

On the Representation of the Cultural Other in the Movie Crazy Rich Asians

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Abstract

As one of top-rated films, Crazy Rich Asians is a most popular movie in the United States, but it has a failure in Chinese market and the reputation. So, the phenomenon and the social factors which remain under the cover are worth analyzing. Based on the public reports, the film is designed to entertain and cater to the Chinese, especial the Chinese American. While from the perspective of comparative imagology and receptionism aesthetics, the film is taken as the objectives to discuss about the factors of cultural differences behind the image, which is thought to overcome the barriers of cultural communication and provide help for Chinese culture to spread out to the world.

Keywords

Crazy Rich Asians; Cultural other; REPresentation; Chinese image.

1. Introduction

In August 2018, Crazy Rich Asians, produced by Warner Bros., was released. After three weeks at the Top of the North American box office, the total global box office grossed 238 million dollars, with only 30 million dollars invested. In addition to its box office success, the film also received critical acclaim. It has an IMDb rating of 6.9, a Rotten Tomatoes freshness rating of 91% and a Popcorn Score of 76%. The artistic level is also recognized by professionals, won two nominations of the Golden Globe Award for best comedy with Musical film and best Comedy actress. At that time, he has won 10 other awards and been nominated 58 times [1]. Mainstream media in the United States, The United Kingdom, Australia and other countries reported the movie constantly. Constance Wu was printed on the cover of Time magazine for the film. It can be said that it has been well received by both professional film critics and ordinary audiences.

Producers and directors have their attentions put on China, which is the biggest foreign market for Hollywood films outside North America. The film is based on the best-selling novel of the same name by Singapore-born Chinese-American author Kevin Kwan, which has sold more than a million copies and been translated into more than 20 languages. The film's creators, including the director Jon Chu, have an all-Asian cast, mostly of Chinese descent. The title of the film can be literally translated as "Crazy Asian Rich". Although the title of the film is the Asian rich, the story of the film happened around the Chinese community. Some critics say the film mainly shows "yellow" Chinese people, but not "brown" Indians. The last time something like this happened was 1993's Joy Luck Club. [2]

There is a conscious Chinese bias in both the storyline and the casting, which is clearly aimed at catering to the great number of China audiences and tapping into the Chinese mainland market. However, the film, which was a huge hit in overseas markets, received little public praise and box office when it was released on the Chinese mainland, leaving it with very limited influence. The film wishes to solve the conflict between Chinese and American cultures, show the integration of the two cultures, and cater to the audiences of both eastern and western groups. It has been widely welcomed in western countries, including the United States, and

caused many discussions. However, it failed in mainland China and suffered controversy. The cultural differences reflected the huge contrast of the reputation and the box office in China and the United States, which are very worthy of our analysis, consideration and summary.

2. Continuation of Genre Films and Reproductions of Cultural Others

2.1. Attractions of Genre Films

Genre films have a lot of attraction for the producers and the audience. This film can be classified with a romantic comedy, which is a typical genre film, is one of the important causes for the success of the film. Romantic comedy is a mature and popular movie genre. It had been several years before the last popular romantic comedy was released. The emergence of this film fills the market vacancy and meets the needs of a part of the film audience.

The main story of the film is that American-born and raised Chinese girl Rachel Chu falls in love with Singapore-born Nick Young. The heroine Rachel Chu comes from a single parent family. Her mother is a real estate agent. She was born and grew up in Flushing's Chinatown. Relying on their own acquired efforts, she now has become an economics professor in a well-known university, which be a collection of beauty and talent in a woman. The hero is from a rich family, who was born with a golden spoon in his mouth. He was born in Singapore, educated in Britain, and is now a history professor who works with Chu. Nick invited Rachel back to Singapore to attend a relative's wedding, and intended to introduce her to his family, this love has not been recognized by Nick's mother, Eleanor Young. And then the relationship was opposed by Eleanor. Naturally, after experiencing various misunderstandings and misfortunes, Rachel was still able to maintain her pure self, break through numerous obstacles, get married, have a happy ending [3].

As a specific type of film, there are some commonalities in this romantic comedy, such as storyline, setting layout, story setting, costumes and props, emotional appeals and conventions. Genre films are built on these old elements and themes, but the director combines them in a new way and presents them to the audience. Audiences will see a movie that is familiar with them and recall the fine days that has past. American cinema plays an important role in the formation of identity. Movies can not only provide contexts that make us think about "who am I," but also reflect the changes in our self-image, tracing the transition from one to another. The audiences are drawn to the cinema to watch the film, just like the way in which a consumer is drawn to the familiar brand store to buy the product. But the movies that they will watch are so different from the movies they are familiar with, because that movies are refreshed and very seductive. Such films not only satisfy the audience's vision of expectation, but also give them fresh stimulation. Genre films get this familiar and unknown, tradition and innovation, and elements of the familiar and different assembled, and mix them together to provide a unique viewing experience for the audience.

