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Crafting Poetic Imagery: The Role of Dialect in Documentary Filmmaking through a Chinese Lens

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Abstract

This article examines how Zhuji dialect operates as a generative aesthetic system within contemporary documentary filmmaking through a Chinese cinematic lens. Focusing on the short documentary *Little Potato*, the paper argues that dialect functions beyond spoken communication or regional realism, becoming a poetic mechanism that shapes cinematic rhythm, imagery, memory, and emotional atmosphere. Through tone, cadence, fragmentation, and oral texture, Zhuji dialect actively informs the film's audiovisual language and contributes to the construction of poetic imagery. Drawing from practice-led research, the article reflects on the relationship between dialect, domestic space, and observational filmmaking. The study briefly engages with the Xiang system in Chinese aesthetics, where sensory images and symbolic associations generate emotional and philosophical meaning beyond literal representation. Within this framework, Zhuji dialect functions as an embodied cultural image that evokes memory, intimacy, and temporality.

Keywords: poetic documentary; practice-led artistic research; the Xiang system; Zhuji dialect

Journal on Ethnopolitics and
Minority Issues in Europe
Vol.25, No.2, 2026

pp.28–44

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53779/CHCH0906>

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Introduction

This article explores the pivotal role of dialect in shaping poetic imagery within Chinese documentary filmmaking. It proposes that the Zhuji dialect serves as a generative aesthetic system within poetic documentary, shaping sonic texture, rhythmic organisation, and image construction in ways that are deeply informed by culturally embedded frameworks of the Xiang system. Using my own work, *Little Potato*,¹ as a case study, I will illustrate how the Zhuji dialect, spoken in my grandmother's hometown, contributes to the construction of poetic imagery. *Little Potato* is a poetic documentary about my grandmother, Shou Ai Xia, who has been living with dementia since 2012. Through this film, I attempt to portray two interconnected worlds she inhabits, one rooted in fading memories of daily life and the other in the hallucinatory reality caused by her condition.

The Zhuji dialect belongs to the broader linguistic family of Wu Chinese, spoken in the Jiangnan region, one of the major regional varieties of Chinese spoken primarily in eastern China. Within Wu Chinese, the Shaoxing dialect functions as a regional dialect group spoken across the Shaoxing area of Zhejiang Province, while the Zhuji dialect may be understood as a local sub-dialect specific to Zhuji city. The Zhuji dialect, with its rich history and unique poetic qualities, is central to this exploration. In this short documentary, dialect influences not only the auditory texture of the film but also helps to evoke emotional and philosophical responses to memory, loss, and identity. In this context, dialect functions as a powerful tool for bridging the past and present, allowing language and the Jiangnan region to become inseparable from the emotional landscape of the documentary. As a practitioner, I explore the role of dialect in shaping poetic imagery in documentary filmmaking, with a particular focus on the filmmaking process utilizing the Xiang system (a philosophical and aesthetic system adapted from Chinese poetry), especially during editing. The Jiangnan region, central to this documentary, transcends its geographical boundaries to become a space in which the subjective experiences of its inhabitants are interwoven, particularly through the lens of my grandmother's life and the dialect she speaks. The Zhuji dialect, gradually diminishing in use over time, emerges as a critical vehicle for articulating the emotional and philosophical essence of both the Jiangnan region and my grandmother's mental state. Thus, this article will demonstrate how dialect plays a vital role in enriching the film's poetic qualities, helping to convey complex emotional experiences while preserving cultural and personal history.

This article contributes to documentary studies by reconceptualising dialect not merely as a marker of authenticity or identity, but as an active aesthetic system that shapes sound, rhythm, editing, and image construction within poetic documentary practice. Rooted in the Chinese poetic tradition yet articulated within contemporary filmmaking discourse, it extends dominant frameworks such as the poetic mode by Bill Nichols through the integration of the Xiang system (Xiang, Yi Xiang, Yi Jing), offering a non-Western, practice-based account of how meaning emerges through sensory and affective structures. At the same time, the article contributes to ethnopolitics and minority language discourse by positioning Zhuji dialect as a

site of cultural memory, linguistic erosion, and embodied knowledge, demonstrating how film practice can engage endangered dialects beyond representational politics. This intervention is shaped by a layered translativity process, from Zhuji dialect to Mandarin to English, in which translation becomes not only linguistic but conceptual, negotiating the movement of culturally specific ideas across epistemological frameworks. In doing so, the article proposes a cross-cultural pathway that maintains the integrity of Chinese aesthetic thought while making it accessible within English-language scholarship, thereby enriching global debates in documentary studies and creative practice research.

Key terms

Given that the chapter utilises distinctive Chinese concepts, it is useful at the outset to establish brief definitions for two key terms used in the study.

