

Research and Analysis on the Experience Reference of Domestic Magical Fantasy Films

The Comparative Study on *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* and *Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract—The first domestic reality CG (Computer Graphics, also called Computer Animation) magical fantasy film *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* was released with an investment of 150 million yuan in 2016 during the National Day holidays in China. The film directed by Guo Jingming, gathered 11 stars who had big influences on the social media, including Fan Bingbing and Wu Yifan. However, the film suffered a box office Waterloo. In contrast, the trilogy series of the magical films *Lord of the Rings* known as the western version of *Journey to the West* created nearly a box office miracle of nearly billion dollars, and also won 17 Oscar awards, which was a harvest of both box office and reputation. Domestic magical fantasy film is now facing problems, such as lack of original creation, rough special effects, stress on the appearances more than acting skills. How should domestic magical fantasy films learn from the western ones?

Keywords—magical fantasy films; China and the West; cultures; values

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 21st century, many Western magical fantasy films poured into Chinese cinemas, creating box office myth one after another: *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and so on. In 2007, a scholar named Gong Jie pointed out that “the fantastic film should be the abbreviation for the magical fantasy film”, and put forward “the magical fantasy film is regarded as a type of film. After the 21st century, its birth is closely related to the development of computer tricks.”¹ “The Magic films are generally adapted based on magics, records of the supernatural, fairy tales. They have a strong conflict between the good and the evil. Most of the films have an ancient historical background, with deep cultural roots, which is an exaggeration of obscure reproduction of the reality. The films often tell a story of a heroic adventure.”

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOMESTIC MAGICAL FANTASY FILMS

From the film *Painted Skin* in 2008, domestic films have gradually begun to explore a type of films called “Oriental New Magical Fantasy” films. Most themes of those films come

from classical ghost novels, such as *Journey to the West*, *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* and so on. Those films found new innovative points based on original stories, and combined them with clothing, sceneries and scenes with Chinese characteristics. *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* in 2013 and *The Monkey King* in 2014 all made good box office results. In 2015, *Monster Hunt* refreshed the records and created more than 200 new box office records. After its release of 63 days, *Monster Hunt*’s box office broke through 2.4 billion yuan, which broke the box office record and the watcher number record that *The Fast and The Furious 7* made in China after its 30-day release.

Guo Jingming, from a novelist to a film director, started his new directing career by making phenomenon-level series of films called *Tiny Times*. Making use of star effect and fan economy, he successfully grasped the impetuous and money-oriented psychology of young people today, and created a box office miracle in Chinese film history. Although *Tiny Times* was criticized by its low reputation and high box office, the fact cannot be denied that Guo Jingming has superb marketing means to make himself a shrewd cultural businessman. In 2016, Guo Jingming transferred his battlefield to the field of films with magical themes, and launched the first domestic reality CG film called *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties*. Unexpectedly, the film suffered a box office Waterloo. The originally planned two sequels that were ready to start shooting and release were also shelved, and their partners might also change. Why the costly and star-gathering film *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* by Guo Jingming didn’t become a miracle? We can find crucial reasons through comparative studies.

III. LEGEND OF RAVAGING DYNASTIES SHOWED THE COMMON PROBLEMS IN DOMESTIC MAGICAL FANTASY FILMS

Legend of Ravaging Dynasties, adapted from Guo Jingming’s long novels published in 2010, tells a story in the Auting continent that the lords who are good at soul magics and their apostles, under the command of silver priests, defend the honor and fight for the power. The film did not draw inspiration from traditional Chinese literary works, but reconstructed an imagined empire, a world of silver priests and masters of soul magics. The theme was closer to western magical fantasy films. However, the film failed to establish an independent cultural value system, for its lack of clear story

¹ Gong Jie, First Exploration on American Magical Fantasy Films, *Fill Literature*, Issue 1, 2007.

lines and not detailed enough characters' personality depiction. In addition, the film scenes and character settings were of a combination of Chinese and western elements, which confused the audience by its complicated disordered story and settings. Through our careful study, it is easy to find the failure of *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* not accidental.

A. The Original Story Lacking in Clear Story Lines

The audiences who choose to watch magical fantasy films basically have three kinds of psychologies: their desire to break through the shackles of reality and realize fantasies can be satisfied; they like the eternal theme of the good defeating the bad; they enjoy hero adventure stories.² Whether it is the oriental classic *Journey to the West* or the western magical fantasy *Lord of the Rings*, the story lines and clues are clearer, and characters know what to love and hate with clear behavior motives. Published in 1954, the trilogy of *Lord of the Rings* is a typical adventure story, and it has a complete outline of the Middle Earth with humans, elves, orcs and monsters living on. The story is about eight ring guardians spontaneously followed the *lord of the rings* Frodo Baggins, experienced difficulties and obstacles, and protected the rings arrived in Mordor safely. Frodo Baggins is like the monk Tangseng in *Journey to the West*, and the rest of the guardians are all with great talents. All along the journey, the guardians killed all kinds of monsters, and some of them even sacrificed their lives to protect the rings. Along the journey, there are many people who want the rings. They are just like monsters who wanted to eat the meat of Tangseng in *Journey to the West*, trying to get rid of the monk's apprentices, but every time the evil side failed. The monk Tangseng and his apprentices completed the expedition to the West and successfully completed their mission.

