

The Role of Community Aesthetics in the External Communication Discourse System of Chinese Films under the Background of the “Belt and Road” Initiative

LI Jing*

School of Liberal Arts, Xi'an University, Xi'an, China

lijingbfa@qq.com

Abstract: As a cultural product, films bear the mission and responsibility of shaping the national image and conveying the spirit of China in international cultural exchanges. However, since the proposal of the “Belt and Road” initiative in 2013, the dissemination of Chinese films in countries along the route has remained unsatisfactory, thereby underscoring the urgency of reconstructing the discourse system for the external communication of Chinese films. To address this issue, it is of the utmost importance to establish a creative orientation that is focused on reshaping China’s image, fully exploring Chinese stories and the essence of the Chinese spirit, and developing a discourse system that is centered on Chinese narratives and supported by the theoretical framework of community aesthetics. Moreover, it is vital to engage in comprehensive collaboration in cultural exchanges with countries along the Belt and Road. This necessitates the adaptation of Chinese film promotion and distribution strategies to align with the characteristics of the new media era. Leveraging the aggregating power of new media platforms and online communities is essential for the creation of a sustainable and Chinese-style industrial model for the global dissemination of Chinese films.

Keywords: “Belt and Road” initiative; Chinese Films; Community Aesthetics; External Communication Discourse System

1. Introduction

In September 2013, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the Silk Road Economic Belt during a significant speech delivered at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan. Subsequently, in October of the same year, Xi further elucidated this concept during a speech delivered before the Indonesian Parliament, wherein he proposed the joint development of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” These two speeches are collectively regarded as the point of origin of the “Belt and Road” cooperation initiative. Over the past decade, economic and trade cooperation between China and the countries situated along the Silk Road has intensified considerably, accompanied by a gradual expansion of cultural exchanges. In the context of the new media era, film can be considered a significant cultural product and communication medium. It therefore has the potential to play a central role in disseminating Chinese culture on a global scale. However, research findings suggest that “the overall exposure of respondents to Chinese films in the ‘Belt and Road’ strategic region is inadequate, with nearly one-third of respondents expressing no interest in Chinese films.”¹ Furthermore, “the dissemination of Chinese films in neighbouring countries is observed to be inadequate, exhibiting clear regional disparities.”² This paper seeks to identify the optimal path and methodology for reconstructing the discourse system of Chinese cinema’s international communication, while also discussing the role of “community aesthetics.” The objective is to present a novel approach to addressing the challenges encountered by Chinese cinema in its global outreach.

2. The “Belt and Road” Initiative and the Reconstruction of Discourse System for the External Communication of Chinese Films

The dissemination of Chinese films to foreign countries can be traced back to the production of *Chuang Tze Tests His Wife* (《庄子试妻》) by the Hua Mei Film Company (华美影片公司) in 1913. Upon completion of filming, investor Benjamin Brodsky facilitated the film’s public screening in the United States. This constituted the inaugural instance of Chinese films being exhibited abroad, marking the advent of their dissemination to foreign countries. Since the reform and opening up of China, there has been a notable increase in the frequency of foreign communication and international exchange activities related to Chinese films. This has led to the gradual formation of an effective foreign communication discourse system. Some scholars have identified three distinct phases in the development of the discourse system of

Chinese cinema's external communication. "The initial phase, which occurred during the early stages of reform and opening up, was characterised by the establishment of a discourse system that reflected cultural nuances and employed a realistic visual style."³ The second phase is characterised by "the emergence of costume blockbuster films, which are contributing to the ongoing reform of China's film industry. These films are responding to the demands of both the domestic and international film markets, and are catering to the viewing habits and interests of Chinese and Western audiences in a proactive manner."³ The third phase is "the current period of constructing an image of the 'Chinese spirit' and proposing solutions to tangible issues such as the potential for Chinese culture to become a global phenomenon."³

This phase represents a further evolution in the discourse system of Chinese cinema's external communication, as filmmakers and industry professionals endeavour to disseminate the distinctive cultural values and perspectives of China to a global audience. By employing innovative storytelling techniques, showcasing visually stunning cinematography, and engaging with global audiences in a considered manner, Chinese cinema is well-positioned to continue exerting a considerable influence on the international stage.³

In the context of China's ongoing reforms and opening up, coupled with the deepening reform of the film system, the construction of the discourse system for film's external communication in the initial two phases has been significantly shaped by globalisation and the market economy. Through a process of exploration and practice, Chinese films have gradually established a basic pattern of national image and value identity. Since the beginning of the new century, films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, *Ip Man* and *Kung Fu* have achieved considerable popularity among overseas audiences, exerting a significant and enduring influence on the international dissemination of Chinese films.⁴ Nevertheless, these films have also contributed to the perpetuation of the "Kung Fu China" stereotype, which has been firmly established in popular consciousness since the era of Bruce Lee.

