

TRADITIONAL CHINESE ELEMENTS EMBEDDED IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS

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Date: May 2, 2012

TRADITIONAL CHINESE ELEMENTS EMBEDDED IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By

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2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who helped me during writing this thesis. First of all, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Richard Garrett, my supervisor, for his constant encouragement and guidance. He led me into the world of cultural infiltration, and he helped me go through all the stages of writing this thesis. I am deeply grateful of his instructive advice and useful suggestion on my thesis.

Secondly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the professors of this English Education program: Prof. Kory Wein, Prof. Dennis Ciesielski, Prof. Thomas Lo Guidice, Prof. Regina Pauly, Prof. Daniel Leitch, Prof. Yuanyuan Hu, and Prof. Kara Candito, who have instructed and helped me a lot in the past two years.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my beloved family for their considerate care and moral support in me all through these years. I also owe my sincere gratitude to my friends and my foreign students in South-Central University for Nationalities (SCUN) who gave me a lot of help and time in listening to me and helping me when I met problems during writing this thesis.

Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Richard Garrett

Hollywood movies have used Chinese elements frequently and have succeeded in winning good reputation worldwide and earning huge box office. This is a strategy which Hollywood utilized to enter into the Chinese film market, and also is the result of the influence of Chinese filmmakers in Hollywood, accompanying an increase of current international cultural exchange. This paper reviews the concrete ways and reasons that Hollywood uses Chinese elements in their films in detail. The great success Hollywood achieved makes Chinese local film industry feel panic, and people also begin to reflect on how Chinese films are more successful in using their own cultural elements. So this paper also briefly reviews the present situation of the Chinese film industry and the experience and lessons that Chinese film industry should learn.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Diversity of civilization is a basic characteristic of human society. In the era of global communications, international cultural exchange is increasing gradually. Producers are looking for themes around the world, which demonstrates the trend of globalization. After a century of production, the western market emerged a shortage of “raw material”. Because of exhausted movie resources and anxiety brought by aesthetic fatigue of audience, Hollywood urgently requires world themes to broaden their cultural influence and profitability (Zhou, 2009). Hence, they have focused on China and the splendid Chinese civilization.

In the 21st century, Chinese comprehensive national strength is increasing day by day, and international status is becoming more and more important. Therefore, the Chinese film market has aroused more and more concern in the world. China has a large population with extensive film market demand, so it is a huge market for Hollywood. But “each year China only allows 20 Hollywood films to be shown to the public in theaters, so those big Hollywood producers into their brains all day long ponder how to win Chinese market. If China is the main back scene of their films or they could cooperate with Chinese film executives, they may enter the Chinese market as copartners” (Zhou, 2009, p. 21). Since 1990s, Chinese faces have begun to deserve a place in Hollywood screens and Chinese elements have also been an indispensable constituent of Hollywood movies, which shows that China's comprehensive national power has markedly reinforced and international cultural exchanges dramatically increased (Zhang, 2010).

Canadian scholars Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn (1997) asserted that some TV shows, movies or videos rooted in a certain culture were very attractive in domestic market, because the

audiences had the same sense and life style. However, attraction would decline in other places, because audiences had difficulty to agree with this kind of style, values, beliefs, history, myths, social system, natural environment and behavior patterns and so on. Hoskins et al. (1997) also proposed that if the TV programs or films are sold to the other countries, the writers should use more universal value which would be widely accepted and try to reduce the American native elements.

The process that Hollywood has used in adopting the Chinese elements is also the process of learning the essence of Chinese culture. Because of the culture shock, there exists unavoidable misunderstanding. Compared with severe distortion of the Chinese culture in early Hollywood films, Hollywood showed the correct comprehension of Chinese culture spirit in recent movies. And that is also the result of the culture fusion (Hua & Gu, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The questions to be addressed in this paper include the following:

1. How did Hollywood adopt Chinese culture?
2. Why did Hollywood adopt Chinese culture in their films more frequently?
3. What should the Chinese native film industry do?

