A Study of Chinese Image Construction in American Movie Dragon Seed

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Abstract. The construction of a national image requires the interpretation not only from self-perspective but also from the contrast and reflection through the perspective of other countries. The film Dragon Seed, telling a story about the Anti-Fascist struggle of Chinese people, is adapted from the novel Dragon Seed written by Pearl S. Buck and produced by the famous American film company MGM. By analyzing the pictures in the movie and the plot of the film, this paper explains how the Chinese image is constructed in the West from the perspectives of the family image, female image, farmers’ image, and citizen image comprehensively. The major findings are as follows: first, this movie intends to construct Chinese image in a positive way for commercial and political purposes, but to some extent, it vilifies Chinese image unconsciously; second, Americans intend to construct a new and positive Chinese image with political purposes but their subconscious political and cultural superiority makes the Chinese image unfaithful to the original in fact. The intention of this paper to study the Chinese image and its construction in the movie Dragon Seed is to find out how this film builds a Chinese image that meets the western aesthetic appeal and ideological needs. Thus, this research would be very helpful to construct a positive Chinese image overseas and to provide a reference for Chinese culture to go out.

Introduction

Chinese image construction plays an important role in improving our country's soft power. Under the peaceful development, China meets a new challenge, which requires China not only to focus on economic development but also to convey a more acceptable and truer Chinese image overseas. Chinese image construction has great significance strategically, which could strengthen the national cultural soft power, promote the Chinese spirit, disseminate Chinese values, and spread the Chinese voice [6].

The film, as an important means for image construction and cultural dissemination, is undoubtedly one of the feasible methods to exchange culture. It can be accepted widely despite countries, time, and cultures. Therefore, it has incomparable advantages in uplifting cultural identity, establishing cultural self-confidence, constructing the national image, and spreading national culture.

Hollywood movies have occupied a dominant position in the world movie market. The images the Hollywood movies created spread over the world, which not only has a great influence on how other countries recognize these images but also indicates American cultural and political views [2]. Thus, the study of the Chinese images in Hollywood movies not only reflects the imagination of the West towards China but also examines the Chinese culture from the perspective of the other culture.

American movie Dragon Seed is a typical Hollywood narrative movie, with huge investment, famous movie stars, professional company—MGM, and multiple Oscar nominations. The film was
adapted from Pearl S. Buck’s novel Dragon Seed. This novel was published in 1942, which was to appeal to the world to pay attention to the Chinese Anti-Fascist War [4]. Because of the popularity of this novel, American MGM Company bought the copyright of the movie Dragon Seed and invested it in production [1]. The person in charge of the company believes that “The novel Dragon Seed is a script specially tailored for the screen. We must admit that it takes huge capital to make this movie, but the future income will be rich.” [8] This movie was released in the United States on July 20, 1944, and was nominated by Oscar in 1945. This movie mainly tells how Ling Tan and his families lead villagers to resist Japanese armies and fight for the country being independent and peaceful. The film was starred by many Hollywood famous actors and actresses such as Katharine Hepburn who used to win Oscar Best Actress, Walter Huston, Aline MacMahon, Turhan Bey, and so on. To match the image of Chinese people in the novel, all actors in this film are dressed in traditional Chinese costumes. The poor women's clothing is mainly composed of large and simple coarse cloth, while wealthy women living in cities usually wear embroidered satin clothes. The makeup of the staff also strives to highlight the oriental characteristics. The hair is dyed black; the female hair is designed in Chinese traditional style; their eyebrows are single eyelids; some men have short hair and some are in braids. The film also set up a scene in the United States based on the Chinese rural landscape at that time. The terraces surrounded by mountains, thatched cottages, buffaloes, porcelain bowls, wooden chopsticks, and many other things and scenery were vividly restored China at that time.

Although there are many pieces of research on Pearl S. Buck and her works, the studies on Dragon Seed are few, especially on the version of the movie. With film as a medium becomes more and more popular in the world, it is typical to be an example to show the differences and similarities between western cultures and eastern cultures. By studying the movie Dragon Seed, what the real Chinese image the western world wants to construct can be reflected, and what kind of Chinese image is acceptable can be indicated.

Chinese Image Construction in Dragon Seed

The Family Image in Dragon Seed

At the beginning of the film, a long shot shows the living environment of the village, where Ling Tan and his families live. The village of Ling is surrounded by mountains, which depart the village from the outside world. In the village, there is a large amount of land with crops planted and big pools scattering among the land with a lot of fish, which supply the villagers with abundant food. Every family has men work in the land and women do housework at home. The life in the village seems ordinary but happy. The villagers are concentrated on their lives and take no care about the outside world. In that way, life in the village is utopian [9].

