

A Look into the Globalization of the Film Industries Through the Lens of Kung Fu Films

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Abstract. This research project in film studies focuses specifically on the action film as a genre and historical developments. This research considers not only a historical perspective but also broader cinematic themes, including the role of the hero, masculinity, foreignness, special effects, and character development, with a specific focus on the Kung Fu genre. It seems most likely that satisfying a global audience does not require a hero who has all characteristics favored by different audiences; instead, adjusting elements of story lines and characterizations to reflect audiences with different backgrounds will enable stronger audience identification, as well as box office performance. It has become clear that there are differences between narratives and characterizations of Kung Fu heroes in movies targeted at American audiences and Chinese audiences; this information can help film productions' target audience strategies.

Keywords: Kung Fu, globalization, Hollywood, genres.

1. Introduction

The film industry in both the United States and China has taken on a globalization trend, with numerous films exporting to each other each year, and regional cultural elements being incorporated to each other's film productions. In contrast to the past when films were mainly made to attract native audience, today, the film industry is aiming to reach a much wider audience that spans national borders in order to generate larger revenues. As a result, efforts are continuously being made by filmmakers and producers to create within a global cultural context. The gap between Hollywood and Chinese film industries is narrowing in terms of film theme, portrayal of heroes, and film-making techniques. In the globalization process, Kung Fu films have witnessed an interesting development which becomes representative of the globalization of the entire film industry and is thus worth digging in. This report focuses on Kung Fu films made in China and Hollywood, discusses the cultural difference that affects Kung Fu film-making, traces the chronological stereotypes of Chinese Kung Fu heroes in Hollywood films, and explores how Kung Fu films from both countries can be better made to cater to a global audience.

2. Kung Fu Film within Different Cultural Contexts

In this section, I'll analyze how Hollywood directors and Chinese directors from the last century handle Kung Fu films differently in terms of the theme, portrayal of the hero, and the narrative, in order to cater to a distinct audience group. Two films starring influential martial artist Bruce Lee are used to elaborate the discussion, which are, *Enter the Dragon* (1973) directed by Hollywood director Robert Clouse and *Fist of Fury* (1972) directed by Chinese director Luo Wei. *Enter the Dragon* depicts the story of Lee, a martial arts expert who is recruited by a secretive agency to infiltrate a tournament on an island hosted by ex-Shaolin Temple member called Han. The agency believes that Han is involved in Opium trade and they need Lee to collect evidence of Han's crime. Later, when Lee is told that his sister's death is somehow caused by Han, Lee sets out on his revenge as well. *Fist of Fury* tells a story that happens in 20th century Shanghai. Returning to marry his fiancée, Chen Zhen learns that his master, Huo Yuanjia, a grandmaster of martial arts has died of illness. During the funeral, a group of Japanese Dojo students show and insult the Jingwu students by calling them "sick men of East Asia". Chen fights back and when he learns that the truth of his master's death is poison, he sets out on a doomed vengeance. Kung Fu movies as a genre has developed globally since decades ago and is continually garnering attention globally. Bruce Lee as a leading figure in martial arts has worked both in the Hollywood and many Hong Kong films. Thus, these two successful films are

representative when it comes to analyzing how directors of different cultures would interpret Kung Fu films in order to attract a specific group of audience. Hopefully, readers can obtain insights regarding how today's filmmakers can better design their films to appeal to a global audience.

Hollywood and Chinese films are two distinct film genres, both as a result of the audience they target and the technologies they use in playwriting and designing. A number of similarities exist between Chinese and American movies though, especially in the portrayal of heroes. Heroes are carved as super-heroes, whose personalities are extraordinary and rarely available in the real world. For example, Lee and Chen Zhen both have positive character setting and both are God-chosen ones to accomplish their missions. Although the two films both are sub-genre of action film, and both starring Bruce Lee, *Enter the Dragon* and *Fist of Fury* are distinct from each other in many ways.