In the context of the contemporary phenomenon of "great power diplomacy," it is evident that Chinese society is assuming a greater role in the process of national rejuvenation, particularly in light of the introduction of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Consequently, the international dissemination of Chinese cinema must adapt to the evolving socio-political landscape. It is of the utmost importance to establish a novel discourse system that effectively reshapes China's national image and promotes the spirit of the Chinese people in this new era. In order to achieve this, Chinese filmmakers and industry professionals must innovate in storytelling, cinematography, and engagement with global audiences, while ensuring that the unique cultural values and perspectives of China are preserved. Adherence to these principles will enable Chinese cinema to continue exerting a significant influence on the international stage, thereby enhancing global understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture.

The academic community is currently engaged in exploring the reconstruction of the discourse system and strategies for Chinese cinema's international communication. The research findings indicate a diversified range of viewpoints, which primarily encompass the following dimensions: the substitution of ethnic expressions with transnational issues in thematic content; the establishment of a cultural regional community within the context of "Belt and Road" cultural exchanges; and the construction of Chinese-foreign communication channels through cross-media fusion and industrial cooperation. A consensus emerges across the creative, communication, and industrial dimensions. It can be summarised as follows: to transcend existing cultural barriers, minimise the discrepancy in cultural dissemination, establish a more open and inclusive discourse system, and address the global issues that confront all humanity under the vision of a "community of human destiny".

The 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative has coincided with a period of considerable transformation in the media environment, market situation, cultural context and audience composition of Chinese cinema. Consequently, the advent of innovative film creation practices has given rise to a need for a new film aesthetic to serve as a theoretical guide. At an academic symposium held in November 2018, the concept of "community aesthetics" in cinema was first proposed by the scholar Rao Shuguang.⁵ He believed:

The wisdom of China has a profound impact on the hearts and minds of people around the world. Chinese cinema, which has evolved alongside the times, has the potential to construct a community-oriented aesthetic based on the national spirit and Chinese experience. This aesthetic could "converge and resonate" with the global cinematic culture and artistic experience. ... Community aesthetics can provide a theoretical method, theoretical framework, and theoretical model, thereby creating a theoretical space, theoretical tension, and theoretical realm that is characterised by strong inclusivity, interactivity, and practicality.⁶

By situating the reconstruction of the discourse system for Chinese cinema's foreign communication within the theoretical framework of "community aesthetics", it may be possible to discern a more distinct and coherent pathway, ultimately yielding a methodology that offers tangible guidance for the international dissemination of Chinese cinema.

3. Theoretical Origins and Methodological Construction of Community Aesthetics

The academic research on the concept of "community aesthetics" is still in its infancy. Scholars including Rao Shuguang, Jia Leilei, Chen Xuguang, An Yan, Li Jianqiang, Zhang Jingwu, Lan Jianhua, Liu Jing and Meng Lijing have published a substantial number of academic papers on the subject of community aesthetics, collectively constructing and enriching the theoretical framework of this field of study from a variety of perspectives. As evidenced by the discussions of these scholars, the theoretical origins of community aesthetics primarily derive from the shared spirit embodied in the "idea of harmony (和合)" and "Datong (大同)" in traditional Chinese culture,⁷ as well as the concept of "community" in Western socio-political theories, with primary references drawn from Benedict Anderson's "The Imagined Community" and Ferdinand Tönnies's "Community and Society."⁸

Community Aesthetics is aligned with the notion of a collective future for humanity, anchored in the esteemed Chinese cultural tenets of "harmony" and "Datong." It incorporates and incorporates Western theories of "community" and "empathy." The fundamental tenets of community aesthetics can be distilled into four key principles: respect for similarities, embrace of differences, reverence for harmony, and pursuit of shared beauty. The methodology employed involves the construction of a pluralistic community, with a focus on the audience's perspective. This approach seeks to balance various elements, including the world, the author, and the work itself. The objective is to attain a mutually beneficial outcome for all parties through collaborative efforts, thereby facilitating the advancement of China's film industry.⁹

