

National and Cosmopolitan Elements of Chinese Film *Forever Young* and Cross-Cultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

As an "atypical" historical film released in recent years, the film *Forever Young* gives up the usual grand narrative angle and pays attention to the small potatoes. It pieces together and links the hundred-year history of China's struggle and self-improvement through a "messy" and "broken" cross-narrative method and a consistent theme of "being true to yourself". This paper analyzes the national and cosmopolitan elements reflected in the film and explores the acceptance in both domestic and foreign markets, indicating the weakness of contemporary Chinese films in the process of cross-cultural communication. It has been found out that the elements of nationalism are mainly embodied in three aspects, hundred years historical changes of China, oriental core values and oriental implicit artistic style and that the elements of cosmopolitanism are reflected in its narrative techniques, characterization and the theme. Based on the analysis of the weakness of this film in cross-cultural communication, this paper suggests that it should avoid dealing with sensitive topics and obscure values for better cross-cultural communication effects.

1. Introduction

Compared with traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television, film is not only a kind of media, but also a kind of art. The advantages of audio-visual characteristics and the function of emotional conquest make it an incomparable and irreplaceable role in spreading China's voice and shaping China's image internationally (Ding, 2019). Focusing on human nature, the film explains the most basic but also the most profound truth of life, which undoubtedly can be empathetic and instructive to the young people who are in or have experienced the stage of confusion and hesitation in their lives. Therefore, in order to produce a film that can be enjoyed by both the local and overseas audiences, it is necessary to have the ideological content, telling method and communication means on the ground of a "China's position and world vision" (Wang, 2017).

The film *Forever Young* was directed by Fangfang Li, a young director, and was filmed in honor of the centenary of Tsinghua University. The film takes the history of development of Tsinghua University from 1912 to 2012 as the background, and records the four stories of many young people seeking self-sincerity and pursuing truth in different time and space during this period. Its multi-line and parallel narrative angle are an innovation in Chinese mainland drama and history movies, and the film scores 7.6/10 and 6.4/10 in Douban (China) and IMDB respectively. On the whole, Chinese films, especially mainland films, won few international awards, and the overseas box office accounted for a low proportion of the total box office. Comparing the scores in Douban and IMDB, we can see that the scores of Chinese films abroad are generally low. In the face of the difficulties encountered in the international communication of Chinese films, it is of great significance to study its nationality and cosmopolitanism.

2. The Elements of Nationality in *Forever Young*

The national elements in the film are mainly reflected in three aspects: First, the film takes the hundred years' history of the Chinese nation as the background, portrays representative figures with the characteristics of the times, and tells stories that happened to young people in the mainstream of the times; Second, the film conveys the affective values of Chinese traditional culture, including family affection and love. The unique expression of these emotions profoundly reflects the eastern value system; Third, the film's implicit imagery artistic style, which is mainly presented in plot setting and picture presentation, is different from the western warm and direct aesthetic preference, showing the beauty of artistic conception and association emphasized by Chinese culture.

2.1 Youth Stories Show the Historical Changes of China in A Hundred Years

With different characters and plots, *Forever Young* shows the real historical development process of Chinese society from 1912 to 2012: ideological changes during the May Fourth Movement, defending the country and fighting for rights during the Anti-Japanese War, unremitting struggle during the construction of New China, as well as moral dilemmas faced by individuals in the development stage of modern Chinese society. In the stories, some people hesitate for the future, some worry about the country, some firmly guard and defend what they cherish in their hearts, and some strive to keep ahold of their inner moral though in the midst of deception and duplicity. These four short stories are like the epitome of the hundred years' history, connecting China's past and present. Both the background environment and the words and deeds of the characters reflect the unique imprint of the Chinese nation.