First, there is a stark difference in the theme of the films, with *Enter the Dragon* focusing on individualism, and *Fist of Fury* preaching collectivism and patriotism. In *Enter the Dragon*, Lee's goal is to help restore the nation's sanctity and avenge his sister, while in *Fist of Fury*, avenging his master serves as a trigger of Chen's ultimate mission to reclaim the honor of the Chinese nation from Japanese. Such difference can be attributed to the variations in the cultural background between the United States of America and China. The American culture values individualism, i.e., opposing to sacrificing individual interests and rather emphasizing on the pursuit of individual goals. The opposite is the case of China as the nation values collectivism. In Chinese film productions, a hero is one who has the super power to save the entire village or nation and one who is willing to shoulder a grave duty even though such duty may cost his/her life. The hero in Chinese Kungfu films is concerned about the sufferings of the entire community, and his/her main purpose in life might be to alleviate his man's sufferings. In the end of *Fist of Fury*, Chen surrenders to the local inspector and as they exit the Jingwu school, Chen confronts a line of Japanese soldiers who point their weapons orderly at him. Seeing this, Chen makes a flying kick at the army as gunshots blow. Chen sacrifices for nationalism. Differently, films designed for the American audience usually feature a hero who is wary of the challenges but never forgets his/herself when trying to salvage the situation. Lee in *Enter the Dragon* falls into this category.

Second, handled by different directors, the portrayal of Bruce Lee as the leading actor is different. Directed by a Hollywood director, *Enter the Dragon* is specifically made for Hollywood fans and therefore portrays Lee as a confident and capable hero who is focused on restoring the sanctity of his country's values. There are not much backstory about Lee nor about the historical context. All that audience can see are his excellent Kung Fu skills and his determination to protect the Chinese culture against evil foreign infiltration. Lee fights on in the tournament to exhibit self-sacrifice as well as his determination to defeat oppression. As Klein states in his article titled "Martial Arts and the Globalization of US and Asian Film Industries", American films tend to introduce an aspect of humanity in their heroes, with human weaknesses despite the heroism being expected (Klein, 2004). In *Fist of Fury*, whose theme is anti-colonial, the backstory is given: dating back to colonial times, a national hero called Chen Zhen stands out to defend against and defeat all other martial arts experts from other countries. Chen vows to defeat the imperialists who are threatening the security of his country, brings hope to the community, and encourages his fellow people to have confidence that freedom and prosperity will come soon.

Through the comparison of two Kung Fu films from the 1970s, we can see that Hollywood directors and Chinese directors handle this genre differently in aspects such as theme, portrayal of the protagonist, and storytelling, in order to attract a specific audience group. Today, in the context of globalization, when film productions from both the western and the oriental are seeking to infuse more exotic elements into films in order to target a larger audience group, it is necessary to explore the interactions between Hollywood and China since a hundred years ago.

3. Hollywood and China

Throughout history, there has been changing stereotypes of Chinese people, demonstrating a certain level of racial discrimination and indirectly hinting the political relationship between the U.S.

and China. Today, with Hollywood film continuing to penetrate Chinese film market, and Chinese filmmakers seeking to appeal to non-Chinese speaking audience, filmmakers from both countries demonstrate huge will to work together to increase their market share. In this section, I will briefly introduce the stereotypes of Chinese characters featured in Hollywood Kung Fu films in order to give insights to future Kung Fu film directors, review the Chinese policies regarding imported Hollywood films, and then conclude how Hollywood and Chinese film industry can better collaborate with each other to attract international audience.

