The Multicultural World in the Films of Ang Lee

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Abstract. As a well-known director with Chinese culture background, Ang Lee could yet shoot films that are greatly welcomed by audience in China and the western countries. His works have wide visions and multiple subject matters, forming an image world of diverse cultural traces. His success is stemmed from his insightful perception and decoding of different cultures. By analyzing several his representative films, this paper explains how he narrows down the aesthetic gap among people from cultures and demonstrates a style accepted by all groups.

Introduction

In the history of films, a number of well-known directors are remembered with certain labels, such as the comics movies were carried forward by Charles Chaplin, the horror movies are the thing of Alfred Hitchcock and black humor is the specialty of Tim Burton. As the winner of the Academy Award, the Golden Globe Award, the Golden Bear Award and the Golden Lion Award, the Chinese director Ang Lee has also proved his status in the contemporary filming industry by these awards and unbeatable book offices of his works. However, it is difficult to mark him with a certain label, as his films have covered vast topics, including the adaption of English literature classics, such as Sense and Sensibility, the cross culture conflicts in traditional Chinese families, marked by his early Father Trilogy, and the fantasy movie, the Life of Pi. It seems that Ang Lee has never stopped to conquer new fields in his career.

An undeniable fact is that most of his films reveal a strong sensation of cultures. He has already grasped the tricks to present a mixing picture of the cultures as well as to make them welcomed by people globally. Therefore, this paper tries to discover the “culture tricks” in his films, especially how he narrows down the aesthetic gap among people from cultures and demonstrates a style accepted by all groups.

To Keep Cultures’ Individuality and Commonness at the Same Time

The ideal solution to cross-culture transmission is to overcome the restriction of culture-centralism, display the background and coordinate the relations with other parties. Ang Lee’s films are the faithful executor of this philosophy. The audience can observe the individuality of each culture as well their compromise to each other. This so called “Harmony but not sameness” is a permanent component existing in Confucius wisdom and comprehended quite deeply in Ang Lee’s works. He used to say that he was just like a chameleon which could totally adapt to the surroundings when needed [1]. But this adaption is more like an implicit way of conveying the Chinese conventional values, such as the harmony between man and nature or maintaining a lukewarm relationship with outside. Even though the slogans, such as great China or great dynasty, are considered as typical cultural outcomes of China now, cannot be heard or seen in Ang Lee’s films. Yet a strong perception of authentic Chinese elements can be sensed in his works. Through them, the audience could feel the intense cultural characteristics brought about by the creator, no matter they are originated from the oriental world or the western stories. The characteristics are not shown by the externally attached tags, but melted in the overall artistic conception and image style of each film.

His early works, the Father trilogy, up to now, still are framed for deeply carving the conventional Chinese spirit. Some distinguishing signs of Chines culture can be observed in them,
such as Tai Ji, calligraphy, the diet habits and wedding banquet customs. The messages Ang Lee was trying to send are not the peculiar part of oriental life, but a thorough retrospection to its ethics. For one thing, the core figure in the three films, the father, is modeled by three different old-styled occupations, such as Tai Ji master in Pushing Hands, the calligrapher in the Wedding Banquet, the chef in Yin Shi Nan Nu. More deeply, the demonstration of traditional Chinese culture is more accomplished through the father’s speech, deportment, temperament accomplishment, as well as his mode of thinking about how to get along with people.

In his first film Pushing Hands, the gesture of hands-pushing could be seen through the whole film. This so-called killing-with-kindness living style is differed from the western approach which is more aggressive and hostile sometimes. Before shooting this film, Ang Lee read loads of books explaining the principles in this Kong Fu art and intended to discover the Chinese weltanschauung within Tai Ji. Besides that, the director applies his perception of Tai Ji to the speech mode in the movie. When dealing with emotional disputes, the characters imitate this mode to conciliate conflicts, so as to highlight the inherent tension in the story.

The common theme existing in Pushing Hands, The Wedding Banquet and Yin Shi Nan Nu, is to seek a new balance in a traditional father-based family from a state of false balance. When confronted with the western-and-eastern cultural collision as well as the deconstruction and restructuring of family, the coping style that the films adopt is more like hands-pushing. The agony and ecstasy are not what the director tries to convey here. Instead, he displays a balanced optimistic attitude in the new relationship, a seeming helpless retreat but actually conforming to the times.

