The Complexity of Chinese Figures in Hollywood Movies

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Abstract: Chinese figures in Hollywood movies, despite its popularity, are presented in a more complex situation than being simply defamed or praised. Considering the uprising economic and political impacts of China as well as the need to avoid cultural discrimination and the boosting cultural confidence for Chinese, it is worth exploring the complexity of Chinese figures in Hollywood instead of repeating the linear development of the figure presentations or the arbitrary conclusion that the deviation of Chinese figures is caused by cultural stereotypes drawn by most previous researchers. This paper examines the complexity from three dimensions. First, directors, not the producers, proves one of the most influential person constructing Chinese figures based on their personal styles or perception of Chinese culture. Also, cultural hegemonism, manifested as the borrowing and recomposition of traditional Chinese elements, causes misunderstandings of Chinese culture since the figures in the movies are created to promote the export of American value. Moreover, recessive ignorance of the changing identities of Chinese people outdates the presentation of Chinese figures in Hollywood movies. To reverse such unsatisfactory filmmaking strategies, mutual and equal cultural communication is necessary.

1. Introduction

Chinese figures, as one of the major outcomes of cultural diversity, have become increasingly popular in Hollywood movies. A great number of examples can be found in, among many others, The Forbidden Kindom [1] where Jackie Chen fights against Jet Li, Kong: Skull Island [2] where Tian Jin, a young Chinese actress, plays an important role, and Pacific Rim: Uprising [3]. Generally, this trend sheds light on America's cultural tolerance since characters from different cultural backgrounds are put together in movies. This marked quantitative change, however, does not necessarily mean a qualitative transformation as to the representation of China. Indeed, the images of China and Chinese in western movies, neither utterly defamed nor objective or positive, are far more complicated than supposed. Given that China is a country with increasing international momentum and which any filmmaker barely risks its box office to offend, the representation of China involuntarily acquires immense economic and political significance.

At the side of China, this representation should also be carefully examined for a twofold significance. On the one hand, more comprehensive knowledge of the popular understanding of China in the west can be achieved, in that Hollywood movies is a principal approach for the mass to know about China. A critical attempt in this trajectory can enable related policymakers, for instance, the censorship board, to act accordingly to resist concealed misrepresentation of China. Hostile cultural communication can be thus avoided. On the other hand, a critical examination of the depicted China alongside the whole story can also guard against the tendency that Chinese audience tend to overlook cinematic techniques and sophisticated concerns behind the seemingly queer image of China and simply associate it with cultural discrimination. In so doing, cultural confidence in Chinese can be boosted.

2. Literature Review

Notwithstanding the claimed importance of this topic, there is limited research on the complexity of Chinese figures in Hollywood movies. The existent related criticism could be roughly categorized

into four groups. One of the most popular approaches is to examine the images from the perspective of cultural utilization. Qing Yang, for instance, argues that Hua Mulan, a classic image celebrating Chinese virtues of "zhong" and "xiao" in traditional Chinese poetry, experiences significant changes in her personalities and identities due to culture filtering and literary misreading [4]. As Qing accurately observes, Mulan is a woman warrior "featuring both feminism and masculinity" as she decides to learn Kung fu to avenge the village and break all womanhood doctrines [4]. In other words, Hua Mulan becomes a symbol of modern feminism.

Similar efforts have been made by Tian Wang, who particularly concerns himself with the neglect of art in critical attempts to study Chinese characters in an international environment. Wang analyzes some classic Chinese images in European movies in the past five decades and thereby states confidently that Chinese images attract scholarly interests mostly from the areas of international policy and news media [5]. Both Yang and Wang emphasize the literary values of Chinese images in Western movies. However, their analyses are heavily relied upon forcefully taking the images of China out of the contexts of movies. Were the particularity of movie ignored, the interpretation of the images of China, I would contend, would be far away from substantial and even become misleading.

An equally popular approach is to explore factors influencing the representation of China, particularly the stereotypes of China in the movies. Among studies in this critical trajectory, the terms "cultural colonization" and "cultural hegemonism" occur frequently. Lin Wang reveals that cultural misreading is involved in the production and promotion of stereotypes among different ethnic groups [6]. Economic and military conflicts among countries also contribute to stereotypical representation of China. Therefore, the depiction of China in Hollywood movies is time-bound as economic and military interests of countries are continually changing throughout history [6].

