

# Transformation of Chinese Women's Cultural Identity Reflected in American Films

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## ABSTRACT

Since the first image of Chinese woman appeared in American film in the year of 1919, Chinese women's images in American films have experienced a great transformation in the past century. With the development and opening-up of China, more and more Chinese female characters appear in different types of American films, and their images have also become richer and diversified. It well reflects the transformation of Chinese women's cultural identity in American films. This paper firstly introduces the cultural background of Chinese women's images in American films, and summarizes the theoretical background of the study of the cultural identity of Chinese women reflected in American films. It then analyses the transformation and development of Chinese women's cultural identity reflected in American films during different periods of time in history. As time changes, Chinese women's images and cultural identity in American films have also changed.

**Keywords:** *Chinese women, cultural identity, American film*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the first film in 1896, film has become a new media and art form with its huge influence and appeal, and has participated in the shaping and dissemination of the Chinese image. The image of Chinese people in American films can be traced back to the film *Broken Blossoms* in 1919. The image of the first Chinese woman also appeared in the American film *The Red Lantern* in the same year. The image of Chinese women in American films has been shaped for nearly a hundred years. In the context of American films, Chinese women are first considered as being "Chinese" and "Oriental". Therefore, the shaping of the image of Chinese women in American films also reflects the attitude and cognition of American mainstream discourse towards Chinese. In different historical periods, due to the specific background of the times and the development and changes of China-US relationship, the Chinese images in American films also show different characteristics in different times. Similarly, the image of Chinese women in American films has gone through different historical stages. With the enhancement of China's comprehensive national power and the improvement of the country's international status, the status of Chinese women in American films has also been continuously improved, gradually changing the original marginal and fixed image characteristics.

This paper mainly studies on the Chinese women appeared in American films since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the historical development, this paper summarizes the images of Chinese women in American films in different historical periods from the perspectives of postcolonialism, feminism and cross-cultural communication. It analyses the main images of Chinese

women and the historical evolution of their characteristics in American films in the past century, and discusses the historical reasons for the development and evolution. It then summarizes the changes of Chinese women's cultural identity that have been shown in major American films, and discusses the cultural identity construction of the minorities in American society.

Firstly, this paper analyses and discusses the models and identity characteristics of representative Chinese women in American films. It takes the most typical images of Chinese women in American films as examples, and analyses those women's identities, social status, life experiences and personality characteristics reflected in those films, and explores the identity and status of Chinese women in American society from the perspective of mainstream white American discourse. It mainly focuses on the analysis of several typical Chinese female images appearing in American films, such as "dragon girl", "Madame Butterfly", "prostitute", and so on.

Secondly, this paper summarizes the historical process of the development and evolution of the image of Chinese women in American films and its inherent reasons. It bases on different time and historical backgrounds, and discusses several important historical events from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present time. The transformation of the images of Chinese women in American films can be divided into five periods, including the period from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period from the World War II to before the founding of New China, the period from the founding of New China to China's reform and opening up, the period from the reform and opening-up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the period since the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This paper selects the typical films of these historical periods, and uses the images of Chinese women in these

films as examples to analyse the cultural identity characteristics of the images of Chinese women in different historical backgrounds, and summarizes the changes in the cultural identity of the images of Chinese women. At the same time, combined with the background of the times, it analyses and summarizes the social and cultural motivations of the changes in the identity of Chinese women.

Thirdly, this paper summarizes the evolution of the cultural identity of Chinese women and the identity construction of ethnic minority women.

On the basis of analysing and discussing the characteristics of Chinese female images in American films and their historical development process, this paper summarizes the cultural identity changes of Chinese female images in American films, and points out that Chinese female images in American films have experienced a process of changes from being vilified and hostile to gradual normalization and diversification. With the development of the times and changes in the relations between the two countries, the cultural identity of Chinese women began to get rid of the state of being marginalized in the past, and gradually gained a much more independent status and their own cultural identity in American society. As an important part of ethnic minorities in American society, Chinese have also experienced the loss and reconstruction of cultural identities similar to those of other ethnic groups. The evolution of Chinese women's cultural identities also reflects American culture's perception and attitude towards Chinese culture.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In recent years, with the continuous improvement of China's comprehensive national power and international status, as well as the increasingly close cultural exchanges between countries in the context of globalization, Chinese scholars have also paid more and more attention to the research on the image of China and Chinese in various fields. These studies involve many fields such as politics, culture, art, literature and film studies. In film studies, related scholars' researches on Chinese women's images mainly focus on the study of film texts, which generally research and discuss the images of Chinese women in film texts. Until now, the only academic work that focuses on Chinese women in Hollywood films is written by Sun Meng which was published in the year of 2010. This work talks about Chinese women's images as the "Other" in many Hollywood films. It summarizes the Chinese female images that have appeared in the history of Hollywood films, and categorizes these female images into 15 categories, namely madame butterfly, prostitute, dragon Girl, Nora, Mulan, angels, demons, maids, slave girls, concubines, spider women, princesses, mothers, housewives and professional women [1]. It discussed the characteristics of the evolution of the image of Chinese women in the history of American films and pointed out the evolution of the images of Chinese women, and the relationship among time, culture, environment, and history.

