

## Case Report

# National Image: Construction and Identification in Chinese Kungfu Movie

Song Yao

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, School of Humanities, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

### Email address:

[songxiaowai@hotmail.com](mailto:songxiaowai@hotmail.com)

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Chinese movie *crouching tiger, hidden dragon, hero*, etc. through Hollywood's doors. "Kungfu" has become a symbol of China's national image in the world. In fact, as early as the 1970s, China's kungfu had spread to overseas, but the people with excellent fighting skills were usually the devil and bad guys at that time. In the 21st century, the spread of China's kungfu towards a new stage: both performances and films are widely popular among overseas audiences. Kungfueven has become one of the most representative Chinese culture symbols, which brings a kind of visual wonders to the world.

**Keywords:** Chinese Movie, Kungfu, National Image, Chinese Culture

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## 1. National Image and Traditional Culture

Bruce Lee brought a positive, masculine image of China's kungfu to the world, which made him won the title of international kungfu superstar. But the role Bruce Lee acted was still full of exotic colors, because they were the entire person with low social status. Then Jackie Chan, Jet Li became the famous kungfu star in Hollywood with their movies popular in the world. However, the idea of Zen in Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou's movie made kungfu movies more significant.

Such kungfu movies gathered Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism ideas. That is to say it was a kind of unique Chinese culture in the movie, of which success attracted audiences all over the world. The mystery oriental world and kungfu hero images with traditional culture and poetic appeared in these movies have become the representative of China.

## 2. China Images in Kungfu Movie

### 2.1. Kindheartedness and Justice in Confucianism

The most important thing in Confucian ethics is love and justice. The hero of the Chinese kungfu movies shows a rich

sense of justice and loyalty is the correct guidance for the audience.

The relationship between the master and the apprentice fully embodies the idea of Confucian ethical. There is a Chinese saying: once a teacher, always a father. That means there are some strict rules in the relationship between master and apprentice. For instance, the apprentice must obey orders of the master. In martial story always has a Universalist, the person who is the master of the leading role. They could determine the future direction of the story, or even able to preset the fate of the characters. This sacred status also reflects the thoughts of Confucianism in respecting teaching.

In the kungfu films, we also can see two kinds of scenarios about salute, one is Zen gesture that is put one's palms together in front of his chest to salute each other, express many blessings and light. The other one is fist-palm salute, boxing on behalf of the force, palm represent peace. That means everybody is friends. This kind of convention salute is also a corresponding point between kungfu and Confucianism.

### 2.2. "Suppress Sensual Passion" and "Unity of Zen and Martial Arts"

In most cases of the traditional kungfu movies, the male characters are a man with strong body, and they are valiant in some crisis. They can easily attract the women, but the hero

seems do not like women. Chinese saying “Indulging on your lust is equivalent to hang a knife upon your head.” Sex is the obstruction for a man to be a kungfu hero. There are many Chinese stories, which happened in temple. Here, “abstinence” of Buddhism and kungfu are a mere coincidence.

In Jin Yong's novels *Swordsman*, there is a kungfu cheats *Kuihuabaodian*, which could help you to get supernatural powers after castration. This is almost a primitive worship for virgins. In the world of Chinese kungfu, love seems to be only negative role for the hero, which will make him in danger.

There is a special view of unity of Zen and Martial arts in Chinese Buddhism, which claims that, the importance of the wisdom of martial practice. In the famous kungfu movie *The Karate Kid*, Mr. Han is a mysterious martial master, who hides in the street. His method of teaching is special, that is let Parker pick up and hangs clothes again and again. The purpose is to make him understand the importance of kungfu virtue. The image of senior monk in the *Kungfu Panda* and *Kill Bill* are also the best examples. The role of Master Roshi and Taoist is to help the hero to complete comprehension of kungfu and to realize the secret of life. But there will be some misreading here. These movies were created by western people, so the values and understandings of Chinese culture always illustrate the eastern philosophy in the western perspective.

### 2.3. Oriental Romantic Charm with Enjoyable

“Kungfu” is an important part of Chinese traditional culture. Although it is a kind of sports, it is totally higher than any other sports. It emphasizes external and internal cultivation and peaceful mind. Also, it advocates that people should pursuit justice.

With the rapid development of high-tech and new media, film and newspaper are filled with bizarre and nuclear explosion, which bring aesthetic fatigue and fear to modern people. People are becoming more and more willing to be able to return to simple life.

