

The Changes of Chinese Figures in Hollywood Movies

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization and digitalization, "national image", as an important cultural soft power, plays an important role in a country's voice and influence in the international community. A good national image not only requires a country to have strong hard and soft power but also requires a country to be able to show this power. The communication of film works has the characteristics of non-direct and subtle, which makes it easier to form a deep and unforgettable impression, and it is easy to let the other side feel the image of a country in all aspects in cross-cultural communication. With its powerful influence on images and stories, Hollywood has become one of the most influential media in conveying national values around the world. Since Hollywood began in the 19th century, it can be said that the history of the image of China in Hollywood films is a history of being othered. By telling and representing China, Hollywood films are telling and representing America, thus realizing America's own cultural identity and identity, which is determined by the dichotomous way of thinking in Western culture. The image of Chinese characters has evolved and changed with time and historical events, and can generally be divided into four periods. Over time, this paper will summarize the complete stigmatization, the beginning of re-examination and change, the fantastic turn of events, and the opening up to richness and diversity to analyze and reflect the important stages that the image of Chinese in Hollywood has gone through. In addition, it will discuss and analyze the contexts of then and now, and the impact of these contexts on later developments. Until now, more and more Chinese characters can be seen in Hollywood, which is great progress compared to the past, however, there are still prejudices in the industry. This paper attempts to illustrate the transformation of Chinese characters in Hollywood films through context and values, aiming to reveal the cultural hegemony of the United States at different times and, from there, to go deeper, explore the reasons behind it, find its connection with culture, politics, and economy, and, based on that, try to explore the solutions.

Keywords: *Hollywood, Chinese, images, cultural hegemony*

1. INTRODUCTION

Early Hollywood movies have been denigrating and alienating the image of Chinese people, and the "yellow scourge" has become the United States of China. With the rapid development of China's economy in recent years, China has occupied an important position in the world film market. To win the Chinese market, Hollywood films have had to change their negative image of the Chinese, and the Chinese on the screen have become brave, righteous, and enterprising. The change in the

image of Chinese people does not mean that America recognizes Chinese values. On the one hand, Hollywood movies seize the huge profits of the Chinese market and enhance the image of Chinese people to please Chinese audiences, on the other hand, Hollywood movies change the ways and means of cultural penetration and colonization, from the nakedly vilified and demonized image of China in the early days to the covertly Americanized image of China later. The movies transplanted American cultural values into Chinese images in a more covert way propagated the American cultural value system, subtly influenced Chinese

audiences to gradually identify with and accept the American cultural value system, and realized the cultural invasion and colonization of China. This unfairness in cultural communication has directly led to the phenomenon of our lack of discourse in international film and television communication, which has seriously affected our right to express ourselves to the world fairly and objectively. From the first days of pigtailed and foot-binding to kung fu and Chinese cooking, movies have framed the mystery of the former Chinese and the insignificance of the modern Chinese, and have brought such stereotypical images to millions of households around the world. The consequence of this "misrepresentation" is not only that the real Chinese are misunderstood, but also that the distorted images are difficult to be dissolved in reality. This paper analyzes the transformation of this image from a temporal perspective through the influence of various factors, taking specific representative films as examples, and explores the value hegemony behind the American film culture. Regardless of the transformation of China's image, the image of China has always been, a product of America's othering of China. The negative impact of this "othering" of China warrants vigilance by the Chinese film industry and Chinese society as a whole to avoid the "othering" of itself by studying its root causes, to shape and convey a true and correct image of China to the world.

2. COMPLETE STIGMATIZATION (LATE 19TH CENTURY - EARLY 20TH CENTURY)

As an ideological state apparatus, Hollywood has long been a crucial tool of American cultural infiltration and colonization. Whether it's investment production, star lineup, marketing strategy, box office revenue, audience numbers, and international influence, Hollywood movies dominate the world. Hollywood movies portray the United States as the ideal country of freedom, equality, and democracy while rewriting, distorting, and stigmatizing the culture of other people, promoting American ideology, values, and way of life, and realizing its cultural hegemony.

The portrayal of Chinese images in Hollywood movies began in the silent film era at the end of the 19th century. When the American film industry had just started, there was a widely spread ethos called "yellow peril theory", claiming that the yellow race is physically barbarian and weak, worship violence, and lacks basic civilization. And "yellow fever" was becoming the pronoun of Chinese, showing great discrimination against China. Plus, the corruption of the Qing dynasty and the ill performance of Chinese officials in international events left a wicked and dark impression of the Chinese to the world. Therefore, it was hardly possible for Hollywood to present the image of the Chinese brilliantly.