Besides, a group of critics seek to trace the transformation underwriting Chinese images in Hollywood movies. These scholars, however, focus on the linear development of these images and ignore the causes as well as the subtle vilification of Chinese figures. Sidian Luo [7], for instance, compares different Chinese images in Kung fu Panda [8] and The Karate Kid [9] to demonstrate the popularity Chinese images gain from the western audience. Another analysis offered by Yike Yu [10] details the transformation Chinese characters underwent during the past century, from a symbol of rioters to the embodiment of Kung fu. Similarly, Qianwei Zhao [11] stresses that Chinese images are virtually tampered in some movies. To be more specific, traditional Chinese virtue embodied in Chinese characters is replaced by personal heroism to fit in American culture. Zhao digs into the cultural dimension of this topic but nevertheless avoids mentioning the impact. Besides, Zhao fails to note the rapid changes in the identities of Chinese younger generation. For instance, young Chinese embrace individualism and freedom. Accordingly, the traditional patriarchal authority has been dramatically challenged. Such transformations in China, I would like to argue, cause the seemingly distorted representation of Chinese characters reminiscent of American heroes. In short, scholars in this group fail to delve into the root cause of such transformation. They either avoid this question, for all its significance, or attribute the changes to filmmakers' careless interpretation of Chinese elements [7].

Some researches, we have to admit, do examine or touch upon the causes of the above-discussed transformation. Lora Yan Chen contests that the combination of Chinese figures and American dreams in Hollywood movies arises from the consideration of effective and profitable marketing strategies [12]. This calls our attention to the role of film producers. Unfortunately, Chen overlooks the dominant role directors often play in film production, which impedes him from going deeper. In fact, the power of the director tends to be easily ignored in the discussion of characters. Peichi Chung [13] is a rare researcher who notices the power auteurs possess over characters. Well aware of the necessity of adapting Chinese filmmaking to the global film industry, Chung insightfully argues that Chinese directors play a great part in understanding western culture and movie industry, which is crucial for the future of Chinese film industry. However, somehow, Chung does not explore the potentially significant role of Hollywood directors in borrowing Chinese elements or in constructing Chinese images.

So far, it can be seen that among the scant studies of the images of China and Chinese in

Hollywood films, most are done by Chinese scholars, and they are in general insufficiently investigated. This, unsurprisingly, often leads to biased arguments. The origin of the stereotyped portrayal of China, I would contend, needs to be further investigated should we seek to protest against cultural hegemony. This essay, hoping to address the above problems, examines the complexity of Chinese images in Hollywood movies through three dimensions: 1) the dominant role of directors, 2) cultural hegemonism as well as its impact on movie characters, and 3) the rapidly changing Chinese identity. Thereby, I will argue that the cultural stereotypes of Chinese figures in Hollywood movies are caused by a complex combination of cognitive factors.

3. Predominance of Directors

Unquestionably, both producers and investors, as the providers of production teams and capital sources, play a part in the process of commercial movie production. However, they do not determine the contents of the movies. Instead, it is scriptwriters and directors who co-decide what constitutes a movie, and the characterization of protagonists are by no doubt a significant constituent of a movie. In fact, directors as the "author" of movies will construct main characters in a way in which these characters sometimes become their spokesmen. For instance, in Ready Player One [14], James Halliday, the founder of the VR gaming system, expresses his gratitude for protagonists in that they play his game. Through the characterization of Halliday, the director Steven Spielberg communicates his appreciation of having the audience watching his movie. In this case, directors determine or at least influence the ways certain characters appeal to the audience.

As Peichi Chung accurately comments, the movie Hero [15] amounts to an illustration of the impact its director Yimou Zhang has on characters. In order to present his "personal auteur style with a striking colorful visual presence and imagery" [13], Zhang arranges clothing and decorations in an exceptionally dazzling way. Almost all characters wear clothes in ultra-high saturation and great contrast. On the other hand, main characters, especially the three assassins with the attempt to assassinate the tyrannical king of Qin, are portrayed as masters of martial arts. They can skillfully walk on walls and run on the water. Consequently, what the audience perceives are not typically violent and sneaky assassins. Instead, these slayers are powerful and elegant, demonstrating a sense of beauty through battling. The transformation of the appearance of assassins in this movie meets director Zhang's pursuit of colorful visual effect.