2.2 Affective Expression Carries the Core of Oriental Values

Shen Guangyao's family embodies the typical Chinese traditional family and its values: maternal kindness and filial piety. Chinese society is ethics-based, and ancient China was patriarchal. The country was made up of families and the filial piety was exactly the link to maintain them, that is to say, filial piety was the most basic element to maintain national unity and stability (Xu&Li 2013). The basic moral requirements of ancient wise men for families are all related to "filial piety, benevolence and righteousness", aiming at forming a good and harmonious family environment (Zou&Yu, 2017). No matter how the times change, in China, the values about family and its affection, such as respecting the old and loving the young and filial piety to the elders, always come down in one continuous line. Additionally, Shen's mother corresponds with the image of Chinese traditional mother: her expectations of her son are moderate and practical, and her attitude is tolerant and charitable (Wong, 2011). First learning Shen's willingness to join the army, she resolutely opposes it for the sake of his safety. However, after understanding his inner pursuit and determination, she chooses to respect his choice; and Shen's first compromise is out of respect for his parents, while his ultimate choice and insistence shows the breakthrough in the rigid family system and absolute hierarchy. This mutual understanding and compromise of both sides is the most valuable part of family value in modern Chinese society. It shows that family members should always advocate individual independence, pursue mutual respect and equality, and also respect their elders (Ren, 2011).

Moreover, Chen Peng's attitude towards Wang Minjia shows the Chinese traditional view of love. Whether it is dealing with interpersonal relationships or romantic affairs, Chinese people always attach great importance to self-restraint and implicit and are particularly cautious about the way of expressing their feelings (Zhang & Fu, 2017). Therefore, there have always been proverbs about love, such as "conveying one's love by stealing a look", "holding hands and growing old together" and "gathering red berries till full in your hand, as a symbol of our love". Chen loves Wang, but after noticing the interactions between her and Li Xiang, he understood her affection for Li and hide the love in his heart. His feelings for her are not based on her appearance, but on her personal qualities of sincerity and kindness. To some extent, his affection for her has gone beyond love; it's a kind of commitment. This unpretentious and true emotion contains the sincerity and sense of responsibility of the older generations of Chinese people towards love.

2.3 Imagistic Expression Shows Oriental Implicit Artistic Style

From the aesthetic style of works of art, Chinese art, influenced by the doctrine of the mean philosophy advocated by Confucianism, pays attention to the euphemism and moderation of emotional expression, and yearns for a tenderness with resentment but not anger, sentiment but not distress and gentle happiness but not lewdness, as well as a moderate gentleness and sincerity (Xu, 2004). The segment of "sitting quietly while listening to the rain" in the film has the artistic oriental charm of being implicit and restrained. "Rain" is a common image used by ancient Chinese poets. The ancients listened to the rain to meditate, and more often they used the scenery to express their feelings and make use of things to connote their aspirations. The close-ups and amplification of the sound of rain in the film reflect the white space in Chinese

traditional art, and what is behind it is Chinese people's feelings of calm and making the best of things while accepting what they are, which are rooted deeply in their heart. In the use of lens, drawing lessons from the method of viewing and the painting concept of scattered perspective, the viewer is guided to have a full glimpse of the art of sound and painting by traversing the long lens, which not only shows the broad and complex content, but also extends the rhythm of the poem, and perfectly blends the narrative reality with the poetic emptiness, creating an image world with pitching and vivid charm (Yu Yueqiu, 2020). Through the white space and the virtual-actual comparison, viewers can enjoy something deeper and more profound beyond the form of art, which is the very beauty of the so-called "artistic conception" (Li Hongming, 2014). The wind and rain here allude to the difficulties encountered in the schooling at that time—poor facilities and the unpredictable relocation at any time—and also refer to the crisis faced by the whole nation under the big environment of the war. "Sitting quietly and listening to the rain" symbolizes a calm and peaceful attitude, the strength and dignity even in the face of an oncoming storm, and embodies a kind of firmness and self-confidence, showing the unyielding spirit of the Chinese nation. Just as a Chinese verse goes: "With a green bamboo hat and a straw rain cape, there is no need of a retreat in the light wind and drizzling rain." There is no need to be afraid. The calm mentality of the elderly fishermen is the best portrayal of Chinese people's handling of affairs. When the wind and rain are coming, life still goes on; and the only thing people need is to summon up the courage and win the battle. The sight outside the window also inspires the students and strengthens their confidence in studying, living and struggling against the storm.