In this context, in 1912, the British novelist Sax Rohmer created a series of novels by Dr. Fu Manchu out of thin air. The author described the image of Fu Manchu like this in the book: You can imagine a person who is thin and tall, shrugs his shoulders often, looks silent like a cat, walks secretly, and has Shakespearean eyebrows and Satan. The face, the bald head, the slender eyes, often flashing green light; it combines all the conspiracies and tricks of the Orientals, and uses them to perfection; it can mobilize all resources at any time, and do it without knowing the ghosts. Feel; the key is that this person is Chinese. In 1929, the first Fu Manchu series film *The Mysterious Doctor Fu Manchu* filmed by Paramount Corporation of the United States began to be released, followed by more than a dozen series of movies such as "Face" and "Mask of Fu Manchu" was released one after another. In every movie, Dr. Fu Manzhou is set to be extremely treacherous and sinister, performing all kinds of murder and torture; and the ending of the movie is often that Fu Manzhou is defeated by the white man, died punitively, and then weird^[1]. The earth is reborn at the beginning of the next movie. As the master of the "yellow peril theory," Fu Manchu concentratedly reflected the negative impressions of white Americans towards China, thus reflecting the hatred of the American masses towards the Chinese. Another classic character who existed almost simultaneously with Fu Manzhou is Charlie Chen. Charlie Chen comes from a series of novels written by American journalist Earl Biggers, based on the Chinese American Hawaiian police detective Zheng Ping. There were about 49 movies produced in the western country relating to Charlie Chen. The character reflected one of the images of Chinese to Americans and was popular with the public, standing for justice on the contrary to Fu Manzhouli. However, the character did not speak for the Chinese people but a perfectly obedient character that fitted the fantasy of an ideal representative of the minority. The novels described that Charlie Chen spoke awkward and grammatically false English, was full of what Confucius once said, but the rare emphasis on what China was like.

Besides, Hollywood movies generally preferred drawing the unpleasant images of the Chinese, molding a large number of stereotypes, prejudice against China that were stubborn, evil, and uncivilized. Among those movies, the majority of the appearing characters were lower citizens, prostitutes, cheap labor workers, and drug addicts, which were obviously negative and used on purpose viciously. Chinese figures were stigmatized as men being brutal, vile, and sinister while women were shameless and slutty. Americans consider the yellow race as a potential threat to their dominance and tried desperately to stigmatize its image. Taking Mr. Fu Manzhou for instance, it was a perfect representative of Chinese evil figures and the impression lingered long in Americans' minds. The attitude of Hollywood took was also under the circumstance that time, What's more, it not

only catered up to the public's imagination of the Chinese but intensified and deepened the "yellow peril theory" and brought about misunderstandings for generations. It was undoubtedly an act of American cultural hegemony but unfortunately, an inevitable consequence of being left behind in the unstoppable wave of time, for America along with other western countries had prospered during Industrial Revolution while China's Qing dynasty was a zombie. All in all, by vilifying and demonizing the image of the Chinese, Hollywood movies shaped the decadent, backward, and foolish Chinese civilization, highlighted the superiority and advanced nature of western civilization and wore a layer of rationalization and justice for the Western invasion of China.

3. START OF RE-EXAMINATION AND CHANGES (1931—MID 20TH CENTURY)

In 1931, With the outbreak of China's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, Western countries, represented by the United States, began to re-examine China. Hollywood movies started to describe and present Chinese figures from a positive perspective, attaching a notice to the kind and brave national characteristic. Nevertheless, the descriptions were still with the color of discrimination. Particularly, Hollywood movies in China then were about love stories between a white male and a Chinese female in general. Moreover, Yellow men admiring white women, yellow women giving arms to white men, white men being the conquerors and controllers above the yellow people were the dominant theme of that period. Therefore, even it was a seemingly kind and friendly figure, behind it was still the idea of the Chinese being inferior. The goodness from Hollywood movies was an unfair judgment to China.

