The Development of Asian Characters' Stereotypes of Ethnic Identity and Cultural Representation in American Films

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ABSTRACT

The paper discussed the stereotypes of Asian people developed in American films. Besides, it also talked about the impact of stereotypes and how people should deal with the impact of existing stereotypes. In order to solve this question, the paper used the qualitative method. To evaluate the creation and cognition of Asian stereotypes in society, a literature review was conducted, which included reading substantial reputable literature and reference materials, as well as combining data and information acquired from multiple platforms to conclude. This paper analyzed the stereotypes of Asians in American movies from three of the most classic stereotypes in selected five films. These films were promoted before they were released due to the media's influence, and they spread quickly compared to decades earlier. This paper concluded that although it was undeniable that stereotypes represent the spread of a country's culture to some extent, the stereotypes of Asians in American films needed to be stopped. At the same time, the conclusion of this paper was a general phenomenon and idea.

Keywords: Asian characters' stereotypes, American Film, cognitive theory, social identity theory, Hollywood

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In recent years, with the continuous development of the Chinese film market, more and more films have been imported to China. Whether live-action or cartoon films, they have different audiences in China, but they all have a huge market. The themes of films are becoming more and more abundant, for example, science fiction, romance, patriotic education, and war. Because of the influence of the media, these films are hyped before they are released, so they spread fast compared to decades ago. Currently, Hollywood studios account for 25 percent of box-office receipts for revenue-sharing films in China [1]. Despite their modest success, Hollywood's reputation in China has not been entirely positive. Some Hollywood films have done well at the box office in China while others have failed. One of the main factors affecting the box office is the character set. In the past, Hollywood films discriminated against African Americans, Asian Americans. Therefore, those films with racial discrimination or racial stereotypes were not popular with people of these discriminated races.

Racial stereotypes of Asians have also been found in Hollywood films many times. In recent years, there has been growing concern about Asian stereotypes in films. The phenomenon of stereotype certainly did not emerge overnight. It has a close connection with the historical background. Over the centuries, the issue of stereotypes about Asian people slowly appeared on the screen. Early Asian characters in Hollywood films in the early 1900s were presented in fixed forms, such as mysterious, menacing, and Asian [2]. In 1920s American films, Asian characters were the typical villains, but they are usually played by Caucasians [2]. In American films, there are many white actors as main characters, while some criminals, prostitutes, good students, or inarticulate roles are often played by black or Asian actors. Especially

Chinese and Japanese men from the 1900s to the 1940s are portrayed by white people. In other words, Caucasian actors imitate Asian characteristics and play stereotypical roles [3].

There are many ways for white people to pass themselves off as Asian. The presentation of the characteristics of Asian characters and the setting of character roles in American film is a reflection and expression of Americans' prejudice and racial discrimination against Asians in life. The most common is to paint white actors' faces yellow, where white directors deliberately emphasize the difference in skin color between Asians and whites. Apart from all that, are the stereotypes of Asians in American films much better now? The Asian stereotypes include that women are submissive. They always listen to their husbands; Asian students are all good at math. In other words, Asian students are likely to be math geniuses in the eyes of some people who have stereotypes about Asia. Even in Hollywood films, Chinese actors play Korean characters. In the minds of most white directors, Asian faces from different countries are very similar: yellow faces, so it is acceptable to cast a Chinese as a Korean. There are several examples of racial caricatures in Hollywood history. People of color, particularly African Americans and Asians, have been repeatedly targeted. Take, for example, the bucktoothed Mr. Yunioshi in Audrey Hepburn's 1961 film Breakfast at Tiffany's, whose stereotypical "English" dialect was meant to insult Japanese people. He was well-known, and there were numerous such examples.

In 1966, Bruce Lee's appearance gave Hollywood film directors another stereotype -- Kung Fu. Suddenly, the stereotype of Asians went from being weak to being Kung Fu. One must admit that Bruce Lee broke the stereotypes of Asians that had been built into people's minds and presented himself as a positive and powerful figure in the films. However, this trait alone does not eliminate many prejudices against Asians. Therefore, this research report will conduct an in-depth analysis and research on the development of stereotypes in American films based on these stereotypes.

