

Research on Chinese film industry under the background of globalization—Taking Zhang Yimou 's film as an example

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Abstract: *As a leading figure of the fifth generation of Chinese directors, Zhang Yimou and his films are well known at home and abroad. This paper selects Zhang Yimou and his works as the subject of analysis to explore the factors contributing to the popularity of his films from internal and external perspectives. Furthermore, it discusses the significance of Zhang Yimou's films to the development of Chinese films and the exchange and cooperation of world films which includes: enhancing global understanding of Chinese culture, integrating diverse cultural appeals, and promoting commercial film development. Finally, through the analysis of Zhang Yimou's films, this paper addresses three major challenges currently faced by the Chinese film industry.*

Keywords: *Director Zhang Yimou; Chinese Film Industry; Film Studies; Globalization*

1. Introduction

Swept by the wave of globalization, international films are eyeing the Chinese market, which makes the Chinese film industry usher in a particular period of opportunities and challenges. In this context, a group of outstanding filmmakers have emerged in China. Among them, the fifth-generation directors who graduated from Beijing Film Academy in the 1980s are the most prominent, including Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang and so on [1]. These directors lived through China's most turbulent period and then received professional training during the reform and opening up period, so they often incorporate personal experience into their creative process. The works of the "fifth generation directors" are particularly subjective, symbolic and allegorical [2]. They are particularly keen on new ideas and new artistic techniques, trying to find a new perspective in each film. They are eager to explore the history of national culture and the structure of national psychology through film. Their films are often based on Chinese stories and reflect deeply on Chinese aesthetic art and culture.

As a leading figure of the fifth generation of directors, Zhang Yimou's innovation in film narrative and profound thinking on content promoted the artistic quality of Chinese films to an unprecedented height, and brought it to the international film industry [3]. His early works have received numerous awards worldwide, deepening the world's understanding of Chinese films, and triggering a new wave of Chinese films [2]. Faced with the unstoppable force of globalization, Zhang Yimou attempted to incorporate elements from Hollywood's production model into Chinese film-making processes such as production and distribution. This strategic move resulted in significant box office success, which is also an essential milestone in advancing commercial films in China [3]. Therefore, this paper chooses Zhang Yimou and his films as the research object to analyze, trying to explore the reasons why his films occupy a place in the domestic and foreign film industry, as well as the significance of his films to Chinese films and global films.

2. The Artistic Characteristics of Zhang Yimou's films

Zhang Yimou has created a series of excellent film works with his unique artistic style and skills. His works take the unique national elements of China as the background, while combining Western elements to adapt to the global market, and finally achieve a win-win effect at home and abroad.

2.1. Unique narrative perspective

The works of the fifth generation of Chinese directors broke through the old creative mode,

generally paying attention to the experience and fate of ordinary people in the social turmoil and focusing the meaning of individual existence and the value of life [4]. Zhang Yimou's debut film *Red Sorghum* casts off the shackles of morality and ethics, confronts people's desires, and shows the barbaric side of human growth in a challenging environment. Another of his films, *Raise the Red Lantern*, focuses on the survival of Chinese women in a specific historical period through the perspective of concubines.

In addition to the stories of specific historical periods, Zhang Yimou is also concerned with the storytelling of contemporary themes. In *The Story of Qiuju*, a rural woman, without any education, is stubbornly continually appealing for a officials' "reply", reflecting the evolution of ideas in Chinese society after the reform and opening up [5]. *The Road Home* uses a narrative way of time-and-space alternation, which shows a generation of Chinese people's view on love through the past and the reality.

Even in his later commercial films, Zhang Yimou has been trying to narrate traditional stories from new perspectives. *Hero* is derived from a famous story in Chinese history "Jing Ke Assassinates the Emperor of Qin". In traditional Chinese historical stories, the First Emperor of Qin is often regarded as a tyrant as he used force to unify the six countries. So, assassins are often seen as heroes if they eradicate the tyrant. However, through the assassin's choice, the film expresses the Qin Shi Huang, who made the country from division to unity, is no longer a simple tyrant [3].

