

# The Analysis of Chinese Elements in Hollywood's Movies

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**Abstract.** With the fast development of Chinese economy and politics, more and more Chinese cultural elements have gone into the Hollywood's movies and are familiar by western people. But there still exists the phenomenon of misreadings of Chinese culture and the limitation represented in Hollywood's movies. This article applies the theory of postcolonialism, especially from the angel of Said's Orientalism, makes a thorough research into the movies in different historical periods and reflects on the negative effects of Hollywood' movies by analyzing the change of Chinese culture and probes the way that Chinese producers can choose in broadcasting Chinese culture and change the imposed stereotypes of Chinese culture.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, in contrast with the depression of American economy, China becomes more and more prosperous. Hollywood, as one good at utilizing and integrating resources all over the world, turns his development focus to the Chinese market. So a series of movies, where Chinese natural landscape, architecture, clothing, diet and Kungfu, have become the focus of Hollywood's movies, which not only satisfy the curiosity of American people to the mysterious East, but also attract the attention of a lot of Chinese people, winning the high profit of box for the producers. This article mainly deals with the utilization and change of Chinese cultural elements in Hollywood's movies, analyzing the misreading phenomenon of Chinese culture and how should we Chinese people can do to destruct and get rid of it.

## 2. Hollywood's Movies in Different Periods

Chinese cultural elements in the Hollywood's movies has experienced the long process from no to boosting, just as the novelist *Ronald A. Knox* in 1928 put forward in the "Ten Commandments of Detection" that "No Chinaman must figure in the story"[1], so did no Chinese people in Hollywood movies. But with the eagerness of American people wanting to know the outside world, the first characters were created according to the imagination of film producers. On one hand, the characters represented the exotic, mysterious East, on the other hand they are too wicked to approach. When this discipline was put in the movies, the evil, wicked and ugly image occurred, the character of Fu Manchu existed as a representative for nearly one whole century, which was just another kind of prejudice against China throughout the long 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 2.1 Images in Earlier Periods

From late 1890s to early 20th century, more and more westerners are curious about the fast East China with a long history, but they can not really grasp the soul of Chinese culture. An evil and odd Chinese image emerged, which is vividly described in the 1968 movie *The Blood of Fu Manchu*. For a long period of 20<sup>th</sup> century, this kind of yellow skin image was rooted in the mind of western people, satisfying the curiosity of them. Until 1960s, the strong Bruce Lee appeared on the Hollywood's screen, the weak, evil image began to change. Though there was a part of promotion in Chinese image, female images mainly appeared as sexy, catering the man. The Chinese Qipao

played an accelerated role in stereotyping the female image. Even today to represent the identity of Chinese female, some females have to wear it in some formal occasions.

In the nearly same period of Fu Manchu, another representative figure familiar by American audience was created by Hollywood, Charlie Chan, a gentle and witty detective. Different from the first generation Chinese immigrants, Charlie Chan was born in America as the second generation, who received the education from White culture. On surface, the evil Chinese image was changed, in fact this character was created as a kind and harmless “other”, still satisfying Americans’ wishes. Edward Said in his work *Orientalism* tries to explore the Eurocentric view in the field of post-colonial theory in terms of subject/object, self/other. To be in the “Other” position, you will have no right to represent and express yourselves, but can only be represented by its “Subject”. The imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.[2]

## 2.2 Change by Bruce Lee

Until 1960s, Bruce Lee appeared on the Hollywood’s screen as the martial nationalist image of struggling against the authorities, which changed the weak and evil images presented in Hollywood movies. He is widely considered by many commentators, critics, media and other martial artists to be the greatest and most influential martial artist of all time, and a pop culture icon of the 20th century. [3] He is known for the roles in five feature-length films: *Lo Wei's The Big Boss* (1971) and *Fist of Fury*(1972); *Golden Harvest's Way of the Dragon* (1972), directed and written by Lee; *Golden Harvest and Warner Brothers' Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *The Game of Death* (1978), both directed by Robert Clouse. He brought the word “Kungfu” into English dictionary and made Chinese Kungfu spread to the world, causing the wave of interest in Chinese martial arts in 1970s. After him a lot of Chinese martial arts actors began to be active on the Hollywood screen.

Though Lee became an iconic figure known throughout the world, particularly among the Chinese, as he portrayed Chinese nationalism in his films, the limitation of figures he created in films is still on the aspect of Kungfu, which is also one of the mysteries that westerners want to pursue. We also can find the characters that Bruce Lee created in films, are impersonal, cold and indifferent to others, which we can regard as a kind of silence.

## 2.3 Hollywood's Movies in the New Century

Into the new century, the solid and powerful foundation of politics and economy of China boosts the Chinese elements in Hollywood’ movies. Hollywood, as one good at utilizing and integrating resources all over the world, turns his development focus to the Chinese market. To cater for the Chinese audience, the producers of Hollywood add a large part of Chinese elements, away from the former description of Chinese backwardness, dirty and messy environment, labors in low position.

