The change of Chinese elements in Hollywood films from a cross-cultural perspective

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Abstract. As a kind of visual communication art, a movie is a product of the fusion of modern science and technology and art, as well as a medium for reflecting social phenomena and spreading multiculturalism. The mainstream Hollywood films naturally represent the ideological characteristics and value orientation of the field or country it belongs to. As a heterogeneous culture, Chinese elements in Hollywood movies have experienced a long and tortuous change, which is not only related to the enhancement of China's comprehensive national power and the change of international relations, but also inextricably linked to the Western core cultural values behind Hollywood. The overall change of the image of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies can be summarized as a shift from negative stereotypes to the inclusion of Chinese characteristic elements and the gradual export of Chinese stories and culture, showing a positive and diversified development trend, and behind this trend change is the refraction and effect of cross-cultural communication between Chinese and Western.

Keywords: cross-culture; Chinese elements; Hollywood movies.

1. Introduction

Hollywood movies have always had a pivotal position in the world's movie world, and the Chinese elements in movies have also become an important communication medium to show China's image and culture. China has a wealth of Chinese element symbols, each of which contains profound cultural significance, and the application of these unique Chinese elements in the shaping and dissemination of movie images can make Chinese elements and brands form a larger symbolic system[1]. Looking at the overall evolution of Chinese elements, it shows a diversified and positive development trend. This is related to China's economic development and openness, as well as the gradual deepening of Western countries' understanding of China, and the gradual internationalization and diversification of the film market. Meanwhile, as a cultural industry, films aim to record the presentation of different times, regions, cultures, and values so as to carry out cultural transmission. Therefore, analyzing the change of Chinese elements with the help of film is an ideal choice for exploring the cross-cultural transmission between Chinese and Western.

2. Cross-cultural collision between Chinese and western cultures

SectiThe concept of interculturality was first introduced by the American scholar Edward Twitchell Hall Jr. in 1955 in his paper "*The Anthropology of Manners*". According to him, culture is not only an external but also an internal influence; it influences not only people's thinking and behavior, but also their emotions and values. Carl Rogers defined interculturality as the interaction between individuals, groups or organizations from different cultural backgrounds[2]. In a general sense, cross-cultural communication is aimed at different groups, and the transmission of culture is different. Naturally, the ultimate impact on each person or group is not the same, and it is this difference between cultures that makes cross-cultural communication meaningful.

The cultural differences between China and the West presented in the movie are reflected in many elements, such as the architectural differences, the clothing differences, the customary differences, the dietary differences, the cultural differences and the value differences. In terms of

architecture, the high-rise buildings in the West collide with the palaces and temples in China; in terms of costumes, the modern costumes in the West collide with the traditional Chinese costumes, Hanfu; in terms of customs, the elements of hanging red lanterns and posting couplets in Chinese festivals collide with the West; in terms of diet, the Chinese food collide with the Western-style food; in terms of culture, the art of Chinese opera and Chinese zodiac collide with the Western culture; in terms of values, Chinese Confucianism, Taoism and collective concepts collide with Western individualistic values. The appearance of all kinds of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies has become the evidence of cross-cultural communication between China and the West. Not only that, with the changes of the times, the presentation of Chinese elements in Hollywood is also constantly changing, keeping up with the times, and moving towards diversification.

3. Interpreting the Changes of Chinese Elements from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

As a reflection of real life, movies embody cultural elements and values that are naturally close to reality, but as a form of art, they are somewhat different from reality. The change of Chinese elements in Hollywood is not only the result of the development of cross-cultural communication, but also the result of the continuous exchange of two heterogeneous cultures, Chinese and Western. Throughout the change of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies, its overall transformation from negative stereotypes to elements with unique Chinese characteristics, and the subsequent transformation into the export of Chinese stories and culture, showing a positive trend of development.

3.1 Single Negative Stereotype

As early as the silent era of the early 20th century, Chinese elements have appeared in Hollywood films, the most prominent characterization of which is the use of Chinese characters. The most representative characters are Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, two completely opposite characters. Fu Manchu, a villainous character from the book, is tall and bald, with thin eyebrows and long eyes, and a sinister face. On the other hand, Charlie Chan, also a character from the novel, is the opposite of Fu Manchu, a Chinese police detective who is calm and collected, with a proper demeanor, but inevitably has a feminine temperament, which is also a positive image of Chinese in Hollywood films at the time. By the end of the 60's, Hollywood movies about Fu Manchu have been up to more than ten, and for the recognition of Charlie Chan, someone did an audience survey on American TV, letting the audience write down the most familiar Chinese, and the result was that Charlie Chan was at the top. It can be seen that these two characters were the most influential images to the western audience at that time, but either character left a negative image of China in the audience's mind.

