

Comparative Study on Aesthetic Features of Black-and-White Images in Chinese and Korean Films — Centered on Films *Shadow* and *The Book of Fish*

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2025.03.10

Abstract

Since the birth of cinema, film has undergone transitions from silent to sound, from black-and-white to color. From the Lumière Brothers' monochrome films to the first color film *Becky Sharp*, black-and-white and color imagery have each developed uniquely in cinematic art. Today, although black-and-white imagery is no longer mainstream, it continues to captivate audiences with its unique artistic charm and value. This paper compares the visual styles and aesthetic contexts of black-and-white imagery in Chinese and Korean films, focusing on Chinese director Zhang Yimou's *Shadow* and Korean director Lee Joon-ik's *The Book of Fish*. Integrating theories from narratology and psychology, this research explores the contemporary application and artistic value of black-and-white imagery.

Keywords: black-and-white imagery, visual style, narrative characteristics, Chinese and Korean film

1. Introduction

Film has predominantly existed in black-and-white imagery since its inception. Even with the rise of color film as mainstream, black-and-white cinema has not become obsolete but instead resurged interest with its unique aesthetic and cultural connotations. For instance, in 2018, Polish director Paweł Pawlikowski's *Cold War* won Best Director at the 71st Cannes Film Festival, while Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* won the prestigious Golden Lion at the 75th Venice Film Festival, reigniting public interest in black-and-white cinematic aesthetics. Korean directors like Bong Joon-ho and Park Chan-wook have also presented special screenings of black-and-white versions of their

color films, stimulating extensive discussions.

Photographer Shao Dalang once remarked: "In terms of auditory effects, tranquility surpasses noise, silence outweighs eloquence; visually, black-and-white transcends color, simplicity prevails over complexity." The foremost characteristic of black-and-white imagery is its visual minimalism and poetic narrative presentation. The absence of color makes contrasts of light and shadow, brightness levels, and composition more pronounced, guiding viewers to focus more directly on the narrative itself. The lack of color detaches black-and-white imagery from realistic representation, creating minimalist and poetic expression. This characteristic provides black-and-white imagery

a unique advantage in setting narrative moods or depicting serious themes. For instance, classic black-and-white films often utilize strong light-dark contrasts to create comedic atmospheres, whereas film noir employs dark lighting and stark contrasts to evoke historical and fatalistic sentiments.

Since early cinema exclusively featured black-and-white visuals, such images carry distinct cultural and emotional weight, often linked to history and memories by audiences. Directors choosing black-and-white presentations typically have specific narrative intentions. Historical periods are frequently recreated through black-and-white imagery in films to immerse viewers in a past atmosphere through color contrasts. In Eastern cultural contexts, black-and-white visuals often associate with ink paintings, emphasizing a harmonious coexistence of emptiness and fullness. Thus, black-and-white imagery simultaneously conveys historical narratives and enhances a film's thematic depth, enriching its aesthetic experience.

This paper aims to investigate the application and differences in black-and-white imagery within contemporary Chinese and Korean films. The films *Shadow* and *The Book of Fish* represent bold experiments with black-and-white imagery in both countries' cinema and embody distinct national and cultural visual styles.

2. Overview of the Visual Style of Black-and-White Imagery

Black-and-white imagery, as a form of cinematic language, possesses unique visual styles and aesthetic characteristics, mainly manifesting in three aspects:

2.1 Contrast and Light-Shaping

Compared to color images, black-and-white visuals emphasize contrasts between light and shadow, using lighting to create a sense of depth and dimensionality. Such visual tension effectively highlights character outlines and facial expressions, intensifying dramatic effects. Early black-and-white films relied on casting shadows and high-contrast lighting to establish atmosphere, allowing audiences to focus intently on characters' actions and inner conflicts. Thus, black-and-white imagery is often seen as pure and devoid of visual noise. Rudolf Arnheim once suggested that "color appeals to emotion, while form speaks to intellect and analysis, making form a more effective method

for communicating information." If vibrant color provides sensory experiences, then form—achieved through clear visual structures—offers more fundamental perceptual experiences. Black-and-white imagery, though seemingly less varied than color, actually contains rich gradations of grayscale, creating refined visual effects that directly and vividly stimulate viewer perception.

2.2 Abstraction and Symbolism

The absence of color information in black-and-white visuals partially reduces realistic detail, thus strengthening formalistic and symbolic qualities. When viewing black-and-white films, audiences often pay greater attention to lines, shapes, and shadows, leading to deeper emotional resonance and imaginative engagement. Consequently, black-and-white imagery embodies an art of subtraction, deliberately abandoning color to achieve more concentrated expression. Though visually simpler, black-and-white imagery leaves ample space for audience imagination. This makes it especially suited for expressing philosophical or poetic themes, often transcending narrative itself to evoke certain moods and atmospheres.