I would argue that in Hollywood movies where Chinese images emerge only briefly, the directors hold considerable power in controlling how these figures look or function in their works. For instance, in Big Fish [16], the director Tim Burton employs the Chinese figures in a way to enhance his Gothic style. As recorded in Helena Bassil-Morozow's Tim Burton, The monster and the Crowd [17], when asked how he makes use of different cinematic elements, Burton responses that he wants to make up his "own idea" about both movies and cinematic elements. Burton's idea here points to his stylistic use of Gothic imagery freely in order to present "horror, myth and mystery" [17]. When Edward, a character in Big Fish, is on a secret mission to sneak into Defa Wang power station, he sees two conjoined women sharing one single body, who speak Cantonese but sing English songs to please a bunch of Chinese soldiers. Burton's introduction of the freak Chinese ladies to his plots, I would argue, should not be misinterpreted as stigmatization against China. This queer image is more likely deployed to reinforce the dark and mysterious atmosphere in the scene, which at the same time speaks to the distinct style of Burton as a director.

Nevertheless, we should not assume that all directors display a strong willingness to apply his inspiration, styles, or preference into the creation of characters. We have to admit that directors' awareness of the popular understanding of Chinese culture exerts a great influence on their use of Chinese elements. The understanding of China and Chinese culture in the west can be traced back to the early decades of the 20th century when China was widely considered to be a poor, weak, and backward country. Although such misunderstanding is not always malicious, it still casts an influence on the way how Hollywood directors represent Chinese elements. A proper example can be seen in Mission Impossible III [18]. The last scene of the movie is set in Shanghai by the director J.J. Abrams, where the hero Ethan Hunt defeats all villains and saves the world. It is important to note that

Shanghai in this movie is not given enough space to demonstrate to its audience its modern, urban side. Instead, old and narrow streets become the symbols of Shanghai, likely generating the wild imagination of China among the western audience. Also, the absence of Chinese police officers from the fighting scene indicates the poor public order of Shanghai and that Chinese officials are irresponsible and incapable. At first glance, Abram's portrayal of Shanghai in this way may not mark overt cultural discrimination. However, the audience without sufficient knowledge of China might be led astray to associate China with utter poverty and disorder. What is worse, such misconception further consolidates the predominant impression of China established one century ago in the west.

To conclude this part, directors possess considerable power in the construction of Chinese culture and characters in Hollywood movies. Their representation of China results either from their different directing styles or their perception of Chinese culture. If we do not take into account the role of directors in film production, we will treat all negative Chinese images indiscriminately and blindly associate all of them with western cultural arrogance. Thus, we might overlook other layers of significance hidden behind these seemingly dark images and impede positive cultural exchanges.

4. Cultural Hegemonism over Chinese Characters

Apart from the influence of Hollywood directors in the representation of China and Chinese, cultural hegemonism never ceases to exert its influence on the Chinese images in the film industry. It is thus inviting to go further and explore its impact on Chinese images in Hollywood movies. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe point out in their scholarly work Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics [19], cultural hegemony refers to combining "principles from different systems of thought into one coherent ideology". Sari Hanafi allies himself with Laclau and Mouffe by emphasizing that different systems and principles are discursively combined to form a unity in order to rule the society through violence [20]. He stresses that cultural hegemony, especially Hollywood cultural hegemony, does not refer to specific western rationality and lifestyle but the combination of different cultural elements to perform in a unified way. Unlike the multi-voiced polyphonic novels of Dostoevsky discussed by Bakhtin where every voice is given the freedom to speak for itself [21], the borrowed cultural elements in Hollywood movies have no such chances. Instead, they are employed to celebrate American ideologies, individualism and heroism in particular.

Perhaps no movie offers a better example than Kung fu Panda II [22] for illustrating the cultural hegemonism informing the representation of Chinese culture in western movies. Overall, the director John Stevenson represents many Chinese elements in a relaxed and pleasant way. Before the shooting of this movie, camera crews of Dreamworks had a field trip in Sichuan to learn about the lives of pandas. Raymond Zibach, the art director of this movie, admits that the trip inspired him and laid the foundation for the later design of many Chinese elements in the movie [7]. However, the images of the pandas and other animals act against traditional values held dear by Chinese, for instance, peace, love and gentleness. The panda is depicted as so aggressive that he violates the actually chubby and harmless images of pandas. Additionally, Qi, which embodies the ultimate origin of all things in Chinese philosophy, is misrepresented as a powerful inner force. As we can see from the movie, Po is enlightened by his comprehension of Qi and thus becomes invincible.

