

# A Study of Chinese Elements in Hollywood Movies

**Jia Xiaoyi, Tian Haiying, Zhu Huilin, Zhou Yuxin**

*Zhejiang Ocean University, Haida South Road NO.1, Zhoushan City, Zhejiang Province, China*

**ABSTRACT.** With the fast development of cultural globalization, "Chinese elements" have been added to Hollywood films in large quantities, attracting great attention from audiences all over the world. With a careful survey of Chinese elements in many Hollywood classic movies, the writer takes an in-depth analysis of the application of Chinese elements in Hollywood films, examining the internationalization of Hollywood film from the perspective of intercultural communication, aiming at helping overseas audience have a better understanding of Chinese culture, promote the spread of Chinese culture, and also provide reference for the internationalization of Chinese films.

**KEYWORDS:** Hollywood Films, Chinese Elements, Cultural Inclusiveness

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, with the deepening impact of globalization, the political, economic, scientific and cultural exchanges among countries have been strengthened. Cultural globalization is the inevitable result of globalization. As a new carrier of cultural communication in modern society, film has gradually become the main medium and powerful force of cultural globalization. Driven by cultural globalization, Hollywood has never stopped its absorption and integration of cultures of various countries in its films. During these years, Hollywood has added many Chinese elements to its films, harvesting huge economic benefits, and also promoting the export and dissemination of Chinese culture.

Hollywood has a history of employing Chinese elements in its films for more than 100 years. The adoption of Chinese elements in Hollywood films has gone through a long period of evolution, from single to multiple, from stereotyped impression to flexible and diversified image building, from being treated negatively to being treated objectively and positively. Hollywood's recognition and emphasis on Chinese elements are inseparable from the charm of Chinese culture and the huge Chinese market potential.

In recent decades, Chinese elements have been paid with even more attention by Hollywood. Instead of backward, decadent, stereotypical and negative Chinese elements, but more and more neutral rational elements or positive elements are now

coming into the eyes of Hollywood audience. Since the 1990s, many Chinese elements such as Chinese actors, Chinese kung fu, Chinese stories and Chinese folk customs in Hollywood films have now been familiar refrains to overseas viewers. The extensive application of Chinese elements in Hollywood pictures has also made Chinese culture widely spread in the world. To explore the success of Hollywood films, the phenomenon of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies is truly worthy of thinking and studying by every moviegoer and cultural communicator.

## **2. A Brief Introduction of Chinese Elements in Hollywood Movies**

### ***2.1 A Brief Survey of Chinese Elements***

In a broad sense, Chinese elements refer to “All cultural achievements gradually formed in the course of the integration, evolution and development of the Chinese nation, or created and inherited by the Chinese people, reflecting the Chinese humanistic spirit and folk psychology, and possessing Chinese characteristics”.<sup>[1]</sup> In other words, Chinese element is a relatively broad concept. From the vertical perspective, it covers five thousand years of Chinese history and culture, while from the horizontal perspective, it refers to all the cultural contents with Chinese characteristics both the material and spiritual level.

### ***2.2 The Classification of Chinese Element***

There is yet no definite classification of Chinese element. Scholars often divide it from the material and spiritual level. From the material level, Chinese element falls into different categories in terms of the visible symbols embodied in Chinese architecture, history, humanities, natural landscape, major inventions, innovation, folk festival, features arts and crafts, clothing, food, traditional opera, musical Instruments, sports, important academic ideas, famous historical figures, animals, plants and so on of all in the Chinese physical world. From the spiritual level, Chinese element is roughly grouped as the moral concepts, value system, folk customs, living habits, religious beliefs, laws, ethics and other intangible ideological values and ways of doing things in the Chinese ideological world.

### ***2.3 Chinese Elements in Hollywood Movies***

The United States is a nation of immigrants with a history of just over 200 years. Hollywood movies in the United States often use the cultural elements of other countries and then integrate them with their own spirit. This is a typical Hollywood movie "Borrowlism", which is also a stepping stone for the foreign expansion of American culture, and a good shot of foreign cultures. As a large developing country with a population of 1.4 billion, China is the most promising international market for Hollywood films. In recent years, Hollywood blockbusters have been infused with Chinese elements, including Chinese actors, landscape, food and historical culture,

making windfall profits for Hollywood.