When the news comes that the Japanese army is invading the land of China, the villagers pay no attention to the enemies. Because they think that they only take responsibility for their land. But as the war comes nearby the village, the peaceful and relaxing life loses its balance. The danger of the enemies threatens the village. The outside civilization breaks into the village. The villagers remain life, as usual, to maintain a utopian life, although life becomes harder and harder. They must be fear of the enemies’ coming and resist natural disasters at the same time. When the Japanese army invades the village, they try to beg for peace. But the cruelty of the enemies breaks up their hopes, so as their utopian life.
The film uses the villages living surroundings at different times to show a contrast. It displays that peaceful and self-providing life is not realistic under the background of the war. A utopian life the villagers used to have is not a real happy life if they depart family from the country.

Besides, marriage is also another side of the family image. At that time, marriage in the countryside must obey Chinese traditional rules: the man works outside, while the woman works inside; and men and women are in an unequal position in marriage, women playing a dependent role. The film demonstrates two different marriages in Ling Tan’s family which combine the Chinese traditional marriage with western marriage to a different extent.

The first is the marriage between Ling Tan and his wife. As the head of the family, Ling Tan is a representative of Chinese traditional man. He has a traditional understanding of marriage. He believes that men and women have a clear division of labor and that women should abide by their duties. So, his wife always takes care of the families without any complains and agrees that men can beat women. Besides the traditional aspect of their marriage, the movie adds a touch of western romanticism to their relationship. They use direct speeches and actions to express their love for each other. Compared to the traditional and conservative image of traditional Chinese farmers, the film uses direct and humorous words to show the love between Ling Tan and his wife.

The second is the marriage between Lao Er and Jade. Unlike traditional arranged-marriages, they get married with the decision made by themselves. Therefore, different from the traditional marriage which emphasizes that the marriage does service for the family, the marriage of the couple pays more attention to seek the true meaning of marriage. The changes in the marriage relationship between Jade and Lao Er show the combination of western thoughts and eastern thoughts. At the beginning of their marriage, there was no communication between the couple. Lao Er remains his conservative view of marriage while Jade is a modern woman. When they experience the understanding of each other’s inner thoughts and get respect from each other, they find the value of their marriage. After the cruelty of the war, their understanding of marriage has changed to spiritual love, which raising marriage to idealistic heights.

Thirdly, the family structure also constructs the family image. As the land is the basic living source for a family, the family structure is cultivated by it. As a traditional Chinese family at that time, all the family obeys father is the rule of the family; mother leading the women takes care of the house while men work outside; the old should be respected by the young and will succeed the belongs of the family. Besides, the land can’t move, making the family structure stubborn and stable. Like other traditional families, Ling Tan’s family has three sons, one daughter, two daughters in law, and many grandsons, which is a symbol of a happy family in China. The family makes a living by the land, which succeeds from their ancestors. Now, Ling Tan as the oldest man in the family has absolute power over his family. In this movie, the marriage of his sons should be decided by Ling Tan; the belongings of the family are divided by him; the departure of his sons should be approved by him. He is the decision-maker and the core of the family. However, with the war coming, the land is destroyed and the balance of the family structure is broken by modern thoughts challenging.

The Female Image in Dragon Seed

In the film, Jade, as the heroine, is a modern woman, while Ling Tan’s wife and Orchid are traditional women at the beginning of the film. As a female in a new society different from feudal society at that time, Jade actively pursues the opportunity to receive cultural knowledge and strives
for women's equal rights in marriage. In the movie, she doesn’t give up learning after marriage, which is progressive in the village; she is enthusiastic about politics that used to be the area of men; she seeks individual value and equality in marriage. However, under the social conditions at that time, Jade’s idea of love supremacy and pursuit of personal value is bold but not radical. In her family, she still must pretend to obey her husband's words and deeds to protect her husband's authority under the traditional etiquette. As the war goes, she finds her duty and takes on it. When she becomes a mature and experienced fighter, she is not satisfied with what she achieves but begins to reflect what she has done is right or not. From that time, she grows up as a mature and mentally independent female.