The Xiang system

In my practice, the core creative strategy of making poetic documentary lies in the Chinese Xiang system [象系统]. The Xiang system is a relatively complex, layered philosophical and aesthetic classification adapted from Chinese poetry. It comprises three traditional concepts: Xiang [象] Yi Xiang [意象], and Yi Jing [意境]. They are in a hierarchical order. The first layer, Xiang, may be broadly translated into English as physicality (or form). It describes the appearance or the surface of something. The second layer, Yi Xiang, describes the fusion of subjectivity and objectivity. It also includes one's emotional response to something physical. The third layer, Yi Jing, stimulates a philosophical feeling and comprehension of life, memory and the universe. Yi Jing reaches beyond a specific Xiang (the physical) object, event or scene and our subjective response to it (Yi Xiang). Thus, the Xiang system functions as the central creative strategy to heighten poetic thinking within practice.

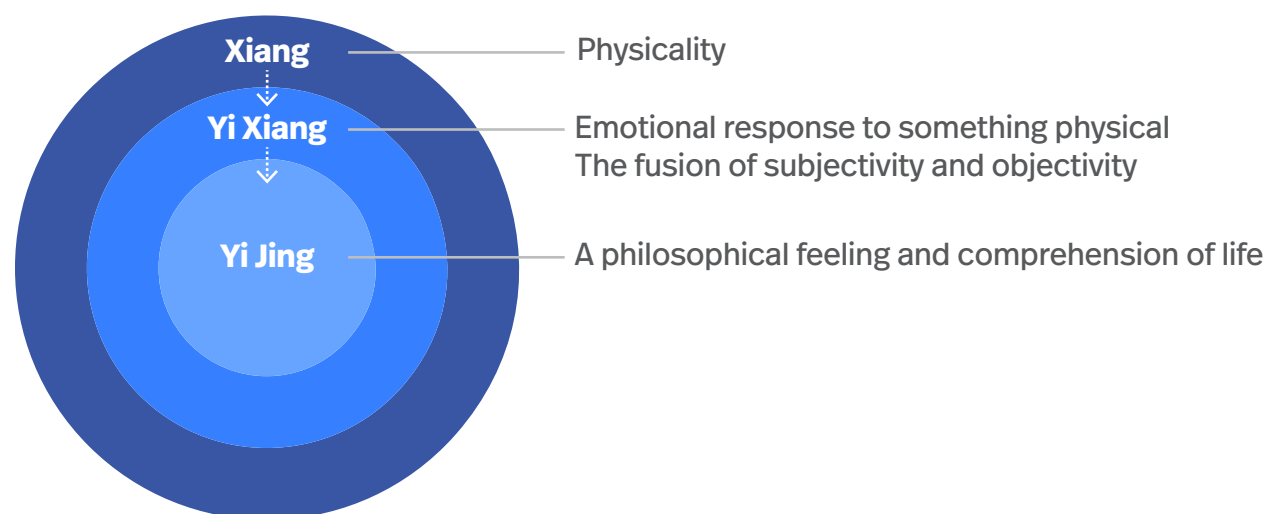


Figure 1. Diagram of the Chinese Xiang System [象系统], illustrating the connections and elements within the framework used in Chinese poetry.

In this study, the *Xiang* system is employed as both an analytical framework and a creative method, enabling a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice in which aesthetic concepts are not only interpreted but enacted through the filmmaking process. In general, I consider filmmaking a process of integrating *Xiangs*. I see dialect, other sound elements, light, colour, music, objects and people as different categories of *Xiang*. In *Little Potato*, the emotional responses of my grandmother and myself as the director to different locations bring together these categories of *Xiangs*, contributing to the central Yi *Xiang* of Jiangnan. Jiangnan, a region known for its watery landscape in southeastern China, serves as the heart of the documentary, featuring as both a physical place and a metaphorical space tied to my grandmother's fading memories. Yi Jing, the feeling of loss, emerges from this Yi *Xiang* of Jiangnan, highlighting the emotional undercurrent of the film. The primary focus of this article is therefore to explore how the Zhuji dialect functions as a *Xiang*, contributing to the creation of poetic imagery in the documentary, and how it reflects my grandmother's mental state within the central Yi *Xiang* of Jiangnan.

Poetic documentary

The concept of poetic documentary is most prominently theorised by Bill Nichols, who identifies the poetic mode as one of six key documentary modes. His poetic mode foregrounds aesthetic expression over narrative coherence, privileging rhythm, tone, and associative structures (Nichols, 2017). Emerging from avant-garde traditions, it disrupts linear temporality and emphasises the sensory and affective dimensions of experience (Nichols, 2001). While Bill Nichols conceptualises the poetic mode primarily through visual and rhythmic organisation, he pays comparatively limited attention to the role of language as an aesthetic system. This article extends his framework by arguing that, in *Little Potato*, the Zhuji dialect itself operates as a structuring aesthetic system. Through its tonal qualities, cadence, and cultural resonances, the dialect shapes not only sound but also the temporal and imagistic logic of the film, aligning with Chinese aesthetic concepts such as *Xiang* and Yi Jing.

In Chinese, the term poetic can be translated as *shi yi* [诗意]. According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* [现代汉语词典] (2012), poetic refers to the beauty of Yi Jing which corresponds to what we may feel in poetry (Lü & Ding, 2012, p. 1179). For example, I may feel what is poetic in a small, green, tender shoot, because I am able to sense the beauty in it and it reminds me of a broad idea of rebirth contained within a small physical object. The term poetic may be identified outside of a poem, and it may describe a state, environment, artefact, or idea that is not structured into literary form.

