

An Eastern Female Character as The Lead Characterin Hollywood Kung Fu Films from 2003-2023

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Abstract

Kung fu movies, centered around the display of Chinese martial arts skills, are a genre of films with martial arts action as their main narrative strategy. Hollywood kung fu movies refer to those produced by Hollywood that integrate elements of Chinese kung fu. The need for an aesthetic of violence is a significant reason for the presence of Chinese martial arts in Hollywood kung fu movies. These films have always been popular, and the phenomenon of Eastern female characters as lead characters challenges the past stereotypes of Eastern women in Hollywood kung fu movies, making it an intriguing and worthy topic of exploration. This study, considering the different historical backgrounds of Eastern female characters in Hollywood kung fu movies, examines the factors constituting the portrayal of Eastern female characters, aiming to assist more Chinese filmmakers in adopting a proactive, conscious, and scientific approach to enhance the portrayal of Eastern female characters in films.

Keywords: Hollywood Kung Fu Films, Eastern Female Characters, Others

Introduction

Since the 1970s, following the success of Asian kung fu superstar Bruce Lee in Hollywood, Hollywood kung fu movies have achieved significant success both artistically and commercially. These movies have enjoyed considerable success in the international market, attracting audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, and have also provided more opportunities for Asian actors and directors.

In the 1980s, influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors, the portrayal of Asians in Hollywood films was often associated with “comical and ignorant” characters, and presented in a caricatured manner (Gao, 2015). With the deepening of cultural exchanges between China and the United States in the 21st century, while American culture continued to influence Asian culture, it was also increasingly influenced by various aspects of Asian culture

(Lei, 2010). Particularly in Hollywood kung fu movies, where Asian actors generally held non-mainstream roles, Chinese kung fu actors began to gain more recognition in the United States, and their influence steadily increased. An increasing number of Eastern cultural symbols began to appear widely in these films.

Since the 21st century, as Eastern women increasingly participate in international affairs, the Chinese public has become more concerned about the continuous and accurate representation of their voice in the international community, and about constructing an accurate, positive, and healthy image of Eastern women. Interpreting the image of female protagonists in Hollywood kung fu movies holds practical significance for the international dissemination of China's image.

Literature Review

The commercial success of film art has stimulated academia to delve deeper into the exploration and study of film art. The concept of Hollywood kung fu movies has been clearly defined (Yan, 2014). states that Hollywood kung fu movies refer to those produced by film companies in the Hollywood region, integrating elements of Chinese kung fu. Kung fu movies are those that primarily showcase Chinese martial arts skills and use martial arts action as their main narrative strategy (Liang et al., 2015). Zhang Yifei notes that kung fu movies, rooted in martial arts and embodying the spirit of chivalry Zhang (2016), draw upon traditional Chinese wuxia culture and are closely linked to traditional Chinese cultural elements like philosophy, ethics, religion, and martial arts, serving as an important paradigm for both Chinese and foreign audiences to understand Chinese traditional culture.

In the past, female protagonists were rare in Hollywood kung fu movies, with most featuring European and American actors in leading roles and very few with Asian female leads. In fact, Hollywood's affection for Eastern martial arts was evident as early as 1973 in "Enter the Dragon," starring Bruce Lee, the first Hollywood kung fu film. Scholars have noted that since the 1970s, Chinese kung fu films popular in the United States have elevated the mystical imagination of Chinese martial arts to a high level Liang et al (2015), with Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li being the main actors of Hollywood's Chinese kung fu films at that time. Contrarily, there are very few Hollywood kung fu movies with Asian female leads, and even if there are, they started very late. Hollywood has indeed had a long-standing issue with the scarcity, marginalization, and stereotyping of Asian characters (Lin, 2020).