In 2008, Hollywood movies *Forbidden Kingdom* put many Chinese classical image in it, such as “the bride with white hair” and Sun Wukong. The plot was shuttling back and forth between reality and fantasy. A white-haired woman stands under the peach tree in the mystery east world. This is a typical Chinese freehand landscape painting, which presents a fantastic Oriental image to the audience. Kungfu movies produced by Chinese production team apply these techniques more skillfully. For example, the fight scene in *the Banquetis* similar to dancing, the slow cane punish the loyal minister likes a description of life.

Whether the *Mulan* or *Kungfu Panda*, Kungfu movies produced by Hollywood are full of symbols of Chinese traditional culture. Chinese traditional style architecture, dialogue with Chinese philosophy and Chinese classical orchestra in these films are the best illustration. In the movie *KungfuPanda*, Chinese Kungfu is symbolized as animals – Tiger, crane, monkey and mantis. Western filmmakers always pay attention to Chinese culture: nuanced fighting scenes, wall-walking and other elements with oriental verve, even in

dialogue between Master Roshi and Raccoon are full of Chinese philosophy.

### 2.4. Shaolin Temple and the Emotion of Family-Country

At about 1500 years ago, an Indian monk came to China and then chose a temple to practice meditation for 9 years. He finally became a generation of Zen—Bodhidharma. The temple was known as the Shaolin Temple. Since then many legend stories happened in Shaolin Temple: 13 monks caught Wang Renze in Tang Dynasty, Shi Yousan fired Shaolin Temple in warlord's period.

The story of Shaolin Temple can frequently be adapted into a movie, which attracts the attention of people, because of its colorful history. This kind of narrative motif reflects the consanguinity patriarchal concept of Chinese culture. In other words, the fabric of “home-country” affects Chinese culture, literature, art and other aspects deeply. The image of heroes is shaped in both loyalty and valiant. They all have strong sense of responsibility of protecting family and country so that they have the courage to sacrifice for state.

The most touching thing of Chinese kungfu movies is its emotion of home-country. It reflects Chinese people pursuit of justice. In the famous Chinese kungfu movie *Fist of Fury*, the most classic scene is Chenzhen kick down “the sick man of Asia”. The slow motion includes too much love and hate of Chinese nation. This sense of responsibility is not only cause the resonance of the Chinese people; it also makes foreign audience deeply touched.

## 3. Time of Kungfu Movie

### 3.1. Superstar: Bruce Lee

In 1971, Bruce Lee returned China and participated in Hong Kong famous movie company Golden Harvest. And then he acted as a hero in the movie *The Big Boss*, which released in Hong Kong. After that, American General Pictures also released it at the same year. And they announced that the theme of this film: “in the era of Confucianism, revenge is the most primitive passion of Chinese people.”

Later, in his representative work *Fist of Fury*, the sentence “Chinese people are not the sick man” was popular in the whole Asia. *Fist of Fury* not only broke the record of box office in Hong Kong, also caused serious traffic jams in Singapore. It released for 6 months in Philippines, and had a full house for time.

But, the movie *Enter the Dragon* was the real chance for Bruce Lee went into the world of Hollywood. This was a tailor-made movie for Bruce Lee, which eventually made him become a superstar in the world. Because Chinese people can only be a supporting role or the villain in the Hollywood film. The investment of this film was less than \$1 million, but its box office was \$200 million. This film was even credited in the “67 movies had changed the world” by *Total Film* in the United States.

Bruce Lee was the first Chinese kungfu star who is popular in the world. His success in the screen made western audience

reacquainted Chinese culture. The most important thing is the image of china is not the mysterious “the other” any longer. The image of him is strong and tough, which finally cleaned off the feminine image of Chinese men before. He is not only a great superstar; also he is more a symbol of China in the world.

### 3.2. *The Road for Martial Arts Films to the World*

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* released in 2000, which was evaluated as the mark of Chinese kungfu movies that from “slum” to “global” and “art” by Leon Hunter. This kind of transformation made it won four Academy Awards, two golden globes, and also swept British Academy Film awards, Chicago film critics association, independent spirit award, more than 30 awards in total. It was the milestone of Chinese kungfu film.

With the popular of martial arts film, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, the fifth generation director in China, has made *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* and *The Promise* and other martial arts blockbuster. Although they ultimately failed to win Oscar awards, they sold well in the North American market.

Paladin, king legend and myth figures of ancient China are often appeared in the martial arts movies, which embodies mysterious world of oriental. The pavilions, small bridges, landscape of bamboo forest in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* which made western audience very yearning.

Hollywood started to imitate Chinese kungfu movie, in which there were many oriental elements. *Kungfu Panda*, *The Karate Kid* and *the Forbidden Kingdom* all brought Chinese philosophy, religion and metaphysics. The “unity of man and nature” and the unconstrained style boxing made western audience feel free and relax.