In addition to male roles, the use of female roles is also of great exploration significance. It is worth mentioning that Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American movie star in Hollywood, has been acting as a supporting role since she appeared in the film "*The Red Lantern*" in 1919. Even though she has a certain popularity and her acting skills are recognized, she still can only get a poor film salary in Hollywood, and has no initiative in selecting roles. As a Chinese face, she either plays a malicious maid or mistress, or is a submissive and overly tolerant woman. Dying pitifully in the film seems to have become her ultimate skill. In 1933, Anna May Wong stated in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that the Chinese on screen were almost always the villains in the film, and they were such cruel villains - murderous and treacherous, just like snakes in the grass, but the real Chinese were not like that. There are many such stereotypical negative images, such as the Chinese man in the Hollywood silent film "*Chinese Laundry Scene*" in 1894, who had long mopping hair and dirty nails. In the 1919 American film "Broken Blossoms", the protagonist is Chinese Cheng Huan, who is a Buddhist, drug addict, timid, and feminine in behavior. In 1937, the film "The Good

Earth", adapted from the novel of the same name by Chinese American author Pearl S. Buck, was released. In this film, the Chinese people are poor and helpless, with thin and long hair that mops the ground[3].

From the perspective of early Hollywood's presentation of Chinese films, it is not only related to the different social and cultural environments of various countries at that time, but also to the different political environments and positions of China and the United States at that time. And Hollywood, as the American film industry, naturally conveys Western ideologies and values.

3.2 Unique Chinese Elements

Until the 1970s, with the impact of the Internet, Hollywood films in the U.S. domestic revenue continues to shrink, while the foreign market continues to expand, and gradually appeared the Hollywood film sweeping the world. In this "globalization-oriented" film market, Hollywood began to gradually change its creative strategy. In addition, China was also embracing reform and opening-up, and the cultural industry was becoming more open and diversified. Meanwhile, in Hong Kong in the 1970s, the Kungfu film played by Bruce Lee was a great success in Hong Kong. Kungfu films mainly focused on martial arts, which was the earliest variant form of martial arts film in Chinese film history, fully showcasing the profound essence of Chinese Kungfu and the unique charm of using softness to overcome hardness. Bruce Lee's films established the basic narrative form of Kungfu films, which mainly told the story of Chinese people who suffered from humiliation and rebelled against it. In the context of the time, this image of individualistic heroes who resisted power had multiple cultural effects. For Hong Kong society, these colonial rebels were the mainstay of the imagination that bridged the divide in Hong Kong society; for the Southeast Asian region, the story of these disadvantaged forces resisting the powerful aroused the empathy of local overseas Chinese; for the United States, in the situation of the soaring civil rights movement, Bruce Lee's individualistic resistance became the object of admiration of the blacks and the ethnic minority groups [4]. Therefore, driven by Bruce Lee, Kungfu has become a major selling point in Hollywood movies, and has also driven the development of Chinese martial arts stars such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li in Hollywood.

To this day, Kungfu elements are still present in Hollywood movies, either directly displayed by Chinese actors or used in the action scenes of a foreign actor. Some scholars have investigated the international dissemination of Chinese film culture and found that overseas audiences prefer Chinese kungfu films because they believe that China is the home of Kungfu [5]. In short, Kungfu has become a characteristic element representing China in Hollywood, opening a new window for the world to recognize China. For example, in "*The Matrix*", the main character, Keanu Reeves, gets his action from the Chinese martial arts instructor, Woo-ping Yuen; "*Kill Bill: Vol.2*" arranges a martial arts master, Baimei, for the main character. Whether from the appearance of Baimeis' white clothes and long beard, or his lifestyle of living in the mountains or the story model of the main character's training, this story is characterized by a typical oriental martial arts story. In addition to Kungfu, other Chinese characteristics are also prominent in this period, such as the natural landscape of China, the art of opera, Chinese restaurants and so on.

In terms of the transformation of Chinese landscapes towards world landscapes, the selection of foreign films coincides with the protection of natural and cultural heritage led by UNESCO, reflecting the widespread impact caused by the process of globalization. China's beautiful landscapes are favored by foreign filmmakers in large part because of their irreplaceable characteristics. By 2023, China will have 57 world-class heritage sites, the highest number in the world. For example, the movie "*The Painted Veil*" was filmed in Guilin, Guangxi, China, the first Hollywood movie ever to be set in China, which not only showcases the beauty of the "Guilin scenery is the best under heaven", but also the ancient and simple waterwheel, the light and thin oil-paper umbrellas, as well as the Chinese national art of Peking Opera, which shows the audience China's unique landscape, culture and art. "*Mission: Impossible III*" is set in the ancient town of

Xitang in Jiaxing, China, and "*Gangs of New York*" tells the story of the grudges and grievances of the New York underworld, including performances of Chinese Peking Opera.