According to the official article of *Wanda Cinema Line*, the typical Chinese elements frequently adopted by Hollywood in recent years include the Chinese national treasure--giant panda, the Chinese totem--dragon, Chinese martial art--kung fu, Chinese dressing--qipao, Chinese language--mandarin, Chinese food, Chinese art performance--puppet shadow play, Chinese ancient philosophy—keeping the balance of five elements in the world: metal, wood, water, fire and earth, and Chinese outlook on life - fatalism. Such as Kirsten Dunst's eye-catching cheongsam costume in *Spider-man*, and the use of shadow puppetry in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. An increasing number of Chinese elements are going to be used in Hollywood films with the constant deepening of globalization.

### **3. The Application of Chinese Elements in Hollywood Movies**

The application of Chinese elements in Hollywood films has also undergone a gradual transformation from negative to positive use, from partial to overall application.

#### ***3.1 The Application of Material Chinese Element***

##### ***3.1.1 The Early Stage of Application***

The Chinese elements have been around since the early days of Hollywood films. In the 1890s, after Li Hongzhang, one of the top officials in the Qing Dynasty, visited the US, elements about Chinese people and Chinese culture had been introduced. However, the early Hollywood films selected a narrow range of Chinese elements, mainly focusing on the story scenes and characters, which were mostly negative. Chinese people are often portrayed as stupid, clumsy characters or villains, and the material culture associated with China is also biased.

In the film *Red Corner*, the Chinese legal system is seriously distorted in the scenes of police officers' violent law enforcement, the torment of prisoners, and government officials' strong interference in the court's decision. The most representative films that demonize Chinese people are the series of Fu Manchu, who first appeared in the book *the Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* in 1913 and was later adapted for film and television. The series consists of 14 films and has been filmed for 60 years. Fu Manchu, a man dressed in Qing dynasty costume with a long moustache, is a sinister and vicious man, a typical humiliating image of Chinese. During the "Yellow Peril" years, Fu Manchu, as a discriminated figure against Asian, became a famous western popular culture villain role.

##### ***3.1.2 The Transformative Stage of Application***

However, with the continuous strengthening of cultural exchanges and the

maturity of the film industry, Chinese culture has been revalued, and the rational use of Chinese elements has finally been realized by Hollywood. After the 1960s, more and more positive images of China and Chinese culture come out on Hollywood screen, especially after the appearance of martial arts stars like Bruce Lee in Hollywood movies. For instance, in the sci-fi film *The Martian*, Chinese characters in the movie are highly praised as fearless humanitarians, especially in the scene where the life of American astronaut Marco Watney hangs by a thread, China's space agency decided to delay its own Mars exploration program and offered a generous rescue that saved the American astronaut from death.

With the further development of film industry, more and more examples about the positive application of Chinese elements can be found in Hollywood films. The science fiction adventure film *Serenity* zooms out to the future in 500 years, when China and the United States become equally strong, they jointly govern the outer space alliance. In the film, the image of China is exceptionally great and many other Chinese elements are constructed in it, including Chinese traditional dressing, paper fan, and the Chinese language also becomes popular. The application of Chinese elements highly satisfies audiences' curiosity about Chinese culture while adding color to the film's cultural diversity.

### ***3.1.3 The Mature Stage of Application***

Since the 21st century, harvesting from the application of Chinese elements, Hollywood gradually shed off their bias against Chinese culture. A great many application cases step onto stage and the number is far from enough. The movie *Notting Hill* has its last scene of Chinese Tai chi; China's ancient city Xi'an and the Yellow River become the story locality in film *The Mummy 3*; Harry Potter's first love is a Chinese character Zhang Qiu, a kind-hearted and courageous image; The outstanding Chinese kung fu in *Kill Bill Vol.1* stun all the western viewers...

Chinese actors and actresses like Lucy Liu, Gong Li, Chow Yun Fat, Jet Li and other stars go abroad to join Hollywood blockbusters, promoting the Chinese cultural influence on westerns and meanwhile bringing economic payoff to the Hollywood film makers. In 2016, Chinese actor Jackie Chan of Hong Kong won the 89<sup>th</sup> Academy Honorary Award, becoming the first Chinese to receive an honorary Oscar.