Definition of Terms

Cultural Discount refers to the reduction in value when cultural products in international market could not be accepted or understood by people because of their different cultural background (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988).

Delimitations of Research

The research will be conducted over a period of 90 days using the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and the library of South Central University for Nationalities. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Wilson databases, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics include “Chinese culture”, “Hollywood films”, “globalization” and “cross-culture”.

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the concrete ways of Hollywood using Chinese elements in their films was conducted. A second review of literature on the reasons for Hollywood adopting Chinese elements was conducted. Another review of literature on Chinese local film industry was conducted. The findings were summarized and synthesized, and recommendations made.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the concrete ways and reasons that Hollywood uses Chinese elements in their films in detail. The success that Hollywood reached has affected the Chinese local film industry, so this chapter also briefly reviews the present situation of the Chinese film industry and the experience and lessons that the Chinese film industry should learn.

Concrete Ways of Hollywood Using Chinese Elements in Their Films

A new idea about Chinese elements has become more and more popular for the past few years. The so-called “Chinese elements” generally refer to Chinese national symbols, customs or image etc, which are full of Chinese traditional cultural characteristics and spirit (Wang & Ding, 2009). For an example, take “Kung Fu Panda”, a very famous film which was directed by John Stevenson and Mark Osborne. It’s a story about a panda named “Po” which lives in ancient China’s peaceful Valley. “Po” from a lazy and gluttonous apprentice of noodle shop turned into a skillful dragon warrior, and helped people who lived in the valley to beat down the devil. As a result he became a legend. This film is filled with oriental wisdom and exotic humor, performing the Chinese traditional culture is more vividly than ever before (Ma, 2009). "Kung Fu Panda" film is full of familiar Chinese cultural elements and symbols, such as wearing a Tang suit, using chopsticks to eat noodles, tofu, playing mahjong, and so on. More people praise the film that it is full of impressionistic background of the Chinese landscape and depicts real-life Chinese martial arts in the world, closer to the story and the Chinese people's psychological distance.

In fact, as early as in the 1930s China elements appeared on the American screen. Chinese cook and laundry boss were the earliest typical Chinese figures on the American screen. The English of these comic roles were extremely poor, and they all had long braids. These Chinese roles were the target of cruel taunts without any sense of humor themselves. Before the Second World War and during the Second World War, the two Chinese figures had been banned specially from Hollywood and never appeared, because the insult to Chinese was too obvious (Jones, 1955).

Since 1990s, many Chinese elements such as Chinese stories, actors and kung fu have frequently been used in Hollywood movies. This is a strategy which Hollywood utilized to enter into the Chinese film market, and also is the results of the influence of Chinese filmmakers in Hollywood, accompanying increase of current international cultural exchange. The concrete ways that Hollywood used Chinese culture in their films appear in four parts.

1. Employ Chinese actors or actresses

In 2008, “The Children of Huang” and “The Forbidden Kingdom” were shown in theaters successively. Both movies read Chinese history and culture with westerners’ view, and the leading actors were Chinese stars (the former was Yun-Fat Chow, and the latter were Jackie Chan and Jet Li). Before that there were many influential films, such as “Miami Vice” in which the leading actor was Li Gong, and “Tomorrow Never Dies” in which Michelle Yeoh stars Jackie Chan, Jet Li and Yun-Fat Chow have been the famous stars in the Chinese-speaking world; they preserve their status after entering into Hollywood, and starred in “Rush Hour”, “Anna and the King” and other movies (Zhang, 2010). Nowadays, the Chinese film stars who have certain status in Hollywood are Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Yun-Fat Chow, Ziyi Zhang, Li Gong, Michelle Yeoh, and Lucy Alexis Liu and so on. In addition, many young actors also

begin to appear on American screen and make a figure in Hollywood, for example Jingchu Zhang, MaggieQ, and Isabella Leung etc.

