

# The Interpretation of Diversified Chinese Images in American Film and Television Series

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## Abstract

In the development of American film and television series, many Chinese images have appeared. These images of Chinese gradually become rich and diversified with more positive connotations, which indirectly reflects the transformation of Chinese images in the minds of the American people. This paper expounds the images of Chinese in American film and television series and briefly analyzes the reasons for the diversity of Chinese images in the works.

## Keywords

American film and television series; Chinese image; Diversity.

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## 1. Introduction

The film and television art has become one of the most important arts in the world. It integrates form, sound, color and beauty as a whole, which is not only comprehensive, but also has commercial, entertainment and political functions. Film and television series are having a profound impact on the society with their efficient dissemination speed and popular text interpretation. Therefore, the United States has always taken film and TV culture as an important means of propagandizing its political, economic and cultural thoughts. By watching Chinese characters in American films and TV series, we can understand the American attitude towards China and the relations between the two countries. At the same time, these works can be regarded as a mirror, through which we can understand the development and changes of Chinese and even China's image in the minds of people in the United States. For a long time, the images of Chinese in American movies have been obscene, humble, indifferent and threatening. However, with the change of times and Sino-American relations and the shaping of the image of China as a great power, some positive images of Chinese began to appear. This paper will sort out some typical Chinese images in American movies and TV series to get some regular knowledge.

## 2. Diversified Chinese Images

After the reform and opening up, China restarted to communicate with other countries, such as in the areas of economy, politics, culture and education, etc. China has strengthened the exchanges and communication with the outside world. Many Chinese went abroad as well as many foreigners came into China, therefore, the image of the real China and Chinese people were known by more foreigners including Americans so that American films can not unilaterally to demonize the Chinese image. At the same time, China's economy began to recover and China's position in the world became increasingly important. As the world's largest country, the United States has a close relationship with China and attaches importance to the Chinese market with a population of 1.4 billion. Therefore, during this period, the images of Chinese in American films began to improve and different types of

characters appeared. For example, in some martial arts films, the Chinese characters played by Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Jet Li were portrayed as heroes. In 2008, *Kung Fu Panda* applied Chinese elements to convey the inspirational theme that “everyone can be a hero”. In the film *2012*, the Chinese became saviors to prevent the end of the world. *Mr. Butterfly*, made in 1993, created an alternative image of a Chinese spy. *Desperate Housewives* (2004) featured two Chinese servants and so on.

## 2.1 The image of spy

In 1993, Hollywood adapted *Mr. Butterfly*, a novel by Chinese-American author David Hwang, into a movie of the same name. The story took place in the period of “cultural revolution” in Beijing. René Gallimard, the staff member of French Embassy, listened to the opera *Madam Butterfly* played by Song Liling in a concert and fell in love with her. Song Liling finally accepted René Gallimard’s love. But Song Liling was a man, he was a Chinese spy. Song Liling obtained a lot of confidential information from René Gallimard, eventually the two people were arrested, and René Gallimard suddenly realized in the court that Song was a man. *Mr. Butterfly* continued the Hollywood tradition of portraying Chinese men as femininity and lacking in masculinity. Two themes ran through the film from the beginning to the end. One is the intricate spy war between the East and the West, and the other was the “love” between the two main characters. It can be said that Song Liling represented a kind of Oriental mystery, while René Gallimard represented the curiosity of the West. As Song Liling said in the film, “Madame Butterfly is moving for westerners”, “it is your favorite fantasy, isn’t it?” Song Liling interpreted the eastern mystery vividly, so he can successfully conceal his gender from René Gallimard for several years.

Another film worth mentioning is *Tomorrw Never Dies* (1997). In the film, the Chinese agent Lin Hui, played by Michelle Yeoh, was a kungfu character with a simple personality. Many people's first impression of her was that she looked like a man, because her movements were too handsome. The cooperation between 007 and Lin Hui was actually a manifestation of the urgent need for the West to strengthen cooperation with China to combat terrorist forces. However, Lin Hui's image was hardly able to get rid of the ugly image of Chinese people in Hollywood, which has become the consistent style of Hollywood, that is, the feminization of Chinese men and the masculinization of Chinese women.

## 2.2 The image of servant

The American TV series *Desperate Housewives* has maintained high ratings since its inception. The first season of *Desperate Housewives* featured Yao Lin, a Chinese-American character, and the second season featured Xiao Mei, who was smuggled to the United States from China. These two Chinese characters were the servants of Gabrielle. Yao Lin looked more crafty, sophisticated and acrid, even when her master was in the difficult time, she only cared her wages. Xiao Mei was a cheap slave. From her glassy eyes, you can see that she was a stupid, ignorant Chinese girl. Coincidentally, Yao Lin and Xiao Mei showed the greed for money, even for material desire, they can sell their souls. The director arranged the two images in order for the American minority actors to be photogenic, but such images are unacceptable. The director arranged such roles for Chinese actors, which can be said to be influenced by Orientalism, and American's views on Chinese people are more or less biased.