## ***3.2 The Application of spiritual Chinese Element***

### ***3.2.1 The Early Stage of Application***

In the first half of the 20th century, the spiritual Chinese elements in the early Hollywood films are often seen as synonyms of superstition, backwardness and cunning. Taking Fu Manchu example again, such an evil and anti-social character by the British novelist became one of the most famous Asian characters in western popular culture. For a long time after that, the Chinese characters in the films were

mostly villains or criminals. In 1930, *Welcome Danger* was released in China. The film depicts Chinese people as drug dealers, thieves and robbers, who specialize in shady things. Chinese people are also portrayed as unscrupulous, demoralized and even kidnapping their compatriots.

### ***3.2.2 The Transformative Stage of Application***

Ever since 1960s, China's excellent traditional culture has been re-recognized by the world. Willing or not, Hollywood began to take a much rational and objective attitude to introduce Chinese ideologies first in a subtle and later much active way. The Chinese traditional idea "man is an integral part of nature", and virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness advocated in Chinese culture have been gradually introduced in Hollywood movies. Western audiences' perception of China's image is unknowingly becoming rational.

*The Good Earth*, a feature film made by MGM in its early years, is a holistic application of Chinese elements. The film tells the story of Wang Long and Alan, a Chinese peasant couple who overcame many difficulties in the face of natural and man-made disasters and become rich through hard work and create a happy family of four generations. As an inspirational film, the resilience of Chinese farmers in the face of hardship and distress resonates strongly with Americans who just coming out of the great depression. To a large extent, the Chinese people's fearless national spirit in times of crisis has corrected the westerners' general and vague understanding of Chinese people in the past. The film transcends the differences of race, ethnicity and culture and has aroused the resonance and reflection of audiences in different countries.

In the blockbuster *2012*, the scene scientists from all over the world make concerted efforts to build Noah's ark, which well reflects Chinese collectivism. At the end of the film, the old lama standing in front of the temple on the top of the peak, facing the huge flood peak, and calmly ringing the bell. This mirrors the Chinese traditional idea of "resignation to fate". Besides, *Kung Fu Panda*, another Hollywood blockbuster not only adopts a lot of Chinese elements on the material level, but also tries to get close to traditional Chinese thoughts on the spiritual level. The character Po finally became the Dragon Warrior after all he had undergone. Although the other fellows are dissatisfied with his promotion, they still obey their master's will, which reflects the traditional Confucian concept of loyalty and filial piety.

### ***3.2.3 The Mature Stage of Application***

Hollywood films are good at combining the current popular elements into the script creation. In recent years, Chinese culture has set off a global upsurge. Both Confucian culture and Taoist concept have made people all over the world curious about the remote and mysterious Chinese culture. Hollywood did not remain its application of Chinese element on the material surface. It also studies the cultural

and spiritual connotation of China, digs deeply into the traditional Chinese culture, explores the "Chinese way of thinking", and appreciates the temperament and beauty of eastern powers.

The upcoming live-action *Mulan* is a classic example of using Chinese elements. Besides the layout of the scene, the costumes, the martial arts, the historical background and the cast, Chinese collectivism and the ideological and moral values of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faithfulness, loyalty, forgiveness, filial piety and filial piety contained in Confucianism are fully embodied in the scenes of the film. Hollywood's precision in controlling audiences' curiosity about ancient Chinese culture made *Mulan* a worldwide hit.

### ***3.3 Features of the Application of Chinese Element***

Examining the history of Hollywood films, it is easy to find that the application of Chinese element in Hollywood films undergoes a gradual transformation, from the early simply use of Chinese symbol to the current overall application of Chinese element, from negative and biased introduction of Chinese society to positive and rational reevaluation of Chinese culture. Undoubtedly, in the coming future, when international borders gradually fade away, a variety of Chinese elements would be presented to overseas viewers through the works produced by Hollywood. A much complete and objective sketch of China and Chinese people would be put on screen.

With the continuous output of Chinese culture and the closer exchange of world culture, the future of Hollywood films for the application of Chinese elements will present a trend of diversity, thoroughness, and frequency.

## **4. Reasons for the Application of Chinese Elements in Hollywood Movies**

Hollywood loves Chinese elements for a number of reasons, including the influence of China's outstanding memes, the driving force of China's huge market potential, as well as the driving force of cultural globalization.

### ***4.1 The Charm of Chinese Culture***

With a history of more than 5000 years, Chinese culture is broad, profound, and totally different from western culture. Western moviegoers admire and seek after the mystery and freshness Chinese culture brings, whether it's myths and legends, literary classics, historical figures, classical clothing, Chinese cuisine, or Oriental scenery. In recent years, with the further opening up of China to the world, Chinese culture has entered the world, which has set off a "China fever" in the western world.