In Zhang Yimou's film, there are not only exciting stories, individual characters and artistic images, but also hidden cultural consciousness and themes. Zhu and Gong mention that his films conform to American scholar Frederic Jameson's theory of national allegory. Jameson points out that all Third World texts are allegorical and specific [2][3]. Berry and Fargunar further argue that Chinese film imagery and storytelling have been greatly influenced by nationalism in various aspects [6]. In *Red Sorghum*, for example, the death of Jiu'er may evoke diverse emotional interpretations while in *the House of Flying Daggers*, Liu was injured and disappeared in the snow, leaving the audience with unlimited imagination. Additionally, Zhang proposed that in the era of globalization, national allegory need to be changed [7]. Zhang Yimou presents us a China that transcends the image of a specific new world. His later films attempted to get closer to Western audiences, combining the cultural texts of Chinese films with Western elements. This kind of cultural text does not have too high cultural barriers, will be more modernized and lived, and the audience will be easier to interpret. This may be one of the reasons why Zhang Yimou's films are more widely accepted.

2.2. Artistic Performance

Zhang Yimou's unique artistic performance is also the key feature of his works to win the global market.

The transformation of virtual and real scenes can make the dramatic contradictions more concentrated and prominent. Virtual setting is a method often used in Zhang Yimou's films [2]. The film's narrative often unfolds within confined spaces, enabling it to transcend the constraints of reality and history and assume a more abstract and symbolic nature [3]. For example, the *Chen Family Courtyard* hung adorned with red lanterns or the palace of the First Emperor of Qin in *Hero*.

Color is also an indispensable element in Zhang Yimou's films. As a professional photographer, Zhang Yimou is proficient in the use of color. He pursues to convey more profound emotional expression through color [8][9]. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, red lanterns are the only bright color in the entire *Chen Family Courtyard*. They represent elegance, glory, power and status, and are the source of happiness for all the women in the courtyard. If the red lantern extinguished, it means that misfortune is coming. Zhang Yimou not only values the metaphorical function of colour but also focuses on the different emotional experiences expressed by color changes. Using different colors highlights the atmosphere of the scene and the subjective emotions of the characters. In *Hero*, it makes extensive use of red, blue and green colors to express different emotional atmosphere. In the depiction of the assassin, the flamboyant colour of red is used in the background which express the blood and danger of the assassination mission; In the description of the king of Qin, a calm blue color is used to express the tension above the hall. Using different colors highlights the atmosphere of the scene and the subjective emotions of the characters.

2.3. Culture integration

Zhang Yimou's films have effectively addressed the cultural demands of integrating tradition and

modernity, rendering them both ideologically significant and popularly appealing. Chinese cinema is primarily constrained by three factors: government agencies, film enterprise systems, and pragmatic intellectuals. Consequently, there are three categories of Chinese films: mainstream cultural films, elite cultural films, and popular cultural films. Typically, these categories exist independently [2].

However, Zhang Yimou has adeptly merged these categories in his works. Initially drawing inspiration from intellectual literary works for a substantial portion of his early creations, but he simplified the exploration of intricate traditional culture and social criticism while emphasizing the reflection of national culture and vitality in everyday life, which makes his film works closer to local audiences [10]. This exemplifies his integration of elite culture and popular culture. In 2002, *Hero* incorporated elements that appealed to mainstream culture, combining characteristics of popular culture, especially the more commercial urban mass culture [2]. This has great enlightenment and reference significance for the development of Chinese film industry.

The global success of Zhang Yimou's films not only represents a milestone for Chinese films, but also promotes the diversity of world films. His films always adhere to the connotation of Chinese culture, dig deeply into Chinese culture and tradition, and become a window for the world to understand Chinese culture. Through artistic exploration and cultural reflection, he presents national culture and traditional culture to Western audiences with his own unique artistic style. At the same time, globalization and the development of market economy have gradually increased the influence of movie consumers on movies, and movie consumers decide the production and existence of movies to an increasing extent. Faced with this situation, Zhang Yimou actively expanded the cooperation with the global film industry, made efforts in the commercialization of Chinese films, and also made Western audiences and Hollywood more closely connected with Chinese culture.

