

Ethnicity and Global Dissemination in Transnational Chinese-language Cinema

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Abstract: *This paper explores the intricate dynamics of cultural exchange and identity preservation within the realm of transnational Chinese-language cinema. It particularly focuses on how films like "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero" maintain a strong Chinese cultural identity while achieving global acclaim. The analysis delves into the portrayal of martial arts traditions, Chinese-style metaphors, and the preservation of regional dialects as core elements that reinforce ethnic identity in a global context. These films not only transcend traditional Hollywood narrative structures but also showcase a unique cultural synthesis that resonates with international audiences. The study highlights the role of visual artistry and narrative depth in promoting a deeper understanding of Chinese culture across cultural and linguistic barriers.*

Keywords: *Transnational Cinema; Chinese Culture; Globalization; Martial Arts*

1. Introduction

In an era defined by globalization, the rapid evolution of digital technology has catalyzed significant changes across the cultural and entertainment landscapes, challenging traditional censorship systems worldwide. This transformation has facilitated the rise of transnational cinema, a phenomenon where films cross national borders and cultural barriers to engage a global audience. Notably, Chinese blockbusters have carved a distinct niche within this transnational context, reflecting a robust blend of global appeal and entrenched ethnic identities.

These films, while navigating through the vast and diverse transnational markets, not only break free from geographical confines but also retain a deep-seated connection to their cultural roots. The prominence of ethnicity in such films is not merely a backdrop but a pivotal element that distinguishes them from the conventional narratives often seen in Hollywood. In this context, films like "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero" stand out as quintessential examples of how transnational Chinese cinema can transcend mainstream cinematic forms while profoundly engaging with and portraying unique cultural and ethnic nuances.

This paper aims to delve deeper into the intricate relationship between transnational appeal and ethnic fidelity in Chinese cinema, using "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero" as primary case studies. By examining the depiction of significant cultural elements through distinct ethnic lenses, the analysis will focus on three critical aspects: the enduring legacy of martial arts traditions, the use of Chinese-style metaphors, and a steadfast commitment to regional dialects. These elements collectively underscore the films' ability to maintain cultural integrity while achieving widespread international acclaim, illustrating the complex dynamics of cultural exchange and identity preservation in transnational Chinese films.

2. Chivalrous Spirit and Character Setting

The chivalrous spirit and distinctive character settings in martial arts films embody a profound aspect of Chinese cultural identity that transcends national borders in a transnational cinema context. Historically, the theme of martial arts has deep roots in Chinese culture, having been a pivotal element of narrative and ethical discourse. These stories, which initially found expression in the oral traditions, were later woven into the fabric of Peking opera in the 19th century, marking a significant cultural evolution. This integration highlighted the theatrical and dramatic potential of martial arts, seamlessly merging physical artistry with moral and philosophical narratives.

As these stories transitioned into serialized novels, they became a staple of mass print culture,

capturing the imagination of a wider audience and setting the stage for their eventual leap into cinema. This adaptation was not just a change in medium but a transformation that allowed these tales to resonate with diverse audiences, incorporating visual splendor and dynamic storytelling elements that were previously confined to the stage or page.

In the era of transnational cinema, Chinese martial arts films have distinguished themselves by integrating the traditional aesthetics of ink painting into their visual narrative. This unique style, characterized by fluid motion and graceful yet dynamic fight choreography, draws parallels with the brush strokes of classical Chinese art, infusing the films with a stylistic identity that is instantly recognizable and culturally rich.

Moreover, these films often feature characters that embody the chivalrous ethos of loyalty, honor, and righteousness, traits that resonate deeply with both Eastern and Western notions of heroism. This cultural synthesis allows them to stand out amid the rising popularity of Japanese samurai films and European knight culture, which also celebrate similar virtues. The characters in Chinese martial arts films, however, are portrayed not just as warriors but as embodiments of philosophical ideals, often exploring complex themes of duty, sacrifice, and personal integrity.

These chivalrous characters, combined with the ethereal and picturesque fight scenes set against lush landscapes or stylized settings, enable Chinese martial arts films to carve a significant niche in the global film market. Their appeal lies not only in their action-packed sequences but in their ability to weave complex narratives of human emotion and moral conflict, making them a compelling portrait of China's rich cultural heritage within the canvas of global cinema.

