my deliberate use of static long take and distanced camera placement minimised these dramatic moments. My intention is to not actively direct the viewer to see what the filmmaker is showing but leave the viewer to freely choose and contemplate. In this way, drama and conflict are not depicted on a surface level, instead, the constant tension lies brewing beneath. However, the dumpling scene in MDIC failed to reflect the deep focus and multiple perspective feature which is one of the most important concepts in representing Yi-Jing.

The lack of deep focus as a result minimised the underlying emotional tension during the conversation between Chang-Li and Lanlan in MDIC. As a result, Jim as an audience felt there were insufficient emotions and wanted to see some more dramatic moments which may express strong emotions.

There are five reasons mentioned in 3.3.2 which prevent me and my crew from filming the dumpling scene with deep focus. However, I am aware that all these reasons are external factors that could have been improved given a larger budget and longer preparation period and shooting period.

4.2.2 Extremely wide shot

Although Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films use a realistic approach, the essence of his films is poetic. In Chen Zhisheng's book *Research on the Types of Poetic Language in Films* (Chen, 2012), he defines it as follows: "Poeticness of the film is an internal expressive ability displayed in the process of film narration, and it is the externalisation of the rhetorical language of the main structural paragraphs that determine the temperament of the film. ." (p. 43) The poeticness of the film can convey the film aesthetic through the characteristics of the film itself and the shooting techniques used. (Flanagan, 2012) These characteristics and shooting techniques are the external expressions of the poetic film. The poeticness of Hou's films is not only expressed through long takes, composition, colours, shot size, and other elements, but also an inherent poetic temperament and an artistic conception of traditional Chinese aesthetics while paying attention to real life. I agree with Chinese scholars Gu (2013) and Liu (2018) that Hou's extremely wide shot of landscapes captures the essence of Chinese aesthetics and Chinese culture's 'artistic conception', forming a unique and engaging blend of openness and ambiguity.

In his extremely wide shot and long takes, Hou always lets the environment in the frame express emotion instead of the characters (Sun, 2020). For example, there are large numbers of empty shots in *Assassin* (2015). All these extremely wide shots look like traditional landscape paintings. Even if there are people, people are often a few small dots in the picture. Immediately after the black-and-white prologue at the beginning of the film, the dusk pond, the dim landscape, the nearby woods, and buildings are almost all black. These objects, along with the title written by the slowly emerging dark red brush, set the tone of the whole film. Then in the following still shot, a bird is flying by, and a wild duck is swimming slowly. The audience's eyes can easily be locked on the wild duck. The wild duck in the sunset is not accompanied by its kind, conveying a sense of loneliness and desolation. The whole picture is atmospheric and hints at the theme of the whole movie -the loneliness of men in the living world. This form of Yi-Jing/artistic conception is explored only in the ending scene (Figure 9.4) of MDIC.

Figure 13.1-13.4 shows Chang-Li's first entrance into the film. A clip of this shot can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/ML8Magfq5rI>. With the music playing, the camera pans down the big tree. We then realise it is Tanaka under the tree who is playing the violin. The tree in the front garden observes Chang-Li's everyday life. As an unchanged, still object in the film, the tree reflects Chang-Li's life experience, her interactions with Tanaka, and the appearance and disappearance of her daughter Lanlan. The contrast of a grand, still object rooted in this land and the small human figures whose lives are constantly changing and drifting implies the nature of the life of Chinese immigrants. The tree was supposed to appear more than once in the film as a still observer. And there are more scenes of Lanlan and Chang-Li walking in Auckland city in the script to reflect the uncertainty and drifting nature of their lives. However, these scenes had to be cut out because of the durational limit of MDIC. As a consequence, without the reappearance of the tree and more walking scenes, Jim felt the use of the tree in the beginning was not effective. He suggested that editing-wise, following Lanlan's shot, Chang-Li's appearance instead of the tree has a better logical order. However, when I cut out the panning shot of the tree, not only did the pace of the scene change, the nature of the scene also changed. Audiences were supposed to slowly look down the grand tree with the music and find the characters at the bottom. As outsiders, they are given the opportunities to explore these diasporic people's lives spontaneously. But if the tree shot is removed, it

loses its poetic aesthetic, and the audiences are forced to look at Chang-Li at a close distance (Figure 15), which in a way, is against the distanced, third-person point of view that MDIC adopted.

Hou is able to present natural landscapes in extreme wide shot and long duration shots repeatedly in his films in order to break through the compositional limitations of the frame, extending the space inside the frame to the outside, and creating an infinite extension of the subject and content. However, MDIC was unable to fully utilise such long durational shots because of its short film form. Therefore, Yi-Jing can only be partially represented in MDIC.