Since the new millennium, Hollywood kung fu movies featuring Asian female characters as protagonists have begun to emerge. The 2000 female-centric commercial movie "Charlie's Angels" was a huge success. It revolves around a team of three beautiful female agents, including Chinese-American actress Lucy Liu, who played one of the lead roles as Alex. Her agile Chinese kung fu and composed demeanor captivated audiences, fully portraying a professional woman with Eastern charm (Zhang, 2014). In 2019, after 30 years in Hollywood, Lucy Liu received her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, marking the first time an Asian actor was recognized by Western media and audiences as the lead in a Hollywood kung fu movie.

On January 5, 2020, Awkwafina became the first Asian actress to win a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy for her outstanding performance in

“The Farewell” Lin (2020), “The World of Thought”. In 2023, at the 95th Academy Awards, the highly anticipated Best Actress award was won by 60-year-old Michelle Yeoh for her role in “Everything Everywhere All at Once” Coe (2023), making her the first Chinese actress to receive an Oscar for Best Actress. That same year, Yeoh won multiple prestigious awards including the Best Actress in a Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy at the 80th Golden Globe Awards and the Best Actress at the 53rd Screen Actors Guild Awards. She was also named the “Icon of the Year” by Time Magazine in 2022, becoming the first Asian actress to receive this honor (Lin, 2020). “The World of Thought” point out that these phenomena indicate that Asian actors finally have a strong presence in the North American entertainment industry.



Figure 1: Poster of the movie “Everything Everywhere All at Once,”
Sourced: https://www.sohu.com/a/550944679_120490186 (2023)

The 2022 film “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” produced and distributed by A24 Films and directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, was adapted from “The Conversations of Women” and released in North America on March 25, 2022. Upon its release, the film sparked widespread discussion both domestically and internationally, with mixed reviews (Sohu, 2023). The movie tells the story of a mother and daughter navigating life’s challenges and their journey to self-discovery. Malaysian Chinese actress Michelle Yeoh, as the lead, successfully portrayed the character of a Chinese mother with the strength and determination characteristic of Eastern women (Chen & Huang, 2022).

Simone de Beauvoir stated, “Man is the Subject, the Absolute; woman is the Other” (Beauvoir, 1953). In the film “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” the mother Evelyn and her daughter Joy find themselves entrenched in the dilemma of being “the Other.” The film presents the

Eastern female lead character as embodying the “Other” predicament of Chinese women. Simone de Beauvoir in her work “The Second Sex II” pointed out, “Women have never formed an autonomous, enclosed society; they are combined with the male-dominated group and occupy a subordinate position within the group” (Beauvoir, 1953). Lacan notes, “The ‘Other’ will ultimately be internalized as ‘Self’, thereby losing its subjectivity and becoming the ‘Object’ of the ‘Other’” (Zhang, 2006). “The Other and Deconstruction - A Keynote Interpretation of Feminist Film Theory,” Chen & Huang (2022) argue that examining the film “Everything Everywhere All at Once” from a feminist perspective elucidates the essence of traditional Chinese culture - the philosophical concept of “harmony but not uniformity,” embodying the way of diversity and coexistence. Therefore, the film’s unique philosophical content of Eastern culture, viewed from a feminist perspective, deserves greater attention.

Data Collection and Methodology

The subject of this study is Hollywood kung fu movies featuring Eastern female characters as protagonists, particularly from 2003 to 2023, with a focus on the portrayal of Eastern female characters. This study employs qualitative research methods, mainly case studies, interviews, and questionnaires. The respondents for this research are limited to individuals and non-commercial organizations in China.

Due to geographical limitations, this study can only gather data from the films themselves, film texts, and questionnaires completed by respondents in China (Chen & Yi, 2023). It is possible that the case samples in this study may not fully cover all Hollywood kung fu movies featuring Eastern female characters, hence there is a risk in the selection of the research samples. If the number of research samples is found to be excessive, additional research methods will be considered.

During the interview process, although the research design to some extent overcame the subjectivity of the respondents, differences in individual experiences, age, gender, and educational levels among various respondents may bring perceptual variations that could affect the objective evaluation of the Eastern female characters in the target films. If multiple interviews can be conducted within a specified time frame, or if more participants are found, and the depth of interviews is increased through longitudinal research, the results will be more comprehensive, enhancing the validity of the study.