I use the term “poetic documentary” to describe a particular poetic treatment of nonfiction material that, while “documenting” a perceived reality, moves its stylistic concerns away from the didactic and dramatic towards the contemplative and lyrically attentive. I place significant emphasis on valuing the ordinary and overlooked in a lyrical manner. I believe that poetry is embedded in small, often mundane things: a facial expression, a fallen leaf, the fold of a cloth, the placing of a cup, or the colour of an old book. Such potentially overlooked aspects of the mundane may be seen as poetic if the artist is prepared to reconsider them.

To further develop an understanding of poetic documentary beyond formalist accounts, the theory from Trinh T. Minh-ha offers a critical framework that foregrounds sensory experience and embodiment that resonate closely with this article's focus on the poetic dimensions of everyday life. Trinh's work shifts documentary away from an informational paradigm toward an experiential one, in which meaning is not delivered through argument but encountered through rhythm, texture, and the interplay of sound and image (Trinh, 1991). Trinh proposes a mode of "speaking nearby," which "does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place" (Trinh, 1991, p. 101). Extending this perspective, poetic documentary may be understood as a mode of knowledge that emerges through affective and perceptual engagement rather than explanation.

Building on her perspectives, this article situates the poetic within the realm of the everyday, proposing that poetic meaning is not confined to exceptional or stylised moments but is embedded within ordinary, often overlooked details. In this sense, poetic documentary becomes a practice of attunement, where the filmmaker does not impose meaning but cultivates a mode of perception that allows the poetic to emerge from the mundane. Such an approach aligns with the Chinese aesthetic notion of Yi Jing, in which meaning arises through the relational interplay between external phenomena and internal sensibility, further suggesting that the poetic is not merely a stylistic device but a way of sensing and inhabiting the world.

Methodology

This study adopts a practice-led research approach, in which creative practice functions both as the site of inquiry and as a method of generating knowledge. Practice-led research is broadly understood as an inquiry in which new knowledge arises through and within creative practice, rather than being applied to it (Candy, 2006). It emphasises the iterative relationship between making and thinking, where artistic processes generate insights that are subsequently articulated through critical reflection (Smith & Dean, 2009). In this sense, knowledge is not produced solely through analysis but emerges through the embodied and material engagement of the practitioner.

Building on this foundation, the study extends practice-led research through a Chinese paradigm grounded in the concept of *Zhe Jiang* [哲匠], which may be understood as "thinking as a philosopher; making as a craftsman" (Chen, 2022). Within this framework, thinking and making are not discrete stages but interdependent processes, where intellectual reflection and artistic practice co-evolve. As argued in my earlier work, practice does not merely illustrate ideas but actively generates them; it is both the source of inquiry and the mode of knowledge production (Chen, 2022). This perspective aligns with broader understandings of artistic research as a form of knowledge grounded in creative experience and perception (Klein, 2010), while also offering a culturally specific articulation of how such knowledge is formed.

Following this approach, the research is conducted through the making of the short documentary *Little Potato*, where filmmaking operates simultaneously as creative practice

and analytical process. Insights emerge through iterative cycles of filming, listening, editing, and reflection, in which the act of making continuously informs and reshapes the research direction. As practice unfolds, it “leads” thinking, allowing knowledge to develop incrementally through engagement with audiovisual materials (Candy, 2006; Smith & Dean, 2009). Particular attention is given to the role of dialect within this process, examining how Zhuji dialect functions not only as linguistic content but as an aesthetic and structural element shaping sound, rhythm, and editing.

Methodologically, the study combines practice-based exploration with analytical reflection. The materials analysed include the completed film, field audio recordings, editing structures, and selected scenes in which dialect plays a central role. These are examined through close analysis of audiovisual form, focusing on sound, rhythm, and temporal organisation, alongside their relationship to the Xiang system as an interpretive framework. At the same time, reflective insights derived from the filmmaking process are used to trace how creative decisions emerged in practice. This allows the study to distinguish between retrospective interpretation and practice-led discovery, ensuring that the research remains grounded in the dynamics of making rather than solely in post-hoc analysis.

Zhuji dialect as a generative aesthetic system within poetic documentary

Dialect as poetic language

The language my grandmother speaks in the documentary is Zhuji dialect that belongs to the Wu Chinese language family. To be more precise, it is a sub-dialect of the northern Wu language. This dialect is mainly spoken in Zhuji City, a county-level city governed by the prefecture-level city of Shaoxing, located in the north-central area of Zhejiang province, China. The Zhuji dialect preserves many words that are remnants of ancient language, traceable to classical texts where their original forms are found, and these words do not appear in Mandarin (Huang & Huang, 2016, p. 71). Shou Jifang [寿纪芳] and Yuan Aozhen [袁傲珍], in their research on the etymology of dialects, pointed out that “the Baiyue language² [百越语] forms the ancient foundational layer of Zhuji dialect; and then during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Mongolian, especially Yuanqu³ [元曲]; and during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), Manchu, especially Qing novels⁴ [清小说], also exerted a close-to-modern influence on it” (1998, p. 49).