3. Globalization and Film Policy

Since the mid-1990s, globalization has brought new challenges and opportunities to the Chinese film industry. Zhang Yimou is keenly inspired by the development of the global film industry, linking his work to world cinema. At the same time, the change of China's film policy has provided support for the success of Zhang's films, promoting the development of China's film industry and the communication with the international film industry.

3.1. The Impact of Globalization

The early film works of Zhang Yimou were greatly influenced by the international film wave, which played a significant role in establishing his presence in the global film market. Following the end of World War II, the center of film began to shift, which was not a simple change of geography, but a major change of film aesthetics [11]. The emergence of "New realism" and "New Wave" as dominant forces in international cinema brought pioneering inspiration to Asian filmmakers [4]. The New Realism film has distinct characteristics. In terms of content, it focused on social realities and portrayed the lives and emotions of ordinary working-class individuals; In terms of artistic approach, it embraced a documentary-style aesthetic which emphasized authenticity [12]. Influenced by this style, the fifth generation of Chinese directors began incorporating real-life settings into their works while employing non-professional actors and preserving local dialects to faithfully depict everyday existence [13]. Zhang Yimou was deeply impacted by this trend as well. His films *The Story of Qiuju* and *Not One Less* both adopted the documentary style and received critical acclaim at the Venice International Film Festival where they won the highest prize Golden Lion Award. The "New Wave" film movement aimed to create unique cinematic forms that highlighted individual styles and self-expression [14]. Zhang Yimou's films have achieved a unique personal style in the aspects of narrative perspective and color application, which reflects his thinking on traditional culture and modern culture [15].

Entering the 21st century, China rejoined the World Trade Organization, which facilitated the further opening of the Chinese market to the world. The quota system of imported films was abolished in the Chinese film market, which allowed Hollywood to rapidly dominate with its globalized productions [16]. Although the work of the fifth generation filmmakers is widely recommended artistically, it can only reach a limited audience [17]. To compete with Hollywood blockbusters, Chinese filmmakers needed to emphasize unique Chinese identity while modernizing techniques and narratives as well as exploring commercial genres [3]. Zhang Yimou has also made great contributions in this regard. In 2002, his film *Hero* earned a record-breaking 2.5 billion RMB domestically and over \$53 million in the US, second only to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* [3]. The film is

considered to be China's first commercial blockbuster, it is a breakthrough in the history of Chinese cinema as well as a successful attempt of Zhang Yimou in the field of commercial cinema after his artistic achievements.

3.2. Updated Chinese film policy

The shift in Chinese government policies and strategies has provided a solid foundation for the development of China's film industry and facilitated the exchange between Chinese and foreign films. Before the 1990s, in response to the impact of global film products, the Chinese government implemented import quotas on foreign films primarily aimed at protecting domestic cinema rather than pursuing economic interests [17][18]. Additionally, the government also offered subsidies to support the growth of art films [19], which played a crucial role in enabling Zhang Yimou's early works. However, following the trend of globalization in the 1990s, China's cultural governance strategy underwent a transformation: shifting from an emphasis on public services and ideological control towards profit-driven cultural industries that catered to market demands [20]. Consequently, Hollywood with its mature production model and theatre chain system, made significant strides into the Chinese market. Faced with the threat of Hollywood blockbusters, the Chinese government began to encourage commercial film production [18], Zhang Yimou's commercial film production began since then.

The change of China's film industry policy demonstrates the determination of Chinese films to participate in the world film. Zhang Yimou, as a leading figure in Chinese film, took the lead in trying to cooperate with the global film industry. Klein mentioned that Asian filmmakers need to do the following four things if they want to pursue the world stage: improving the production value of Asian commercial films, professionalism, regionalism, and borrowing Hollywood's visual and narrative styles [21]. Zhang Yimou's films well reflect these four points. For his first commercial film *Hero*, for example, he used a budget to build a first-class production team before shooting, including well-known overseas action coaches, costume designers and music producers. To ensure the digital visual effects of the film, *Hero* was transferred to three Australian companies for post-production [3]. In addition, American studio Miramax Films acquired distribution rights of the film in advance for \$21 million, which was also used to pay for the film. This series of operations completely follows the Hollywood model [21]. The crew from different regions ensured the diversity of the film's audience, taking into account both Chinese elements and the tastes of international audiences. The cast is mainly from China, including Chen Daoming and Zhang Ziyi from the mainland, Tony Leung Chiu-wai and Maggie Cheung from Hong Kong, and internationally renowned Jet Li and Donnie Yen. Meanwhile, the production team also have Japanese fashion designer Emi Wada, American composer Tan Dun, violinist Itzhak Perlman[21].