Figure 13. 1 A panning down the tree shot in MDIC



Figure 13. 2 A panning down the tree shot in MDIC



Figure 13. 3 A panning down the tree shot in MDIC



Figure 13. 4 A panning down the tree shot in MDIC



Figure 14. 1 Chang-Li hanging clothes while listening to Tanaka playing violin in the garden

4.3 Multicultural crew and diasporic experience

In *Directing Film Techniques And Aesthetics*, Rabiger (2008) suggested that some directors express a strong desire to take control of everything. This is especially true when a multicultural crew is working together. Before I worked with my cinematographer, there was another Pākehā DP that I intended to work with and he expressed his concerns to me in our second meeting: ‘as an outsider (Pākehā), I am not confident to work with a crew of Chinese filmmakers because I’m afraid that they’ll criticise me for not understanding Chinese culture or the way I shoot doesn’t qualify to film Chinese subjects’. During the shoot, I did feel the native English speakers tended to be quieter and, in a way, self-marginalised because they didn’t feel like they fit in. They did not provide any suggestions in terms of shooting strategies aesthetic-wise. Rabiger (2008) pointed out that although a film crew cannot perform without a director, each crew member has their own technical specialty and a director should treat them as creative artists and give them enough trust instead of taking over the job. However, at the time, both myself as the director and a majority of my crew members believed I should make every creative decision because I seem to understand traditional Chinese aesthetics and Hou’s film style better than anyone else in the team. Thus, the cinematographer was not given enough creative freedom to visualise the shots he filmed. While my decision to reshoot the scene may have felt to some like redoing something that did within the context of the film I think my decision to do this was vindicated by the end result

What I have learned from working with a multicultural crew is that a crew member may have many years of working experience and high achievements, it may still be difficult for them to deal with different cultural representations, aesthetics, and values. Especially when they have to work with others who speak in a language that they do not understand. Under such circumstances, the director, producer, and/or AD need to have great managerial skills and respect crew members by not taking over their creative freedom. Compare to a standard film crew where all members speak the same language and received similar filmmaking training, It is necessary to communicate more often (increase meeting times) and give a longer pre-production period when working with a multicultural crew in order to make sure all crew members understand the director’s vision and have a reasonable understanding of the culture that will be represented in the film. Finally, it is common and dangerous to presume that all crew members will interpret a cultural subject the same way as the director in a multicultural crew.

However, problems may occur because of such diversity. For example, there is a scene in MDIC when Tanaka came and invited Chang-Li to listen to his violin performance, my supervisor Jim pointed out that the scene was not rational as Tanaka can see Lanlan in the living room which is not far from him, but they did not say anything to each other at all. The scene was not changed in the final version because to the Chinese audience it is normal for an elderly to not speak to the young person in the house and only speak to her parents especially when the young person did not come forward and greet him first. However, in New Zealand society, native New Zealanders do not have such conventions. The elderly and the young see each other as equal. They often call each other by name directly. And it was not polite for a visitor to ignore a household member when they acknowledged each other regardless of their age difference. It would not be an authentic representation of Chinese migrants if I changed the scene and made the characters act the “Kiwi” way. However, it will affect the watching experience for New Zealand’s native audience like my supervisor Jim when they feel a film scene is illogical. Perhaps it is up to the filmmaker to make the decision to provide an honest representation of a specific culture or to slightly alter it to please the targeted audience and the commercial market.

4.4 Problems and Limitations

4.4.1 Geographical setting

The location of the story, Auckland, is of great importance to the film.

Firstly, the city of Auckland is the cause of family fragmentation (the mother leaves China and immigrated to New Zealand) and the place where personal ambitions are realised (the mother accumulates wealth and is able to support her daughter in China to realise her dreams).

Secondly, the location of Auckland is a constant reminder to Chang-Li (and diasporic immigrant audiences) of the loss of her family (and culture, and even self), and the resultant longing and yearning for the past should contribute to the nostalgic style of MDIC.

Thirdly, Auckland is a metaphor for the divide between mother and daughter: the everyday things that are familiar to the mother (the house, the garden, the lemon tree, the weather, the English language, the locale) are unfamiliar to the daughter. In this unfamiliar environment, it is the mother's everyday actions (drying clothes, washing, cooking, talking, playing the violin) that are familiar. This contrast between strangeness and familiarity creates confusion for the daughter, and the accumulation of this confusion leads to her reluctance to communicate, unable to determine whether the mother in Auckland and the mother she remembers in China are one and the same.