2.3 Narrative Function and Aesthetic Choice

Choosing black-and-white rather than color imagery constitutes both an aesthetic stance and narrative consideration for filmmakers. Through specific tones and contrast design, black-and-white imagery directs audience emotions, effectively supporting thematic storytelling. Flashbacks or dream sequences in black-and-white clearly differentiate from colorful present-day scenes, signaling temporal and spatial transitions. This structural use of imagery highlights black-and-white as a unique narrative strategy. In the digital age, black-and-white films represent an aesthetic and narrative resistance against mainstream forms. Rather than merely nostalgic or retro, they employ differentiated visual styles to create unique beauty, balancing sensory enjoyment with cinematic contemplation.

In summary, black-and-white imagery's distinct visual style, characterized by sharp contrasts, abstract refinement, and profound aesthetic implications, offers a unique expressive mode for film art. By analyzing its application in *Shadow* and *The Book of Fish*, this paper explores how each film fully realizes the artistic potential

of black-and-white imagery.

3. The Aesthetics of Black-and-White Imagery in the Film *Shadow*

The 2018 film *Shadow*, directed by Zhang Yimou, is a martial arts movie predominantly presented in black-and-white visuals. By largely abandoning vibrant colors, the film establishes an ink-painting-like aesthetic tone. This bold choice, distinctively different from Zhang Yimou's previous works celebrated for vivid colors, has garnered significant attention. The film continues Zhang's consistent emphasis on visual excellence while innovatively exploring aesthetics. Elements from traditional Chinese ink paintings are incorporated, using varying levels of black, white, and gray to build a rich Eastern visual atmosphere.

3.1 Composition and Tonality

Shadow adopts a desaturated black-and-white visual style to evoke restrained emotional expression. The grayscale deliberately minimizes the direct emotional influence of vibrant colors, resembling sketch-like imagery that directs viewer attention away from color distractions and towards character performances and narrative progression. Zhang frequently uses visual elements like drizzling rain, umbrellas, and rippling water textures combined with black-and-white tonality to create striking visual tension and dramatic contrast. Several pivotal scenes unfold in gentle rainfall, where black umbrellas spread out beneath gloomy skies, resembling the ink wash technique found in traditional Chinese painting. The characters' silhouettes subtly appear and disappear, reminiscent of the intentional blank spaces and ink strokes of Chinese art. This visual approach not only aligns with the film's theme of yin-yang duality and the interplay of reality and illusion, but also emphasizes the subtle beauty characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

3.2 Light, Shadow, and Atmosphere

Shadow leverages black-and-white imagery to heighten the narrative's grim atmosphere and tragic tone. The storyline revolves around political intrigues and the survival of a "shadow-double," permeated by tension and psychological oppression. The grayscale visuals fittingly intensify this mood; low brightness and low saturation render the scenes bleak and heavy, enhancing the audience's perception of oppression arising from power struggles.

Psychologically, black-and-white visuals often evoke gloominess and repression, aptly matching the film's persistent tension. Zhang adeptly employs black-and-white tones to highlight the fragility of life and the devastating costs of violence.

3.3 Cultural Significance

The aesthetic choice of black-and-white in *Shadow* is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Zhang Yimou has expressed that the visual inspiration for the film derives from traditional Chinese ink paintings, aiming to infuse "ink-wash painting" charm into cinema. Extensive use of black, white, and gray vividly translates the essence of ink-wash aesthetics to the screen. This aesthetic experimentation carries the significance of propagating cultural symbols, communicating traditional Chinese artistic sensibilities through commercial cinema. Moreover, the black-and-white imagery symbolizes Eastern philosophical concepts such as yin-yang duality and the interplay between reality and illusion. The film's narrative, revolving around the blurred identities of the protagonist Ziyu and his double Jingzhou, embodies a dialectical relationship, visually echoed by the interplay of black and white. This restrained and subtle expression aligns with the Eastern aesthetic tradition of "leaving blank space" and implying rather than explicitly stating emotions. Instead of openly revealing sentiments, the film leaves interpretative space to viewers, creating an implicit beauty in harmony with Eastern aesthetics.

Ultimately, the black-and-white visual aesthetic of *Shadow* represents not merely a stylistic innovation, but also pays homage to traditional culture and explores new dimensions in cinematic storytelling. The ink-wash-inspired visuals distinguish the film among colorful commercial blockbusters, providing fresh possibilities for the aesthetic development of Chinese martial arts cinema.

4. The Aesthetics of Black-and-White Imagery in the Film *The Book of Fish*

Released in 2021, *The Book of Fish*, directed by Korean filmmaker Lee Joon-ik, is a historical film presented entirely in black-and-white. Adapted from historical events surrounding the 19th-century Joseon scholar Jeong Yak-jeon, the film recounts his exile to Heuksando Island, where he collaborated with fisherman Chang Dae on a book documenting local fish species.