The concept of community aesthetics, as it is understood within the context of Chinese film theory, is understood to encompass three fundamental dimensions: practicality, integration, and inheritance. It not only creatively incorporates the findings of past film theory and aesthetics research, but also engages with the intellectual and ideological heritage of traditional Chinese culture. In the process of engaging with the ethos of world cinema, it gives rise to original film concepts. Moreover, it concurrently monitors the latest advancements in film practice, including the profound influence of high technology on the creative process, such as artificial intelligence, big data, and digital technology.¹⁰ Community aesthetics also encompasses the perspectives of authorial aesthetics, textual aesthetics and receptive aesthetics, with a particular emphasis on empathy, sympathy and resonance between the text, the audience and the creator.⁹ The theoretical approach known as Community Aesthetics is notable for its inclusivity, openness, and practical applicability. It is a Chinese-style theoretical creation that is based on the learning and reworking of Western theories, representing a synthesis and transcendence of Western film theories.

In the context of the "Belt and Road" initiative, the external dissemination of Chinese films can benefit from the methodological insights of community aesthetics to inform film creation and industrial practice. Firstly, the aesthetics of community does not serve the interests of the audience or the market. Instead, it prioritises the creator's self-expression at the textual level. Concurrently, it effectively engages with the audience at a more profound level, facilitating the formation of an "imagined community" through the aesthetic processes of sympathy, empathy, and resonance. Secondly, in the context of new media, geographical space is no longer the sole material condition that defines a community. The increasing popularity of smartphones and the advancement of Internet technology have facilitated the formation of discrete communities, or "disembedded community,"¹¹ that correspond to specific apps. These communities are becoming increasingly capable of representing cultural communities in the context of the new globalisation era. It is therefore evident that the production of films within the framework of community aesthetics should transcend the barriers of national imagery and regional experience. It is necessary to adopt a macro perspective of the new media era, focus on more significant global issues, and seek homogeneous common experiences within heterogeneous contexts. This approach will facilitate an accurate understanding of the requirements of the majority of viewers in other countries and enable the construction of a discourse system for the external communication of Chinese films.

4. Paths and Methods for Reconstructing the Discourse System of Chinese Films' External Communication

Since 2011, the Research Institute of International Communication of Chinese Culture at Beijing Normal University has been engaged in a research project, entitled “International Communication of Chinese Films”, which has been conducted on an annual basis. Over a period of twelve consecutive years, the project has yielded twelve research reports and ten books, collectively known as the “Silver Book.” The Annual Report on International Communication of Chinese Films. The research outcomes have established a robust empirical basis for the study of international communication of Chinese films, and provide the foundation for this paper’s investigation of strategies for reconstructing the discourse system for the external communication of Chinese films.

In order to facilitate the international dissemination of Chinese films, it is first necessary to establish a creative orientation that will enable China to present a new image to the world. This necessitates a comprehensive exploration of Chinese narratives and the Chinese spirit, the transcendence of cultural barriers, the minimisation of cultural dissemination discounts, and the establishment of a discourse system centered on Chinese narratives and supported by community aesthetics theory. Secondly, it is recommended that China engage in close collaboration with countries along the Belt and Road in cultural exchange. Adaptation of Chinese film publicity and distribution strategies to align with the characteristics of the new media era is also advised, as is the utilisation of the aggregating power of new media platforms and online communities to create a sustainable Chinese-style industry model.

4.1 Community Aesthetics: The Theoretical Foundation for the Discourse System of Chinese Film External Communication in the New Era

As indicated in the research report, the reception of Chinese films in countries along the “Belt and Road” has been less than optimal. The 2016 research findings indicate that, “in terms of genre preference, martial arts and action films continue to be the most popular. Chinese films have yet to establish a market for diversified genres in neighbouring countries”,² and this situation has not undergone a significant transformation thus far. The popularity of Chinese martial arts and action genres can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the historical context of the long-standing Orientalist vision and the rapid development of the film industry since the advent of the era of globalisation. This has resulted in the stereotyping of China’s national image, with the image of “Kung Fu China” becoming deeply entrenched in popular consciousness. The spectacle and othering of China and Chinese landscapes in cinema have become the most significant attraction for foreign film audiences. This phenomenon serves to reinforce the existence of cultural barriers and reflects the fact that there is still a considerable distance to be traversed before the goal of cultural exchange, communication and understanding between different countries can be achieved. Conversely, foreign audiences possess limited knowledge of the contemporary socio-political landscape of China and encounter difficulties in accessing reliable information from cinematic sources, which contributes to the persistence of the stereotyped image of China.