The intimacy with nature results in the pursuit of artistic conception and performance in Chinese art, with the scenery depicted and the emotions expressed in perfect harmony. This image method is largely used in Brokeback Mountain. The peaks rise one higher than the other. The flocks of sheep are scattered all over the mountain, enjoying their leisure and carefree moment. The nature, full of exuberant vitality, is not only the spiritual home of Jack and Ennis, but also the symbol of their pure and neat freedom. Such circumstances create a higher degree of integration between man and nature, as the towering mountains witness their romantic emotions. To a considerable extent, the success of this film owns to how the director processes the relationship between scenes and the image language. It is a perfect fusion of the eastern implicit aesthetics and the heavy feeling of vicissitudes usually found in the western movies.

Ang Lee’s secret of success lies in his way of expressing his understanding of the multiverse, a calm and gentle approach rooted in different cultures [2]. Before he went to college in America and lived there for 20 years, he was raised in a small county in Taiwan where Chinese traditions were well-reserved. His qualities like being low profile and accommodating, together with his gentleness and simple aesthetic taste, conformed of a peaceful, reserved, friendly but aloof manner in his works. The style logo of his films include witty languages with strong personality, a rhythm loose outside but tight inside, detailed and vivid image description, a romantic sadness close to reality. In the film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”, these cultural marks can be noticed in its vacant martial world. In Brokeback Mountain, the audience can experience the characters’ sentimental struggles. In the Life of Pi, no matter the viewer has faith or not, would be amazed by the magic starry picture over the ocean. Even though there’re not tangible descriptions, this distinct cultural continuity stimulates the aesthetic expectation of the audience and leads to Ang Lee’s success both artistically and commercially.

To Coexistence and Complement: Seeking Multicultural Communication Method

1. To find an universal language in diverse civilizations

The cross cultural communication should not be referred as a one-way cultural activities influenced by globalization. It contains globalization and regionalization at the same time, as well as the confrontation and interaction of two culture forces. On account of the unique characters of images, films rely on its culture attitudes, the process of subject matters, art means and operational strategies to achieve successful communication between the producer and audience. Meite Hjort
once said that when every factor of a film is utterly confined to a certain ethical imaginative space, it is impossible for the foreign viewers to understand its implications [3]. In this case, it is necessary to adopt the content and manner of expression approachable to the audience and Ang Lee is a master in dealing with these situations. It seems that all his films could always achieve admiring box office results as well as widely praise in the Chinese and Western cultural circles, no matter how distant their original themes are. People believe the success comes from his willingness to broke the central state of his own culture and draw available nutrients from others. A good cross-culture communication is hence realized by seeking the intercommunity among diverse civilization.

From his Father Trilogy to Sense and Sensibility, from Ice Storm to Brokeback Mountain", from Lust and Caution to the Life of Pi, Ang Lee’s films have shown constant interest in the mutual affairs among humans, such as family, tradition, love and beliefs. Although the attention to family is much inherited from the traditional Chinese ethics, it is also a common concern beyond times and cultural groups and with considerable universality.

Not only good at finding the commonness from different regional cultures, Ang Lee is also skilled at using the similar emotions as the selling point in his film. The official description to the emotion in Brokeback Mountain is a love between the same sex, as Lee didn’t consider it as a pure homosexual movie. [4] He believed that there were always huge obstacles lying between great loves and the machismo and conventional values long existing in the west part of America are the two main characters’ obstacles. They need to cherish the unspeakable things in their lives, for the relation is underground. What attracts the audience is not the unusual homosexual background, but a more widely understanding of the great love and the persistence to their relationship. The two reticent and strong-minded men are struggling in the isolated surroundings. Even though they get married and have children, it never occurs to them to give up their relation. It is their persistence that surpasses the cultures constrains and touches the audience, for it is the most sensitive and beautiful part in people’s minds.

2. To narrow down the aesthetic gap

Besides focusing on the matters that arouse resonance of different cultures, Lee’s films have narrowed the aesthetic gap among different cultures through comprehending the viewers’ habits to gain better acceptance. The pattern characteristics of Hollywood movies used to cost much of Lee’s efforts, so he could extend his personal style to get close to the aesthetic habits of the viewers. Therefore, the stories are told through western perspectives and skills, while blending the oriental ideas and feelings. The films are seemingly based on their characters, the plots and emotions, yet are adapted to the viewers’ aesthetic taste so as to gain their favorable comment.