2.2. Allure of Cultural Others

It can be sure that this film is an ethnic film. As a minority in the United States, Asians are undoubtedly the main audience of this film. This film will certain promote the influence of Asian culture and the popularity in American movies, especially Chinese culture in American society. It plays a great role in shaping the cultural identity and national identity of Asian-Americans, especially the ethnic Chinese. Due to various obstacles, cultural misreading is inevitable in the process of cultural communication. Sometimes, because of ideological and other reasons, the images of foreign nationalities in films of a country or region are often uglified or beautified, and the original real appearance is distorted intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously.

The title is *Crazy Rich Asians*, and Asians don't need to call themselves Asians, only when "self" faces "other". "The Other" is a concept formed by being relative to "self". Other refers to all people and things except for self. Whatever being may be called the other, which is external to the self, despite of that exists in what kind of form it appears, which is visible or invisible, and perceptible or imperceptible. The other is an essential part to the definition, construction and improvement of the self. Self-formation depends on the differences between the self and the other, and rely on the success of the self in distinguishing itself from the other. The image of China is a symbol constructed by the west, which is opposite to the self and helps to establish the self. The image of China is the mirror of the "other", and of western culture. It can be idealized, expressing desire and wish, the impulse of self-denial and self-transcendence. It can also be demonized and festering, expressing fear and rejection, to meet the need for self-confirmation and self-consolidation [4].

The extravagant and sensuous scenes shown in the film are mainly scenes of Chinese life in the East, whose history and culture can be traced back to a book that westerners are familiar with, the first book in the Western world that mainly discusses China, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. The kingdom "Khitai" in this book is a country with vast territory, convenient transportation, developed trade and social stability. This is the historical impression that the East, especially China, has left on Europe and the United States inherited the icon. The reality is that the rapid economic development of East Asia was preceded by the Asian Tigers and followed by the rise of China since modern times and the last decades. China has grown into the world's second largest economy, the world's largest importer and exporter of goods, the world's second largest consumer goods and the world's largest manufacturing industry. In contrast, the financial crisis occurred in the United States in 2008, which do not wholly recover from then until now. Although it has gradually and slowly emerged from the quagmire, the crisis has had a profound psychological impact on the public. This kind of historical memory is combined with the attention of reality, and the strong perception that a "Khan's empire" may not exist geographically, but psychologically, appears on the screen.

2.3. Satisfaction of Vision of Expectation

The reason why this movie is popular among Americans is that it satisfies the audience's vision of expectation. As one of the core concepts of reception aesthetics, the vision of expectation refers to the directed expectation of the recipient before accepting the works. The movie should show the most familiar stranger, give the audience both familiar and strange feeling, and story developing is not only reasonable, but also full of unexpected pleasure. The character setting just looks like the movie, *Cinderella*, but it is a modern version of *Cinderella*. After all, it is still very difficult to make the audience feel live in the distant castle which built in the medieval times. The story is like the female version of the movie, *Meet the Parents*. The luxury scenes in the movie are a bit like *The Great Gatsby* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Even in the opening scene, the audience feel back to the scene in *Blackjack*, the heroine, Rachel dresses and acts like the well-known Chinese female Texas Hold 'em Poker player. All of this gives viewers a sense of familiarity and yesterday all comes over again [5].

The film shows what had existed in their mind and caters to the western imagination of the East. Highlight and strengthen Chinese cultural elements, such as making dumplings, playing mahjong and enjoying epiphyllum. These symbols reduce the barriers for Chinese Americans to watch movies, arouse their emotions and resonance, and meet their expectations. The Chinese in the film live in the Western society, but cannot integrate into the Western culture. They wear an Oriental face, but are incompatible with traditional Chinese culture. They spoke English and read the Bible, but rejected the Christian idea of the family. They make dumplings and play mahjong without inheriting traditional Chinese customs. This involves the complex

identity of Asian groups in the film, because different cultural identities produce different cultural identities, and thus have different identity positioning.

The film attempts to break down the cultural barriers between China and The United States and carry out cultural integration. However, when the film was transferred to mainland China, there was a question of acclimatization. The life of the big-spending rich, lavish fans and night-time entertainment shown in the film are far from the daily life of ordinary mainland moviegoers, causing discomfort and disgust among the audience.

3. China's Feedback under Western Narrative

3.1. Senses of Distance to Film Narrative

Movies are based on life, which is the direct or indirect reflection or reaction of real life. To be recognized by the audience, the plot of the film must go into the deep hearts of the audience, produce empathy effect with the observer, and arouse their inner recognition and emotional resonance. Chinese audiences usually watch comedies, the core of which is mostly tragedy, in which some nobodies face the difficulties of life, struggle to escape, and hit the wall everywhere. The protagonists of the film are humble and helpless, but tough and kind. Using the effect of "tears with laughter", through successive layers of narrative, it reflects the long-standing creation concept of "Context to convey faith and truth" in our film. All kinds of predicaments in the narrative of the film and all sorts of hardships experienced by the characters are closely related to real life. They are rooted in the audience's daily life routines. Behind the laughter, there are tears and sadness. However, the narrative of this film is still the love story of "Prince Charming" and "Cinderella". This narrative structure has a sense of distance from the Chinese audience who pay attention to the concept of marriage and love.