Cheng Ring, the hero of the film *Falling Flower* (1919), was a kind and compassionate Chinese who adored Lucy, a white girl, but dared not express it; Their love for white girls failed and they eventually committed suicide. Behind the film's surface narrative structure lies a racist sexual taboo, and the combination of yellow men and white women is considered taboo, highlighting the racial superiority of white people over the yellow. Cheng, who bent over, shrugged his shoulders, and frequents the big smokehouse, is a symbol of the mental and physical weakness of the "sick man of East Asia", while General Gong is imperious, believes in the army, military power, and expansion, and forces the girls much smaller than himself to be a symbol of feudal destination. General Cheng and General Gong became the symbol of Chinese civilization in the eyes of Americans, while white women were the symbol of the advanced Western civilization promoted by the United States, and the suicide of two Chinese-admiring Western women after unsuccessfully was the manifestation of the eventual demise of American masturbation of Chinese civilization at that time."

Another movie that was symbolic for the background that age was the *Good Earth* (1937), adapted from the novel written by the U.S. writer Pearl Buck. The movie was a cut and gained great popularity with the audience since it was shown. The author Pearl Buck herself was taken to China when she was merely three-month-old and raised here for throughout forty years. The authentic living background provided her with solid writing material and the effort did pay off for winning the Nobel prize in 1938 with the novel *The Good Ground*. What's more, the actress Louise Rainer who played the heroine of the movie version also won the Oscar prize, from which we can easily tell the popularity of the work. The *Good Ground*, the first Chinese-themed work to win the Nobel Prize in literature, described a small-town Chinese farmer named Wang Long, married to a landowner's sister-in-law, Alan, and the two men worked hard to keep their homes, and their life was not long; Coming, Wang Long with his wife and children to live a difficult life uprooted from home, an accident, picked up some treasures, Wang Long began to lead a luxurious and extravagant life, and Alan never abandoned, and finally the husband and wife returned to the land, completed with a happy ending. Although the success of the film was undoubtedly a milestone for Chinese figures' destigmatization, what's noticeable is that the actors of leading characters were all white instead of Asian, not to mention Native Chinese. And the famous Chinese-born Actress Anna May Wong failed in obtaining the character who was Chinese.

The political background in the early 19th century was chaotic and variable at any moment, and each change may lead to the influence on the relationship between nations and the image of a country^[2]. Destructing and rebuilding the image of a nation was undoubtedly an enormous task and took the work of millions of its people with decades to go. During a turbulent war age, it was indeed a good thing to witness the transformation of Hollywood's view of the Chinese, into a brighter side. Meanwhile, we could not forget that the temporary and newly existing benevolence was under the huge history event and covered with American superiority and artificial fantasy towards the orient culture and people of it. Many a time, a lot of misunderstandings and dislikes kept lingering in the movies. Another consequence of movies this phase was the impact on Western's new one-sided stereotype for Chinese figures that China equaled to the countryside, farmland, conventional customs, and female farmer.

4. A MAGICAL TWIST BY ONE (1966-2000)

In the late 20th century Hollywood even the whole world has come to witness an incredible figure who presented himself as a historical culture symbol of the Chinese. The essential change of images of Chinese

characters was started by him – the very Bruce Lee. It was this person that changed how the world considered China, by representing a strong, powerful, heroic personality and breaking down the stigma against the Chinese being cowardly and weak. His presence could never be ignored but branded into our memory as a true hero. Likely, the Chinese were bonded with a new impression of Kung Fu, but at least, it is a positive one this time. For so long after him, Hollywood kept producing films about China around the core topic of Kung Fu which turned into a national symbol. On one hand, it offered more opportunities for the Chinese to appear on the screen. On the other hand, the type of movies about Chinese figures and persisting opinion were fixed to Kung Fu, refusing lots of Chinese cultures buried behind.

In 1966, Bruce Lee made his Hollywood start, playing Kato, the supporting actor in the TV series *The Blue Bee Man*. In 1971, back in Hong Kong, Bruce Lee made the first kung fu film, *Brother Tangshan*, adapted from a true story. "Tangshan" was from the overseas Chinese to China another name; In 1972, Bruce Lee filmed the film *Jing wu men* and *Mammoth Cross the River*, in which Bruce Lee used a double-intercepted stick to fight many people, "Chinese is not the sick man of East Asia" and other moments to stay in the anthology, greatly improving the Chinese's self-confidence, but also profoundly changed the perception of Westerners. In 1973, Warner found Bruce Lee, and the two co-wrested the film *Dragon fight*, which was the pinnacle of kung fu, grossing \$3.2 billion worldwide. Different from the past discrimination fu Manchuria's image of being obedient and capable, and Chen Charlie's image, with a high martial arts skills and fearless fighting spirit, Bruce Lee's kung fu film vividly set up a positive, full of masculinity of the Chinese hero, to defend their homeland, and protect the friends and relatives around him, regardless of personal safety, straight to the danger with brave resistance. Bruce Lee's on-screen image has a profound impact, directly adding a new word to the English language system -- KUNG FU.