In *Little Potato*, the Zhuji dialect operates not only as a vehicle of communication but as a poetic language system that shapes meaning across multiple linguistic levels. These include lexical, rhetorical, and phonological dimensions, each contributing to the construction of poetic imagery.

At the lexical level, Zhuji dialect carries semantic density that exceeds its Mandarin equivalent. Amidst the remnants of ancient tongues, classical poetic Xiangs linger in Zhuji dialect, elusive to the ear of Mandarin. In my documentary, some of these Xiangs are expressed directly through the dialect’s vocabulary in dialogues or monologues. For example, in the scene set in the barbershop, when the barber begins drying my grandmother’s hair, the

dialogue includes the phrase “冰冷的”, (4:04) which is translated as “cold as ice”. In standard Mandarin, the equivalent expression would be “冷的”, simply translated as “cold”. Here, the use of dialect serves as a means of guiding the poetic interpretation of Xiang. The audience’s hearing of the term “冰冷的” increases the likelihood of evoking a more vivid, picturesque mental image [画境].

Moreover, Zhuji dialect often incorporates common rhetorical devices from Chinese poetry into everyday conversations. According to Ying (1997), compared to Mandarin, the dialect features many more techniques frequently used in Chinese poetry, including metonymy, metaphor, personification, allusions, synaesthesia, and philosophical expressions. In my film, some of these distinctive rhetorical devices are presented through dialogue and monologues. For example, when my grandmother describes the departure of the thief she encountered in her hallucination, she uses the term “旋得去” (15:15), translated into English as he “twirled away and disappeared.” This expression is not common in Mandarin. It conveys a sense of elusive movement, evoking not just the physical act of vanishing but also an emotional or spiritual sense of disappearance, as if the thief is swept away by an invisible force. Such expressions create a unique atmosphere in the film, bridging language and emotion while adding layers of meaning to the poetic storytelling. By using Zhuji dialect, I aim to preserve these subtle nuances, allowing the viewer to experience not only the story but also the texture of the language itself, which deepens the emotional resonance of the film.

Some Xiangs in this documentary are inspired by a local drama, “The Landscapes of West Lake Remain Unchanged” [西湖山水还依旧], a work within the Yue opera⁵ [越剧] tradition, to provide another layer of imagery and meaning. The entire opera is delivered in poetry using the Zhuji dialect, with the opening lines : “Though the mountains and waters of West Lake remain unchanged, I gaze into the autumn with my eyes.” [西湖山水还依旧, 憔悴难对满眼秋] (8:33) Motivated by these lines, particularly “the autumn in my eyes”, I reimagined the creation of Xiangs, constructing both a physical and emotional space for the film’s conclusion. In the final sequence of this documentary, the viewer is immersed in the Xiangs of autumn leaves, a gently flowing river, a distinct silhouette of my grandmother, and her sorrowful cries in dialect (21:29–23:00). Through this, we feel the autumn in her eyes, evoking a Yi Jing of loss. In this context, loss is presented as part of a fluid transition between the present and the fading past, rendered with a soft, melancholic quality.

Dialect as emotional sound and rhythm

The utilization of Zhuji also contributes to the poetic sound design. At the phonological and rhythmic level, dialectal structures further intensify poetic expression. Many words in the dialect are naturally melodious and exhibit a high degree of rhythmicity. In the case of the dialect’s four-character expressions, if rendered in written language, they could typically be condensed into one or two words. By adding auxiliary sounds, imitative words, and onomatopoeia (衬音、拟形词、摹声) after the main word in a typical type of four-character structure, they consist of two beats in the spoken form: a strong beat, followed by a weak

beat, then another strong beat, and another weak beat, creating a rhythmic flow (Shou, 1998). For example, after describing the encounter with the thief, my grandmother explained her reaction as “kuqukuqu,” [哭去哭去] (15:19) which is translated as “I was crying, and I kept crying.” If expressed in Mandarin, the phrase would simply be “I was crying.” The repetition in Zhuji dialect not only conveys the intensity of the emotion but also evokes a sense of continuity or ongoing action, as if the feeling itself refuses to subside. This rhythmic structure deepens the emotional weight of the scene, allowing the viewer to feel the persistence of her sorrow in a way that is more subtle yet profound than a straightforward translation would offer. This aligns with Jakobson’s (1960) notion of the poetic function of language, where the emphasis shifts from referential meaning to the materiality of expression itself, including sound, repetition, and rhythm. Such linguistic features allow the use of Zhuji dialect to create a more immersive and expressive emotional landscape within the film.

There are also common instances of word repetition forming rhythms. Zhuji dialect features a unique form of verb “distinct from Mandarin, structured as AAB” (Shou, 1999, p. 88). Such verbs, typically denoting sensations, often carry a sense of intensified meaning, adding emphasis to the description. When my grandmother is trying to convince her friends to believe that this film shoot is a mission from the Communist Party and to bring their friends to the set, she uses the term “Xiang Xiang Kan” [想想看] (12:20). In Mandarin, we would typically use just one term, “Xiang”, to describe it. The repetition of “Xiang” in Zhuji dialect intensifies the meaning, suggesting not only the act of seeing but an enhanced, almost persuasive vision that she is trying to convey. This form of repetition adds urgency and conviction to her speech, reinforcing the seriousness of her message. Through such expressions, the dialect communicates a deeper, more vivid sense of urgency and persuasion that shapes the atmosphere of the scene. Meanwhile, dialect functions as a rhythmic generator, shaping the temporal flow of scenes. The repetition and cadence of speech establish an internal pacing that guides both viewer perception and editorial decision-making.