3.1 Hollywood's Changing Stereotypes of Chinese

The intersection between Hollywood and China appeared when filmmakers of the United States began to feature Chinese characters in their films. According to scholars Zhu and Cai in their book *Representations of Chinese people in Hollywood Martial Arts Films*, which looks into the changes in the stereotypical representations of Chinese people in Hollywood Kung Fu films from late 1960s to late 1990s, martial arts films have begun to be taken up as a way to appeal to both the Chinese audience and Hollywood fans of Kung Fu since the 1920s (Zhu & Cai, 2013). As a result, a number of Chinese characters have been featured in Hollywood martial arts films. According to their research, directors employed white people to represent Chinese roles at first, and the portrayal was mostly negative. The crew usually used theatrical makeups such as full body coloring, long fingernails and half-shaved hairstyles on Chinese characters, whose facial expressions were mostly impassive. In 1929, a Chinese actor named Fun Manchu began to show up in Hollywood martial arts films. In most of his works, Fun was portrayed as “a menace in every twitch of the finger, a threat in every twitch of the eyebrow, and a terror in each split second of his slanted eyes. (Zhu & Cai, 2013)” Through the use of darkly painted upward sloped eyebrows, heavy eyeliner, moustache, and long fingernails, the crew wanted to give Hollywood filmgoers an impression that Fun was merciless, vengeful, evil, and frightening. The popularity of Fun among people who were interested in the oriental culture further propagated the negative stereotype of Chinese people. Later, Hollywood Kung Fu films demonstrated a slight change in the portrayal of Chinese. Charlie Chan emerged and the depiction of him showed qualities such as law-abiding and modesty. Yet the actor was still portrayed as dull, calculative, and being unable to speak fluent English. Kung Fu characters in western films before 1970 remained to resemble people of the Qing Dynasty. In the 1970s, Bruce Lee began to gain fame and his emergence represented a huge change in the portrayal of Chinese people in Hollywood films. In the film *Enter the Dragon*, although there were still traces of “yellow face” stereotype in Lee, he presented a much more positive image than his predecessors. Being the top student of the Shaolin Temple, Lee in *Enter the Dragon* is a just Kung Fu artist. However, the director did not forget to stereotype Lee as a volatile Chinese Kung Fu master.

The negative representation of the Chinese people can be related to the geopolitical power wrangles existing between the East and West at the time, according to Isaacs in his book, *Images of Asian: American Views of China and India* (Isaacs). In between the 1920s and the 1930s, the potential military and economic power of Japan and China would threaten that the Western countries, resulting in a hostile relationship between the West and the East. The intense relationship was manifested in the negative stereotypes being propagated in each other's art works. During the 1940s, when Japan was an enemy of both China and America, friendship between Chinese and American roles was evident in most Hollywood martial arts films. Things changed between the 1950s and the 1960s as China grew stronger and posed a threat to the dominating position of the United States in the globe. As a response, Hollywood films reverted back to the “yellow race” depiction, pitting the America and against the Chinese within the films (Kawai). For example, in the film *Marlowe*, Bruce Lee was portrayed as devious, cruel, untrustworthy and callous. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, Hollywood's depiction of Chinese heroes drastically changed. Kung Fu artists possessed positive personality and tended to use their Kung Fu to safeguard their community. This represented a peaceful period between the two countries after the U.S. established diplomatic relationships with the People's Republic of China. The *Big Brawl* was made during this time, introducing a hybrid of martial arts and comedy. In this film, Jackie Chan who played the role of Jerry Kwan entered the sight of

Hollywood fans. Being benevolent, intelligent, hardworking, respectful, honorable and persevering, Kwan the Chinese character reversed the Hollywood's stereotype of Chinese for the first time.

3.2 Hollywood Films in China

Before the 1990s, communication between the Hollywood and the film industry in China was rare. Audience in both countries were unable to watch films from the other country. Efforts to improve the situation have increased since the turn of the century. After the first Hollywood film - *The Fugitive* - showed in China's cinema in 1993, the following years saw an unstoppable trend. In-between 1995 and 2001, 134 Hollywood imported films were shown in China's cinemas, 61 of which were in a profit share deal between China and Hollywood, guaranteeing that these films be shown in major cinema chains in China. Sadly, during the same period, none Chinese made films were distributed to the United States, representing an unbalanced equilibrium.

The invasion of Hollywood films in China was confronted with mixed reactions. On the one hand, welcoming Chinese audience found Hollywood films bring not only exotic sceneries but also a different outlook of the world. Hollywood films began to steal fans from domestically made ones in China's theatre. On the other hand, conservatives deemed Hollywood films a threat to the domestic film industry as they amassed more and more viewership. Worse still, the trade imbalance between the two countries implied that as Hollywood films increased viewership in China, none Chinese films were shown in America. As a result, China put forward new regulations to protect its own film industry against Hollywood. After the regulations were put into practice, most Hollywood films were unable to show in China. In 2007, the United States issued a dispute to the World Trade Organization. During the investigation, the panel found that China violated its obligations (World Trade Organization-China, 2007). In response to WTO, China agreed to import 20 Hollywood revenue sharing films each year but remained a restriction in terms of DVD sales. In February 2012, China and the U.S finally came to an agreement in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding, which stated that they would increase market access to each other. According to the MoU, China should increase the number of revenue sharing Hollywood films from 20 to 34 a year and offer American studios 25 percent of the box office receipts, and vice versa (United States State Department).

