

The Formal Evolution of Chinese Martial Arts Action Movies and the Spread of Core Values

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ABSTRACT. *The transformation and development of Chinese martial arts film era has a new pattern in its creative form and expression. Under the influence of the globalization, some of the distinctive cultural elements in martial arts films continue to be passed down in the local creative vision. The other part is “foreignized” by other overseas regions and used by others to achieve cross-cultural communication. Therefore, as a kind of distinctive type of local films, creative transformation and innovative development have been realized, and its evolution has been become international in the new era. Through synchronic and diachronic analysis, the article reveals the changes in the form of Chinese martial arts action films and the inheritance and expansion of core values in the three aspects of nationalist turn, action spectacle and marching into the international arena.*

KEYWORDS: *Martial arts action films; Nationalism; Value leadership; Internationalization*

1. Introduction

As the name implies, action films take human or mechanical movements as the main form of expression [1] with the missions of social function and moral education, combining the emotions of the characters with the urgency of the events to make the conflicts and describe the story line. In North America, the action movies was firstly named by the type films concept, which was followed up the establishment of the American studio system [2]. Due to decades of reform and development, its form and shape have shifted and changed, and it is bound to evolve and transform in light of the needs of the times. Therefore, the definition of the current action films and core values will be somewhat different from the scope of the previous action films. However, in Chinese movies, people call the early native action films as “Kung Fu Movies” or “martial arts films.” As one of the earliest types of films in the history of Chinese cinema, there will also be corresponding changes and explorations, injecting new elements and values, and expressing new symbolic meanings, making it more in line with the developing environment of the world's film trends.

Based on Mr. Chen Mo's combing and analysis on martial arts films, Chinese martial arts films go through several different stages: the germination period, also named the legendary era, happened from 1920s to 1930s, the chivalrous era from 1940s to 1950s, the martial arts era from 1960s to 1970s, the era of entertainment of new videos from 1980s to 1990s. The 21st century is a new era, showing an international trend [3].

In fact, this change is subject to the social background, and it is inextricably linked with the national contradictions, economic forms, political system and film market at that time. At the same time, there are some deep factors to be explored. Meantime, there are fewer things as traditional Chinese characteristics, and there are more drivers of the modern trend of the world. Besides, the meaning of social judgment and educating responsibility is weak and interests of the commercial attributes and sensory entertainment are enhanced. The moral norms and chivalrous spirits are weak. The impact of violent aesthetics and formal aesthetics gets strong. It is also under the control of this trend that many movies, like the Marvel of North America, the super-British movies of DC, and the hard-core police films and modern war action films of the world came into being. To a certain extent, the development of action films is like a “serious game.”

However, no matter how the form of the martial arts action film changes, how the foreign culture absorbs and draws on it, its local cultural attributes and the core of value-oriented will not change. On the contrary, it will show on the internationalization with new appearances and trends. Modern martial arts action film represents the meaning of “commitment”. Therefore, the article uses the action film as the type of film to compare the Chinese martial arts action film. The article discusses the cultural spirit and humanistic connotation of action movies, as the business card of Chinese film, and how to evolve and change under different times.

2. Nationalism Turns to Universal Values

“Chivalry” originally represented the spirit of practicing Tao for heaven in Chinese martial arts, and punishing evil and promoting good, while martial arts film is the remolding of martial arts literature. The early classic martial arts film focused on the concept of “chivalrous spirit”. In the films, stunts and martial arts is the exclusive skill of Chevalier. The martial arts film shows a certain cultural outlook, values, and morality. It is also the root of Chinese traditional culture. This chivalrous concept develops into a cultural phenomenon that caters to the public's aesthetic psychology and cultural psychology. Therefore, the broad and profound essence of “Xia Culture” has its inherent humanistic connotation and aesthetic implication, just as in the novel of Mr. Jin Yong: “For the country for the people, the man of the greatest.”