The traditional females represented by Ling Tan’s wife and Orchid adhere to the traditional women’s rules of feudal culture. Under these rules, women's rights and consciousness were ignored. Even Ling Tan’s wife, who is also a woman, is also deeply affected by feudal culture, denying women’s rights to receive cultural education and agreeing with the supremacy of men. However, under the influence of Jade, Ling Tan’s wife and Orchid gradually germinate women's awareness of independence and equality. Orchid grows into a strong mother who directly faces the enemies to protect her children. Ling Tan’s wife gradually has modern thoughts with the war going on. She becomes independent in deciding and brave in fighting against the enemies.

The Farmers’ Image in Dragon Seed

The villagers of valley Ling have been farming and inherited the land of their houses for generations. The conservative farmers’ group represented by Ling Tan follows the patriarchal family structure and the patriarchal social structure. In the film, the peasant group represented by Ling Tan regards land as the foundation on which the family depends, and the state is the authority that provides land ownership and protects farmers' right to use. In their eyes, the world is just the part of the land extending outwards, which is no different from the local customs of the land where they are located. Under the isolation and protection of the mountain, they are content to live a self-sufficient life while guarding the land. Although they are curious about the world outside the mountain, they have no intention to explore. Even when talking about the people and things on the other side of the earth, they think they are all enemies that will endanger their land. War, as the fuse of the development of film stories, has become the driving force for breaking the barrier of the mountain. The news of the war outside the mountains causes the traditional farmers represented by Ling Tan to start looking at the world outside the mountains. In the later period of the war, the traditional farmers’ group represented by Ling Tan are gradually developed from the initial compromise of the war to actively respond to the war. When Jade and his sons seek to unite and jointly resist the enemy's rule in a guerrilla manner. They actively respond and participate in the battle. However, when Jade proposes to let the villagers burn their land and houses to cut off the enemies' food sources, Ling Tan expresses their strong opposition and still tries to keep their land through passive resistance. When Jade and Ling Tan confront each other fiercely, she tells him that the encroachment of the enemy is not just their land, but peace and hope. If they do not resist, their children would always be in war and fear. The traditional farmers represented by Ling Tan finally understand that land is only the material basis for survival, and what makes land meaningful is an independent country and a peaceful world.

The Citizen Image in Dragon Seed

The citizen image in this film is represented by businessman Wu Lien and intellectuals who
organize Anti-Japanese activities in the cities and villages. Compared with the roles of farmers who always appear with the scene of the village in the film, Wu Lien, as a businessman, lives and works in the city. As a representative character of citizen image, he shows a dual image in this movie [7]. On the one hand, he loves his family. Under whatever conditions, he never gives up his family. On the other hand, he is a selfish and greedy man. At that time, the Japanese are invading China. Instead of caring about the fate of the country, he only takes care of his goods, which are all from Japan. When the students come and blame him for selling Japanese goods for money, he doesn’t feel shameful at all. When the Japanese occupy the city and kill his mother, what he thinks is not to resist them but submit to the enemies. He offers goods to the Japanese for free. And to show his loyalty, he hangs the Japanese national flag in front of his store. Moreover, he is not ashamed of his treason but shows off his power to Ling Tan. At that time, what he does is not for a living but his greedy for power and cozy life.

Since the protagonist of this movie is Chinese farmer, there are few plots about intellectuals. The intellectual first appears in the village to promote Anti-Japanese. Although they use video and inspiring speeches to call on the villagers join them to resist Japanese, no one reacts with them. Instead, they are mistrusted by other people. Then they appear again when they come to Wu Lien’s store. They destroy Wu Lien’s store and burn his goods in the public. What they have done displays a group of people who cares about the country’s destiny and uses their knowledge to resist the war.

### Conclusion

Through the analysis of the family image, female image, farmers’ image and citizen image in the movie *Dragon Seed*, the whole Chinese image constructed by the movie can be concluded as follows: the Chinese image in the movie contains Chinese people who love peace and take part in the Anti-Fascist War actively, a new China where traditional society is transiting to modern society, and a spirit that all men are brothers in the world. The Chinese image constructed by the movie is positive as a whole, but to some extent, it is also vilified by the movie unconsciously. Chinese people, especially farmers in this movie are displayed too ignorant and coward towards the war. Besides, the make-up of the actresses, which makes emphasize the single eyelid and thin eyebrow, shows the stereotype of the Chinese women. Compared to those Hollywood films, *Dragon Seed* constructs a relatively positive Chinese image. Thus, an equal and peaceful international environment is conducive to the correct shaping of the country’s image. China remains committed to the path of peaceful development and uses excellent stories to express the mutual values contained in the Chinese spirit.

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### References