In the movie of *Kung Fu Panda*, the beautiful natural landscape prototype is Chengdu, Sichuan province, shows the ancient architecture and natural scenery. The protagonist in the kung fu panda is chosen as China's national treasure panda, the choice of other animals are connected with other martial arts in China, which also become a major selling point of the film. Even the film

probes the essence of Chinese traditional culture of tai chi, and wuwei(letting things take their own course , a Taoist concept of human conduct). In *Transformers*, the modern Shanghai is represented as the metropolis in China, In the film of *2012*, the image of Chinese army first appeared on the screen, shouldering the task of saving the world together with the Americans, which is one great breakthrough in broadcasting China and Chinese image.

### 3. Cultural Misreadings from the Western World

The images of Chinese people at the beginning of the Hollywood's movies, undoubtedly were depicted as negative ones, such as the wicked and evil Fu manchu, which reflected the imagination of westerners on backward China. Chinese culture was misread of prejudiced. According to what Said stated in his *Orientalism*, the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. [4] So this kind of imagination and representation satisfied the westerners' curiosity to faraway mysterious China. It is also because the Chinese society of that time was in late Qing Dynasty, which can not be denied the backwardness and weak. It can be concluded that the backwardness of country is bound to have no voice. For a long time the image of Fu Manchu deepened the stereotype of Chinese people.

Even though in the stage of Bruce Lee, the image was changed into the positive one, who can defend the weak and his country, just like a hero. We can not deny the great role Bruce Lee has played in bringing China to the world and make western society know China. However, the Chinese cultural elements were focused on the sole Chinese Kungfu, which just one aspect of China. And the character that Bruce Lee created is also defected to some extent, cold, indifferent and even silent, which also reflects the silent Chinese in mainstream American society.

Although the movies in the new century have got rid of some bad images of earlier periods, to some extent they are still misreadings of westerners to China, just coated with the high-tech. The tale story of *Fa Mulan* is familiar by every household in China, the faithful filial piety culture is the basis of Chinese edition. While it is adapted by Hollywood into a heroic character, realizing the ambition of herself, which is conforming to the American cultural values. So it can not be defined as the Chinese story and no real Chinese culture is depicted, just a brown skin girl pursues the success of her ambition.

In the series film of *Kungfu Panda*, not only the choice of panda as the main character, but also the other animals are all the representatives of some Chinese Kungfu. The large amounts of Chinese cultural elements are put into the film, from the natural landscape to Chinese noodles, which reach the limits of expression. The result of the box income is extremely good, winning billions. But to some extent, the creation of Po as an hero to defeat the evil force and save the people. The success of Po can not be separated from his own efforts, which conforms to the spirit of American heroism and individualism.

Most of the American audience take it for granted that the Chinese story is an authentic representation of Chinese culture and society. Or we can say the interest in the Orient is another kind of cultural interest in the exotic features. They never realize the effort that Chinese people try to mediate these two cultures, nor will they spend time investigating the truth of context in which the story took place. They often conclude the story from their own imagination and confirm to the Western Orientalist's construction of China as mythical and patriarchal.

#### 4. Roles of Chinese Cultural Elements

With the strengthening of the world cultural exchange, no one country may choose to close themselves. Today's China international status is inseparable with China's reform and opening policy. Chinese cultural elements are being brought into Hollywood in various kinds of forms, from the traditional Chinese story, traditional Chinese diet, to the essence of Chinese culture, adding to the diversity of world culture. Chinese native films also began to go into the Hollywood with more Chinese cultural elements. We can believe misreadings of Chinese culture can be deleted in some day.

With five thousand years of Chinese civilization, extensive and profound Chinese culture, China plays the important role in promoting human progress and social development. In order to let more people understand China, Hollywood's movie, as a kind of broadcasting mass media, has ever since played an important role in exchanging culture. So we hope the producers of western country can really burden its name and bring more real Chinese cultural elements into the world. The people especially the producers in China also should shoulder the task of outputting Chinese culture, not only pursuing the economic profit.

#### 5. Conclusion

With more and more positive Chinese cultural elements appearing in the Hollywood's movies, the real image of China has been known by more and more westerners, but it is still not enough. On one hand, there still exist the misreadings of Chinese culture, on the other hand, the contents representing China still focuses on the limited fewer aspects, such as Kungfu, diet, clothing and natural landscape. So if we really want to westerners knowing China, there still is a long way to overcome and it needs the harsh efforts Chinese producers can make and the self-awareness of all Chinese people, especially those going abroad for study or living, who are burdening the task of cultural exchanging. With more and more Chinese actors and Chinese native films gaining success in Hollywood, we have the chance to express our real Chinese culture.

#### Acknowledgement

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