1.2 Research Gap

Before this, many scholars have studied Asian characters in American films. For example, the article Asian American Media Representation: A Film Analysis and Implications for Identity Development analyze the representation of Asian-Americans in the media. What's more, the focus was on whether there were any forms of rejection or validation of stereotypes portrayed by Asian characters in film over the past 25 years [4]. However, what the article lacks are specific stereotypes that Americans have about Asians. Therefore, this research report will conduct in-depth analysis and research on the development of stereotypes in American films based on

these stereotypes and find out what are the development of Asian characters' stereotypes of ethnic identity and cultural representation in American films. Before the survey, the hypothesis was that Americans' stereotype of Asians would improve over time based on their understanding of Asian culture.

This study is important in today's society because stereotyping Asians in films can have broader damaging effects. Asians now make up about 7% of the nation's population, and their numbers are expected to exceed 46 million by 2060, nearly four times the current total [5]. This article will focus on the stereotyping of Asian characters in American films, analyze their causes and encourage the elimination of cultural and racial inequities. Entertainment or media is influenced by social culture and identity. It is a medium that reflects the mainstream values of the whole society. At the same time, this kind of media has a huge impact and also affects back people's thoughts in society. A large number of stereotypes shown in films will reinforce people's prejudice against this group and deepen the simple and limited label of this group. Over time, people solidify these stereotypes, and they unconsciously turn into discrimination and inequality. Therefore, when people promote racial equality on the streets, they should also start with films and other media with strong influence and communication power. Art is social, and people can use it as a medium to change people's minds, be open-minded and non-judgmental, rather than perpetuating stereotypes. In addition, media portrayals of characters can form certain opinions about an entire race, regardless of their precious merits and unique value [6]. Not only does the outside large number base group or the society have a deeper stereotype on this group, but more importantly. This group's cognition and evaluation of themselves will also be affected by the social mainstream. The doubt and denial of self-identity will even lead to the disappearance and extinction of multi-culture in the world.

1.3 Structure of Paper

This study will analyze and summarize the main external stereotypes of Asians and the reasons for their formation, as well as the presentation of stereotypes of Asian characters in American films. This paper will introduce the social background and historical factors of the development and formation of Asian stereotypes, and summarize three major aspects of stereotypes: appearance, skills, and personality. By analyzing the three stereotypes presented in the films and the box office of these films to represent their influence, the harm of the propaganda of the films on racial stereotypes was studied. It is hoped that using art as a medium can promote racial equality and cultural diversity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cognitive theory

The dominant aspects of cognitive theory involve the interaction between mental components and the information that is processed through this complex network [7]. Through the intellectual development of human beings from infants to adults, the content of the cognitive theory is constantly being enriched and perfected. Especially during the period of infants and young people, children's cognition will develop rapidly, because children will go through four different stages of intellectual development, from the simplest sensorimotor stage to the final stage of formal operational before adulthood.

In cognitive theory, intelligence and development are usually regarded as different manifestations of the same content in theory, but it is not the case. Intelligence is improved after continuous ingestion of knowledge, and development is changed after experiencing different experiences [8]. Cognitive theory is the study of human psychology of learning from the perspective of intelligence and development. Unlike cognitive theory, social theory is more inclined to study society and the crowd. It pays more attention to explanatory concepts, and on the premise of having data, makes logical speculations and assumptions. The trend of the whole society will change because of the thinking of many people [8]. Social theory is an attempt based on the theory of purposeful action. Therefore, after having some data, the public tried to get a purposeful theoretical basis for action, and finally changed the trend of society [9]. The most important thing in social theory is that it is the study of the whole, not the study of individuals like social studies, after studying the whole, from the level of individual behavior to the movement of macro social functions.

2.2. Social Identity Theory

In social identity theory, a social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group [10]. Participants were assigned to groups randomly, and when they were asked to divide into groups, they preferred to choose in-group members other than out-group members [11]. From this small act, people can see that when people are categorizing each other into groups they consider themselves and others as group membership instead of individuals. Therefore, social identity theory originated from the gospel of group membership can instill meaning when it comes to social situations [11].

Piaget developed cognitive theory when he was working at Binet institute in the 1920s [12]. He was intrigued by children giving wrong answers when he asked a question that required logical thinking. He believed that these wrong answers reveal significant differences between adults' and children's intelligence [12]. Children and adults think differently, and they build up their knowledge about the world slowly by themselves without the need of other people filling things in their heads. Piaget aims to study the development of basic concepts of numbers and quantity [12]. Through using both naturalistic and controlled observations, he studied children from infancy to adolescence [12].