According to a report by *the South China Morning Post* on March 8, 2018, people's perception of Chinese food is changing all over the United States. Chinese food is changing its "cheap" image to the high-end and becoming the dining option

for rich Americans. In more and more European and American films and televisions, the frequent appearance of Chinese food confirms the saying of "Chinese food craze". In 2018, original designers from China displayed a transnational love between Oriental crafts and western aesthetics with the theme of "CHINOSERIE, Silk Road and Rebirth" in Milan fashion week. Exquisite embroidery techniques and unique Oriental art made people feast their eyes.

In 2009, *Newsweek* reported that, according to the vote by netizens of the United States, Canada, Britain and other countries, China is undoubtedly on the list of top 2 of 21<sup>st</sup> century the world's most influential big cultural countries. Elements representing Chinese culture typically include Mandarin, the Great Wall, Confucius, Tang empire, silk, the Peking Opera, kung fu, etc. Once Chinese characteristics have been picked up by the world again, the time-honored treasures of Chinese culture have been excavated by Hollywood. In particular, a generation of Chinese martial arts actors such as Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and Donnie Yen has brought Chinese kung fu to the world, which has set off a "Chinese kung fu fever". As a result, various Chinese elements frequently appear in Hollywood films.

#### **4.2 The Market Potential of China**

As a populous country, China has one fifth of the world's population. That means one out of every five moviegoers in the world will be Chinese, proving the importance of the Chinese market to Hollywood. Chinese elements in Hollywood films have played an invisible role in promoting the Chinese film market. The Chinese film industry has made a great progress in recent years, but the production technology is still not mature enough, the characters and plots are not innovative enough as well, and the complete marketing chain has not been formed, which provides a good opportunity for Hollywood movies to seize the Chinese market.

The application of Chinese elements is not only reduces the overseas promotion cost of Hollywood films, but also greatly promotes the box office revenue. The emergence of Chinese elements and Chinese faces in Hollywood blockbusters, even if only for a short time, will make Chinese audiences more eager and more willing to go to the cinema to "boost the box office". Take *Iron Man 3*, for example, the brief scene of Chinese film star Fan Bingbing, which was specially designed by Hollywood for Chinese audiences, unquestionably boosted the film's box office in China. Similarly, in *Zootopia*, the cuddly "anchor" panda is Hollywood's exclusive surprise for Chinese audiences. The film grossed 22.39 million yuan on its first day in China and 155 million yuan over the first three days' screen. From March 4th to April 10th, the film had grossed \$285 million in North America and \$527 million overseas, of which China accounted for 44 percent. The American blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* even had its premiere in China, where many foreign fans flocked to see the premiere. All the examples signify the importance Hollywood attaches to the Chinese market.

### ***4.3 The Driving Power of Globalization***

As the world is moving further toward globalization, different cultures closely interrelate with each other under the simultaneous effects of "fusion" and "mutual difference". Driven by cultural globalization, Hollywood films continue to integrate American culture with others, which is not only a means of making and promoting films, but also an embodiment of cultural tolerance in the context of globalization.

The United States, the world's largest country of immigrants, is a typical cultural "melting pot". Open-minded thinking and high tolerance to different cultures make it easier for the United States to re-present different cultures to the world in an innovative way. It offers a common refreshing cultural platform for the world. Among the films that have achieved good box office performance in the North American film market, there is nothing but American audiences' expectation for the originality and strangeness of foreign language films in content and culture. American audiences are more willing to accept the foreign culture full of amorous feelings and legendary scenes.<sup>[2]</sup> Films such as ever nominated *Raise the Red Lantern* (China), the *Little Shoes* (Iran), and the winning movies *A Separation* (Iran), and *Overheard* (Germany) won popularity among American viewers for their exotic and ethnic features.

## **5. Enlightenments**

### ***5.1 Openness, Inclusiveness and Mutual Learning***

Although there are still more or less different cultural interpretations of Hollywood movies in different countries, the efforts made by Hollywood to create high-quality films deserve our appreciation and reference. Taking Chinese elements as an example, Chinese culture, as an integral part of the world's diverse cultures, has been on the Hollywood screen for many times. From the prejudice and misreading of the last century to today, it has gradually moved towards rationality and tolerance, which undoubtedly reflects the openness and tolerance of Hollywood to other cultures. Although Hollywood uses Chinese elements mostly for commercial purposes, Chinese culture has been revived all over the world in recent years through Hollywood films, and the charm of Chinese civilization has attracted more and more attention from the international community.