The Chinese restaurant is also a common Hollywood highlight as Chinese elements, which has threefold meanings: as a store, it enables the public to taste Chinese delicacies; as a club, it is a space for Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges; as a building, it is a landscape with Chinese or Chinese culture characteristics at home and abroad [6]. For this reason, many Hollywood movies use Chinese restaurants as places of events, venues, or professional spaces, such as "*Short Circuit 2",* "*Strange Days", "Men in Black III",* and "*It: Chapter Two".*

It can be seen that the application of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies during this period became significantly more diverse and rich. At the same time, the martial spirit conveyed by Chinese Kungfu, Chinese landscape, opera and Chinese restaurants are all uniquely Chinese, which are hard to be seen by westerners in their daily lives. It is precisely this cultural difference that enables the excellent elements of China to be seen by the world, thereby promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture.

3.3 Presentation of Elements that Covey Chinese Stories and Culture

The shaping of China's image in Hollywood movies is influenced by multiple factors, including cultural background and ideology, international politics and social affiliation, market positioning and production mechanism. It is under the influence of these factors that Chinese elements have changed. Western filmmakers no longer blindly copy Chinese elements to showcase, but learning more deeply about the historical and cultural behind the Chinese elements used, and further grasp Chinese elements at a deeper and more accurate level.[7]. With the improvement of China's comprehensive national strength, China has also received attention in the cultural field, especially the hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which further helped the world understand a stronger and better China and became a new trend guiding the development of Hollywood films in the Chinese market. More movies that draw on Chinese stories and integrate Chinese culture have emerged, such as "*Kung Fu Panda", "The Forbidden Kingdom", "The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor"* and "*Farewell Atlantis", "Save The 365th Day"* and "*Mulan(2020)"*, and most of them are adapted from Chinese mythology and folktales. For example, the movie "*The Forbidden Kingdom"* is based on the story of the Monkey King and his image in China's "*Journey to the West"*; "*The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor"* is based on the history of China's Qin Shihuang, who built the Great Wall and the underground palaces, and adds the story of China's Meng Jiangnu; and "*Save The 365th Day"* is an adaptation of the Chinese New Year's legend of "年" into the story of a young boy called "Guang" who drives away the Year monster, and "*Mulan(2020)"* is taken from a folk song of the Northern Dynasties and tells the story of a woman, Hua Mulan, who joined the army on behalf of her father and defended her country.

The movie "*Kung Fu Panda"* is not based on a Chinese story, but the whole movie is full of strong "Chinese flavor". "*Kung Fu Panda"* borrows the narrative and fighting styles from several classic Kungfu movies, which will delight fans of Kungfu movies. In addition, various elements of Chinese architecture, folklore, food, clothing, and other cultural characteristics are brought together and interpreted by the producers in a pictorial manner. With regard to the deeper interpretation of Chinese culture, the film brings together traditional Chinese philosophical ideas from Confucianism, such as "teach students in accordance with their aptitude" and "respect teachers and value education". Overall, this film is a positive combination of advanced Hollywood animation technology and traditional Chinese elements, showcasing the unique charm of Chinese culture to the world. It is a positive attempt in the field of cross-cultural communication. The subsequent movie "*Farewell Atlantis"* also pushed China's image to a new height. The image of China in the movie is presented in front of the audience as a group image, which is more representative of the mainstream image of China and has more practical significance in performance. In this movie, Chinese officials and military forces also join the Hollywood-created team of world saviors, which makes the Chinese elements in the movie more diversified than the previous Chinese images.