## 2.3 The image of hero

In the 1970s, Chinese martial arts films made in Hollywood and starring Bruce Lee became popular in the United States. Jackie Chan, who entered Hollywood in the 1980s, continues Bruce Lee's martial arts legacy. In the 1990s, martial arts masters like Jet Li appeared on Hollywood screens. A series of martial arts action movies played by Chinese actor Jet Li has been a hit, and his portrayal of a Chinese man as a hero has taken hold. *Kiss of the Dragon* is one such movie. The film told the story that a Chinese policeman Liu Jian was ordered to Paris to help the police detect the local drug smuggling case, but was framed by the a Paris policeman. After hardships, Liu Jian finally annihilated the drug cartel.

Liu Jian, as a hero, he did not covet women, also did not covet money. The order was important, but the most important thing was that he had a righteous heart. The man with a righteous heart and a thinking mind was truly a modern hero. But the film downplayed the emotional aspects of Liu Jian. *Kiss of the Dragon* is undoubtedly an ode to Chinese Kung Fu and Chinese people's perseverance and indomitable spirit, but we see Liu Jian as an indifferent hero.

In the 21st century, it is clear that China has become a world-renowned power, especially with its economic, political, military and cultural rise. *Kung Fu Panda* in 2008 proved the point, with a story set in China and imbued with Chinese elements. Raymond Zibach, the art director, has spent eight years delving into Chinese culture in an effort to reflect Chinese characteristics. The use of Chinese elements in 2012, of course, cannot be separated from commercial interests, but more importantly, it reflects that after the rise of China's national strength, China's national image in the American films has undergone a certain transformation. In the film, China became the last salvation of mankind. In this film, the image of Chinese people is no longer backward and dull, but full of wisdom and ability.

### **3. Reflection on Chinese Image Building in American Film and Television Series**

The image of Chinese people is an important part of national image, and the establishment of national image has a natural connection with the image of characters in movies. Based on the brief analysis of Chinese image in the film and television works in the United States, the paper analyzes the cause of the Chinese image change and the study finds that the root of Chinese image generation is the social collective imagination under the influence of ideology, however, the image is not fixed. With frequent cross-cultural communication between China and the United States, Chinese are getting rid of the negative images and showing a tendency of diversity. While keeping optimistic, Chinese people should not ignore that some negative voices still appear in the ears from time to time.

In this post-colonial era, the great power countries represented by the United States rely on their dominant political, economic, cultural and powerful means of cross-cultural communication, and Hollywood Dreamworks acted as the representative carries out cultural colonization in the world. On the theme of the film, the American films combine entertainment, commercial and artistic elements perfectly under the package of scientific imagination, technological innovation, disaster epic and romantic love. In the choice of talent and content, American films face the world and they are inclusive. It has greatly enhanced the competitiveness of Hollywood films in the world film and television market and made Hollywood the hegemon in the world film industry. Hollywood, on the one hand, has enriched our cultural life; on the other, it has become one of the best ways of western cultural colonialism. While the economic success has been great, it has undermined the film industry in other countries. The ideology of western life style, thoughts and concepts, value identification and so on spreads and influences the national imagination and cultural identity of other countries. The original pluralistic world culture is gradually replaced by a single, homogeneous culture. But we should also have the belief that the result of dialogue with the powerful does not mean our blind acceptance and passive resistance to cultural colonization. Film globalization, also gives the same opportunity to write Chinese culture. Along with China's national strength enhancement and the improvement of international status, the country's voice is also on the increase year by year in the scope of the world. China allows Chinese people to participate in the competition together with the world film and to reshape the image of the country and the people on the basis of insisting on their own cultural tradition, cultural pluralism and interest.

### **4. Conclusion**

It is certain that Orientalism, as a concept, will always exist in the minds of westerners. American movies and TV programs still inevitably present cases of uglification of Chinese images, but to our relief, uglification of Chinese images is no longer mass-produced. These changes are closely related to China's increased communication with the outside world, China's growing power and the U.S.

focus on the Chinese market. This also requires Chinese filmmakers to shoot films with representative images of Chinese people, so as to guide audiences in other countries to objectively and truly understand China and Chinese images. At the same time, Chinese filmmakers can also apply foreign elements to attract audiences from other countries to pay attention to Chinese films.

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