Chan (2019) through an analysis of the film "Hero," elaborates on how China, after becoming a global economic powerhouse, is rediscovering its cultural "Chineseness" through globally recognized genre films such as martial arts films^[1]. For instance, in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," Jen appears gentle and serene on the surface, her noble origins confining her within the small bounds of a courtyard house. Yet, when night falls, she reveals her inner desires and restlessness, embodying romantic freedom and rebellion; Yu Xiulian represents the traditional female role in a patriarchal society, adhering to norms but transforming internally at a critical moment in Li Mubai's life, moving from constraint to freedom. Li Mubai upholds the traditional Chinese virtues of chivalry, secular morality, and patriarchal values. Xingyu (2022) views the three main characters of the film as products of the evolving social environment; Jen is a rebellious dissenter, a product of alienation under extreme dogmatism; Yu Xiulian mirrors a more traditional Eastern heroine; and Li Mubai aligns more closely with the Eastern traditional aesthetic definitions of chivalry^[2]. However, in portraying traditional ethnic culture, Jen's character does not quite fit the traditional Chinese settings: Cai (2005) provides a somewhat crude conclusion, stating that the Chinese martial arts persona differs from Hollywood's portrayal of women, not objectifying them as subjects of sensual desires^[3]. Nevertheless, Xingyu (2022) argues that the subtle affection between Jen and Li Mubai actually represents the zenith of Zen culture, symbolizing both society and the true 'jianghu'. Moreover, Klein (2004) believes that only through experiencing passion can characters achieve the Daoist pursuit^[4].

Thus, the nationalist structure in Chinese cinema has been closely related to gender structures from the outset (Fengliang, 2010)^[5]. The essence of Chinese art, deeply embedded in the psyche and spirit of the Chinese people, manifests as an intrinsic element of their cultural identity. In the realm of transnational martial arts films, the character settings serve not only as representations of individual personas but as embodiments of the collective Chinese spirit. These films initially emerged as expressions of national identity but have since evolved into powerful symbols of Chinese cultural heritage.

As these narratives transcended the traditional confines of local storytelling, they adopted a broader, more inclusive approach that reflects a modern understanding of national identity and cultural dialogue. The portrayal of knight-errant characters in these films, with their complex moral landscapes and adventurous spirits, offers a cinematic re-interpretation of traditional Chinese values. These characters, once bound by the rigid structures of past narratives, now move freely across global screens, showcasing the flexibility and evolving nature of Chinese cultural expressions.

This evolution reflects a shift from a straightforward nationalistic portrayal to a more nuanced exploration of cultural identity, where the past and present coalesce to form a dynamic interface. The diverse depictions of these knight-errant figures not only affirm the enduring relevance of national themes but also challenge and expand the conventional boundaries of how nationality and culture are represented in cinema. Through this transformative lens, Chinese martial arts films continue to contribute to and shape the global cinematic landscape, reaffirming the profound and enduring impact

of Chinese cultural and artistic traditions.

3. Metaphors under Chinese Elements

Most of China's transnational films exhibit a distinctive style marked by restraint and subtlety, echoing the typical foreign perception of Chinese demeanor and culture. This understated approach extends to various cinematic elements, including the use of props, the choreography of major fight scenes, and the meticulous portrayal of Chinese landscapes—all of which carry metaphorical weight and serve to deeply integrate ethnic identities into the narrative fabric of martial arts films.

These films utilize their visual and narrative components not just for entertainment but as vehicles for cultural expression, subtly weaving traditional Chinese values and perspectives into the storyline. For example, the props used in key scenes often symbolize virtues such as honor and sacrifice, while the choreographed fight sequences more than just action, represent internal and external conflicts. Moreover, the detailed depictions of landscapes go beyond mere backdrops, symbolizing the emotional and spiritual journeys of the characters.

A prime illustration of this method is seen in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," which not only brings to the forefront the extraordinary beauty of China's varied geography but also uses these settings to enhance the narrative's emotional depth. The film features panoramic shots of the Gobi Desert, the expansive and rugged terrains of the Taklamakan Plateau in northern Tibet, and the unique cultural landscape of Urumqi, the westernmost Uighur-speaking city in China. Each location is chosen not only for its visual impact but also for its cultural resonance, contributing to a richer, more immersive viewing experience. These settings reflect the characters' internal states and the overarching themes of destiny and restraint that permeate the film, thus exemplifying how transnational Chinese cinema skillfully marries visual artistry with deep cultural significance.