Dialect and editing

One of the central contributions of this study lies in demonstrating how dialect influences editing as a temporal and rhythmic practice. My approach to editing is rooted in the rhythm of my grandmother’s emotional flow, which is externalized through her dialect. Ames (2009) argues that, according to Chinese philosophy, the heart is not merely a physical organ but the centre of a person’s being. He suggests that the rhythm of the heart conveys both social and physiological relationships and emotions. My grandmother’s speech emanates from this very heart. For example, in the opening scene of the old ladies gathering, there is a tense moment when my grandmother tries to convince the others that making this documentary is a communist call.

During this, we can hear her breathing heavily. After hearing their remark, “She said what is true to her heart” [这两句谈头是真谈] (13:23), she begins to slow down. By the end of the scene, when the women have no more to discuss, they simply sit quietly (13:45–14:18).

Here, I use two long takes to close the scene, allowing the pacing to reflect the rhythm of her speech. The internal rhythm subtly guides the editing pace. The resulting aesthetic emphasizes the idea of editing as a form of breathing: the images align with one another, and movement in one frame often mirrors movement in the next, creating a harmonious, integrated flow. I would argue that this distinctive “heart” rhythm in my work has the potential subtly to move the audience emotionally. Instead of drawing attention to itself, it remains understated, secondary to the emphasis placed on the images. This approach resonates with Andrei Tarkovsky’s concept of “sculpting in time” (Tarkovsky, 1987), where the filmmaker shapes temporal experience through the internal rhythm of events rather than through externally imposed structures such as plot or montage. For Tarkovsky, “the director’s task is to reproduce life, its movement, its contradictions, its dynamic,” and this involves allowing time to unfold organically within the frame. In this sense, cinematic rhythm arises from within the material itself, in the case of *Little Potato*, through her breath, rather than being constructed solely through editing techniques.

Additionally, the commonly used inverted word order in Zhuji dialect serves as an inspiration for poetic editing. The phenomenon of “morpheme order reversal”[构词语素序换] refers to “the structure where the morphemes that form compound words are the same as in Mandarin, but their order is reversed without altering the central meaning” (Hou, 1995, p. 44). This reversal, however, opens up intriguing possibilities for varied interpretations by the audience. For instance, in a poignant moment from the closing scene, my grandmother, struggling to find her way home, says: “我真的找不到有好几次” (“I really can’t find home, many times”) (22:13). While the more conventional Mandarin word order would be “我真的有好几次找不到” (“I have many times can’t find home”), the inversion here subtly shifts the focus, highlighting the emotional weight of her disorientation. This inversion, though seemingly minor, invites a different kind of engagement with the sentence, offering room for nuanced readings and interpretations.

This feature of ‘morpheme order reversal’ also inspired me to experiment with reverse editing techniques during the editing process. In this documentary, reverse editing techniques involve deliberately altering the traditional sequence of shots, by rearranging them in a non-linear or unexpected order. The benefit of this editing approach primarily lies in how it opens up new interpretations. In the first scene (0:39–1:37), by changing the conventional order, starting with my grandmother’s face, followed by indirect conversations about the massage, and then revealing the foot’s owner only later, the sequence encourages the audience to engage in a more active process of interpretation.

This disruption of the usual shot-reverse-shot structure creates a sense of mystery and anticipation, prompting viewers to form their own connections and meanings as the story unfolds. The unconventional flow of shots, rather than adhering to a typical master shot followed by close-ups, invites a more sensory and observational experience. It allows the narrative to unfold in a less predictable way, offering room for multiple interpretations and a deeper emotional engagement with the characters. The change in shot order not only shifts the viewer’s perception but also adds nuance and surprise to the sequence.

This strategy can be understood in relation to Sergei Eisenstein's (1949) notion of montage as a process of meaning-making through juxtaposition, where the arrangement of shots generates new associations beyond linear representation. However, unlike classical montage, which often aims to intensify narrative or ideological conflict, reverse editing operates more subtly by destabilising temporal expectation. The inversion of sequence introduces ambiguity and openness, allowing multiple interpretive pathways to emerge. Crucially, reverse editing is not merely a formal experiment but is grounded in the rhythmic and structural qualities of dialect. In this sense, editing becomes a form of translation, where linguistic structure is rearticulated as visual and temporal organisation. The result is a mode of filmmaking in which meaning is not fixed but emergent, shaped through the interplay between dialect, perception, and time.

This approach aligns with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the time-image, where the breakdown of sensory-motor logic gives rise to a cinema defined by uncertainty, indeterminacy, and contemplation. In Deleuze's formulation, classical cinema operates through a sensory-motor schema in which perception leads to action, and action resolves narrative situations. By contrast, in the time-image, this causal chain is disrupted: characters no longer act decisively upon what they perceive, and situations are not resolved through movement. As Deleuze (1989) writes, "the sensory-motor link is broken," and what emerges instead is a direct presentation of time, often expressed through hesitation, gaps, or disconnected sequences.