It also analyzes the American mainstream ideology's perception of the Chinese people's images and their cultural identity.

There are also some academic papers which study on the image of Chinese women in American films. Here are some of the results. Li Yu (2009) analyzed the love stories between white men and Chinese women in American interracial romance films and pointed out that this type of Chinese women can never escape the fate of the role of being consumed, abandoned and conquered, which reflects the cultural status and politics of easterners. Gao Yang and Dou Kelin (2010) analyzed the image of Hua Mulan in the film *Mulan*. Kang Qin (2015) summarized and sorted out the changes in the image of Chinese women in Hollywood films. Zhang Shengli (2012) pointed out that American society's intuitive and limited impression of Chinese women has become an important source and realistic basis for the image of Chinese women in Hollywood films. Xu Yanrui (2013) discussed the Chinese female roles in Hollywood films since the 1990s and the changes in the Chinese image interpreted by those roles. Lv Yi (2014) analyzed the image of Chinese women in American films from multiple angles by the theory Orientalism. Zhao Fuxia (2015) summarized the common types of Chinese women's roles and images in this period between the year of 2000 and the year of 2014, and pointed out that the shaping of these characters has made some progress, when compared with those images 2000 years ago, but they still haven't got rid of the limitations of collective imagination by the American society. Liu Min (2016) analyzes the three aspects of American films: the foreign imagination under "Orientalism", the flexible presentation of Chinese images, and the new types of women under cross-cultural construction.

At present, in the field of literary studies, the analysis and research on Chinese women and their cultural identities in American literature has been relatively rich, but in the field of film studies, the main researches only focus on the types of Chinese women's images. There is still a lack of in-depth research on the cultural connotation of Chinese women's identity. In the future, there will be more and more scholars who will turn their research focus to the deep cultural connotation of the changes in the image of Chinese women in American films. That is to say, there will be more and more scholars who will pay their attention to the cultural identity of the images of Chinese women in American films.

### **3. ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHINESE WOMEN'S IMAGES IN AMERICAN FILMS**

#### ***3.1. The period from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century***

The Western postcolonial theorist Edward Said once pointed out in his book *Orientalism* that the East is almost a European invention. It has been a place full of romantic legends, rare and exotic objects, giving people a wonderful experience. The theoretical viewpoint of *Orientalism* holds that the Orient “was almost a European invention” [2]. It “had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” [3]. This is also reflected in the early American films. From 1919 to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the images of Chinese women in American films were the objects of vilification, ridicule and sarcasm by mainstream American discourse. The most representative films of this period are the films starred by the first Chinese actress in the United States, Anna May Wong. Those films include *The Red Lantern*, *The Toll of the Sea*, *Daughter of the Dragon*, *Shanghai Express*, etc. The images of Chinese women starring by Anna May Wong can be basically classified into two categories. The first one is the image of sexual prostitutes, dancers and mistresses, or dragon girls with certain evil qualities. Another one is the image of pure Chinese girls who are willing to sacrifice themselves for men—the image of “Madame Butterfly”. These two types of female images fully reflect the fixed stereotypes of Chinese images and Orientals in the American film contexts of this period, and also reflect the marginalized cultural identity and status of Chinese women in the United States under the background of China’s backwardness.

#### ***3.2. The period from the World War II to the founding of New China***

During World War II, China became an important member of the world’s anti-fascist alliance. China and the United States also formed an alliance. Therefore, the relationship between the two countries gradually became friendly. The attitude of the American people towards Chinese people from all walks of life has gradually changed. American people’s former negative attitude to Chinese people thus gradually became positive. This attitude is also reflected in American literary works and films. The most famous image of Chinese women on the screen during this period of time is the heroine O-Lan in the film *The Good Earth*, which shows the outstanding qualities of Chinese women’s hard work, courage and perseverance.