The depiction of the final fate of Wang Minjia and Chen Peng also applies Chinese imagery technique. At the end of the story, the camera switches its focus to the picture of Wang's walking in the desert—she is going to find Chen. In the film, the distant view of the desert combines the image of objects and the situation from the perspective of space. "Creating the image to fully express the feelings" makes the object image have the dual functions of both visual rhetoric and emotional transmission, which produces rich implication beyond the tangible picture (Huang Jin, 2019). The vast expanse of the desert well implies the unknown fate of the two. They who don't have contact information of each other may never meet again—Chen may die soon because of radiation suffered by his body, Wang may be criticized and distained for her appearance and experience all her life, or probably, they finally find each other and have a happy ending. The story ends with a close-up of Wang's veiled face, her eyes clear and determined. Perhaps, nothing matters to them anymore—only sincerity and love long live with the hearts.

There are actually a series of implications and associations behind this obscure and implicit expression; The seemingly understated pictures and plots may well reflect the whole life experience of the characters or the grand background of a historical era. Different individuals may even have their own different interpretations. After truly grasping the connotation and value of the story, the audiences can eventually realize the way of "understanding by heart without words expression" and its imagistic beauty, which is thought-provoking and aftertaste-evoking.

3. The Elements of Cosmopolitanism in *Forever Young*

The cosmopolitan elements in the film are mainly reflected in three aspects: First, the film adopts narrative methods of parallel montage and contrast, which presents four stories happening in different time and space with a unique multi-story line, and makes the use of contrast to enhance the tension and artistic effect of the plot; Second, the film pays attention to shaping the images and characters of the ordinary people, with the diversity and richness of the characters and the details of their characteristics deepening the film's insight of human nature; Third, the theme focuses on the qualities of "goodness and sincerity". No matter when and where, human beings cherish kindness and pursue self-consistency, which is the common part of human nature and the emotional expression point where audiences all over the world can find resonance.

3.1 Narrative: the use of parallel montage and contrast techniques

The concept of parallel montage in movies is to show more than two plot lines in parallel and narrate them separately, or to show more than two events interpenetrated with each other. These plot lines and events can be carried out in the same place and the same time, in different places while at the same time or in both different time and space (Dong Ziyang, 2015). This shooting technique can be traced back to the film *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout The Ages* by American director D. W. Griffith in 1916, and *Forever Young* also uses this multi-line narrative mode, which connects four stories about young people in different time and space, and shows the national history of different times along the way. Film montage usually connects the scenery people have seen with the scenery they haven't seen, resets the sequence of time and space, and combines the past, present and future to a contrastive presentation, so that the audiences' enthusiasm can be fully aroused (Cao Wei, 2015). Slightly different from the use of parallel montage in *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages*, there are still direct characters' connections among the four stories in *Forever Young*, which adds inherent coherence to the narrative, thus emphasizing a coherent hundred-year history in the process of China's development and construction, highlighting the inheritance of Tsinghua spirit.

The film also uses technique of contrast a lot, reflecting the opposition and shift of emotions and attitudes. In 1909, Griffith used two sets of contrast shots to show the poor and the rich for the first time in the film *A Corner in Wheat*. The powerful contrast technique was officially introduced into the film art and played an extremely important role. It can even be said that contrast shows the fundamental meaning of life, and comparative narrative is the most important form of expression in film art (Zhang Fangxin, 2014). In Wang Minjia's story, the camera switches focus between the scenes of struggle session and commendation meeting constantly. Compared with the character charm embodied in the image-shaping, it is even striking in logic to emphasize the direct conflict between characters by way of shooting (Yang, 2020). This kind of contrast reveals selfishness and cowardice, stupidity and impulsiveness in human nature, and Li Xiang's last glance strongly satirizes the hypocrisy inside him. But finally, Li's fate ends up with self-sacrifice. His last words, "May the deceased rest in peace while the living must move on with their lives.", are his answer to everything in the past. The comparison of his choices before and after shows a kind of self-salvation, making up for the criticisms and beatings Wang has suffered alone. This change in attitude and concept of life also highlights the film's theme of young people's determined pursuit of truth and self, enriching completing the plot structure of the story.