The low level of recognition of China’s social order, humanistic and natural environments is closely related to two factors: firstly, China’s strategy of exporting its culture to the outside world; and secondly, the content and quality of its exported films. At the present time, the majority of Chinese films that have received considerable attention from the international community are those that have been awarded at recent international film festivals. These films primarily focus on portraying China during the 1980s and 1990s. The paucity of cinematic portrayals of contemporary Chinese social life contributes to a relatively low level of awareness among respondents regarding the contemporary image of China.²

In recent years, there has been a notable enhancement in the content and quality of Chinese films exported to foreign countries. New films that have achieved considerable success within the domestic market have also been exported to the international market. The findings of the 2021 study indicate that “action films are the most widely accepted genre by overseas online audiences, followed by new mainstream cinema and Chinese comics and animation films. The types of Chinese films accepted by overseas audiences are becoming increasingly diverse.”¹²

A comprehensive rating list of overseas online platforms has revealed that martial arts action genre films, including *Shadow*, *Ip Man 3*, and *Ip Man 4*, as well as new mainstream films such as *Vanguard*, *Wolf Warrior 2*, *Operation Red Sea*, *Eight Hundred*, and *The Captain*, have ranked among the top 20. Additionally, Chinese animations such as *White Snake*, *Big Fish & Begonia*, and *Ne Zha* have also achieved a notable position on the list (as illustrated in Table 1). These films have been identified as the most outstanding Chinese films in the overseas evaluation system. It can be observed that the simplistic and

stereotypical image of China in recent years has been improved to a certain extent, and that the image of contemporary China as a “great power” has also begun to exert a certain degree of influence.

Table 1 Top 20 Films on Overseas Web Platforms¹²

Movie Title	IMDB	Rotten Tomato	Netflix	YouTube	Google	Twitter	Totals
<i>Shadow</i> (《影》)	24.26	23.61	0.00	21.80	2.63	15.79	88.09
<i>White Snake</i> (《白蛇: 缘起》)	22.38	20.33	0.00	23.44	0.47	20.00	86.61
<i>Big Fish & Begonia</i> (《大鱼海棠》)	21.97	22.38	0.00	24.18	1.13	16.84	86.50
<i>Vanguard</i> (《急先锋》)	23.61	20.00	0.00	20.41	2.46	18.95	85.42
<i>Ip Man 4</i> (《叶问4: 完结篇》)	24.10	22.05	2.00	14.84	2.36	17.89	83.24
<i>Ip Man 3</i> (《叶问3》)	24.10	21.89	2.00	22.05	2.36	10.53	82.92
<i>Legend of the Demon Cat</i> (《妖猫传》)	19.67	21.31	0.00	23.44	1.62	14.74	80.79
<i>Better Days</i> (《少年的你》)	22.38	22.87	0.00	21.80	2.78	8.42	78.25
<i>Kung Fu Panda 3</i> (《功夫熊猫3》)	24.59	23.28	0.00	15.00	1.97	12.63	77.47
<i>Ne Zha</i> (《哪吒之魔童降世》)	21.89	21.80	2.00	23.11	1.97	6.32	77.09
<i>The Great Wall</i> (《长城》)	24.92	20.66	0.00	14.59	2.83	13.68	76.68
<i>The Foreigner</i> (《英伦对决》)	24.67	21.48	0.00	24.02	2.68	3.16	76.00
<i>The Monkey King 2</i> (《西游记之孙悟空三打白骨精》)	18.77	20.00	0.00	24.92	0.47	11.58	75.73
<i>Wolf Warrior 2</i> (《战狼2》)	22.46	19.92	0.00	22.54	2.90	7.37	75.19
<i>Operation Red Sea</i> (《红海行动》)	22.21	19.43	0.00	21.64	2.21	9.47	74.97
<i>Mermaid</i> (《美人鱼》)	23.28	23.36	0.00	14.43	2.73	5.26	69.06
<i>Railroad Tigers</i> (《铁道飞虎》)	20.33	19.84	0.00	23.77	0.47	4.21	68.61
<i>Eight Hundred</i> (《八佰》)	21.89	21.97	0.00	19.59	2.58	1.05	67.08
<i>The Captain</i> (《中国机长》)	20.16	18.85	0.00	21.64	2.34	0.00	62.99
<i>Operation Mekong</i> (《湄公河行动》)	20.17	19.03	0.00	20.49	1.13	0.61	61.34

It can be argued that diversified genre films continue to serve as a significant conduit for China’s film communication discourse to the global community. Nevertheless, the formation of genres in Chinese cinema is not merely an imitation of the Hollywood commercial genre model; rather, it represents a distinctive Chinese inquiry within the theoretical framework of community aesthetics.