For instance, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, the winner of the Best Foreign Language Film Award of Oscar in 1999, is a successful application of blending eastern story and western plot. It abandoned the narration preference in the old-styled martial films which tended to concentrate on enmity and ignore the description of the characters. Yet the film is converted to a story about the growing experience of Yujialong, an arrogant and unyielding girl who just entered society. Compared with the killing and revenges in the old-styled stories, this new individual-struggling narration is highly greeted by foreign audience. Besides, the rebellion shown from Yu Jiaolong has made a clear contrast to Yu Xiulian’s calmness and unyielding. Lee once admitted that this film was his fantasy to the brotherhood in ancient martial world [5]. He believes that Chinese poetry is responsible for delivering the positive factors, while the negative sides, the inner depressions of Chinese people, are hidden in the martial arts fictions [6]. Therefore, the essence in the film is not about flying over the eaves and running up the walls, or the triumph of the Kong Fu masters. The genuine intention of the director is the leading characters exploration about morality of life and the true essence of love. Hence the arrangements of the plot and the action designs are all served for the illustration of their personalities. In the scene that Xiulian and Jiaolong are chasing each other at night, both of them are using Light Kong Fu. Jiaolong’s action is easy and unruly, indicating her fearlessness to the world. Xiulian’s movements are steady and forceful, implying her strong self-discipline.
Besides, Lee is good at telling stories and able to attract people with different cultural identities. After graduating from the Department of drama and film in Taiwan National Art College, he continued his studies in University of Illinois for stricter training on western drama. His latter works were apparently influenced by this dramatic tendency. Drawing lessons from the Hollywood melodrama, Lee tells his stories in a simple way and uses conflicts to be the framework of the films. The film Wedding Banquet is all around the son’s marriage. Two concepts of ethics, stemmed from the conventional Chinese family and the modern anti-traditional western family respectively, meet in a certain occasion and thus generate a bunch of conflicts. Furthermore, the Ice Storm tells a story about two families happening in a single night. The husband and wife sleep in the same bed but dream different dreams, and the adolescents are full of rebellions and quirks. The long-period family collision reaches its climax in a premeditated Key Party. It means that wife would choose a car key randomly at the party and spend the night together with the car’s owner, which naturally is not her legally husband. This "swing party" would bring suspense to the fate of the characters, yet a sudden ice storm ended the sex game unexpectedly which is supposed to be a personality liberation binge. The storm outside and the depressive atmosphere inside of the family are interconnected, forming a picture like what goes on in an old Chinese saying: the gale is raging and the storm is about to burst. The two couples are eager to play this wife-swing game but anxious about the upcoming family collapse. The dramatic tension is further intensified by the combination of all the factors.

Conclusions

The long-time cross-culture exchanges in mankind’s history have shown that the communication among people with different culture background, which aims at self-confirmation, self-fulfillment and self-development, usually is based on a sort of self-derived communicative demands. It can be seen as the process to reveal conflicts, to transform, blend and recreate their own field of vision. However, it is almost impossible to utterly discard the basic elements and signs in one’s own culture system as well as to escape away from the strains from the prior component in history [7].

The globalized context is both a challenge and an opportunity for Chinese films. How to cope with the upcoming changes with a positive attitude is a significant topic in front of Chinese filmmakers. From the discussion above, it can be seen that Ang Lee, with his fruitful exploration, has brought about valuable inspirations to the cross-cultural communication of Chinese films.

The prior task is to establish a correct attitude toward culture. On one hand, the explorations to other cultures are often rooted in a self-recognition of one’s own culture identity. Simply catering to the outside culture may seem to be a shortcut, but it won’t last forever, just like some of the early Chines movies won their international fame by showing the decayed and dark side of Chinese culture. The correct attitude toward culture is to admit the plurality and rationality in each culture, so to achieve development with mutual promotion. The practice of Ang Lee’s films shows that the common culture and common emotion of human beings are the important bridges to eliminate the difference between the east and the west. The success of a film means that the audience can be impressed by the common theme or common emotion, despite of their different cultural identities.

References