2.3. Conclusion

According to the research question, social identity theory could give the idea that people use social characterization to generalize people into in-group and out-group members. Tajfel would argue that people relate in-group members with positive traits and out-group members with negative traits and this is how stereotypes form. Cognitive theory may link to the research question that when children are growing, they might build up knowledge about the people around them slowly. Stereotypes might form naturally while they grow.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The research method of this paper is the qualitative method. To analyze the formation and cognition of Asian stereotypes in society was first developed based on the literature review using social identity theory and cognitive theory, through reading extensive reliable literature and reference materials and combining data and information collected from various platforms to get the conclusion. The research object of this study is three typical Asian stereotypes, and its exploration is presented in the form of American films. Data included in the research include but are not limited to online and offline film ratings and literature datasheets. The research uses such a variety of data collection methods, and on this basis, further divides the stereotypes of Asians into appearance, skills, and personality aspects. This paper analyses these three dimensions in American films and summarizes the influence of film serves as an artistic medium to present and spread the stereotypes.

3.2 Research Object

This essay is mainly talking about the history of the stereotypes of the Asia characters develop in American film, which includes the aspects of different races and cultural backgrounds as well. The Asian characters in the American film were usually emphasized and differentiated by different skin colors. Besides, they were always deliberately stigmatized as bookworms who could do nothing but read books. These are all the obvious stereotypes in American films. "In social psychology, a stereotype is a fixed, over-generalized belief about a

particular group or class of people [4]. By stereotyping, this paper infers that a person has a whole range of characteristics and abilities that the paper assumes all members of that group have.

Stereotype means a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing, so Asian stereotype is the fixed image or idea on the whole Asian ethnic groups. Asians refer to citizens of Asian descent, mainly including Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Indian Americans, Filipino Americans, and so on. This paper focused on three typical Asian stereotypes that are shown the most in Western movies. they are divided into Appearance, skills, and personalities. Based on the research question and the literature review, the two main theories are Social Identity theory and Cognitive theory.

3.3. Americans' Stereotypes on Asians

3.3.1 Appearance

One of the most common stereotypes of Asians in American films is their physical appearance. In the eyes of many Americans, Asian men are generally small-eyed, close-cropped, and short. In addition, Asian characters in Hollywood films are often represented in costumes. In other words, to tell which country people with Asian faces are playing in a film, people can often tell which country they are playing simply by looking at their costumes. For example, the character Wong portrays the Asian character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe Films *Doctor Strange*. He is an Asian man with mysterious powers in the film. He is a Chinese character who learns his magic from Ancient ones. In the film, his chubby figure is dressed in traditional Chinese clothes, and he is also carrying a birdcage and a suitcase in Chinese style. When the character came out, people saw the clothes and they thought of Asia. His physical features would then reinforce the belief that he was Asian.

3.3.2 Skills

The stereotype of Asians is that they are good at studying -- especially Math. In many American films, scriptwriters exaggerate the point that Asians learn well to highlight the differences between Asians and whites. The academic performance of Asians in many American films contrasts sharply with that of whites. Most of the time, Asian kids do well academically, whereas white kids tend to do worse academically than Asian kids. For example, there is a film called Fresh off the Boat (See Figure 1). In this film, Eddie Huang got a straight-A on his report card while the American boy got C.

Besides, for kids and adults, men and women, the math stereotype seems to be a label that is hard to shake. For example, in the film *Inside No.9*, the woman is portrayed as a 'nerd' who loves math. She wore glasses

and was neatly dressed in a shirt. Meanwhile, black hair is also one of the symbols of Asian people. In the film Young Sheldon, this shocked little boy is sharing how he is seen differently because of his Asian identity. He tricked others into going into Sheldon's math competition, just because he is Asian.

Figure 1. Young Sheldon [13]

3.3.3 Personalities

Furthermore, in American films, many Asian people, especially Asian men, are shy, introverted, and unable to express themselves. In the film the edge of seventeen, Erwin was shy to give a presentation. He was not used to making a speech in front of so many people. Besides, he was nervous because he was not confident in speaking in public. When Erwin and Nadine dated, they mentioned their family. Erwin noted that his father was not an expressive person, either. He did not say "I love you easily" [14]. On the contrary, in this film, Asian men are always shy to express their true feelings and hide their true feelings under a "bad temper."