2. Borrow Chinese story

The animated films “Mulan” and “Kung Fu Panda” directed by American are Chinese stories based on Chinese culture for background. The animated film “Mulan” doesn’t sufficiently respect Chinese traditional version, but boldly makes artistic exaggeration and adaptation according to the western psychology and habits. “The Disney Corporation probably decided from the very outset that, even though the background story came from ancient Chinese history, they would not abandon Disney's characteristic atmosphere and humor” (He, 1999, p. 23). In the film, Mulan became a straightforward and active “western girl”, not completely reserved and cautious of traditional Chinese woman in feudal society. In China, Mulan was the symbol of filial piety, patriotic, and responsible. Compared with severely misreading the Chinese culture in “Mulan”, Hollywood showed the deep and correct interpretation of essence of Chinese culture in “Kung Fu Panda”. This film was filled with the wisdom of Oriental culture; meanwhile it mixed with unique style of witty humor, so that Chinese traditional culture was deduced vividly and incisively. DreamWorks apparently drew lessons from “Mulan”, and this panda, whatever appearance or spirit, has greatly absorbed Chinese elements, so it is successful (Hua & Gu, 2010).

3. Adopt Chinese background

In fact, in the past five years, along with China’s economic strength enhancing, box-office contribution is increasing day by day, and “Chinese elements” in Hollywood movies have become a trend. “Mission: Impossible III”, “Memoirs of a Geisha”, and “Rush Hour” and so on a series of films all more or less use the “Chinese elements”, until “2012”, the application of

“Chinese elements” achieve a highest point. The performances of Chinese elements in “2012” are considered the maximum and the most positive of Hollywood commercial films in recent years. Obviously, Hollywood has considered Chinese film market which develops rapidly at the present as the most potential market in the future, so they are painstakingly working with Chinese elements to cater to Chinese audience (Ran, 2010). So in the movie there was the grand scene that Chinese was manufacturing “Noah’s Ark” to save humans, and also appeared the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and the hero still didn’t forget to say “we go to China” when piloting a Russian plane in crisis fugitive process.

4. Simulate Chinese kung fu

The culture of Chinese martial arts is extensive and profound. It is exhibition and publicity of unique Chinese traditional culture. Sword-play films which are based on the traditional martial arts are still coruscating tremendous artistic vitality. From 1928 enjoyable feature “Burning Paradise in Hell” to 1949 true kung fu “Once Upon A Time In China”, and from King Hu and Bruce Lee in 1960s, Jackie Chan and Woo-ping Yuen in 1970s and 1980s to Tsui hark and of Jet Li in 1990s, sword-play film has been fashionable in East Asia and Southeast Asia for the last eighty years. Since 1990s, action directors (such as John Woo, Tsui hark and Woo-ping Yuen) and kung fu stars (such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li) have sweep the world kung fu boom and added some refreshing Oriental kung fu elements for western commercial movies. They reduced clumsy and dull tussle of the western traditional tough guys; on the contrary, they brought clear-cut fighting action and beautiful pictures and real details in art to give new audio-visual enjoyment to the western audience. Michelle Yeoh was famous for excellent martial arts in the James Bond films “Tomorrow Never Dies” in 1997 (Zhang, 2010).

The Reasons for Hollywood Adopting Chinese Elements

1. Globalization

In the era of global communications, different civilizations influence each other, and boundary of cultural has begun ambiguous, and also begun to be rewritten constantly. Many people praise this era for diversification and convenience brought by globalization. Under the trend of globalization, it is impossible to resist the global reading tide which invades likes a flood (Zhou, 2009). Hollywood movies are looking for themes around the world, which demonstrate the trend of globalization. Since 1990s, Chinese faces began to deserve a place in Hollywood screen and Chinese elements are also been an indispensable constituent of Hollywood movies which shows that international cultural exchanges dramatically increase (Zhou, 2009).