The above discussed cultural hegemony accounts for the contradiction between the represented Chinese elements and their original meanings. Chinese elements are borrowed intentionally to celebrate values advocated by western societies, including liberty, democracy and individualistic heroism. To put it otherwise, Chinese elements in Hollywood movies function as a strategy of promoting the cultural export of American values. Such conflation of Chinese and Western cultures leads to misunderstandings about China, including its culture and value. If not dealt with properly, the hegemony over Chinese characters or elements in Hollywood movies might even overturn the value systems of China.

5. The Newly Emerged Recessive Ignorance of Chinese Identities

Although the intentional and even hegemonist modification of Chinese elements is common in Hollywood movies, it is unfair to assume that all cultural stereotypes about China are malicious with certain goals of desecrating Chinese culture or even the country. In fact, some are entirely unintentional. Producers might accidentally repeat stereotypes due to previous impressions about China. Specifically, most movie producers create Chinese characters without sufficient knowledge of the rapidly changing Chinese identity. As Robert Paul Smith accurately comments, the identity and beliefs of the Chinese are subject to ongoing changes [23]. For instance, because of the birth control policy, young Chinese come to value individualism more than ever before [23]. The weakening kinship in China also reflects the strengthening individualism among the younger generation [23]. The traditional extended family consisting of three or even more generations is no longer the predominant family pattern in China, with the younger generation tending to live far away from their family [23]. Smith only lists a small amount of identity transition in China, which, however, should be valid to indicate that Chinese characters and scenarios in Hollywood movies fail to represent China accurately.

In light of this fact, it can be argued that a Hollywood movie where most Chinese families are still strictly following the traditional family form lacks authenticity. Besides, the recessive stereotypes about the chaotic urban landscapes in China reflect an utter ignorance of the rapid urbanization in China. Curiously, this recessive ignorance even persists in the representation of some of the biggest and most prosperous cities in China. For example, the second act of 007: Skyfall [24] was shot in Shanghai, which had been well acknowledged as an international city in China back then. However, the typical modern building, the Oriental Pearl Tower, only shows up for a few seconds. The dominant images about Shanghai presented to the audience are dingy gambling houses. What the movie introduces to the world is a depraved crime center instead of a modern city. Perhaps the producers of this movie do not aim to defame Shanghai or China. However, they do ignore the profound changes in Chinese cities along with their citizens. These movie producers allow more space for the negative landscape, probably because it matches their previous impression of China or because of the practical concern of the plots. As a result, the presentation of Chinese elements in the movie consolidates outdated prejudices, the newly emerged changes not addressed properly. Without any doubt, such stereotyped images of China will blind the audience to the dynamic development of China and thus reduce the attraction of Chinese culture, which is detrimental to mutual cultural communication.

After examining the three dimensions above, it is worth advancing the discussion, though only briefly, of the reasons for overall transformed Chinese figures in Hollywood movies. My contention is that it is a change closely associated with marketing strategies. At the side of producers, incorporating Chinese elements into the movie can help open up the huge Chinese film market even with some deviated and controversial presentation. Given the deeply rooted cultural and political impression of China, pragmatic solutions to change the stereotypes about Chinese within Hollywood movies prove significant for both the film industry and cross-culture communication. On the one hand, a more objective and comprehensive presentation of Chinese figures can prosper the movie markets, especially the Chinese film market. On the other, it helps produce a more polyphonic genre of movie where each culture articulates its own voices instead of being programmed to promote a certain type of culture. Therefore, a truly multi-voiced movie that respects every culture contributes to positive cross-culture communication.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the representation of China and Chinese in western movies, especially Hollywood movies, used to and continues to be informed by cultural stereotypes. It is important to note that the misrepresentation of China is not a mere outcome of cultural hegemony. As discussed above, three major factors contribute to the complexity of Chinese figures in Hollywood movies. As directors play

a crucial role in movie production, Chinese images can be significantly influenced by their personal styles. Apart from that, cultural hegemony and recessive ignorance of the changing Chinese identity are the other two causes of the misleading depiction of China in Hollywood movies. This paper has at least two folds of significance. One is to see through the insidious filmmaking strategies and the corresponding masks to guard against conventional stereotypes. The other is to promote mutual and equal cultural communication. Hopefully, further research can work on the role of the audience in the formation of Chinese images in Hollywood movies, in which case, the argument of this essay can be further expanded and enriched.

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