It can be said that martial arts is a folk Chinese dream, the product of Chinese agricultural civilization and the Chinese dream deposited in the feudal era before the completion of the transformation of modern Chinese civilization [4]. In each period, there will be different “Chinese dreams”. This is the requirement of the times and a mission. The Chinese dream of the feudal period requires the knights to complete. And the heroic spirit will continue to be passed down. The early chivalrous culture was served as the spiritual leader and pillar in the world of martial arts movies and the description of showing nationalism has not been highlighted. Therefore, the nationalism has just sprouted under the cloak of chivalry and still in the recessive stage. The main contradictions of the story are concentrated in the ordinary people, showing the happiness and enmity between this group. There are no strong national contradictions and hostility between the countries. However, after China became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, it suffered a lot from the impact of Western industrial civilization and the bullying of the powers. The nature of society changed greatly, mainly caused by the contradiction between imperialism and the Chinese nation and the contradiction between feudalism and the people. At this time, the martial arts film carries the national sentiment, and its function is regarded as a kind of weapon. Therefore, it is somewhat out of place to praise the noble qualities of swearing and killing the rich and helping the poor. The social background has promoted the transformation of the movie characters in the martial arts films. In the context of ethnic contradictions, the transformation of martial arts movies from praising chivalry to affirmation of nationalism is not only a metaphor for the social environment, but also announcing to the world the complex state of mind that we want to save the nation and save violence.

Since then, the years from 1960s to 1970s have been a fruitful period of Chinese martial arts films. The works of this period are very stylized and typical. In Hong Kong, the environmental orientation of this period evolved from “Jianghu” to Internationalization, from the affirmation of two directors, Zhang Che and Hu Jinxi on the “masculine aesthetics” of men to the “Kung Fu philosophy” of Bruce Lee's own family, from the costume martial arts to the modern kung fu, from the swords to the fists. Later, Bruce Lee successively launched a series of works full of revenge nationalism, such as “Jingwumen”, “Raptors Cross the River” and “Dragon Fighting”, which shaped the great heroes, attacking foreigners and proclaiming that the sleeping lion was awake. In fact, what behind the theme of the film is an insinuation of dark reality. The contradictions of nations and classes are undoubtedly revealed. The only solution is the raising fists and changing the image of the sick and weak Chinese thought by foreigners. The martial arts fight fits the audience's venting desire and the theme of the movie is precisely in line with the Chinese national psychology. Therefore, the appearance of Bruce Lee's work greatly enhanced the national self-confidence and pride and met the psychological needs of various social groups, becoming the leading concept and declaration of the “Main Melody in Early Days”.

After the 1990s, China returned to the center of the world stage and its voice and influence were greatly enhanced. During this period, the martial arts action films in mainland China and Hong Kong closely followed the time. And the movies were no longer represented as before. The actions of Violence as a mean of fighting foreigners has no longer existed. More works showed that our country has changed from poor to rich, from the urgent desire to establish an international image to the promotion of economy, breaking through the absolute binary opposition in the narrative and the creative barriers of good and evil, and gradually fading away the fixed modes of extremely antagonistic stance of the foreigners and Chinese and the situation of foreigners must be beating. Compared with the content of the movies in 1970s, the works are more rational, instead of just venting and showing off. The appearance of the analysis and judgment in the works reflected the richness of martial arts films in creative mode. At this time, the value orientation of the martial arts action film expanded, and the theme focused on the relations between the states and the nations, showing the inclusive attitude to conform to the development trend of the time. Therefore, the creative perspective shifts from national sentiment to humanity, from hysterical shouting to hesitation of survival. All of these have included the philosophical thinking of “existentialism”. Under the surface of the fight, the concept of humanistic care and universal values is constructed. Of course, this is also a change caused by current events. It is no longer a simple binary opposition philosophy, but a sense of justice and stopping the violence by violence. This is the soul and ultimate value of Chinese martial arts action films. At the same time, it also tells a simple but profound truth that how to coexist