2. Rapid development of Chinese economy

In the 21st century, China's comprehensive national strength is increasing day by day, and international status is becoming more and more prosperous. Therefore, the Chinese film market has aroused more and more interest in the world. China has a large population with extensive film market demand, so it is a huge market for Hollywood. Regarding Hollywood, for example, "each year China only allows 20 Hollywood films to be shown to the public in theaters, so those big producers would certainly into their brains all day long ponder how to win Chinese market. If Hollywood film makers come to China to produce films or cooperate with Chinese film executives, they can enter the Chinese market as copartners" (Zhou, 2009, p. 21). For this reason, shrewd Hollywood producers are more willing to join various Chinese elements in their own movies. For this phenomenon, the professor of Tsinghua University Yi Hong and domestic famous critic Wei Junzi had said that "China element" became more and more important in Hollywood because of rapid development of Chinese economy and the explosivity of Chinese

native movie markets (Zhou, 2009).

3. Cultural discount

Canadian scholars Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn (1997) asserted that some TV shows, movies or video rooted in a certain culture were very attractive in domestic market, because the audiences had the same sense and life style. However, attraction would decline in other places, because there audiences had difficulty agreeing with this kind of style, values, beliefs, history, myths, social system, natural environment and behavior patterns. If the TV shows or movies were made in other languages, the attraction would be reduced because of dubbing and subtitles. Even the same language, accents and dialects also incites problem.

Francis L. F. Lee (2008) also pointed out that “cultural differences are likely to affect the extent to which and the ways in which audiences appreciate foreign media products. Not all media products travel across cultural and national boundaries equally successfully. When media contents are highly culturally specific, a high level of relative cultural discount and a loss in cross-culture performance predictability are likely to result” (p. 117). Chinese professors Yu, Ding, Zhi, and Chen (2009) pointed out: in international cultural trade, cultural products such as TV shows, film were not accepted by other national audience because of their intrinsic cultural factors and the product value would reduce. Products with high degree of cultural discount hardly brought people's interests; on the contrary, if the degree of cultural discount is low, the products would be easy to be accepted by people.

4. Hollywood itself

After a century of production, the western market faced a shortage of “raw material”. The well-known visual technology director in Hollywood, Mou Huaqi, once bluntly expressed her view that theme innovation was the biggest problem to Hollywood at the moment (Wu, 2005). In

an interview the famous film maker Peter Roy said that Because of exhausted movie resources and anxiety brought by aesthetic fatigue of audience, Hollywood urgently needed world themes to broaden their cultural influence and profitability. In fact, Hollywood has worked on exploring themes about Chinese legend (Wu, 2004). The director Mou Huaqi also said that China had abundant themes, lots of talents and low cost, and those would attract international film capital flow to China. So Hollywood has focused on China and the splendid Chinese civilization (Wu, 2005). Chinese elements have become a magic weapon for Hollywood films to attract Chinese audience, and Hollywood is getting better at using it.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted above, Hollywood movies have used Chinese elements frequently and succeed in winning good reputation worldwide and earning huge box office. Diversity of civilization, a basic characteristic of human society, is the power to develop human society. As globalization has confirmed, the cultural development in every country around the world cannot be isolated; it should always exchange and reference with other national cultures. This kind of penetration not only promotes the development of national culture, but also greatly propels the social progress.

Traditional Chinese culture has strong vitality, and its vigor and charm attracts the attention of the world. Culture exchange is a process of reflecting each other and taking what they need. However because of the culture shock, several Hollywood early films only focused on slight apprehension of Chinese culture and using mysterious power of Chinese elements to attract audiences (Xu, 2009). Especially in the early 20th century, Chinese figures were pedestrian, humble and negative. Many Chinese figures and Chinese culture symbols were misunderstood and distorted arbitrarily. “Many movie makers built up imaginary Chinese figures, composites assembled from fragmentary, third- and fourth-hand information; caricatures with sallow skin, conniving character, long pigtailed, impenetrable language and mysterious cults abounded” (Tang, 2011, p. 46). The early Hollywood movies highlighted the western culture’s superiority when they adopted Chinese elements in order to satisfy their own spirit culture demand.