3.2. Strangeness of Characters

Successful and popular films have a vivid and impressive character or group of characters. If the audience is not familiar with the characters in the story, which can produce a sense of strangeness, then the movie will be difficult to be accepted. The characterization of comedy films is related to the development and accumulation of real-life experience. If the film attaches importance to the connection between characters and real-life experience, the character image will be fuller and the audience will be more easily moved by the characters. The same strategy is true and suitable in comedy films. Chinese comedy films are used to portraying marginalized underdogs or nobodies, who are the same as the audience, and the audience can exactly feel the joys and sorrows of the protagonist in movie. A comedy film often shows or portrays some people around the audience or even some marginal people in society, whose social status is lower than the audience, such as the two characters in the Chinese popular movie *Crazy Alien*. However, the main characters and the supporting cast of the film all have the lives of wealthy ones. The life shown in the film is so different and distant from that of the average mainland audience, so it is hard to make any connection between the audience and the character. Audience can't blend in the movie at all, it's impossible to have empathy effect. As a mainland Chinese audience, it is difficult for them to get the identification of the role of overseas Chinese, when they watch the face of the Chinese characters on the screen. Although art comes from life, it is higher than life. However, the leading actor in the movie is a super-rich kid, and the leading actress is a young professor in a famous university, which is very strange to ordinary mainland audiences. The audience has no sense of identity with these characters, and it is impossible to have a sense of substitution.

3.3. Senses of Absurdity about Roles of Fathers

Father, no matter east or west, is one of the most important roles in a family. He is the representative of authority and the symbol of tradition. Fathers are not only the giver of their

children's lives, but also the guardian of their safety. Jacques Lacan introduced linguistics into Freud's psychoanalysis. The emergence of subjectivity is mainly the result of entering the language world. The linguistic world, characterized by institutions such as law, religion and morality, is the epitome of paternal authority [6]. However, the role of the father in the film feels absurd. The heroine grew up in a single-parent family without a father. The hero's father is just a symbol, an absent presence. He does not appear as a real person, but he is constantly mentioned. He is the connection between the family and the foundation of all this activity, but he is not visible throughout the film. The absence and presence of the father becomes a mysterious symbol or metaphor. Like the father of a mysterious, untouchable, but omnipresent "monarch", he is the representative of authority. Another type of father, which exist in the film, is the opposite of the father of the supporting actress. The kind of father is an abnormal father, who is a funny clown and a gag funny bear. There is no normal and common father character in the film, and the image of father is a far cry from the symbols of power and authority that Chinese audiences are familiar with. The film deliberately blurred the image of the father, and even made the father in a state of aphasia and absence, which catered to or implied the western image of Chinese fathers on the cultural level. It is the consistent expression of western culture for Chinese fathers, and it is also taken for granted by western audiences. But when Chinese audiences watch the movie in the cinema, they will have a hard time identifying with and understanding the father in the film.

3.4. Alienation of Male Images

The male characters in the movie particularly prominent, the hero of the movie is tall, handsome, and robust, while at the same time, those other male roles who stay in Asian are quite painful and offensive, who are the local tyrants, feminine bromeo with weird words and deeds, or deviate freaks. In a word, all the male roles are also a kind of the embodiment of the stereotype of Chinese. Such characters remind people of Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan, who are famous in film history as the stereotypical images. The construction or shaping of these male images are all the continuation or variation of the previous stereotypes, causing dissatisfaction among the audiences who have already watched the above films, but also blocking out the potential audiences who want to watch the film in the future, which leads to the failed box office and low reputation.

In short, the film has aimed at Asian-Americans, especially with a focus on Chinese-Americans. The Chinese elements shown in the movie, such as making dumplings, red skirts and playing mahjong, can arouse the thoughts and resonance of these people. But when audiences in mainland China see these sorts of elements, it can be particularly uncomfortable, and some stereotypes can be offensive and disrespectful. Just like General Tso's Chicken of Chinese restaurants in American, it is one of the so-called famous Chinese dishes in the United States. It is very popular in the US, but it rarely appears in restaurants in mainland China, and it doesn't belong to any of the "eight major Cuisines" in China. Therefore, the creators intend to cater and entertain to the western imagination of China, intentionally or unintentionally utilizing or reproducing the Chinese stereotype in western culture, so it can be easily resonated in the west. However, in mainland China, it is difficult to succeed due to the diversified cultural background.

4. Conclusion

Film is not only a piece of works of art and a commodity, but also a powerful medium. For a film with a strong and widespread impact, there must have some kinds of cultural consensus with the audience. Through the different performances of *Crazy Rich Asians* in Chinese and foreign markets, comparative imagology is used to explore and explain the cultural reasons behind it, so that reference is provided for American films which are designed to enter the Chinese mainland market. And moreover, the enlightenment and the inspiration can be derived to

provide suggestions and help for Chinese films to spread out to the world. The study of "the other" helps to analyze and understand the communication between different cultures in a specific historical period from the perspective of comparative imagology, and helps to eliminate the estrangement and misunderstanding between different cultures.

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