Lee boldly uses black-and-white imagery to depict this historical episode, giving the film a distinctively poetic and understated charm. Unlike Zhang Yimou's *Shadow*, which emphasizes dramatic conflict, *The Book of Fish* does not feature grand mise-en-scène or intense confrontations. Instead, it employs calm, restrained storytelling to portray emotional depth and the mentor-disciple relationship. The black-and-white visuals perfectly match the film's intended poetic ambiance.

4.1 Poetic Narrative and Visual Atmosphere

Black-and-white imagery enriches the film with profound poetic expression. Each frame resembles a timeless poem imbued with deep emotion and lingering resonance. This poetic visual style emerges primarily through skillful handling of black, white, and gray tones, which perfectly translate traditional ink-painting aesthetics onto the cinematic canvas. The film's depictions of landscapes, characters, and objects evoke an otherworldly beauty reminiscent of moving ink paintings. Heuksando Island's natural scenery, viewed through the camera's monochrome lens, becomes particularly evocative: the vast, misty sea, tranquil islands, and humble fishing villages appear even more ethereal and profound in their colorless presentation, immersing audiences in a remote, serene past. The black-and-white palette enhances the historical authenticity and unpretentious elegance of the film, inviting viewers to experience the poetic dimension of history through understated visual expression.

4.2 Director's Intention and Aesthetic Characteristics

Director Lee Joon-ik clearly articulated his artistic vision behind using black-and-white imagery, stating that this style perfectly aligns with the film's thematic intentions. He believed "black-and-white films possess unique depth," and despite budget constraints, refused to compromise on visual quality. Ultimately, choosing black-and-white allowed him to authentically represent the historical context. Lee confidently asserted, "I dare say every frame of this film is visually exquisite." Indeed, the cinematography captures numerous extraordinary moments; scenes such as Jeong Yak-jeon and Chang Dae drifting on a small boat across a vast, open sea resemble living ink paintings with profound resonance. Black-and-white imagery thus serves as an essential medium for recreating history in Lee's

work, imbuing the film not only with historical authenticity but also profound artistic elegance. This monochrome visual style integrates seamlessly with traditional Eastern ink aesthetics, creating elegantly poetic visuals. From a viewer's perspective, the cinematography of *The Book of Fish* is undeniably successful, as its poetic black-and-white imagery beautifully evokes ink-painting aesthetics, immersing audiences in a delicate interplay between historical depth and poetic emotion.

4.3 Narrative Structure and Symbolic Meaning

The entire film is presented in black-and-white until its final scene introduces color imagery—a transition with significant symbolic meaning. In the film's concluding moments, a panoramic view of Heuksando Island shifts from monochrome to full color, providing a poetic epilogue. This shift from black-and-white to color highlights the symbolic significance of the island as a central motif, transforming it from a mere geographical location into a metaphorical "island of the soul." When the monochrome Heuksando Island finally transitions into vibrant color, it symbolically marks Jeong Yak-jeon's inner transformation and intellectual enlightenment experienced during his exile—a previously bleak and lifeless place now imbued with renewed significance and life. This creative approach underscores the narrative's poetic dimension, with black-and-white establishing the film's historical and poetic atmosphere and the sudden introduction of color intensifying thematic clarity and emotional depth. The restrained pace and quiet narrative, accentuated by black-and-white imagery, allow audiences to savor the intimate exchanges and scholarly dialogues between mentor and disciple. Such nuanced and introspective storytelling contrasts sharply with dramatic tension common in commercial color films, yet possesses a deeply affecting and memorable power.

In conclusion, *The Book of Fish* employs black-and-white imagery masterfully to craft a poetic narrative and historical ambiance. Monochrome visuals lend the film an elegant, solemn beauty, emphasizing the weight of history and the quiet force of cultural depth, offering audiences a lingering and contemplative viewing experience.

5. Comparison of Visual Styles in Chinese and Korean Films

Through the analysis of *Shadow* and *The Book of*

Fish, differences clearly emerge in how Chinese and Korean cinema utilize black-and-white imagery, each highlighting distinct visual styles and cultural implications.

5.1 Visual Style

Shadow employs an almost monochrome grayscale style. Though not completely devoid of color, the film predominantly features an ink-painting aesthetic with subtle hints of skin tone and red, injecting vitality and dramatic tension into an otherwise stark visual framework. In contrast, *The Book of Fish* utilizes genuine black-and-white photography throughout the film, introducing color only in its concluding scene. This uniform monochrome palette creates a purer, more coherent visual experience. While *Shadow* focuses on deliberate visual design, carefully balancing blacks, whites, and grays for maximum dramatic impact, each frame intentionally constructed to achieve equilibrium and intensity, *The Book of Fish* adopts a more naturalistic approach. Its unembellished, straightforward monochrome visuals allow audiences to authentically experience the historical context free from colorful distractions.