Economy is foundation; politics is the concentrated reflection of economy; culture is reflection of the economy and politics. Nowadays, culture is interactive with economy. With the

development of the Chinese economy, the Chinese international status has improved. China is a big market for Hollywood. Hollywood requires exploring essence of Chinese culture more diligently in order to show authentic Chinese culture to the world. Along with the policy of reform and opening up, foreign countries learn more and more about China and Chinese elements' appearance are more and more objective. Those Chinese cultural symbols which mutated before can reflect essence and connotation of Chinese culture gradually. More and more Hollywood movies are a "successful combination of Chinese tradition and American spirit" (Tang, 2011, p 48).

The great success Hollywood achieved makes Chinese filmdom feel panic, and people also begin to rethink how Chinese native films use cultural elements to enter the international film market. "By the early 1990s, the industry was already in crisis. Annual attendance at theaters dropped from 21 billion in 1982 to just under 4.5 billion in 1991. Despite serious reservations, China's government decided in 1994 to allow Chinese moviegoers to see up to 10 Hollywood films each year in domestic theaters" (Rosen, 2002, p. 94). But now, according to China Film Industry Report 2011-2015 (2010), global movie box office reached 29.9 billion dollars in 2009, and North America, Europe and East Asia became the core regions of the world's film market. China was the ninth in movie box office that achieved 6.2 billion, and was the fourth in the number of films and the second in the number of times people went to the cinema in the world in 2009. China has become a superpower in film. Since 2003, the Chinese native films have a higher proportion than imports in domestic market. Nonetheless, because Chinese domestic films are limited by the theme and the audience, most films can't go abroad. It is still a big problem for domestic film to enter the international market, especially the European and American market.

In this case, how do Chinese films participate in such fierce competition and have a place

in international market? Yimou Zhang, Kaige Chen, John Woo and other Chinese directors have done a lot of film attempts, but only Ang Lee won the double success including art and business. Ang Lee, as outstanding of Chinese directors, attracts more people to know Chinese films. His Chinese culture background and western education experience make his films include not only Chinese traditional aesthetic ideas and principles of Confucius but also western open mind and modern culture. Throughout all Ang Lee's films, Chinese films such as "The Wedding Banquet" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" or English films such as "Sense and Sensibility" and "Brokeback Mountain", he paid more attention to in-depth excavation of the cultural connotation. Sometimes he depicted human nature in culture conflict and sometimes he emphasized showing the spirit of Chinese traditional culture. All techniques make his films have a unique cultural charm (Berry, 2007).

Colin Hoskins et al. (1997) proposed, if TV program was planned to marketing to foreign countries, it should include little native culture and add more universal values which were widely accepted. This cultural strategy is an experience worth using for reference. Media products, on the basis of drawing the other ethnic cultural literacy, should decompose and recombine their native culture, and then convert it to have universal values and cultural significance. In that case, it will realize the integration of Chinese and western culture and achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication. "Purely domestic productions, with no transnational appeal, may be doomed to play to mostly empty theaters" (Rosen, 2002, p. 98).

Traditional culture is considered as collective memory and spirit created by a country and national history. As a country with a long history, the national blood relationship of China can continue to this day, because of the inheritance of traditional culture (Li, 2006). At first, Chinese directors should admit Hollywood's understanding and expression about Chinese traditional

culture, “and then regenerate other culture with selective adoption of foreign cultures, so that traditional Chinese culture can be publicized throughout the world by the intercultural communication” (Zhou, 2008, p. 69).

Chinese films should pay more attention to interface between ancient culture and modern civilization. “Any tradition, if it will be accepted by the audience today, must be a part of the contemporary culture. Let the tradition chat with modern and pay attention to the themes most interesting to audience” (Li, 2006, p. 70). The Chinese film industry, under the situation of globalization, should regenerate their culture with selective adoption of foreign cultures, so that traditional Chinese culture can be publicized throughout the world by intercultural communication.

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