Even though Hollywood is digging deeper into Chinese elements, there are still some differences for Chinese audiences who are familiar with Chinese history. In the *"Mulan(2020)"* , Hua Mulan was originally a character in the Northern Dynasty folk song "The Mulan Ballad" and was born in what is now China's Henan Province. However, the opening of the movie is reflected in the Tulou, a characteristic building of Fujian that appeared after the Song Dynasty, which is contrary to history. Secondly, "*The Mulan Ballad*" wants to use the character of Hua Mulan to express Hua Mulan's loyalty in defending the country, her courage in facing the battlefield and her filial piety in taking her father's place in the army, which are embodied by "忠", "勇"and "孝", but in addition to this, the word "真" is also added to the movie. The ancient Chinese concept of "真" is mainly used to refer to a duty to observe etiquette, but it is clear that this concept has nothing to do with the message of the movie. In the West, "真" is the highlighting of subjective self-awareness. In the movie, Hua Mulan's bravery on the battlefield is no longer simply the spirit of not backing down and the determination to protect the country, but also her determination and courage to pursue herself and get rid of the constraints. This awakening of self-awareness not only showcases the national and contemporary characteristics of the original work, but also emphasizes the significance of individual values in Hollywood [8]. In addition, *"Mulan(2020)"*, as a film that highlights the spirit of women, is also in line with Hollywood's focus on feminist themes in recent years. The underlying gender consciousness in the film is implied within a classic ancient Chinese philosophical category, "气". In the film, the Chinese concept of "气" becomes a symbol of feminist realization. In the movie, "气" is exclusive to men, and women who have "气" are called witches. At first, it was a witch who possessed "气", and it was precisely this witch's two saves to Mulan that changed her from "knowing herself" to "being herself", which can be reflected in the mutual assistance between modern women. Afterwards, Hua Mulan saves the whole army with her own strength, which makes the other generals collectively "lose their voices", and here Hua Mulan has already completed her individual feminist molding. This is a Hollywood movie that combines a unique cultural concept with its country of origin.

From Hollywood's use of Chinese storytelling and culture, it is clear that the inherent differences between China and the West are enormous. For the problems such as the inconsistency between the architecture and the era in which the movie is set, from a cross-cultural perspective, the movie is dominated by the Western audience, and there is bound to be a phenomenon of cognitive differences between the cultural information and the audience group. But from the perspective of the overall effect of cross-cultural transmission, there is more positive significance. In addition, in terms of Chinese and Western values, as Hofstede proposed the individualism and collectivism dimensions in the theory of cultural dimensions, the relationship between people in societies with individualistic tendencies is loose, and people are more inclined to pay attention to themselves; whereas societies with collectivistic tendencies focus on intra-ethnic relationships, believing that strong ethnic relationships can provide continuous protection [9]. The culture displayed in China embodies collectivism, while Hollywood advocates individualism. This deep cultural difference is also the significance of cross-cultural communication, and Hollywood's combination of Western values and traditional Chinese concepts is also a unique and positive attempt.

4.   The Reasons for the Changes of Chinese Elements

The change of Chinese elements is intertwined with multiple factors. In the political aspect, the increasing international status and international image of China, as well as the closer ties between China and the West are also one of the reasons that contribute to the change of China's image [10]. In the economic aspect, with the accelerated development of globalization, the target market of Hollywood movies is no longer limited to Western countries, and China as a mysterious and exotic culture for movie producers can not only catch the eyes of the original audience, but also open up the Chinese market. In addition, China's own cultural resources are an inexhaustible treasure trove,

such as China's landscapes, ancient cities, and unique customs, which are ideal choices for filmmakers because of their low cost and their ability to add color to the film. Therefore, the use of Chinese elements has become a powerful tool for Hollywood to attract box office and save movie costs at the same time. As cultures intermingle, the need to stay close to Chinese stories and culture becomes inevitable. It is the superposition of these multiple factors that provides an opportunity for cross-cultural communication between China and the West.

5. Summary

The presentation of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies is both a presentation of Chinese culture and a way for the West to convey its own values. For the collision of these two cultures, this constitutes both an obstacle to cross-cultural communication to a certain extent and a condition for cross-cultural communication at the same time. Looking at the overall change of Chinese elements, the trend is positive, from the initial single to the presentation of Chinese characteristics, and finally to the promotion of Chinese stories and culture in Hollywood. The diversified development of Chinese elements also confirms the development and depth of Chinese culture in the cross-cultural field.

At the same time, in today's increasingly deepening globalization, facing the integration of diverse cultures and the presentation of different forms, from the viewer's point of view, we should keep an objective and tolerant attitude to appreciate the wonderful interpretation of the intersection between cultures, and to feel the overall sensory effect created by it. From the filmmakers' point of view, blindly adhering to the concept of "ideology" and narrow nationalist sentiment is no longer conducive to the development of cultural undertakings, and it is necessary to seek the plasticity and value of other cultures and combine them with one's own culture to form a sustainable road of exploration for new films.

The development of multiculturalism will stimulate the spirit of innovation and creativity in the whole society, inspire forward-looking thinking about the future world, and promote communication between different countries, ethnic groups and cultures, which is conducive to the formation of a sense of common destiny of mankind. To this end, China should embrace other cultures and build up its own cultural self-confidence, so as to better promote its own culture to go out and create a true Chinese and international image in cross-cultural communication.

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