3.2 Characterization: Concentration on Small Potatoes Under the Big Historical Background

The film creates many images of young people, all of whom have their own distinct features and characteristics. Different from the focus and grasp of the big background and the eulogy of great men in Chinese mainstream movies of the past, *Forever Young* turns to the ordinary people in the historical trend. In the movies that mainly depict common people, the living environment of characters is often used as a symbol to express special meanings, and the function of space has transcended the basic narrative level (Luo Wenyi, 2018). Wu Linglan is emotional and determined; Shen Guangyao is just and fearless; Chen Peng is sincere and simple; Zhang Guoguo is kind and selfless. Sufficient details draw the audiences' attention to the heroes' experiences and emotional changes, which enhances the audiences' sense of substitution and experience, and satisfies the needs and preference for a deep emotional resonance when watching a movie both in western society and contemporary China.

Meantime, Wu Linglan's pride, Wang Minjia's recklessness, Li Xiang's selfishness as well as other slightly negative characteristics of those characters reveal the dark side of human nature, which makes the portrayal of characters even stronger, fuller and closer to real life. At the end of the story, most of these negative characteristics of human nature are reversed or compensated for in a way, and thus the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty of human nature is sublimated through the contradiction and transformation, which accords with the role and significance that the film art carries in digging for the depth of human nature and disseminating positive values. This none-protagonist structure does not require an absolute protagonist, but rather depends on multi-characters to complete the narrative (Du Xuan, 2018). To a certain extent, it enriches and reinforces the film's grasp and presentation of human nature, echoes with the theme of the film, and sublimates the value behind the film at the same time.

3.3 Theme: Kindness and Self-Consistency

A film of cosmopolitanism, should focus on the metaphysical part of its content, presenting the basic state of human existence: kindness, affection, love, separation, etc., which all belong to the common ground of nationality and cosmopolitanism—the common value we emphasize in the plays, which, originating from the common nature of human beings, transcends the limitations of time and space and reflects the essential power of human freedom and the material and spiritual world of life (You, 2015). The choices made by young people with different personalities in the four stories all display a common theme, that is, kindness and self-consistency. In their respective times full of different difficulties, they all share a common feature, namely, their pursuit of a true self. The "self" here is nothing not about arrogance or pride, but the struggle between outer reality and inner personality. Wu Linglan understands the significance of learning, faces up to the nature of self, and finally finds the balance between self-worth and reality. Shen Guangyao bravely makes choices among individuals, families and countries. He knows that it is more important to defend his country under that special situation, which makes his blood boil far more than his mother's expectation of a happy but ordinary life. Chen Peng's kindness and tenderness take him to think of Wang Minjia in priority whenever he makes choices. This kind of affection, which indeed transcends love, makes Chen's image full of glory of humanity. Wang's sincerity and kindness are reflected in her simplicity and even kind of vanity. Although Li Xiang is weak and hypocritical in the early stage, his final sacrifice and personality transformation also make his image more credible and complete. As a young man living in the modern world, Zhang Guoguo's compassion for strangers and his sense of responsibility for commitment are something of a rarity. It's not that people don't have inner kindness, but they dare not offer kindness casually in an increasingly complex and unpredictable society. Zhang's help to strangers and forgiveness of his former

boss are unwise and disadvantageous to some outsiders, but in fact, this kind of tolerance and giving can bring people inner peace and stability, in contrast to the deeper and deeper pain and suffering caused by infighting.

The stories in the film are not mere "chicken soup" to instill the good qualities of human beings, but show many aspects of human nature in a realistic way, including positive bravery, sincerity, filial piety and justice, as well as selfishness, coldness, vanity and infighting in the workplace, so that we can see real people, those with shortcomings just like in our daily lives. However, these dark sides of human nature finally transform to and reflect the most essential goodness of human nature. The striking contrast provokes thoughts about human nature and brings hopes and expectations for the continuance of beauty of humanity.