between people, how to seek common ground while reserving differences between countries. These thoughts can be answered in the series of films such as “Chinese Hero”, “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”, “Night Banquet”, “Wu Xia” and “Ye Wen”. Just as the lines in “Wu Xia”: “All things are composed of innumerable marriages, and everything is self-contained [5]...”. The interpretation of the lines is made up of the table and the inside. On the one hand, through the stories and lines, it can be seen what kind of factors are planted, what kind of fruit will be formed, and how the Zen philosophy of human thinking can be infiltrated. On the other hand, the nature of human can be more understood by the contradictions and struggles in the chaos. Not only will we talk about how to protect our country from revenging, but we will use the joys and sorrows in “Jianghu” as a backdrop to create a universal real world. Therefore, this universality should focus on people's living conditions and attitudes towards life. Based on humanistic concern. The proper environment and quality of Chinese martial arts films should pay attention to “human feelings”, human nature and changes of people's psychological structure in specific time and space [6].

3. Step into the Action Spectacle from the Ordinary

The martial arts film is the characteristic of Chinese film culture, and it is also the business card of Chinese film. It has been synonymous with Chinese film for a long time. According to the film research scholars, the prototype of the martial arts film can be traced back to the 1920s or so. The film “The Pirates of the Car” was filmed by Peng Nian Ren. The story is simple and the narrative is single. And the action form is “God + martial arts” [7]. It is a stylized martial arts short film. After that, the films, like “Kanto Heroes”, “Fire Red Lotus Temple”, were released in the market. During this period, there was a boom in the filming of martial arts films. Investigating its characteristics, the movements of these works follow the early routines and tricks, lacking of expressiveness and the actions being stereotypes and fixation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the concepts of Chinese and Western action movies met with each other and penetrated and learned from each other. Chinese martial arts spread widely overseas. A large number of domestic directors absorbed the elements and visual images of Hollywood action films, and then supplemented with technology to polish and gradually break away the expression of screaming and the fists s traditional martial arts. All of these jumped out of the closed space of the ordinary roads and transformed into the beautiful fighting design, combining the visual and real actions. Thus, this has also become a new peak in the history of martial arts movies. Later, the “martial dance spirit”, violent aesthetics and other forms came one after another in an endless stream, combining with the traditional action design. Here, I have to mention the concept of “martial dance” proposed by Mr. Jia Leilei: After Chinese martial arts entered the audiovisual system of the film, it evolved into a martial arts dance with art performance as the mainstay and hitting the other side as a supplement[8]. The postures, forms, rhythm and temperament of the fight are magnificently integrated. This form of beauty has provided a new martial arts element for the later generations of martial arts films. There are many shows in the films such as “Night Banquet”, “Demon Cat” and “Shadow”.

On the other hand, in addition to the above-mentioned martial arts-style costume martial arts films, modern action films are unscrupulously adding a large number of violent aesthetic elements, making visual features and movements more direct and shocking, from concealed violence to intense Violence, rendering violence to the extreme. Many details and scenes, like fluttering flesh and blood, the shattering teeth, the disassembling body and the parabolic blood, are often shown in close-up and upgraded shots. And there are sound of bones and the environment used as a foil. This way of enhancing the audio-visual language stimulates the eyes and nerves of the audience, and the aesthetics of the bloody scenes are unobstructed, reaching the dazzling destination. These details are too numerous to mention in many works, like “Blood and Blood”. In addition, the form of violent aesthetics in the works is not exaggerated and debauchery from beginning to end. The truly superior violent aesthetic works in this respect must be relaxed and able to be freely retracted. It is an organic combination of bloody violence, beautiful violence, and slow-temporal violence. Therefore, this is enough to show that martial arts and violent aesthetics are the newly added elements of action aesthetics in the late stage. They are romantic, independent, and extremely exaggerated to the formal aesthetics. Although the moral guide and the responsibility of education are retreating, the movies still had such missions. It is just to return aesthetic choices and moral judgments to the audience and create an existentialist situation [9]. It has to be acknowledged that martial arts, violent aesthetics and traditional tactics jointly construct the visual wonders and cultural spaces of modern martial arts action films.