In the first half of the film *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties*, the restaurant waiter Qiling was selected by the seventh-degree lord Yinchun as a seventh-degree apostle, and he started to learn how to master his own skills. With the unfolding of the contradiction between different lords, the story clue is no longer Qiling. The second-degree lord Youming and the fourth-degree lord Teleiya were ordered to kill the fifth-degree lord named as Guishan Fenghun and his apostle Guishan Lianquan, so they came to the immortal island where the sixth-degree lord Xiliuer stayed. At the end of the film, Guishan Fenghun died, and Xiliuer passed his power to Guishan Lianquan. Guishan Lianquan became the first lord with two identities. The film plots are not closely connected, and the film is lacking in clear story clues. Many characters' behaviors also don't have enough motives. Moreover, there is no necessary connection between places appearing in the film, such as Fuze Town, Crystal Palace, Royal City Glanerte, Soul Tomb, the Immortal Island and Leien City.

B. Rough Depiction of Characters' Personality

In a successful magical film, despite that the plots and the characters have a very strong surreal color, the personality of the characters is actually real and plump, and their prototypes

² Liu Ying, Cross-Cultural Psychological Analysis on the Audiences of Magical Fantasy Films, Foreign Language Education, March 2010.

can be seen anywhere in daily life.³ In *Lord of the Rings*, the rings symbolize all the dark and sinful things in human's unconscious mind. In the film, everyone has their own obvious personality. For example, the wizard Gandalf represents justice. Throughout the film, Gandalf was the spiritual leader of Frodo. He was the first one who supported Frodo to be the guardian of the rings, and he led people to the journey. Unfortunately, he fell into the abyss during his fight with Balrogs. At the end of the first film of the series, Frodo prepared to give up his faith in being the guardian. It was Gandalf's words that inspired him. Only by facing difficulties rather than escaping, Frodo's faith for guarding the rings can be kept.

The main characters of the film *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* include seven lords and seven apostles, and all characters have no particularly obvious features in their personality and modeling. The small number of characters' lines in the film left almost no deep impression on the audience's mind. The audience had no clear recognition of those characters, which makes it not easy for the audience to remember their names in even more than 110 minutes and figure out their relationships with each other.

In the film *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties*, a live-and-die-together relationship between a lord and his apostle was built, and each lord and his apostle have the same soul lines, so they have the same talent. In the film, the soul animals, horcruxes and talents of some lords were described and displayed, but the personality of the characters was not deeply depicted, which resulted in the fact that the values of the characters were vague, and the good and the evil didn't have a clear opposition between each other. During the climax of the film, all the lords fought against those uncontrolled soul animals, which look more like a show of computer effects. It is hard for the audience to find a sense of identity from the characters.

C. Lack of Cultural Connotation and Independent View of Value

According to the layering mode of film analysis, culture can be regarded as the sum of lifestyles and inner relations, and people can only observe its visual parts from the outside, including clothing, language behaviors and buildings, etc. that is like the top layer of iceberg exposed out of the water. The middle layer is the cultural points of view and value systems that can be understood by explanation, such as faith, national traditions, and social norms and so on. The bottom layer is a deep structure, including the world's basic assumptions that people have learned when they were young, such as human nature, human relations, time and space, etc., which are hidden in the subconscious mind of people and guide people's surface-layer behaviors and attitudes towards the world.⁴

In *Journey to the West*, Wu Chengen clearly put forward the theme and value of the novel is "minds up, all kinds of monsters up; minds off, all kinds of monsters off". Humanity

³ Shi Song, Human Instinct Badness and Their Pursuit of Kindness: The Comparison of Philosophical Ideas in The Lord of the Rings and The Journey to the West, Journal of Hubei Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science), Mar. 2015.

⁴ Song Suchen, Analysis on the Cross-Culture of Film from Different Aspects, Film Art, 2006

is the focus of the novel, which makes *Journey to the West* with realistic metaphors. In *Lord of the Rings*, the rings represented the evil sides of human nature. Once their desires get out of control, people often will lose themselves at some point. Only faithful people can resist temptations.