4. Cross-Cultural Communication and Acceptance of *Forever Young* in The Context of Globalization

The common recognition of domestic and foreign audiences for the film *Forever Young* mainly lies in that the film tells the ideals and pursuits of the characters and the confusion and choices they face at that time. Audiences from different cultural backgrounds can make a reflect on their own lives and resonate with the film's core theme of humanity; Furthermore, the background music and close-up shots used in the film make the theme more prominent and arouse the audiences' emotions. Some foreign professional film critic expresses his appreciation of the description of personal character and destiny in the film, which breaks the routine that most Chinese historical films follow to pay only attention to the national destiny from the perspective of patriotism, and shows the dual role of individuals and collectives in China's development; The film's depiction of characters' shortcomings also makes the film credible and penetrate easily into people's hearts. The negative evaluation mainly focuses on the narrative structure and the presentation of characters' lines and environment in the film. Foreign audiences particularly consider that this editing structure directly affects their understanding of the content, and the excessively lyrical lines, exaggerated plots and some costumes of the characters all seem to be false and affected. Domestic audiences can understand and analyze the content and characters based on the historical background of China, and weaken the influence of the film's flaws; while foreign audiences, on the other hand, comprehend from their own cultural background as well as with the fragmented understanding of Chinese history, which indeed amplifies its defects and thus deepens the misunderstanding of its content and even the historical stage described by the film.

4.1 Elements of Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism Complement Each Other

On the one hand, the film takes the perspective of ordinary people, and creates vivid and round characters of young people, breaking through the typical "great man" perspective and absolutely positive characters in Chinese history movies. The sense of reality brought by the film enables foreign audiences to empathize with the characters in the play, regardless of nationality and time limit, and find a sense of substitution from emotional ups and downs of the characters, thus striking a chord. In addition, the themes selected—kindness, sincerity and self, as well as the plots, are also associate closely to the situations where countless personal choices are faced by contemporary young people in their study, careers and family life. These cosmopolitan factors in the film reflect the common point that transcends national boundaries, and even foreign audiences can find their own similarities from them, thus realizing and understanding the ideas conveyed by the film. Based on those common grounds, the implicitness of oriental imagistic expression and Chinese interpretation of affection and love are incorporated within. The commonality of characters and emotions makes it easier for the audiences to accept the beauty and value coming from the East, thus achieving the effective dissemination of national elements.

On the other hand, the film uses the method of parallel montage to connect stories in series, aiming to develop four successive stories in parallel on the basis of emotion. However, due to the frequent switch and shift of stories and scenes, and foreign audiences' unfamiliarity with the specific events in China's history, the film is likely to be criticized for its chaotic editing and confusing plots. Especially for the story of Wang Minjia, without a correct and comprehensive understanding of the history of the Cultural Revolution, many foreign audiences hold preconceived thoughts about the society at that time, thus regarding the lines and expressions of Wang Minjia and Li Xiang as exaggeration. They subjectively think that the film shows strong political tendencies, and this cognition is often over-amplified, leading to an ignorance and misunderstanding of the real theme. The discomfort caused by the lens language eventually affects the audiences' overall grasp of the true history.

4.2 Cross-cultural Acceptance of *Forever Young*

Forever Young is classified as drama in IMDB, and the western usually expect good historical movies to restore the truth, so the lyrical lines, plots and colorful shots in the movie will unsurprisingly bring discomfort to them; On the domestic Douban website, *Forever Young*, however, is classified into drama, romance, and war. To some extent, the Chinese audiences are hinted at the romantic and lyrical elements in the film, which makes the dramatic plot in the film more acceptable. Therefore,

in terms of publicity, especially in the overseas market, movies should make clear their own categories and genres positioning, so as to avoid the obstacles in content dissemination and understanding caused by the mismatch of movie positioning and audience's expectation.

Furthermore, the parallel montage used in *Forever Young* is a relatively new technique in field of Chinese movies. Compared with the general narrative technique, it is more correspondent with the historical background of the movie in terms of form. However, due to the relatively small time-span of the four stories, the frequent switching of shots and pictures, and the lack of in-depth understanding of this history, the foreign audiences feel it hard to keep up with the plot development, and unable to understand the development process of stories and the connections between them. They fail to grasp the emotions and main ideas meant to be understood in the film, thus considering the whole story line chaotic. What needs to be made clear, is that *Forever Young* is not simply a historical film, but a youth literary film with values output in its core. The characters need a gradual change, and the plot needs to be paved. If the film expects to tell four stories well within two hours, it's unavoidable to abandon those incremental process and get straight to the theme. But the premise of doing so is that the audiences have mastered the relevant background of the times and environment, which is obviously difficult for foreign audiences in reality. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, it's an absolute cart-before-the-horse that *Forever Young* abandons the more delicate and specific narrative techniques for the sake of formal innovation and overlooks the audiences' cognitive level of the historical background.