5.2 Aesthetic Atmosphere

The two films differ markedly in their aesthetic atmospheres. The monochrome style of *Shadow* tightly aligns with its tense martial arts narrative and philosophical reflections on duality (yin and yang). The film's ink-wash aesthetic captures both the oppressive atmosphere of political intrigue and a deeper philosophical exploration of balance and conflict inherent in Eastern thought. Each frame appears meticulously crafted, exuding an austere yet magnificent beauty, strongly symbolic and visually impactful. This aesthetic closely aligns with Zhang Yimou's long-standing pursuit of the Chinese aesthetic spirit, leveraging visual form to convey profound cultural meaning.

On the other hand, the black-and-white imagery in *The Book of Fish* emphasizes poetry and tranquility. The film intentionally excludes drama and conflict, instead using monochrome visuals to construct a contemplative space detached from worldly chaos. Watching the film resembles reading an extended narrative poem, inviting audiences into quiet introspection on intellectual exchanges and emotional nuances. Thus, the aesthetic of *The Book of Fish* resembles traditional literati paintings—subtle, understated, and intellectually profound—while

Shadow evokes the grandeur and visual intensity of ink-wash paintings, emphasizing symbolic visual power and cultural metaphor.

5.3 Cultural Expression

Both films' monochrome aesthetics closely tie to their respective cultural contexts. *Shadow* unmistakably bears the imprint of Chinese traditional culture, blending ink-painting aesthetics, yin-yang philosophy, and Eastern aesthetic sensibilities. It simultaneously inherits and innovates Chinese aesthetics, confidently using mainstream cinema to disseminate traditional Chinese cultural beauty to broader audiences.

Conversely, *The Book of Fish* deeply roots itself in Korean history and East Asian intellectual traditions. Depicting Joseon scholars' steadfast pursuit of knowledge and faith amid turbulent times parallels Chinese narratives of exiled poets, such as Su Shi's banishment to Danzhou, and reflects historical intellectual exchanges under the influence of Western ideas. Here, black-and-white imagery facilitates cross-cultural resonance: Chinese audiences recognize familiar historical echoes, while Korean audiences gain renewed appreciation for their cultural heritage and quiet intellectual strength. The film's aesthetic reflects Korean cultural ideals—modesty, reverence for nature, and poetic portrayals of history. Director Lee Joon-ik's monochrome approach authentically portrays Joseon-era life, enhancing historical realism and profound cultural resonance.

In summary, the black-and-white aesthetics of *Shadow* and *The Book of Fish* distinctly embody their respective cultural characteristics. *Shadow* strongly represents traditional Chinese culture, emphasizing ink painting and yin-yang philosophy to showcase Eastern aesthetics and cultural confidence. Meanwhile, *The Book of Fish* draws deeply from Korean history and intellectual traditions, using black-and-white imagery to poetically narrate historical and intellectual themes, generating cultural resonance among both Chinese and Korean audiences. Both films effectively employ monochrome visuals to highlight thematic and emotional depth but differ markedly in visual style and aesthetic orientation. While *Shadow* emphasizes dramatic tension and visual spectacle, *The Book of Fish* prioritizes poetic serenity and historical authenticity. These differences reflect distinct Chinese and Korean

aesthetic traditions, narrative styles, and directors' innovative explorations of black-and-white cinematic language.

6. Conclusion

Through the comparative analysis of *Shadow* and *The Book of Fish*, it becomes clear that black-and-white imagery retains significant artistic value in contemporary filmmaking. Despite color films dominating mainstream cinema, black-and-white visuals continue to demonstrate their potential to expand cinematic visual expression and enrich narrative depth with their distinct aesthetic charm and cultural significance. Advances in digital technology have also provided new creative possibilities for black-and-white films, enabling precise grayscale manipulation and higher-quality visual representations.

This research further highlights the close relationship between black-and-white imagery and cultural expression. Zhang Yimou utilizes ink-wash aesthetics to convey traditional Chinese philosophical and aesthetic values, while Lee Joon-ik uses monochrome visuals to poetically represent historical and intellectual themes in Korean culture. Both examples illustrate the potential of black-and-white imagery as a cross-cultural visual language. Moreover, black-and-white aesthetics extend beyond nostalgia or retro style; by intentionally limiting color, filmmakers accentuate elements such as lighting, composition, and symbolic imagery, achieving an artistic effect characterized by restraint and introspection, allowing audiences to deeply engage with narrative contexts and emotional subtleties.

Although black-and-white imagery may face challenges regarding audience acceptance in commercial markets, successful examples clearly demonstrate its considerable artistic impact and commercial viability. Future research can further explore additional Chinese and Korean films to deepen understanding of aesthetic responses and innovative applications of black-and-white imagery in cinema.

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