*The Good Earth* is adapted from a novel written by the American female writer Pearl S. Buck. In *The Good Earth*,

the author created a series of images of industrious and simple Chinese farmers by a drawing techniques with a sympathetic tone. She has vividly depicted those people’s family life and created “the soul of peasants” with a pen full of sympathy. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the novel was published, this work has crossed the gap between Eastern and Western cultures and has effectively changed western readers’ impression of China as being a mysterious country with a long history but is weak and backward.

Similarly, the film *The Good Earth* also truly depicts the courageous and hard-working Chinese women whose images have greatly changed American audience’s understanding of China and Chinese women.

#### ***3.3. The period from the founding of New China to China’s reform and opening up***

After the founding of New China, the United States and the Soviet Union began a decades-long Cold War. With the ossification of the relationship between China and the United States, the attitude of American films towards Chinese people has gradually turned hostile. The kind of Chinese women who were sexually colored and marginalized in the period of Anna May Wong returned to the screen. The typical representative is the dancing girl Suzie Wong in *The World of Suzie Wong*.

Directed by Richard Quine, the film *The World of Suzie Wong* mainly tells a story in which an American businessman named Robert falls in love with a Chinese prostitute Suzie Wong when he moves to Hong Kong to find a career.

#### ***3.4. The period from the reform and opening-up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century***

The period from the 1970s to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a time when China moved from a closed country to open-up, and the country’s national strength continued to increase. With the normalization of China-US relationship, the image of Chinese people in American films has gradually changed from being hostile to being normalized. In terms of the shaping of Chinese women’s images, the film *The Joy Luck Club* filmed in 1993 is a landmark work. It is the first film in American history which takes the life of the Chinese people as the main clue of the story. It takes two generations of Chinese women as the main characters and tells the life and emotional experiences of Chinese women in the United States from the perspective of women. It explores the predicament they face both in family and in society and the process of the identity construction of Chinese American women. In this film, Chinese women broke through the passive and marginalized status as the “Other” in past decades and began to obtain equal status and discourse right with men. This is also a true portrayal of the rising status of Chinese and Chinese women in American society.

Since then, in the films *Mulan* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Chinese women's spirit of independence, courage and active exploration has been further demonstrated. It can be said that this period is an important historical period when the images of Chinese women in American films gradually gained equal status.

### **3.5. The period since the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Since the beginning of the new century, China's comprehensive national strength has continued to increase. As the country gradually gain a higher international status and greater global influences, the images of Chinese women in American films has also changed. They are no longer the original single, rigid, and fixed images. They have become richer and much more diversified. Since the new century, the number of films that have portrayed the image of Chinese women has also been increasing. More and more Chinese women appeared in American films, such as *The Rush Hour*, *Cradle 2 the Grave*, *Charlie's Angels*, and so on. In those films, the images of Chinese women began to become full and enriched. They gradually got rid of their marginalized position and gained the right of discourse. Chinese women began to occupy a more important and active position in American films, and they have received more and more attention from American audiences.

## **4. THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE WOMEN'S CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Through the summary and analysis of the images of Chinese women in American films in different historical periods, it can be seen that in the United States, the images of Chinese women on the screen have gradually become more and more diversified from being vilified and marginalized. China and its status in American society have become increasingly important. In this process, Chinese women who once lost their identity gradually gained independent status and right to speak, and gradually re-established an independent cultural identity. This process of transformation also reflects the gradual acceptance of Chinese culture by mainstream American culture. Chinese women are an important part of minority women in American society. To a certain extent, the construction of the cultural identity of Chinese women also reflects the process during which women of other races in the United States rebuild their independent cultural identities.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

On the basis of analyzing and summarizing the images of Chinese women in different historical periods, this paper deeply analyzes and discusses the evolution and transformation of Chinese women's cultural identity in

American films during different historical periods. It mainly combines the characteristics of Chinese women appeared in American films in different historical periods and analyzes the cultural connotation of Chinese women's images in American films. It then explores the construction of cultural identities of minorities in American society. As there are not enough researches made by scholars in the past, this paper will probably make up for the deficiencies of existing research results to a certain extent and has certain innovative significance.

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