However, compared to the same type of superheroes portrayed in Hollywood in the United States, such as James Bond in the 007 series. It is easy to tell the difference in comparison to Bond's image that Bruce Lee's side lacks sexual encounters, lack female characters, even in the face of temptation, but also quite a gentleman, which made Bruce Lee a little imaginary and aloof^[3]. At the same time, as an insurmountable peak, Bruce Lee also set a huge shadow for later Chinese actors to enter Hollywood, that is, must have the capacity of Kung Fu, when it was the only golden ticket for Chinese actors to Hollywood. Years after Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan is another well-developed Chinese actor in Hollywood. He managed to become one of the only three Chinese actors who have left their marks on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and the other two were Anna May Wong and Bruce Lee. In Jackie Chen's movies, instead of focusing on the

fierce and furious martial movements, they attached more importance to the sense of humor, ease, and entertainment. Nevertheless, the Chinese characters were still pale and thin, serving the performance of Kung Fu and other amusing effects. The condition persisted for a long span and coming to the dawn of the 21st century, there were few movies themed on pure Chinese martial art and culture appearing in Hollywood. Frequently, Chinese figures showed up in movies as an accelerated symbol of China.

It was of no question that Bruce Lee's turning out had erased many of hostile prejudice against China, and build up a favorable characteristic based on traditional culture. He had succeeded in bringing in a magical twist of Chinese images and presented to the whole world What China was like and how brave her people were. Even till nowadays, if you ask a western what is his or her favorite Chinese, he or she would often say "Bruce Lee". Bruce Lee has become a sign of bravery, justice, rebellion against bullying, and peace. However, it didn't mean that unfair treatment for Chinese figures in Hollywood had come to an end^[4]. Chinese's image of Satan and courtier did not completely disappear from the depths of American consciousness This phenomenon of Satan and the image of the courtiers coexisted with the needs of American society, that is, the dangerous Satan was to be eliminated from American society, and taming courtiers became a tool to serve American society.

5. INCREASEMENT OF ABUNDANCE AND DIVERSITY

In the new century, Hollywood has opened its arms wider to Chinese figures, producing a chain of movies related to the new image of China, and this improvement was owing to both the former people's great effort and the change of the background of the new age. Most importantly, China has leaped since the beginning of the new period economically, setting up the stage for the growth of cultural soft power, as a result, it is inevitable Chinese characters would embrace a brighter day and broader world^[5]. The Chinese image is becoming more positive, the reasons for which are both political and economic. on October 6, 2011, and June 8, 2012, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives apologized to all Chinese Americans for the 1882 Chinese-Chinese Act, respectively. There was a matter of the development of Hollywood itself. The well-known film director Steven Allan Spielberg remarked that the biggest problem of Hollywood is innovation. Of course, the more important factor was the economy. China's economy has been growing at a high rate since the reform and opening up, and now GDP and box office are second only to the U.S., and the country's image has soared, especially after the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. This is gradually reflected in Hollywood movies.

In 1998, Walt Disney has presented the story of Hua Mulan, the famous female character who volunteered in the army for her father in Chinese culture, adapting into a more entertaining way and decorated with Disney's iconic singing and dancing part. Differing from the original story, the movie showed us a modern-minded woman who was passionate and brave, identifying with equality between men and women, and dare to pursue her happiness^[6]. It was an innovation of both Chinese culture and Hollywood. Hollywood had made a huge leap in recreating traditional Chinese stories and making them adapted to the current time. It was a representative of win-win mode between the relationship of Hollywood and China and set a successful example for later movies. Likely, in 2020, the real-person version of Mulan has made its way to the silver screen, using all Asian cast and half of the Chinese actors. The progress and improvement were so huge that we can not overlook compare to the all-white cast in early 20th century movies represented by the *Good Ground* (1938). We Chinese are thrilled to see the rise of Chinese rights and interests and the strength of our country. Through decades, the Chinese finally gradually come from being single-directed described with a bias to taking actions in writing and presenting our own stories.