In *Little Potato*, the reverse editing strategy contributes to precisely this breakdown. By withholding spatial context and reordering the expected sequence of shots, the film interrupts the viewer's habitual process of recognition and orientation. Rather than moving seamlessly from perception to understanding, the viewer encounters fragments – including faces, gestures, and sounds – that resist immediate integration. This delay produces what Deleuze describes as a "purely optical and sound situation" (1989, p. 2), in which images are no longer subordinated to action but exist as autonomous perceptual events. The viewer is not guided toward a clear narrative outcome but is instead invited to dwell within the temporal unfolding of the scene.

This temporal disruption is particularly significant in relation to the film's thematic engagement with memory and dementia. The fragmentation introduced by reverse editing mirrors a perceptual world in which connections between past and present, cause and effect, are unstable. Time is no longer linear or goal-oriented but appears as layered, recursive, and uncertain. In this sense, the editing strategy does not simply represent disorientation but reproduces it at the level of cinematic experience, aligning the viewer's perception with the altered temporality of the subject.

Dialect and the construction of Jiangnan Yi Xiang

In *Little Potato*, my camera wanders in Zhuji, where my grandmother lives, which is part of the Jiangnan region of China. Culturally and geographically significant, Jiangnan is characterized by its picturesque water towns, intricate networks of canals, and traditional wooden architecture. Zhuji exemplifies Jiangnan's tranquil, water-bound aesthetic. However, what makes this representation of Jiangnan unique in the documentary is its role as a central

Yi Xiang. Yi Xiang is the most significant layer of the Xiang system. It generally relates to the fusion of emotion and scene, self and universe, which is generated through the process of making or appreciating artworks (Ye, 1998; Yuan, 1999; Zhu, 2006; Zong, 2005). In short, Jiangnan operates not merely as a geographical setting but as a central Yi Xiang within the Xiang system. Within this framework, Jiangnan functions simultaneously as a material environment, a symbolic system, and a perceptual field, where dialect plays a crucial role in shaping its aesthetic coherence.

Pauline Yu (1986) [余宝琳] suggests that meanings and connections pre-exist in the world, and it is the poet's job to discover these and then present them in the form of Yi Xiang. Ye Lang [叶朗] (2008) believes a real, complete and evocative world (which is a fusion of subjective consciousness and objective reality) can be revealed in the process of creating Yi Xiang. Jiangnan, as the central Yi Xiang of this documentary, is not just a geographical region but a space where the subjective experiences of its inhabitants converge, particularly through the lens of my grandmother's life and the dialect she speaks. The Zhuji dialect, fading with time, becomes a crucial element in expressing the emotional and philosophical essence of Jiangnan.

At the most immediate level, Jiangnan appears as a physical setting, characterised by waterways, humid air, soft light, and everyday domestic spaces. However, within the Xiang system, these elements do not remain as isolated visual details; they are integrated with sound, memory, and affect to form a unified Yi Xiang. This approach resonates with the aesthetic philosophy of Wang Guowei, who asserts that "the language of landscape is the language of sensation" (一切景语皆情语). In this sense, landscape is not simply an external environment but a medium through which subjectivity and emotion are articulated. Extending this concept into filmmaking, *Little Potato* constructs Jiangnan not only through visual imagery but through an integrated sensory field in which dialect functions as a central component.

Within this system, Jiangnan becomes a relational space in which physical environment and inner experience intersect, particularly in the representation of my grandmother's mental state. The blurring of temporal boundaries, between past and present, memory and perception, is articulated not through narrative exposition but through the interplay of image, sound, and rhythm. The textures of dialect, alongside visual motifs of water, stillness, and domestic routine, contribute to a perceptual environment in which time appears fluid and layered rather than linear.

At this point, the relationship between dialect, memory, and dementia requires careful qualification. While the film draws a parallel between the gradual erosion of dialect and my grandmother's experience of cognitive decline, this connection is poetic rather than literal. Linguistic change and neurological conditions operate in distinct domains, one socio-cultural, the other medical, and should not be conflated analytically. Instead, the film mobilises this parallel as an affective strategy, using the instability and fragmentation of language to evoke a broader sense of temporal dislocation. The generational differences in dialect use within the family, my grandmother's fluency, my father's partial retention, and my own limited

comprehension, further situate this condition within a continuum of linguistic transformation rather than a singular point of loss.

Thus, Jiangnan as Yi Xiang is constructed through the dynamic interplay between dialect, environment, and perception. It is neither purely a setting nor solely a symbol, but a relational aesthetic system in which meaning emerges through the integration of sensory elements. Dialect, as a key Xiang within this system, enables the film to articulate a mode of experience in which space, time, and memory are inseparable, forming a poetic yet analytically grounded understanding of place that engages both personal experience and broader processes of cultural transformation.