In other words, the setting of Auckland represents for the daughter another distant and unfamiliar identity for her mother: that of an independent woman. For the daughter, this identity of her mother excludes her, cuts her off from her mother, and is something she fears and wishes to avoid. The dialogue between mother and daughter in the film, therefore, suggests that in the past it has been the mother who has returned to visit her daughter, who has never visited Auckland once in turn. However, the geographical setting of MDIC was not well reflected in the film. In the script, Lanlan walks through the city, witnessing the city of Auckland (environment, houses, people) while looking for her mother. However, because of the time limit of both the filmmaking schedule and film duration, all these exterior scenes were deleted.

4.4.2 Empty shot



Figure 15. 1 Empty shot in the end of MDIC: Lanlan's book



Figure 15. 2 Empty shot in the end of MDIC: Clothes hanger



Figure 15. 3 Empty shot in the end of MDIC: Chang-Li's laundry

Traditional Chinese art has a deep emphasis on the balance of imagination and reality through artistic conception. Opera, painting, and Penjing/ horticultural arts all emphasise the use of white space. In Hou's films, the 'empty shot' technique is an inheritance of white/ negative space (Ye, 1985) and one of his signature features. In MDIC, there are three empty shots at the end of the film. Although these images added aesthetic value, they did not contain an emotional weight that Hou's empty shots carry.

The uniqueness of Hou's film style can be traced to the aesthetic of traditional Chinese painting which separated the system of visual representation between the Chinese and the West. (Hou, 1994). Wilkerson (1994) believed such differences are a result of different viewpoints towards human beings and nature in Chinese and Western culture. In traditional Chinese culture, men were seen as an element of nature rather than opposed to it. Thus, there is no need to separate human emotions, feelings and awareness from nature, or "between subject and object" (Wilkerson, 1994, p. 45). This ideology formed the foundation of Chinese visual representation. "While the subject provided the form of visual representation, the object provided its content, and thus constituted the elements of Chinese vision" (Wilkerson, 1994, p. 45). Similarly, spatial composition in Hou's cinematography is not so much concerned with the narrative function of space, but more with its emotional nature (Li & Li, 2008).

The composition of space in Chinese art films does not pay much attention to the narrative function of the space but focuses more on the emotionality of the space (Chen, 2012). In one of China's most famous art films, *Springtime In A Small Town* (1948), the city walls, gardens, and rooms are all given symbolic meanings, but the specific locations and relationships of each space are relatively vague, and the composition of the space is not subject to narrative principle, but subject to the logic of emotion. For example, In *Springtime In A Small Town* (1948), the dilapidated courtyard that appeared many times in the film is always associated with decadence and frustration. The dying husband, worried wife, and the doctor who started to develop unhealthy feelings towards the wife have all stepped into this courtyard one after another. Yet the innocent and lively younger sister has never once done so. The younger sister's room is filled with sunshine and flowers, to symbolise youth, liveliness, and hope.

The poetry of Chinese cinema is deeply rooted in its relationship to space - as people move in space, space also has to take on a poetic and emotional weight. In visual language, the composition of space must take into account the emotional relationship between subject and environment. However, although the sound of violin evoked certain emotions, the imagery themselves (Figure 16.1-16.3) did not contain any emotional meaning.

4.4.3 Summary

If we examine these issues individually, the causes of each issue can vary greatly. For example, the reason that Auckland's landscape cannot be filmed may be because there is not enough time to go to the location, unexpected weather change, or the cinematographer's personal choice. However, what we really want to know is the fundamental reason why Hou's film aesthetics cannot be fully adopted in MDIC. In other words, the causes behind the challenges faced. I believe there are two reasons: the lack of time and communication of the crew due to the influence of COVID-19; and the short film form of MDIC discussed in section 4.2.

Through the making of MDIC, I have discovered that in order to visually communicate a diasporic experience and the culture of diasporic people with a specific film aesthetic, it may not be the most effective way to follow the standard short film shooting strategy. The pre-production period needs to be longer, especially when working with a multicultural crew. It is necessary to have sufficient crew meetings which allow the team to know each other, build trust, and reach a mutual agreement on the style and aesthetic of the film. This is because different members may have different understandings and visual perspectives of the culture and aesthetic of the film they are going to shoot.