This fulfilled director Ang Lee's deep-seated fantasies as a Taiwanese resident about his ancestral homeland (Klein, 2004). Similarly, "Hero" vividly presents ancient China on screen through its lavish and meticulous period costumes. Moreover, action scenes are a distinct feature of Chinese culture. In "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," the famous bamboo forest fight scene, while appearing as a martial arts duel, is actually a representation of passion. The props, specifically the bamboo, are seen as elements of yin and yang, symbolizing transcendence. The flashes of blades amidst the bamboo accentuate an ethereal romance (Xingyu, 2022). The Green Destiny sword, a staple prop in martial arts films, features throughout "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and, according to Cai (2005), acts as a cultural symbol with ideological appeal both to heroes and outlaws. Furthermore, Klein (2004) further refines this special prop, suggesting that the sword points to violence and introduces and brings out the long-simmering tension between the two main characters. In European films, knights might fight vehemently for treasure; under Ang Lee's direction, the sword is not only a treasure but also a representation of spirit and national integrity. Similarly, in Zhang Yimou's "Hero," the wildness of the action scenes and the beauty of the colors create a striking collision (Larson, W(2008)^[6]). The detail of the assassination of Emperor Qin not only leaves outsiders speculating about its strong political undertones but also aligns with Chinese history and superbly promotes Chinese culture. Cai (2005), somewhat controversially, believes that Zhang Yimou's use of metaphor in the film, although bringing the national tradition a step closer to modernity, might attract criticism of national psychology. However, Köhler (2003) disagrees with Cai's view, arguing that this actually breaks the traditional rules of martial arts films, shifting the focus from combat and violence to emphasizing spiritual communication, highlighting Chinese aesthetic culture.

Therefore, given China's five-thousand-year cultural history combined with the national sentiments of Chinese directors, details in films often carry dual meanings. Metaphor can be considered a unique and crucial expressive technique in transnational Chinese cinema, holding a significantly important position.

4. The Uniqueness of Native Language

In the landscape of transnational cinema, it is common for films to adopt English as the primary language to cater to a global audience. This linguistic choice often serves to bridge cultural gaps, allowing films to reach and resonate with viewers across different geographical and linguistic divides. However, the use of English is not a definitive hallmark or an indispensable requirement for the success of transnational films. In fact, for nations characterized by a rich tapestry of ethnicities, the preservation

and incorporation of native dialects can provide a more authentic and powerful representation of their cultural heritage.

For multi-ethnic countries, the strategic use of indigenous languages and dialects not only enhances the authenticity of the cinematic experience but also deepens the audience's engagement with the film's cultural context. This approach allows filmmakers to deliver a more nuanced portrayal of the characters' identities and socio-cultural environments, enriching the narrative with a layer of realism that transcends linguistic barriers. The authenticity conveyed through native dialects can evoke a stronger emotional connection from viewers who share the same linguistic and cultural background, and intrigue international audiences with its exotic appeal.

Furthermore, the inclusion of native dialects in transnational films highlights the diversity and cultural specificity of the nation, countering the homogenization often seen in global cinema. It asserts the importance of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized world, reinforcing the notion that language is a vital carrier of cultural values and traditions. Thus, while English may serve as a convenient medium for cross-cultural communication, the use of native dialects stands as a potent testament to the rich cultural narratives and heritage that these films strive to portray.

Lau (2018) in his analysis of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," distinctly points out that these transnational Chinese stars speaking Chinese in various accents allow audiences worldwide to reconsider the image of transnational Chinese without the assumption that globalization is always "Western"^[7]. Fengliang (2010) believes that as various countries begin exporting transnational films, the issue of national language identity is continually being restructured. Klein (2004) disagrees with Lau (2018) and Fengliang (2010), arguing that in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," aside from Zhang Ziyi who speaks fluent Mandarin, Chang Chen's lines carry a Taiwanese accent, while Chow Yun-fat and Michelle Yeoh, who were raised in Cantonese and English-speaking households respectively, deliver their lines in their own accents. This linguistic imbalance not only hinders the Mandarin-speaking audience's viewing experience but also makes the actors' accents appear comical to a global audience, leading to perceptions that the film is not a true Chinese movie. However, Lau (2018) and Fengliang (2010) oppose Klein's somewhat extreme view. Fengliang (2010) argues that the most crucial marker for film culture is the use or non-use of specific local languages, and even though dialects are spoken, they represent a pan-Chinese consciousness. Lau (2018) analyzes Gong Li's frequent use of Mandarin in international events as an alternative strategy confronting the English ideological hegemony in the transnational film market. Berry (2021) also acknowledges that Chinese films now include the only non-English films among the world's top-grossing movies^[8].