### 3.3. *Swordswoman in Hollywood*

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was welcomed in western world is because the swordswoman enriched the image of oriental woman in the eyes of western people. In the Chinese movies, female characters are dominant in many stories: *The Bride with White Hair*, *Swordsman II* and so on. These films clearly reflect the important role of female characters in the new period of Chinese film.

Yu Xiulian and Yu Jialong in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* were no longer the “Oriental objects” and “dragon lady”. Yu Xiulian is steady and intelligence, while Yu Jialong is rebel and valiant, their characters are more vivid than before. Chinese women become the leading role, who is no longer the complement of the heroism in the movie. They are not only with beautiful appearance, but also with redoubtable Kungfu, which shows that the characteristics of Oriental women have become more independent. Michelle Yeoh, who was the new bond girl in 007 series, showed a smart image who fought together with Mr. Bond. From then on “Oriental stunner” started to disappear in Hollywood, instead there were the beauty and wisdom swordswomen.

Except the introduction of the image of oriental

swordswoman, Hollywood movies also polished blondes into more independent and courageous swordswomen. *Charlie's Angels* was a film that kungfu story of three girls. Although they wore sexy tights sex which showed an enchanting image, they are wisdom, brave, strong and independent. Since then, many blond swordswomen came to public notice, which was an important part of the world feminist movement.

### 3.4. *The Legend of Shaolin Temple*

*Shaolin Temple* not only caused a big splash in the mainland of China, it also became a hot trend in Asia and America. Then *Kids from Shaolin*, *North and South Shaolin* and other movies about Shaolin Temple appeared in cinema. This kind of movies were all with high box office. “Shaolin Cyclone” also made Jet Li a “martial arts” superstar in the world. In addition, a boom of learning martial arts appeared in western world.

The popular of Kungfu movies made Shaolin Temple to be a holy land for the world's martial fans. It became the most famous tourist attractions of China mainland with more than 100000 visitors a day at the peak time. In 1982, because the release of *Shaolin Temple*, tourists from all over the world visited Shaolin Temple from 200,000 to 2.6 million a year, which brought huge economic benefits. In 1988, Shaolin kungfu performance was presented on the stage for the first time, after when Shaolin Temple went onto an economic development path of “kungfu”.

In recent years, Shaolin Temple established book shop of shaolin martial arts, shaolin cultural institution, ShaoLin kungfu studio and other specialized research institutions. They also have published internal magazine *Chan Lu*. Besides, they held international academic seminar of Shaolin kungfu and then published collected works about that, which all enhanced the value of Shaolin brand.

### 3.5. *Industrial Chain of Kungfu*

In addition to kungfu movies, the cultural products of kungfu show a strong vitality in the industrial chain of kungfu.

In 2006, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Shaolin Temple, which made a hit of the institution about teaching Kungfu. There were more than 50 countries and regions which set up specialized school and community to teach Kungfu. The University of Brussels had even incorporate Chinese kungfu in the syllabus.

In Singapore, there are more than 230 folk martial arts groups, which regarded Chinese kungfu as a national sport. In 2009, Singapore National Wushu Federation changed its name to Singapore Wushu Dragon and Lion Dance Federation, forming the trinity management structure of martial arts, dragon dance and lion dance.

In addition, we often can see the performance of Chinese kungfu in Art Festival in many countries or regions. Shanghai International Arts Festival and Asian Art Festival built Chinese kungfu as a business of “go to the world”. At this point, “kungfu products” will become a new brand in the international market.

Shaolin monks began their world tour of performance in

more than 60 countries and regions since 1988. Although their performing session was more than one thousand times, their characteristic that attracted foreign audience was their changeful martial arts style. With the development of kungfu industry, they went onto a branding way so that they produced a large number of new works, such as large ecological show *Inside and outside the Temple*, blockbuster *Kungfu Poem*, etc.

Obviously, around the Chinese kungfu culture, except kungfu films, they can develop the show, tourism, catering, training and a series of powerful industrial chain, which could bring huge economic benefits.

## 4. Internationalization of Chinese Kungfu

### 4.1. The Culture Mixture of Chinese and American

Chinese kungfu includes too many Chinese excellent traditional culture elements so that foreigners do not understand it. So it is very interesting that Chinese kungfu can be so popular and even cause boom of kungfu around the world.

The hero in Hollywood movies is not only the embodiment of Chinese traditional swordsman, also with heroic of American culture. The core of the American spirit is: "Believing in individualism is that human can change themselves and the world." The heroes in the kungfu movies are all fighting against the evil forces for justice to save the world. While their external image is Chinese paladin hero, they are actually free and independent American.