For example, I am a Chinese-born diasporic director, my cinematographer is a New Zealand born second-generation Chinese, and the Camera Assistant is a local born Pākehā. Our understanding and visual perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics are very different. Multiple COVID-19 lockdowns had several negative impacts on our crew, their works and families, and MDIC's production schedule. As a result, we were unable to have enough crew meetings. Discussions of shots, shooting, and lighting style had to be done on set under pressure. As we had different ideas about how to visualise the script, a reshoot day had to be added as a consequence.

5 Conclusion

Scholars such as Kerrigan (2018), Skains (2017) and Greenhalgh (2018) believe filmmaking practice can be adopted as a means of academic research as it provides the experiential part of knowledge from an insider's perspective. This research project confirms that effective creative strategies of adopting Hou Hsiao-Hsien's visual aesthetics in representing a Chinese New Zealand diasporic experience in a short film form and the limitations of such adoption can only be explored through tactical experience. The methodological approach of practice-based inquiry suggested by Batty and Kerrigan (2018) is adopted as the foundation approach for this research project, and both the short film and the process of making it are reflected in this research exegesis. The critiques of my supervisor - the experienced and respected New Zealand filmmaker Jim Marbrook - on each edited version of MDIC has also been included as an outsider's point of view to reflect the development of the project. His valuable film criticism highlighted different interpretations of the shots in MDIC from a Western point of view which allowed me to discover the inadequacy and inappropriate use of Hou's aesthetic expressions in MDIC.

Li (2018) pointed out that in the era of globalisation, the concepts of "marginal" and "mainstream" have been given new meanings in European countries such as Germany. She suggested in the new form of diasporic cinema, everyone is drifting in the globalised society and shifting from different cultures. However, Zalipour (2019) observed that in the New Zealand context, there are limited on-screen representations of Asian diasporic experiences in the national cinema. I agree with Zalipour and would like to also point out that existing Chinese New Zealand diasporic films show the tendency of presenting similar thematic concerns but place less emphasis on visual expressions and artistic philosophies sourced from their own culture. In response, *My Daughter Is Coming* provides a new aesthetic perspective derived from Hou's visual aesthetics under New Zealand's geographical and cultural context, which is an unexplored area in New Zealand cinema.

Skains (2018) indicated film can be used to gain insight into the culture and society in which it was produced, while also anticipating the future development of certain art forms. This project confirms Sakin's statement as MDIC was made to explore ways of representing the memory and experience of a

Chinese migrant in New Zealand in a different visual form from contemporary Hollywood cinematic expressions. MDIC is both individual and cultural. As a carrier of culture, cinema is rooted in the intertwining of history, culture, and reality. It provided an authentic and honest reflection of the dilemma faced by first generation Chinese migrants who were constantly struggling between Chinese traditional values and Western perspectives. Despite the story being fiction, the dilemmas faced by the characters in the story are undoubtedly true. It recognizes the collective unconsciousness of an era behind the diasporic experience. On the other hand, my experience of making this diasporic short film as a diasporic filmmaker with a multicultural film crew also provides insights into diasporic/intercultural filmmaking practice.

Through the filmmaking practice of MDIC, this research project explored some specific elements of Hou's aesthetic style such as the portrayal of reality and the creation of artistic conception. The external poetic expression of Hou's film aesthetics is represented through MDIC's long take, composition, shot size and other elements; an artistic conception of traditional Chinese aesthetics is also created in certain scenes. Although the inherent poetic temperament was not fully explored, because of external factors such as time and budget constraints. MDIC's short film form also limited the creation of Yi-Jing/poeticness as its ambiguity and openness can only be fully expressed in long takes and repeated use of extremely wide shots of nature and landscape. A duration of 17 minutes was not long enough to fully utilise these visual techniques. Deep focus was not achieved in MDIC, which means the essential concept of multiple perspectives in traditional Chinese artworks such as landscape painting was not reflected.

Nevertheless, MDIC is characterised by a distinctive style. It utilised director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film language which was deeply influenced by traditional Chinese aesthetics and was shot by a New Zealand born English-speaking Chinese cinematographer. Just like the hybrid identity of migrants, MDIC's visual aesthetics also reflected such a nature of hybridity.

The short film produced for this research project is neither perfect nor complete, but as a research method, this film work reveals the core concepts and shooting experience of integrating traditional Chinese aesthetics and New Zealand immigration experience in a 5-day shoot with a multicultural crew. I hope this research project will provide useful methodological insights for understanding diasporic filmmaking, inspire Chinese diasporic directors and other minority immigrant directors in New Zealand to keep researching and practising diasporic filmmaking in their own unique ways.

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