Zhang Yimou also attaches great importance to participating in film festivals as a way to propel his films to fame and fortune. Film festivals are important platforms for the exchange of films between different countries. Attending and holding film festivals can promote domestic films to be recognized by world cinema [22]. Zhang Yimou's films have won many awards and nominations at home and abroad, such as *Red Sorghum*, which was awarded the Golden Bear Award at the 38th Berlin International Film Festival; *Ju Dou* which was awarded the 63rd Academy Awards in the United States. These achievements not only catapulted his films onto the global stage but also bolstered the prominence of Chinese cinema within the international market. At the same time, Zhang Yimou's films have become a brand of Chinese films, and audiences are willing to go to the cinema and pay for his films [23].

4. Conclusion

The case study of Zhang Yimou's films demonstrates that the success of any film is intricately linked to its distinctive artistic value and the support provided by the external environment. The development of a unique artistic style is closely intertwined with the director's personal experiences, historical context, social culture, and customs. Without these factors, a film lacks a distinct cultural essence. Whether it is Zhang Yimou's early works or his later commercial works, his films are deeply imbued with Chinese culture as their core element while maximizing his individual characteristics within each piece, enabling audiences to readily identify them. These exceptional artistic attributes serve as a significant factor contributing to the success of Zhang Yimou's films both in China and on the global stage.

Through the analysis of the factors contributing to Zhang Yimou's film success, it becomes evident that his achievements are closely linked to his adaptability to societal progress, ability to confront challenges, and aptitude for seizing opportunities. During a period when Chinese cinema required introspection and exploration, Zhang Yimou pioneered a new direction by establishing the identity of new Chinese films and made up for the absence of Chinese film in the world. Furthermore, amidst globalization and national transformation, Zhang Yimou adeptly aligned himself with the zeitgeist by directing commercially successful films like *Hero* and *The Great Wall*. These endeavors effectively facilitated the amalgamation of Chinese cinema with its international counterparts while simultaneously fostering domestic market growth.

In addition, the production, distribution, and exhibition of films are intricately related to the external environment, exerting a significant influence on Zhang Yimou's cinematic achievements. Following China's reform and opening-up policy, the creative landscape for Chinese films has become comparatively more conducive. The flexible and accommodating national policies have not only fostered robust growth within the domestic film industry but also facilitated global collaboration and exchange in filmmaking endeavors. This has enabled cooperation not only with Hollywood but also propelled Chinese cinema onto the global stage. As an integral component of film communication, film festivals serve as a platform to showcase Chinese films worldwide while simultaneously facilitating knowledge transfer from global cinema.

Zhang Yimou's film is a microcosm of Chinese films, and his filmography also serves as a representation of the evolution within the Chinese film industry. By studying Zhang Yimou's works, we can gain insights into three major challenges confronting the development of Chinese film industry. Firstly, how to strike a balance between nationalism and globalization is crucial. The influx of global films into China and the international exposure of Chinese films necessitate considerations on how to enhance international recognition for domestic productions. Secondly, finding equilibrium between artistic value and commercial viability poses another significant challenge. While Zhang Yimou's earlier works were more artistically inclined, market demands have led him towards prioritizing commercial success in recent years. Although his commercially successful ventures are not devoid of artistic merit, they have faced criticism for potentially lacking in this aspect. Consequently, navigating this conflict between artistic integrity and commercial appeal remains an important concern amidst globalization and increasing commodification trends in filmmaking today. Lastly, while the fifth generation directors paved new paths for Chinese cinema, emerging filmmakers need to strive to break free from their influence and establish their own achievements by exploring distinct cinematic styles.

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