

Research Article

Construction of New Female Image in Early Modern China - Review of *Performing China: Female Stars, Performance Culture, Visual Politics, 1910-1945* by Huiling Zhou

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Abstract

The author of the book *Performing China: Female Stars, Performance Culture, Visual Politics, 1910-1945*, Huiling Zhou, through the method of careful cross-text reading of cultural and video data and the theory of performance cultural studies, studies the tortuous course of constructing new female images of Chinese women represented by female film stars in the early 1920s and 1930s. They are not only “theater actresses” on the screen, but also “social actresses” in social practice. In face of various social opinions, gossip and party comments at that time, early Chinese female stars found ways to release themselves in their screen roles and real lives in the real society. Their performances in the process of China’s modernization revealed the society’s conception of the country, urban scene and female image at that time. Hollywood’s influence on Chinese films in the 1930s was profound and extensive, from the portrayal of urban women in China to the demonstration of film marketing strategies. From the perspective of film performance, the author analyzes the process of cross-cultural communication and interaction between China and the United States in the 1930s, involving various aspects of film, literature, politics, painting and industry. The difficulty of reading this book lies in its strong theoretical nature. Then, the film documents and image data selected by the author in the early 1920s and 1930s are relatively unknown to many people today. The author’s cultural research method with visual as core of cross-cultural interaction research can make us have some new thinking about many popular cultural forms at present, and broaden our vision and thinking.

Keywords

Female Stars, Film Marketing, Visual Arts, Cross-Cultural Interaction

1. Introduction of the Author

Huiling Zhou is an associate professor in the Department of American and American Literature at the National Central University. Her main specialty is “performance studies”. Her research scope includes 20th century European and American performance theory, modern Chinese performance theory,

and performance cultural anthropology. Her research has been published in journals and books on history, sociology and literature. Her theatrical works include *Click, Baby* (2004, director) and *Surprise Party* (2003, director) [1].

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2. A Review of This Book

2.1. The Reason Why the Film Chose Shanghai

Chinese film was born in the ancient imperial capital at the foot of the emperor, but the newborn Chinese film quickly chose another city, Shanghai, which became important production and dissemination base of early Chinese film.

Shanghai can be called the economic and cultural center of modern China. It was the first place where western civilization took lead, and it was the most commercialized and urbanized city at that time when trade circulation and western civilization converged. After the opening of the port, Shanghai, as a concession area, gradually became a place of cultural co-prosperity, where Chinese and Western cultures converged, forming a new cultural atmosphere for the citizens, which was a prerequisite for the choice of Shanghai for the movie.

Another important factor for the film landing in Shanghai is that Shanghai is a city of immigrants, commonly known as the “Four Gangs of Shanghai Immigrants”, who mainly came from Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, Guangdong Province, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, and the northern part of Jiangsu Province [2]. These immigrants became the main composition of Shanghai filmmakers and moviegoers in the future, bringing capital to Shanghai for investment and enjoyment became the biggest driving force for many wealthy businessmen to immigrate to Shanghai. Another potential type of early filmmakers was the cultural elite intellectuals. Many of the early immigrants from Jiangnan to Shanghai were literati and painters. For example, Zheng Zhengqiu is an immigrant from Chaozhou, Guangdong, and Bao Xiaotian is an immigrant from Suzhou. In 1922, Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu set up Star Film Company, with Bao Xiaotian as the scriptwriter, and wrote a number of films that were very popular at the time [2]. After this, a large number of literati of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school began to write scripts, laying an important foundation for the development of the early film industry. The general public, such as traders, housewives and students, were also an important part of the film audience. Therefore, the choice of Shanghai for films was a result of the political and economic environment and culture. As a kind of imported product with both cultural and commercial attributes, films integrate the western modernity with the traditional Chinese culture in the process of cultural exchange between China and the west, turning the contradiction into symbiosis. After the film takes root, it is no longer a phenomenon, but a fusion agent of the symbiosis of Chinese and western culture.

2.2. The Marketing Means of Early Female Stars ——“Act as an Example to Others”

As early as the 1920s and 1930s. the United States made good use of star power. In 1927, the Coca-Cola Company opened up the Shanghai market, and in 1933, local manufacturers in Shanghai became the largest producer of cola sodas

outside of the United States. At the time, the foreign soda was translated into Chinese as “thirsty and spicy”, and the black bubbling liquid deterred many Shanghai residents from trying it [3]. Manufacturers invited the famous film star Ruan Lingyu as a spokesperson, so that the public feel that Coke is sweet and delicious, drinking Coke is a fashionable thing.

The movie itself is a kind of marketing, and the marketing methods of the early movie can also be applied today. To this day, film stars are still a powerful tool in the movie marketing arsenal. For example, many movie stars attend film festivals, participate in celebrity talk shows, etc. to increase exposure, and especially in the current Internet era, many stars win the attention of their fans and gain traffic by posting their daily routines on social network media.

2.3. Film Posters Were and Still Are the Cornerstone of Movie Marketing

A good film poster can clearly express the theme of the film and instantly catch the eye of the audience [7]. The poster of the film “New Woman”, Wei Ming and Li Aying respectively represent the intellectuals and the working class, Wei Ming as a female intellectual forced by life, but chose to do a prostitute, female worker Li Aying is a representative of the working class, she gave Wei Ming a lot of help and encouragement, suggesting that the working class has the ability to help and guide intellectuals, take them to the bright road of life. In the poster, the “tumbler toy” stands on Li Aying’s side suggesting the final outcome of the film, Li Aying is the new woman who really does not fall.