4. The Production Standards Have Entered the International Arena

Nowadays, the types of movies that are popular among the audience include action movies, comedy films

and romance films. Every year, there will be works that win both revenues and reputations. As a kind of local-type film that made the world refreshed, the Chinese martial arts action film became popular in the late 1920s. After nearly a hundred years of development, its production mode and shooting mode have undergone tremendous changes, proceeding in the process of internationalization. In the process of technological advancement, we abandoned the traditional film production methods of the last century, added other visual styles, strengthened the visual impact in the scenes and styles, and combined the social environment with the natural environment to create vision wonders. At the same time, 3D motion effects and CG technology fill the gaps in the technology and improve the level of industrial production. In the final analysis, one of the main drivers of this situation is the change of the local environment and the progress of the Chinese film industry. In the test part of entering the international stage, the advancement of science and technology has pushed forward the production of martial arts action films. Although the production methods such as hanging WIA and wire hanging are part of the film industry, they are only preliminary developments. The usual techniques of the period also symbolize that this is one of the means of upgrading the Chinese film industry.

At the turn of the century, the martial arts action film is famous for its glory. It has entered into the world with its new style and is deeply welcomed and exclaimed by Westerners. Movies such as “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” and “Hero” are new starting points, and the latter are endless. These outstanding works have been recognized and praised. The Western countries looked the Eastern countries (specifically China) as a different cultural perspective. Besides, the most direct way is that commercial value has become the first measure of Chinese martial arts action films in foreign markets. Undoubtedly, we are gradually forming a barbaric development in the great movies, and the current spirit of chivalry is not limited to the meaning of keeping security in violence and make actions for justice, but the starting point is placed in the whole world to explore common social problems. That is the “community of human destiny”, which is a kind of representation of universal values and ideology. Therefore, the core of the martial arts action film (here refers to the knight culture) gradually extended to the domestic war action film, science fiction film. There are many successful cases in the market, including hard-core movies such as the “Red Sea Action”, “Mekong Action” and “War Wolf” series, highlighting the distinctive and fearless sacrifice of Chinese soldiers, and resolutely safeguarding world peace and international humanitarianism. There are also sci-fi movies represented by “Wandering Earth” that let the people of the whole world unite to create opportunities, overcome difficulties, change destiny, and make our own dedication. These two types of works adhere to the concept of international cooperation and witnessed the image of a big country, the responsibility of a big country and the power of a big country. Therefore, these works can show that our current film industry development has entered a new stage, and even entered a stage where we can directly compete with Hollywood and fight against court. From this point of view, the industrial development entering into a new stage is an unstoppable trend, and it also promotes the domestic film to win the international film industry.

Looking back at the development path of Chinese martial arts action films, from the very beginning of its birth, it has encountered its ups and downs as commodities. It is also a vicissitudes of life, closely following the times, as the horn of an era until today and it is still enduring. It is also the unique inclusiveness of Chinese martial arts films. It can not only convey its voice and contribution in the world, but also be an inclusive one. On the whole, the type of films changes during a certain period of time, so as the new forms, expressions and states. And its evolution still catches up with the trend of society. Of course, from Chinese martial arts films to action movies in the whole world, it can be said that under certain geographical conditions, the Chinese martial art movies still ranks first in many fields, like forms, quality, quantity, market power, revenues and technology exploration and so on. Even though its violent elements increase, the proportion of ethical guidelines decreases, and the visual effects are excessively disordered, the expression of this art form is one of the important ways for people to experience cultural life and participate in artistic activities in public space. It is true that the Chinese martial arts action film, as a standard type of film, has been popular at different stages and in different countries. The movies have an important and historical position in the world, fully demonstrating the distinctive contribution of Chinese filmmakers to the world.

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