Released in 2015, *Monster Hunt* did better than *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* on the aspect of setting up view of value. *Monster Hunt* tells a story that a young man called Tianyin accidentally got pregnant with the upcoming monster king, and escaped from all kinds of monsters under the protection of monster hunter Xiaofeng. During the journey, they gradually had feelings for the little monster king, and ultimately fought with evil monsters with human appearance in order to guard the little monster king out of monster killing house. The film's plots are clearer, with simple relations of characters. The film promotes the universal value that humans and monsters can live together harmoniously, and it also promotes human's compassion and the spirit of hating evils as enemies.

D. Computer Special Effects Covering Story Deficiency and Appearances Covering Acting Skills

The development of western magical fantasy films has a deep relation with the development of computer digital special effects. The use of special effects has maximally showed all kinds of absurd bizarre imaginations that films want to present. If there are no computer effects, we would never see the Hobbits with a pocket-sized body, angular ears and huge feet, and we would never see students of magic academies sitting on their brooms in a Quidditch game in *Harry Potter* series.

Under the impact of European and American films on the market, the audiences now become pickier to the domestic film effects. The entire film of *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* didn't have a real shot, and all shots were from action captures and computer post-synthesis. However, the subtle facial expressions and emotions the film showed seemed a bit powerless. Except Fan Bingbing and Chen Xuedong's little facial expressions, the other characters in the film were all poker faces, almost without any facial expressions. Moreover, the hair effect processing of the mythical animal called Teeth of Cangxue reflected that the director paid more attention to details, which is good. When Teeth of Cangxue fell into the Soul Tomb, and when soul animals were combating in the second half part, the film effects processing looked rough.

Although *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* gathered 11 good looking stars and used the propaganda banner of "the first reality CG film in China", it still didn't avoid its failure of box office, without the support of clear story plots and complete characters images. The development of magical films cannot be separated from the technological innovation and promotion, but 3D films (Stereoscope Films) not only can stay in the aspects of producing visual stimulation and sensory consumption, but also can open up the road leading to the audience, to express creators' thoughts of religion, life and belief, etc.⁵

⁵ Wu Shenkun, Peng Jixiang, The Aesthetic Progress of Stereoscope Films: from Visual Spectacle to Concept Expression, Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), Jun. 2014.

E. Mixture of Chinese and Western Elements

In *Lord of the Rings*, there are immortal elves, brave and battlewise dwarves, the carefree hobbits, and the brutal Orcs. These modeling characteristics of different races can be described as elegant, vulgar, unadorned and brutal. There is a big difference on the modeling of different races, which makes it quite easy for the audience to distinguish them.

In *Legend of Ravaging Dynasties*, the modeling and names are completely chaotic. Sixth-degree apostle Tianshu Youhua has a traditional Chinese-style modeling, but the fourth-degree lord Teiyea wears a western-style dress. The name of Qiling's hometown is Fuze Town, which is a typical Chinese name. However, Royal City Glanerte and Leien City are western styled names. The audience will have doubts about the time and space backgrounds of the story. As for the setting of the characters' names, the blending of names with Chinese characteristics, such as Yinchen, Qiling and Shenyin, as well as names with western characteristics, such as Qila, Teiyea and Xiliuer, may make the audience confused.

IV. CONCLUSION

In Western countries, there is no actual boundary between magical fantasy and science fiction. *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* and science fiction films can be attributed to the same category — fantasy films.⁶ Western science fiction films started earlier. As early as the 19th century, the French science fiction writer Jules Verne wrote works such as *2,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Around the World In 80 Days*, and they were translated into multiple languages. Western magical fantasy films have a wealth of literary resources. Since 2001, J.R.R. Tolkien's novel has been adapted into the trilogy of *Lord of the Rings* and the trilogy of *The Hobbit*. Moreover, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* has been adapted into seven films.

Chinese films have a lack of imagination for a long time. As one of the most likely film type to break through the limitations of imagination film, domestic magical fantasy films made many attempts and achieved some good results in ten years, from 2008 till now. The Domestic magical fantasy films want to narrow the gap with the Western magical films, but also need to continue deep digging details from many aspects such as space-time construction, narrative and special effects. In addition, they should absorb nutrition from traditional novels, provide some magical fantasy stories with ideals and ambitions, and create a work with more audio-visual effects and emotional appeal.

Blind imitation of Western magical fantasy films is not the best choice. The vitality of Chinese films is rooted in the cultural and emotional connotation of the vast majority of local audience. Thus, paying attention to original works should be a breakthrough way.⁷ Guo Jingming released four films of *Tiny Times* in two years while Peter Jackson spent seven years to make *Lord of the Rings* series. Audiences are looking forward to works with thoughts rather than imitated stories with

⁶ Chen Xuguang, Wu Yandong, Thoughts on the Problem of Chinese Films Lacking in Imagination, Cotemporary Cinema, Nov. 2012.

⁷ Li Xin, Doubts about the Development of Domestic Magical Fantasy Film, New Films, Jul. 2015

disorder elements. The model of creation only for good box office and quick success will eventually result in popularity loss.

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