The benefits brought by the MoU are evident in present day. For example, Chinese film producers and directors feel freer to explore larger themes now that they are catering to international audience rather than only domestic audience. In the film *Kung Fu Hustle*, the crew try significantly to appeal to the international audience by moving away from traditional characteristics of Kung Fu films. Unlike past films that explore constructs of nations, gender and race, *Kung Fu Hustle* employs a one-dimensional construct that shies away from mainland politics while still portraying Kung Fu heroism. The portrayal borrows elements of Western imagination, illustrating how the film's writer-Stephen Chow's use of global representation affects the representation of Chineseness and Kung Fu heroism (Dumas). In the same regard, Shu compares Kung Fu films featuring Bruce Lee with those featuring Jackie Chan, taking into account the differences in the representation of Kung Fu heroism. Shu argues that the main reason Jackie Chan is able to break out within the Hollywood audience while still doing Kung Fu films is because Kung Fu directors have moved away from the traditional focus on racial politics as illustrated in Bruce Lee's Chinese films to embrace multiculturalism that is easier to relate to by both the Chinese and the Hollywood audience (Shu).

The MoU also motivates Hollywood directors to make films catering to more Chinese audience. Also, in response to the aesthetic fatigue among action film audience as well as American's growing interest in Chinese culture, Hollywood filmmakers demonstrate a tendency to incorporate martial arts fight scenes in action films. As a result, collaboration between Hollywood and Chinese film productions becomes a new trend.

3.3 Collaboration between Hollywood and Chinese Film Productions

Co-production between Hollywood films and Chinese producers is being increasingly taken up by film producers who aim to appeal to a global audience. A great example is the annual Chinese American Film Festival which is organized by EDI media, a media firm in Los Angeles, and

supported by Chinese Film Bureaus PGA and MPA. The event has been hosted for over ten years now, and features films produced in both countries (Shan, 2017).

Co-production is currently being hailed by film producers in both countries as a strategy to bypass stringent laws and restrictions, especially those in China. As earlier explained, in 2012, China agreed to an MoU which demands the country to import 34 Hollywood films each year (United States State Department). However, these 34 films have to first register in the Chinese film industry and conform with all the censorship regulations put in place by the Chinese government, making it difficult for producers to make it to the list. To solve the problem, Hollywood film producers are opting to co-produce their films with Chinese film producers because a collaborated film is not considered foreign. Co-producing has become a common practice, resulting in a total of 37 co-produced films released from 2002 to 2012. Kawai points out in his research “Stereotyping Asian American: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril” that co-produced films perform better than domestically made ones in Chinese cinemas, as exemplified by the film *Kung Fu Panda 3*, a co-production of DreamWorks Animation and China-based China Film Corporation and Oriental DreamWorks (Martina). The exciting result has led to Hollywood studios opening up offices in mainland China, aiming to seek ways for their films to increase access to the Chinese market.

4. Conclusion

China is surpassing the U.S in terms of film market and is very likely to become the world’s largest film market. To ensure that ticket sales and revenues continue on an upward pedestal, Hollywood film producers will have to look toward the East to ensure that their films appeal to the Chinese audience. Since Kung Fu art originates from Chinese, Kung Fu films would be an easy way for Hollywood films to gain access to China. On the other hand, since the increase in the import of Hollywood films poses a threat to the domestically produced films, Chinese producers have to find out ways to secure their market share; for example, incorporating elements of Hollywood film production, and improving the film quality to the Hollywood standard. To both sides, improving their market standing requires incorporating outstanding elements of the other side. Co-production is a good solution. Since Kung Fu films made by Hollywood and Chinese film productions used to demonstrate varying themes, portrayals, and narratives as discussed above, a combination of the two film industries would be easily accepted by both the Chinese and the Hollywood audience. By pulling together resources beyond the national boundary, filmmakers can then produce masterpieces that appeal to the present audience as well as the future generation to come.

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