5. To Avoid Sensitive Topics and Obscure Values in Cross-Cultural Communication

In the movie, the most controversial part lies in Wang Minjia's story. First of all, the film involves the historical period of the Cultural Revolution, and people's manner in the film have a strong feature of that time. However, due to the lack of historical background by western audiences, it is easy to assume that the film itself is a kind of political propaganda with strong political tendencies. Every nation has its own cultural tradition and way of thinking; when people interpret the cultures of other nations according to their own habits, there will be some misinterpretation and misreading (He Jing, 2020). This subconscious cognitive tendency has caused the cross-cultural communication failure of this story to a certain extent. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, films should actively promote positive values and avoid sensitive topics, which will also lay the foundation for cultural communication of China in the future, both eliminating ingrained stereotypes and prevent preconceptions.

Secondly, foreign audiences are easily disgusted with characters' words and deeds, because they are not familiar with the history of the Cultural Revolution. For example, the quarrels between Xu Bochang and Liu Shufen, and especially her attitude towards marriage are difficult for foreign audiences to figure out. Liu represents the early Chinese rural attitude towards marriage, while Xu, as one among an earliest generation of Chinese intellectuals, has awakened to have personal consciousness—to oppose the arranged marriage and pursue the freedom and true love within a relationship, which also implies the transformation process of early Chinese generations from rural to urban areas. For Chinese audiences, the contents with obvious historical nationality bring back and reminds them of the past as well as deepen their thinking on modern values. However, under the premise that foreign audiences lack the corresponding historical and cultural background, these persistent quarrels about loveless marriage for the sake of maintaining its formal bond, appear to be artificial and redundant, and are suspected of being excessively sensational. From this perspective, it is difficult for *Forever Young* to spread and get across the views of marriage and love overseas. In addition, the tone of conversation between Wang Minjia and Li Xiang when they are writing the report letter, as well as the plot where Wang is criticized for reporting and lying to have taken photos with the chairman, are prone to be misunderstood among foreign audiences. It's hard for them to distinguish between true history and artistic plot, only to grasp from their own experiences and attribute these to exaggerated and artificial plot performance.

With the deepening of globalization, every piece of film is the carrier of Chinese culture even if it does not aim to be. China should always express its cultural content and form correctly from the perspective of national cultural communication, so as to fully attach importance to the effective communication of Chinese culture while adapting to and respecting other countries' cultural customs; improve China's core communication ability in cross-cultural communication step by step and in a planned way; correct the wrong label of Chinese culture in the world; and dig out the high-quality content that Chinese culture can spread worldwide. So that Chinese culture can really go abroad and spread out, and gain more recognition and respect (Zhou Mi, 2020). What filmmakers need to do is make clear the acceptance degree of movie audiences. In that Chinese cultural background has not penetrated into the western world as the western culture has done in China, they should carefully avoid obscure behaviors and words in movies, and win more recognition by displaying contents that are in line with

modern Chinese values and easy to be understood and accepted by the outside world. Only by retaining the nationality and disseminating it gradually from shallow to deep, can the cross-cultural communication effect be better achieved.

6. Conclusion

In the process of film communication, especially cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to make clear the audiences' acceptance degree, take the cosmopolitan elements in the film as a stepping stone, serving as the basis for foreign audiences to accept and understand the film content and emotion, and then arouse the audiences' resonance, contributing to the dissemination and understanding of the national elements, including national history, emotion and value. It is worth noting that the selection and presentation of national elements should be appropriate and incremental, otherwise it will produce the opposite effect. Although there is still weakness of contemporary Chinese films in the process of cross-cultural communication, the elements of nationalism and cosmopolitanism embodied in the film *Forever Young* help the audience in different cultures to understand.

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