Mr. Lee played by Bruce Lee in the movie *Enter the Dragon*, is a man with independence, freedom and oppose authority, which reflects American culture very well. But at the same time, he is a very upright man, abhorring evil as a deadly foe, who is totally a Chinese swordsman.

The heroic image can not only bring freshness to foreign audiences, but also make them to find their heroism dream in the film. Hollywood famous movie director Brett Ratner evaluated Bruce Lee: "Lee inspired me, he gave me a dream." Yu Jialong in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was popular among American audiences is because her spirit of independence and freedom. Although she is the princess of Qing dynasty, she dares to challenge the traditions. She yearns the free life of Jianghu so she struggles to free herself from her family. Such distinct images of women struck a chord with the foreign women.

### 4.2. Contradiction between Reality and Spirit

Chinese kungfu has a strong cultural and religious background and more than 1500 years of traditions so that the marketization and commercialization will inevitably cause some controversy.

In the movie, Shaolin Temple is endowed with a symbolic meaning, which is the symbol of noble spirit. With the development of Shaolin Temple tourism, Chinese kungfu has attracted attentions of audiences from all over world. Shi Yongxin, the head of the Shaolin Temple, set up more than 40 companies in Berlin, London and other regions around the

world, which has evolved into a multinational business group.

As the explanation of Shaolin Industrial Development co., LTD: "commercialization is only a means, not the final purpose. We are still in a commercial society; the development of the market is the most effective way. As long as can protect the shaolin culture, we will use the most effective means, such as a registered trademark, business performance and even inscription." But in fact, people unable to distinguish the profit-seeking and martial arts culture protection.

Shaolin Temple has built "kungfu" as a brand of Chinese culture. But it is not an easy thing. People cannot make a fair comment on its success. The debate of what should do for Shaolin Temple--reality and spirit. It is not only a one-sided judgment in China's moral standard, we should also notice the promotion of Chinese culture, which inevitably been incorporated in modern society that need to follow the modern social value system and operation mode. Shaolin Temple is not an isolated fairy hidden place of religious beliefs, but an important part of Chinese traditional culture.

### 4.3. Sex Question of Post-Colonialism

Kungfu movies carry a large number of cultural elements. Western film factories also make action movies that with scenes of martial arts. However, in those movies, male hero always accompanied with some women. Some of these movies even led by the lust.

The Chinese Kungfu movies inherit the spirit of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism of China, and the hero in the movie is always of "pilgrims". In the local Chinese Kungfu movies, love between male and female is usually arranged, and the love is quite ignorant and subtle. But in a movie that made by Hollywood, even a super star like Jackie Chan or Jet Li, can only be an "asexual" hero, which means that they don't have any form of intimate contact with the actress.

American mainstream used to regard Oriental male as a man out of masculinity. Although the hero image of oriental male with masculinity occupied the mainstream media with the popularity of kungfu films, traditional elegant image of Chinese entrenched as before. So Chinese hero in the kungfu films cannot get rid of the collective imagination from western audiences, whose image are desexualized and demonized under the influence of colonial ideology.

Jackie Chan broke the "abstinence" puritan image of Chinese men in his more than 20 Hollywood movies. Whether the kiss with Isabella in *The Rush Hour 2* or the acceptance of love from his beautiful partner, they all can build a more plentiful image, which can attract attentions of western women.

### 4.4. Violence Aesthetic

Kungfu inevitably associates with violence. In the 1970s, Bruce Lee brought Chinese kungfu to Hollywood, and then in the 1980s, John Woo used actions of violence and aesthetics which attracted the attention of foreign audiences. Instead of gradually eliminates the violence in the attacks and defenses, Chinese kungfu is a kind of beautification of visual experience.

The hero is built in the violence, which is an idiomatic means of kungfu films. This kind of practices can also get more identification from audiences. The crazy, cruel and malicious negative characters eliminates in the kind, sincere, brave of kungfu hero, from what audiences would not feel discomfort, instead they can feel pleasure from the hero's retaliatory actions.

The scene of crazy fighting in the kungfu movies is well known to the audience all over the world. The aesthetic of the Chinese kungfu can show its graceful and stretch in the movements of shoot, when chasing and fighting. For instance, the design of attacks by Yuen Wooping, who with the background of martial arts in Xiqu stage, is slower that can increase stage expression and body posture. The martial arts world in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* can deeply attract foreign audiences is because the slow motion in climbing, flying and fighting.

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