Therefore, considering China's status as a multi-ethnic nation with a rich historical culture, dialects are not merely a language but also a cultural embellishment. They represent an important perspective for studying the culture of transnational Chinese-language films, directly reflecting the living conditions of the Chinese people and highlighting ethnic characteristics.

5. Cultural Differences and Audience Acceptance

The international success of transnational Chinese-language films hinges not solely on their distinctive cultural elements but also significantly on their ability to transcend cultural boundaries and resonate across diverse audiences^[9]. While these films are inherently steeped in Chinese culture, embracing its rich traditions and aesthetic nuances, they must also navigate the varied expectations and aesthetic preferences of global audiences. This delicate balance between cultural authenticity and universal appeal is crucial for their acceptance on the world stage.

Transnational Chinese-language films skillfully retain core Chinese cultural characteristics—such as filial piety, communal values, and Confucian morals—while simultaneously weaving in values and themes that have universal resonance. This strategic integration allows these films to maintain their cultural integrity while ensuring their themes are accessible and relatable to people regardless of their cultural background. For example, films like "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Hero" transcend their roots in the martial arts genre by addressing broader themes such as freedom and responsibility, individualism versus collectivism, and the conflict between personal desire and societal duty.

These themes are not only central to the human experience but are also portrayed in ways that reflect both Chinese philosophy and universal principles. The duality of personal freedom against societal obligations in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" mirrors the tension between ancient Chinese values and modern aspirations, while "Hero" explores the complexities of heroism and sacrifice in the

face of overwhelming state power. By engaging with these universal concepts, the films offer multiple layers of meaning that appeal to a global audience, thereby broadening their appeal and enhancing their reception internationally.

Thus, the ability of these films to resonate with international audiences underscores their capacity to act as cultural bridges, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture while highlighting shared human values. This dual focus not only enriches the viewer's experience but also elevates the films' status in the global cinema landscape, affirming their role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

Visual effects and action design are crucial means by which transnational Chinese-language films attract international audiences. The action scenes in martial arts films are not just about fighting; they are expressions of visual art. This art form has been greatly exploited by directors such as Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou, who, through carefully designed fight scenes and exquisite visual effects, provide audiences with an unprecedented viewing pleasure. For example, the bamboo forest fight in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" not only showcases traditional Chinese martial arts skills but also conveys a sense of poetry and philosophy through the agility of the bamboo and the elegance of the combat.

However, transnational Chinese-language films also face some challenges in international dissemination. One such challenge is the language barrier. Although many transnational Chinese-language films are subtitled when shown internationally, linguistic differences can still affect the audience's understanding of cultural nuances. For example, when "Hero" was released in North America, the audience's understanding of the characters' dialogue and cultural background was somewhat limited. To overcome this barrier, some directors choose to incorporate more visual and action elements into their films to compensate for linguistic shortcomings.

For international audiences unacquainted with the intricacies of Chinese history and culture, the depth of certain narratives and symbolic elements in films like "Hero" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" can pose comprehension challenges. The plot surrounding the assassination in "Hero," and the emblematic Green Destiny sword, for instance, carry rich cultural significances that may not be immediately evident without a background in Chinese lore and history.

Consequently, as transnational Chinese-language films gain popularity across global markets, filmmakers face the challenge of preserving the unique cultural narratives inherent in these stories while ensuring they are relatable and comprehensible to an international audience. This balancing act requires innovative storytelling techniques that can bridge cultural gaps, making the rich tapestry of Chinese cultural heritage accessible and engaging to viewers worldwide.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, while Chinese blockbusters are increasingly produced within a transnational framework, they unequivocally retain a profound Chinese essence at their core. This essence is vividly brought to life through various culturally specific elements that are integral to transnational Chinese-language cinema. Notably, the diversity and depth of martial arts characters, coupled with the dynamic and visually stunning fight sequences, serve as a foundation for these films. Moreover, the nuanced symbolism embedded within key props and the deliberate inclusion of local dialects throughout the narratives enrich the films' cultural authenticity.

These distinctive features set transnational Chinese films apart from typical Hollywood productions, offering a cinematic experience that deeply respects and highlights ethnic nuances. The reliance on traditional elements such as martial arts not only enriches the storytelling but also enhances the visual and auditory impact of these films, making them compelling on both narrative and sensory levels. This unique blend of cultural fidelity and cinematic innovation is crucial for the success of transnational cinema, as it bridges global audiences with Chinese cultural heritage, making these films not only commercially successful but also culturally significant in the global film landscape.

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