Chinese culture is exported by Hollywood films, and Hollywood films also sell well by the virtue of Chinese elements, which brings a reflection to China's film industry: why do Hollywood films belong to the world while Chinese films belong only to China? Although the total box office of Chinese films is increasing every year, why is the proportion of the box office occupied by overseas markets always low?<sup>[3]</sup> To move forward on the way of internationalization, Chinese filmmakers should take a careful observation on Hollywood films' openness and inclusiveness.

Due to geographical and historical factors, China and the West having no similar cultural roots, they lack resonance in culture and so that the overseas acceptance of



Chinese films has long been in a low state. To loosen the bondage of cultural barriers, Chinese filmmakers had better learn from Hollywood through the ways of establishing the brand of Chinese films, cultivating the market, and altogether emphasizing the characteristics of Chinese films.<sup>[4]</sup> Enhancing the accessibility of Chinese film culture is an important step for domestic films to step out of the world and shorten the cultural gap between China and the west. The Chinese civilization has a strong personality, but it also has a very high tolerance for culture and the ability to merge.

### **5.2 Excellent Production and Ingenuity**

As one of the four ancient civilizations, China has every reason to be proud of its culture. In recent years, with the strong support of national policies and multi-directional guidance, it has become the main trend of cultural development to return to Chinese culture and regain Chinese classics. In order to respond to this trend and promote the spread of Chinese culture, Chinese filmmakers have made and distributed many films based on the traditional culture. However, only a handful of films have truly applied Chinese culture creatively to films. Most of the films fail to grip the recognition by domestic and foreign audiences.

The film *Song of the Phoenix*, for example, even if the producers, directors, and actors are racking their brains to spread the “suona horn”, Chinese folk art, but no attempt was taken to combine the traditional art form with modern musical instrument, or to reprocess the traditional culture in an innovative way. They took into a brute force blindly without thinking of the acceptance of audiences. Therefore, the film failed the domestic and international film market for being boring, obscure, and lack of communication with the public. Naturally, *Song of the Phoenix* could hardly seize the heart of audiences even there came the shocking event that the producer went down on his knees to beg for the box office. China's rich traditional culture should be a source of treasure-house for the film industry, but it has not been well produced and operated, and the lack of originality and innovation is the most pressing problem.

Different from the *Song of the Phoenix*, another blockbuster movie *Ne Zha*, enjoyed a huge box office success after its premiere, captivating audiences for its attractive plotting, extraordinary characters, well-designed scenes and sophisticating postproduction. The producers have devoted much effort in retaining the essence of Chinese traditional culture, and joining the familiar pop elements. The bold innovation makes the film finally broke through 5 billion at the box office, in return for high public praise, also make the traditional Chinese myth figures to get the attention of people. Therefore, the Chinese traditional culture presented in the movie is more easily taken by audiences over world.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper studies the application of Chinese elements in Hollywood movies,

analyzing the current situation and reasons behind the application, aiming to offer film makers valuable enlightenments and strong inspiration. Chinese elements are widely used in Hollywood movies. While enjoying the happiness, we should also be good at analyzing and absorbing the successful factors of Hollywood, learning from the strengths of the advanced film industry, and taking the initiative to go out and integrate into the world.

### **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my teacher, TIAN Haiying, for her instructive advice and useful suggestions on my thesis. I am deeply grateful of her help in the completion of this thesis.

High tribute shall be paid to the co-authors.

Finally, I am indebted to the sponsor of this paper: University Project Plan of Zhejiang Ocean University.

### **References**

- [1] Guo Youxian, Hao Dongheng. *Chinese Elements and Advertising Creativity* [M]. Peking University Press,2010.1
- [2] Wei Chenjie. *The Global Integration and Expansion of Chinese Film Cultural Consciousness* [J]. Shanghai Art Review,2016(05):95-98.
- [3] Wang Yuanliang, Wang Yule. *On the Gap between the Overseas Box Office of Chinese and American Films* [J]. Economic and Trade Practice, 2018(19):69.
- [4] Zhang Nan. *Comparison of Operation Mechanisms of Chinese and American Film Industries* [J]. Journal of Guangxi University (philosophy and social sciences edition), 2017.
- [5] Fu Li. A study on Chinese Elements in Hollywood Films [D].2015.6.