Xu and Ji: A theoretical lens

To further explain the function of dialect in the construction of Jiangnan as a central Yi Xiang, I would like to borrow two terms from the framework of Xu [墟] and Ji [迹],⁶ as theorized by Hong Wu [巫鸿] (2012). For Wu (2012), Xu and Ji are two sides of the site of memory. Xu suggests that memory is a lack of the framing of materiality, implying a space where the traces of history have faded or disappeared, yet memory lingers in their absence. In contrast, Ji represents a place where material evidence still exists, offering a tangible connection to the past despite its decay. By employing this framework, dialect becomes a pivotal medium in reflecting the duality of Jiangnan's cultural landscape. Zhuji dialect, much like Ji, offers a living connection to the past, allowing us to trace the linguistic remnants of a rich cultural heritage, while simultaneously its gradual disappearance aligns with Xu, embodying a memory that is slipping away, leaving behind a fading but ever-present trace.

This notion of Xu and Ji, when tied to my grandmother's experience with dementia, becomes profoundly significant. As she loses language, particularly her grasp of the Zhuji dialect, it mirrors the loss of connection to its cultural heritage, including the communist history that the dialect represents. Her dementia symptoms exemplify Xu, the fading, incomplete memory of words that once held meaning. In this sense, her mind becomes a site of memory where the dialect, much like an ancient place, has disappeared from her consciousness, leaving behind only fragments, traces of its former presence. At the same time, some words, like Ji, remain within her, but in a state of decay and disintegration, much like the way remnants of a once prosperous place are still physically present but are no longer functioning as they once did. This linguistic decay parallels the physical and emotional decline she faces, making the dialect a Xiang of both the lost and the lingering elements of her past, intertwining the fading of her language with the broader decay of a cultural landscape that is over time also slipping away. The dialect becomes a crucial tool for constructing Jiangnan as the central Yi Xiang, a space that not only evokes memory through its materiality but also through the fragmented, decaying yet ever-present remnants of language and place.

Thus, the Yijing of Jiangnan as a central Yi Xiang is rooted in the concept of loss, a sentiment deeply woven into the fabric of the Zhuji dialect in a melancholic way. This feeling of irretrievable loss is palpable in this documentary, where certain pieces of the past treasure

are irretrievably lost. The use of dialect amplifies this loss, for as it fades from common use, a sense of mourning is evoked for something once rich with cultural and personal meaning.

Dialect as auditory Xiang: Constructing Jiangnan through practice

From a practice-led filmmaking perspective, the Yi Jing of Jiangnan is not pre-defined as a thematic concept but emerges through the process of making, with dialect functioning as a primary generative force. Rather than beginning with an abstract idea of Jiangnan as a place of loss, the construction of this Yi Xiang is driven by attentive engagement with dialectal sound, which guides both perception and editorial decision-making. In post-production, the process began not with image selection, but with listening – repeatedly returning to field recordings of Zhuji dialect. Through this sustained auditory attention, dialect revealed its role not merely as dialogue, but as a structuring Xiang, shaping the temporal and affective organisation of the film.

Dialect contributes to this construction by operating as an auditory Xiang, binding together visual, temporal, and affective elements. The Zhuji dialect, with its tonal softness and rhythmic fluidity, resonates with the material qualities of Jiangnan itself – its water, its slowness, and its continuity. Rather than acting as a neutral medium of communication, dialect shapes how space is perceived and experienced, producing what may be understood as an acoustic landscape. In this configuration, Jiangnan is not only seen but heard, and it is through this auditory dimension that its Yi Xiang gains coherence. At the same time, dialect functions as a connective medium across temporalities, linking past and present through sound, memory, and affect, thereby enriching the construction of Jiangnan as a unified perceptual field.

Importantly, Jiangnan also operates as a structuring principle within the film's aesthetic system. The selection and arrangement of images, sounds, and temporal rhythms are guided by their capacity to contribute to this central Yi Xiang. During the editing process, dialect plays a key organising role: its cadence, repetition, and emotional tone inform the pacing of shots and the juxtaposition of scenes. In this sense, dialect does not merely accompany the image but actively organises cinematic form, shaping how time unfolds and how meaning is constructed. Through this process, Jiangnan emerges not as a pre-existing location but as a constructed aesthetic field, shaped through the integration of multiple Xiangs – visual, sonic, and affective.

This approach positions dialect as an entry point into the construction of Jiangnan. The tonal softness, rhythmic flow, and repetitions within the Zhuji dialect provide cues for editing, pacing, and the selection of visual material. Rather than illustrating pre-existing ideas, images are chosen and arranged in response to the internal rhythm of speech, allowing the film's temporal structure to be guided by the embodied qualities of language. In this sense, dialect operates as a form of temporal logic, determining how duration unfolds, where cuts occur, and how sequences are organised.

Through this process, Jiangnan as Yi Xiang emerges as a sensory configuration shaped by dialect, rather than a fixed representation of place. The auditory textures of speech – its hesitations, continuities, and tonal variations – activate corresponding visual and spatial

associations. Sounds of dialect recall not only linguistic meaning but also environments, gestures, and lived experiences, prompting a re-engagement with the filmed material. The act of editing thus becomes a process of attunement, where dialect mediates the relationship between memory, perception, and cinematic construction.