Not only that but American films also probably mention gender inequality in China's s history. Their stereotype of China has still stuck thousands of years ago. In the film Man on Fire, the girl learned about the history of China. She knew that China had emperors in the past. there was polygamy, but not every emperor had more than a thousand concubines. Girls are stereotyped about China with only partial information. The stereotype is that men and women are not equal. Men are in a higher position than women. There is no denying that it was true in China thousands of years ago, but nowadays with the development of the country, The inequality between men and women is no longer as it was in ancient times. Therefore, film media is influenced by the mainstream of society, but also greatly affects the thoughts of people in society. It can be seen that a large number of stereotypes in films will deepen people's s prejudice against this group. And even solidify those stereotypes and turn into discrimination and inequality. Moreover, in American films, Asian characters are portrayed as supporting characters, nerds, not articulate, introverted, bad at sports, and so on. Those stereotypes are being spread among a wide range of people using these media. It causes a huge influence on Asians and the interrelationship between films and Asian characters, even more, deepens the stereotypes of Asians. Such immaterialized presentation not only solidifies people's stereotype of this race and

causes discrimination, but even leads to the disappearance of self-identity within the race.

4. RESULT

In conclusion, people can be sure that American films do contain Asian stereotypes, especially the three types the paper has identified. The result is the same compared with the hypothesis. According to social identity theory, in future American films, these Asian stereotypes might still appear because these are the features of certain types of groups. Because of the minimal group paradigm, groups members will favor individuals with similar features, people would naturally do the same thing if they are in the same group, so this kind of stereotype cannot be eliminated. The influence of the media cannot be ignored. According to the article the Influence of Media Violence on Youth, the media is widespread violence in the media and teenagers spend a lot of time on media, which has a bad influence on them [4]. Likewise, media plays an important role in spreading stereotypes about other countries. If the media disseminates a biased culture of a country, then those who believe the media information will probably gradually form a stereotype of that country. Thus, the first time a person is exposed to information with a stereotype, after that, no matter what information he receives against the stereotype, he will insist that the information about the stereotype he is first exposed to is correct.

5. DISCUSSION

Through the influence of the media on people's opinions described earlier, the stereotypes of Asians in American movies still exist today. With the development of movies, from the past decades to the present, Hollywood movies have been trying to put Asian people in their movies. Stereotypes of Asians are also being concretized, from the days when women wore elegant Hanfu and cheongsam to the days that all Chinese knew kung fu. Next, stereotypes are specific to Asian appearance, for example, small eyes, flat nose. And then to Asian study is good, especially math. then there is the Asian personality: inarticulate, shy, and reserved. According to Fuller, in American society, people of color are stereotyped not only on the basis of their race but also on the basis of their gender [8]. The dominant stereotypes of Asian women in popular culture are of male-submissive emotional sex objects: concubines, geisha, etc [15]. As a result, stereotypes of Asians in American films have not disappeared and become more specific over time, making it easier to create "false" impressions [16]. One suggestion is that American movies could be made with some images that break the traditional American image of Asians so that Americans can gradually accept the true characteristics of Asians.

6. CONCLUSION

There has been a growing percentage of Asian stereotypes in Hollywood films, Asian characters usually playing characters such as good students or inarticulate roles. White actors or actresses often portray themselves as Asian characters in three aspects: physical appearance, skills, and characteristics. The research paper investigated the main stereotypes of Asians in Hollywood films and the reasons for their formation. By learning the historical context and the stereotypes presented in the films, the paper is able to study the consequence of the racial stereotypes in these films. Through reviewing the two theoretical theories cognitive theory and social identity theory and doing analysis on the films Doctor Strange, fresh off the Boat, inside No.9, Young Sheldon and The edge of seventeen. His research's final conclusion is that American Hollywood films do contain racial stereotypes, especially the ones that the research paper identified. The major issue that the research article is trying to convey is that the racial stereotype needs to stop. Asians should not be defined as a group of people with certain characteristics.

The paper is trying to raise awareness of this problem that is happening a lot recently and hoping to stop the propaganda and the negative consequences among Asians. However, the number of films that the research paper could take and analyze is limited because not every film contains an Asian character. Therefore, the number of evidence is small, and the conclusion might not be convincing. Another limitation is that the stereotypes of Asians cannot be eliminated due to the social background or historical context. Furthermore, the research paper only takes into account films that were produced recently, the number of films is limited as well. Stereotypes are normal labels of someone or some countries. But when stereotypes are presented to the public, media should report them truthfully, not exaggerate and discriminate based on speculation. In future films, the presentation of Asian characters should not be exaggerating a few fixed certain types of images, it should be a variety of figures.

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