In the disaster blockbuster 2012, China's Tibet became the last living barrier of mankind. United and efficient Chinese created the "Noah's Ark", and the kind-hearted Chinese mother saved the protagonist's family. In 2013's *Iron Man 3*, the biggest villain in the version of the comic book was originally Chinese, based on Fu Manchuria, but when the studio adapted it into a film, it was re-established as a non-Chinese character and featured a special edition for the Chinese audience. In the special Chinese version of the film, doctors and nurses, played by Wang Xuexuan and Fan Bingbing, have cured Iron Man's lethal disease with Traditional Chinese medicine. The actions Hollywood took was true to win the vast Chinese box though, we cannot deny that it was also a transformation of attitude towards China and the consciousness of de-stigmatizing Chinese figure. In Hollywood's sci-fi action blockbuster "*Bio-Crisis 5*", released in the same year, Li Bingbing, a Chinese-American female named Ida, had fought alongside Alice, as an important supporting actor and bio-chemical character, searching for the culprits of the spread of the virus, and eventually lead mankind through the holocaust^[7]. And *Death Squad* trilogy, the film which assembled Sylvester Stallone, Anjo Schwarzenegger, Jason Stenson, Mickey Locke, Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson and many other Hollywood hard men, Li Lianjie as a member of the *Death Squad*, continuously appeared as a positive role, contributing to directly enhance the image of the Chinese. Among these, the film that set the winner for the economy was *Transformers 4*, released in the summer of 2014. A collection of Many Chinese elements of the Hollywood film not only had Chinese companies'

investment, shooting in Hong Kong, China, Wulong Scenic Area, and many other places but also had a large number of Chinese advertising implants. Many Chinese actors naturally played more positive roles, including Li Bingbing playing a strong woman. Wu Gang played the stable government and so on. In the end, the film grossed 19.7 billion yuan in China and topped the global box office for the year with \$108.4 billion.

The rapid and enormous success gained in Hollywood for Chinese roles is the result of multiple factors. Firstly, the political power and changes in nations are far different from any time in the past, China in particular. With decades of development, no country nowadays dares to ignore China's growing strength and influence on different perspectives. America is no exception, having no way but to face the rise of China and quickly transform its perception and view of China and this is already to be seen in Hollywood^[8]. Secondly, it was due to China's noticeable economic development. On one hand, China nowadays is the second silver screen owner and box market only to America. Resulting in the flattering of Hollywood by describing more and more positive Chinese figures that the Chinese audience would go to the cinema and see, aiming at the interest of China's huge market. On the other hand, Chinese film industries have also soared at a rapid speed and formed tons of film companies of funds and authority. Therefore, more Chinese are now participating in Hollywood and becoming part of the production. Last but not least, it is our glory and pride to have such a distant and abundant history and traditional culture, uniting us as a whole and keep digging into it for more valuable cultural treasure to show to the world. We China are proving ourselves by actual work and progress.

6. CONCLUSION

Looking at the four different stages of change in the portrayal of Chinese characters in Hollywood films, we can see them as an exchange and communication between Chinese and American cultures. Initially, the image of Chinese people was generally imagined and interpreted by Westerners alone, but now we are collaborating to produce Chinese characters that truly represent Chinese origins and adapt to current realities. Through a detailed analysis of the transformation of the image of China in Hollywood films, we can summarize the reasons for this shift: in terms of political factors, the rise of China on the international stage has disrupted the international pattern of American domination of the world, and the search for normal and friendly relations with China has become an international diplomatic strategy of the United States. In terms of economic factors, China's huge film market has become a coveted target for Hollywood; in terms of cultural factors, in the face of the increasingly fierce cultural competition brought about by globalization, the realization of American cultural hegemony needs to start

with the most threatening China. After entering the new century, in the face of an increasingly powerful China, Hollywood has taken the initiative to cater to the interests of Chinese audiences and integrate Chinese resources into its films. More importantly, while Hollywood films have succeeded in making huge profits with the help of Chinese culture, they are also subliminally influencing Chinese people's thoughts, lives, and behaviors. This article compares the changes in Chinese characters in Hollywood films, aiming to provide a practical perspective, a starting point for thinking and pursuing goals. China must enhance its cultural competitiveness and compete for a place in the international cultural competition. Domestically, China, as the ancient civilization of the world, has rich traditional cultural resources, while its vast territory and special geographical location make it a country with a large number of spectacular and beautiful natural and human landscape resources, and the global success of Hollywood movies is the best case we can learn from and absorb. At a time when China's national power is increasing, whether we can create a comprehensive and three-dimensional China by making efforts at all stages of film production is not only a task facing Chinese filmmakers but also an important issue that should be included in the agenda of China's international image dissemination and cultural export. This process and goal is by no means easy and requires great efforts to achieve.

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