Within this framework, the affective dimension often described as “loss” is not imposed as a narrative theme but arises from the temporal qualities of dialect itself. The gradual fading of dialect in everyday use introduces a subtle tension within the soundscape, yet this is experienced through rhythm, texture, and duration rather than explicit representation. It is important to emphasise that the film does not equate dialectal change with my grandmother’s experience of dementia. Instead, the relationship between linguistic transformation and cognitive decline operates as a poetic resonance, not an analytical equivalence. Dialect functions here as a medium through which temporal instability can be sensed, rather than as evidence of loss in itself.

The material qualities of dialect further shape the film’s aesthetic through the interplay between fluidity and dryness. The Zhuji dialect, often characterised by its soft and flowing tonal structure, establishes a sonic texture that aligns with the material environment of Jiangnan – water, movement, and continuity. In contrast, my grandmother’s voice introduces interruptions, irregularities, and moments of fragmentation. From a practice-led perspective, this contrast is not treated symbolically in advance but is discovered through the editing process, where different vocal textures suggest different temporal states. These qualities are then extended into the visual domain, informing the juxtaposition between flowing elements and more static or fragmented moments.

This dynamic can be further understood through the conceptual framework of Xu (墟) and Ji (迹), as discussed by Wu Hung. Within the filmmaking process, these concepts are not applied externally but emerge through the interaction of materials. Ji can be understood as the persistence of sensory traces – sounds, gestures, and images that remain present within the film – while Xu reflects moments of absence, interruption, or dissolution. Dialect plays a central role in negotiating this relationship, as its rhythms and textures reveal both continuity and fragmentation. As a result, Jiangnan as Yi Xiang is constructed as a field of coexistence, where presence and absence, fluidity and interruption are held together through the mediating force of dialect.

Conclusion

In the short documentary *Little Potato*, the Zhuji dialect operates as a generative aesthetic system that helps shape poetic imagery within a Chinese approach to documentary filmmaking. Through its interplay of sound, rhythm, and texture, the dialect not only breathes life into the representation of my grandmother’s fading memories, it also serves as a bridge between the physical and emotional landscape of the past and present. As explored in this chapter, the distinctive features of Zhuji, such as its melodic quality and the rhetorical devices intrinsic to it, enhance the emotional resonance of the film, while also reflecting the complexities of

dementia. The language itself becomes a poignant Xiang of cultural and linguistic erosion, mirroring the gradual fading of my grandmother's memory and identity.

In practical terms, the dialect's rhythmic qualities offer a framework for the film's editing, guiding the pacing of shots and sequences in a way that mirrors the flow of my grandmother's emotions. The use of inverted word orders and other linguistic nuances invite a deeper level of open interpretation, allowing the viewer to experience the flow of memory, time and decay. Furthermore, the dialect is inseparable from Jiangnan, a region not just of geographical significance but also of emotional depth in this documentary. The soundscape and the visual imagery together create an immersive Yi Xiang of Jiangnan, which is a world on the cusp of fading; one that exists simultaneously in memory and reality.

Ultimately, *Little Potato* demonstrates how dialect may function not merely as spoken language within documentary, but as a culturally embedded poetic system that shapes perception, rhythm, and emotional experience. Rather than operating solely as dialogue or regional marker, the Zhuji dialect becomes a *Xiang* through which memory, sensory experience, and cultural identity are mediated. In this sense, the film extends existing understandings of poetic documentary beyond visual and formal strategies, proposing that poetic meaning may also emerge through the tonal, rhythmic, and affective qualities of language itself. Through the central *Yi Xiang* of Jiangnan, the dialect contributes to the construction of a *Yi Jing* marked by loss, fragility, and persistence, allowing the film to approach dementia not through direct explanation but through sensory and emotional attunement. The poetic construction of *Little Potato* therefore positions the Zhuji dialect as both an aesthetic and cultural presence: a living yet gradually fading resonance that mirrors the instability of memory while continuing to sustain connections between place, identity, and lived experience.

Endnotes

- 1 *Little Potato* (24:23) is a short documentary made by the author. The online screener is <https://vimeo.com/927779613?share=copy>. The password is Louis220224. This short documentary received its international premiere at the St. Louis International Film Festival 2024 and its national premiere at the Doc Edge Festival 2025, both of which are Oscar-qualifying film festivals.
- 2 Baiyue language was the language of the ancient Yue people, spoken during the Spring and Autumn period in the states of Wu and Yue.
- 3 Yuanqu refers to the dramatic and musical works that were created during the Yuan Dynasty in China. It is a genre of Chinese literature that combines poetry, music, and drama.
- 4 Qing novels refer to the novels written during the Qing Dynasty, including some of the most famous Chinese novels, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West*.
- 5 Yue opera (越剧), originating from Zhejiang Province (particularly the Shaoxing region, which includes Zhuji city), is one of China's prominent regional operatic styles. It is renowned for its refined and graceful performances, combining elements of singing, acting, and dance to create a distinctive theatrical experience.
- 6 Literally, Xu means a place that was once famous and prosperous but disappeared. An example of this would be the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Literally, Ji means a once prosperous place that has decayed with time where there is still existing physical evidence that we can trace back to a prosperous past. An example of this would be the Great Wall of China.

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