This study inevitably involves an analysis of American ideology, entailing certain political sensitivities and pressures of public opinion direction. Additionally, the topic addresses the binary opposition of “weak” males and “strong” females, the contradiction between the awakening of female consciousness in modern society and patriarchal discourse, and the debate on traditional patriarchal society, among other social issues.

Findings

The portrayal of martial arts, as a representational practice of Chinese martial arts imagination, has become an indispensable element of Hollywood kung fu movies. Simultaneously, as a symbol of Chinese culture, Chinese martial arts, through the lens of Hollywood kung fu movies, have to some extent changed the Western society’s historical stereotypes about China.

Over the course of more than four decades from the 1980s to the early 21st century, Asian martial arts actors such as Bruce Lee, Sammo Hung, Jackie Chan, Lucy Liu, Jet Li, and Michelle Yeoh successfully portrayed righteous, positive, and proactive screen images in Hollywood kung fu movies. This phenomenon reflects the subtle changes in China's image within the American cultural context. Hollywood kung fu movies have evolved from an unconscious blending of Chinese elements to a conscious use of them. During this time, due to multiple differences in politics, culture, concepts, and ideologies, the depiction of China's image in Hollywood kung fu movies has undergone a development from a singular perception to a more diversified approach.

Conclusion

As Hollywood kung fu movies increasingly influence the global film industry, their portrayal of Eastern female characters, as part of a dominant culture, significantly shapes the perception and understanding of Eastern women among audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. Hollywood kung fu movies' understanding of Chinese martial arts culture and Eastern women is initially based on the perspective of the "Other." Therefore, there is a degree of subjective interpretation from the perspective of the "Other" in Hollywood kung fu movies. This subjective interpretation based on the perspective of the "Other" differs from objective reality.

At the same time, due to the multiple differences in politics, culture, concepts, and ideologies, the depiction of Eastern female characters in Hollywood kung fu movies has evolved from a singular perception to a more diversified approach. Against the backdrop of cultural globalization and media discourse competition, Hollywood kung fu movies have had a positive impact on the global film industry and cross-cultural communication. Hollywood kung fu movies have introduced a series of Eastern "female heroes" who are adept in martial arts. This image, a combination of martial arts skills, the spirit of chivalry, and the gender identity of Eastern women, conveys the Western society's imagination of Eastern women, reflecting a partial recognition of Eastern culture by Western society.

This study systematically analyzes the evolution and reshaping of Eastern female images in Hollywood martial arts films from 2003 to 2023, highlighting the transformation of gender images from a cross-cultural perspective. While existing film studies have extensively explored Oriental elements and gender issues in Hollywood, a systematic analysis specifically focused on the depiction of Eastern women in the martial arts genre has been rare. This research fills this gap by providing a new framework for examining the historical and cultural evolution of Eastern female images in Hollywood.

By examining the careers of a range of Asian actors from Bruce Lee to Michelle Yeoh in Hollywood, this study reveals how cultural identity and gender politics intertwine and impact the global media industry. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of gender and racial dynamics in the global film industry but also deepens our comprehension of how Hollywood shapes and reshapes images of Eastern women. These images often display stereotypical tendencies but also reflect diversity and profound cultural exchanges on an international scale.

Against the backdrop of cultural globalization and media discourse, the findings of this study underscore the critical role of cultural products like films in shaping and disseminating cross-

cultural understanding. By analyzing the portrayal of Eastern women in Hollywood martial arts films, this research not only provides insights into how film art can change and challenge gender and racial stereotypes in international society but also offers valuable references for filmmakers and cultural policymakers to promote more authentic and balanced cultural expressions.

In summary, this research not only provides new research perspectives and methodological tools to the academic community but also offers empirical research foundations for practitioners in the film industry and cultural exchange. It aids in promoting a deeper and more diverse understanding of Eastern female images under a global perspective, which is of significant practical relevance and applicational value in today's accelerating globalized world. This cross-cultural perspective provides new insights and directions for the global dialogue on cultural diversity and gender equality.

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