2.4. Cross-Cultural Interaction Between China and America from the Perspective of Film

“Kung Fu Panda” cleverly uses Chinese cultural elements, and organically combines them with American culture and commercial film culture [8]. It is the right blend of Chinese culture [9]. In the protagonist, panda and kung fu are used to create a contradictory and innovative image. While the film’s intrinsic values are somewhat western, “Kung Fu Panda’s” world is very Chinese. For example, the landscapes in the film are taken from the landscapes of Guilin and Qingcheng Mountain in Sichuan province, and the traditional Chinese acupuncture and moxibustion used to treat Po’s injury, eating noodles and using chopsticks, lion dance and firecrackers by the animals in the film all show real Chinese characteristics.

In addition, Kung Fu Panda is a Hollywood-style Chinese story. Although there are many Chinese symbols used in the film, Po is a slack character who knows nothing about martial arts, but uses luck and talent to surpass the martial arts. Po’s individual heroism is amplified in the film, which is at odds with the hard work and collective spirit that the Chinese admire. The perfect combination of Chinese culture and American creativity creates a successful commercial film.

2.5. Analyzing Guo Jianying's Cartoons from Feminist Film Theory

Guo Jianying, known as the new feeling cartoonist, is the soul of the *Women's Illustrated* magazine. His cartoons are known as the killer of Women's Illustrated magazine. He describes the urban life and fragrant smell of old Shanghai with concise lines, which can be called the line version of modern Shanghai. His 1931 work *The Evolution of Dogs - Modern Dogs of Shanghai's Famous Products* witnessed the infiltration of the Hollywood female stars into the cultural imagination of China's modern metropolis [1]. In the cartoon, a modern woman with fluffy wavy hair, sexy lips, and upturned willowy eyebrows blend the almond eyes of Hollywood female stars, wearing high heels and Qipao, and she is holding a prone man called modern dog. This is in great contrast to traditional drawings. Comics as a visual art was also influenced by Laura Mulvey, a famous British film theorist. She put forward the theory of female cinematography to critically view mainstream movies from a female perspective, and argued that all mainstream Hollywood movies have underlying gender rules in their narrative structure, that is, "hidden rules" [4]. Deconstructing a film in this way allows the audience to accept it without resistance and at the same time gain the pleasure of watching it. She argues that there is a pre-existing relationship of "seeing" and "being seen" in Hollywood movies [5], where men "see" and women "are seen". Women, as objects of viewing "desire," are both desired by the male protagonist in the story and by the male audience in the theater, that is, the men are the subject of the action, and the women are the object to be viewed. In traditional paintings, women are often the seen, and the modern woman in the paintings is a commodified presentation to cater to the peeping eyes of men and to attract readers.

Guo Jianying's cartoons not only turn mem into the watched, but also become the modern woman's pet dog, looking pleasingly at her master. The modern woman in the cartoons is no longer the "gazed upon" in Laura Mulvey's sense. Instead, she takes the initiative to look at men, and the reason for this change is precisely the influence of the women's liberation movement in the 1920s and the modern Western concepts [10], which increased women's education and social status, turned men into "to be seen" objects, and took the initiative to tease her pet, which showed us a new female image that against the logic of the tradition.

2.6. Global Projection of American Culture from Hollywood Films

Hollywood films are the representative of the commercial films of the world, as they were then and are now. Films were originally just a kind of entertainment and spiritual products, but Hollywood materialized and industrialized them according to the market needs. Hollywood has now developed into a film and television cultural and creative industry base with a

complete industrial chain of production, distribution, screening and star manufacturing. Hollywood is not only the world's famous film and television culture center, but also has become an important cultural symbol. In addition to Hollywood blockbusters, there are Starbucks coffee, McDonald's, Universal Studios and so on, which continue to impact the nerves of global consumers every day. The American culture represented by the Hollywood film and television culture industry permeates the daily life of consumers around the world through products branded with various American cultures, thus splashing American values around the world. While the United States builds cultural boundaries, it also keeps its economy in a leading position in the world.

2.7. Selfies Are Also a Form of Performance

As the most interesting and compelling form of popular culture today, the selfie is a kind of performance. This is the era when every selfie-taker is eager to be stared at, and is everyone only staring at themselves, we can see a strange situation everywhere, that is, everyone is facing back to the beauty, in the pose of selfie. When everyone takes a selfie, ask yourself if you are really staring at yourself as an object of desire, or if you want to summon others to gaze at the same desire as you.

3. Conclusions

Film, as a foreign product with both cultural and commercial properties, the choice of Shanghai is the result of political, economic environment and culture. The combination of marketing and social practice of Chinese female stars, the trend of "showing up" of Chinese female stars [13], mainly influenced by European and American films, leads film audiences to appreciate not only the dramatic performances of actresses, but also their life behaviors. Hollywood films focus on embellishing the private bold actions of female stars in order to reproduce the life mode recognized by the mainstream society in the media, while Chinese films hope to use the life behavior of female stars to construct a new concept of women in the public opinion [14]. From the perspective of film, the American film "Kung Fu Panda" is a classic work of Chinese culture and American creativity. Similarly, as a kind of visual art, this paper applies the feminist film viewing theory of Laura Mulvey, a famous British film theorist, to analyze Guo Jianying's *the Evolution of Dogs - Modern Dogs of Shanghai's Famous Products* comic work. Due to the influence of the women's liberation movement in the 1920s and modern western concepts, women's education level and social status have improved [15]. What appears in the comic is a new female image that defies the traditional logic. It can be seen that the process of cross-cultural communication and interaction between China and the United States involves various aspects such as film, literature, politics, painting and industry. This book is a thematic treatise on performance culture with a

unique perspective and is recommended for anyone interested in the study of performance culture.

Author Contributions

Zihui Dai is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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