The most pivotal issue pertaining to the genre film pertains to the “contractual” relationship that is forged through sustained interaction, communication, and negotiation with the audience. This relationship concerns the construction of a “Community Aesthetics” that resonates with the audience and reflects the distinctive cultural and artistic expressions of Chinese cinema.⁴

In recent years, China’s new mainstream cinema has made notable advancements in terms of its typological strategies and community aesthetic construction. The cinematic breakthroughs achieved by films such as *Operation Mekong*, *Eight Hundred*, *Operation Red Sea*, and *The Captain* in the fields of action, war, and disaster films are all remarkable. *The Wandering Earth* and *The Wandering Earth 2* can be regarded as exemplars of “community aesthetics” in terms of worldview structure, genre mode, and the expression of the “community of human destiny.” These films are of significant historical importance within the context of Chinese science fiction, and moreover, they represent the pinnacle of industrialisation within the Chinese film industry. It is therefore evident that the construction of the discourse system for Chinese films’ foreign communication should fully recognise the leading role of community aesthetics in creative thinking and the guiding significance of theoretical direction. Furthermore, these elements should be transformed into the film’s typology creation strategy in order to achieve the communication effect of reshaping China’s image.

4.2 Integrated Media Thinking: Constructing a Community of Interest Through Differentiated Distribution Strategies

One of the key factors impeding the global dissemination of Chinese films is the lack of precision in the promotion and distribution strategies employed by Chinese film studios overseas. As early as 2017, the project team of the “Research on the International Communication of Chinese Films” highlighted the necessity of incorporating new media into the process of foreign communication of Chinese films.

It is reasonable to conclude that new media is becoming the primary source of film information and a dominant platform for film consumption. As the output of online films increases, it is also necessary to provide communication solutions that align with the regional communication characteristics and the audience characteristics of each region, in order to ensure effective communication across different contexts.²

Nevertheless, the findings of the 2021 study suggest that:

A significant limitation of overseas viewing platforms such as Netflix and IMDB is their inability to search for a comprehensive range of Chinese films. Furthermore, the amount of information available on these platforms is severely inadequate. ... It is therefore recommended that, in addition to theatrical distribution, overseas dissemination of Chinese films should also prioritise distribution on overseas online film platforms.¹²

In the wake of the global pandemic, cinemas across the globe suffered significant disruption, while online cinemas seized the opportunity to expand their reach. The rapid development of new media technology has led to the emergence of online screening platforms as the primary viewing channel for the younger generation of moviegoers. Concurrently, internet social platforms have become an indispensable resource for users seeking diverse forms of information. Among these platforms, film apps have assumed a pivotal role in the promotion of Chinese films through word-of-mouth. It is therefore evident that the target audience for the external communication of Chinese films should not be limited to those who attend cinemas. In light of the fact that online cinemas have emerged as a significant growth area in the post-pandemic era, it is imperative that promotional and distribution strategies are promptly realigned with new media platforms, thereby ensuring precise delivery to internet users.

The publicity and distribution strategy of Chinese films is not merely about updating the distribution platform; it also requires a detailed grasp of the cultural background, viewing habits, and circumstances of the film audience in the countries along the Belt and Road Initiative. It is of the utmost importance to implement targeted strategies in order to guarantee effective communication. The implementation of differentiated promotion and distribution strategies can effectively mitigate potential incompatibilities of Chinese films in the process of foreign dissemination, thereby enabling foreign audiences to maintain positive value expectations for Chinese films. This facilitates the formation of a genuine community of interests between creators and audiences, thereby achieving the desired effect of Chinese films' foreign dissemination.

5. Conclusion

The international dissemination of Chinese films plays a pivotal role in shaping China's national image and is also an exemplification of the country's cultural soft power. Community aesthetics represents an extension of the concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind." It emphasises a win-win situation through cooperation that is beneficial to all parties involved. In order to reconstruct the discourse system of Chinese films' external communication, it is necessary to adopt community aesthetics as the theoretical foundation and to implement conceptual updates and practical transformations in content production, promotion and distribution strategies with minimal delay. This approach is designed to facilitate the breakdown of cultural barriers, the reduction of cultural discounts and the continuous advancement of high-quality Chinese film development, thereby enabling global audiences to witness the spirit of China in the new era.

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