Cultural values presented in Chinese movies

Leilei Jia

Received: 1 January 2014/Revised: 1 February 2014/Accepted: 1 February 2014/

Published online: 22 November 2014

© Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture and Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg 2014

Abstract Either the purchase of a certain kind of goods, or the selection of different ways of life, or even upholding one's faith is based on one's cultural values. Therefore, the cultural values are actually the spiritual orientation system that determines the existence mode of mankind and the development direction of society. As a mainstream social ideology gradually developing in the long-term practical activities, the cultural values are not just the written signs in classic literatures, but embodied in changing expressions of artistic works, penetrating through massive and complicated commercial transactions, extending into the basic necessities of common people's daily lives, and of course presented in the dazzling and colorful popular culture of movies.

Keywords Chinese movies · Cultural values · Cultural competitiveness · Cultural expression

At present, Chinese local movies have been facing increasing pressure of competition, as more movies imported from Hollywood have continuously enlarged their market share in China, and the overseas movies have exerted the growing influence on local movies in the mainland of China. In the severe market competition, top priority must be given to enhancing the competitiveness of movies in the master plan for the development of Chinese movies. Without recognition of the market and attractions to the audience, a movie is almost valueless. Therefore, to enhance the market competitiveness of Chinese movies should be the most important part in the strategies of the industrialization of Chinese movies. However, market competitiveness does not just refer to the commercial competitiveness of a movie,

L. Jia (✉)
Chinese National Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, China
e-mail: jialeilei1008@126.com

but also includes its cultural competitiveness. In other words, the cultural factors must be injected in the commercial concept when a movie's commercial competitiveness is improved. Therefore, we can by no means set the movie's functions and its competitiveness against each other whether when we discuss the artistic mission of the movie or the social responsibility and cultural function of Chinese movie. In other words, we cannot talk about a movie's artistic mission, social responsibility and cultural function by putting aside its economic responsibility. Likewise, when we cheer for the victory of a movie at the market, we should not only summarize the movie's business mode of operation and the successful marketing strategy, but also concern about its cultural expressions. Especially for those with magnificent themes, huge capital investment and a strong market response, the cultural analysis is as important as the summarization of its business experience. If a positive cultural value is effectively disseminated in these movies, then it will not only make a magnificent contribution to the historical development of Chinese movies, but also contribute to the long-term development of the Chinese culture.

Yearning for Benevolence and Love

The cultural values are the basic orientation embodied in a nation, a country and a culture in respect of lifestyle, social ideals and spiritual beliefs, and determine the basic judgments of people upon right or wrong, good or evil and beautiful or ugly in the political, social and ethical and artistic fields. What should be valued and what should not? What kind of life is meaningful and what is not? What kind of ideas can be accepted and what not? All these are closely related to people's value orientation. The cultural values expressed in Chinese movies are not always consistent in spiritual aspect due to the difference in the subject matter, type and theme chosen; however, in terms of the overall value orientation, the representation of traditional Chinese culture and the recognition of traditional cultural value in Chinese movies is an important part of our analysis of the cultural experience of Chinese movies.

As a kind of universally recognized cultural values, the thought of "Love and Charity" exists in different spiritual fields such as politics, philosophy, ethics and art and it is the organic integral part of the Chinese core value system. For thousands of years, the benevolent have been admired and the science of benevolence been observed, because, first of all, the science of benevolence teaches people how to love others. Research shows that, the Chinese character "仁 (benevolence)", the composite of the other Chinese character "人 (human)", is the paronym of "任 (responsibility)" and "妊 (pregnancy)", the other two Chinese characters. "仁" meant pregnancy in ancient times with the extended meanings as "giving birth to people", "cultivating people", "helping people" and "loving people". Ruan Yuan, an ancient Chinese, says: "'仁 (benevolence)' means '人 (human)'", that is to say, the essence of benevolence is to treat everybody in a way conforming to the universal will of mankind. In 2012, a movie called *Painted Skin II* bettered the box-office record in China. Integrating love, magic and action, the movie broke five records in the history of Chinese movies. As a typical commercial movie, what is the cultural value system behind it? In other words, what traditional cultural elements are injected into this

movie? Xiaowei, a fox demon who had practiced for a thousand years, saved a mortal man's life by sacrificing herself, which violated the laws of the demon world, and she therefore has been imprisoned in an icy abyss for 500 years. It shows Xiaowei has stood on the same moral benchmark as human beings. After the bird demon rescued her from the abyss, she has been dreaming of becoming a human and living a human life. Once she asked the bird demon: "Do you have a human temperature and heartbeat? Can you smell flowers? Can you tell the color of the sky? Have you shed tears? Is there anybody in the world loving you and prepared to die for you?" These senses only owned by human beings are what Xiaowei wants most—just as the Green Snake in the movie of Tsui Hark, for whom the tears in the human world are bitter, but it is after all a colorful and fragrant world. Finally, Xiaowei exchanges with her beautiful skin for the heart of Princess Jing and married to the State of Sirius on behalf of the princess, just to experience the short but happy human life. Yearning for the human world is both the theme of the movie and also its core value orientation.

In fact, Xiaowei, touched by the human feelings of life and death, forsook evil and abandoned the bloody fight for the human heart, leaving the hope of living to her beloved person. Watching her beloved person gradually recovering from death, she slowly assumes the image of a fox. She returned to the side of the rock cave later, quietly watching the human world... Is it what a demon should do? The demons or ghosts we saw were either punished by gods or executed by human beings, but never died a martyr for a just cause. In this conversion from demon to human, the most touching part is not the incredible digital technology, nor the magical space modeling, but the humanitarian recognition of diabolism, the conversion from evil to benevolence. When talking about the impressive box office of a movie, we ought to pay attention to its expression of cultural values. Is the popularity of Korean movies and TV plays in Asia owing to the dazzling digital technology or the colossal production funds as the Hollywood movies? It is the cultural concept of benevolence and loyalty that make Korean movies popular among Asian audience. It shows that the culture is still the intrinsic power driving the wheel of the movie business.

It is impossible that the ancient Chinese thought of benevolence cuts across the time tunnel of thousands of years to directly penetrate into the hearts of contemporary audience. It can be recognized, understood and accepted only through the appropriate carriers. The movie *Five Bullets...* is originally named as *Gun of Mercy*. The gun is a tool of violence, a killing weapon. "Mercy" with "Gun" is obviously not to strengthen the gun's killing function or highlight its material power, but to emphasize its cultural metaphor and moral strength. Named Mercy, it becomes a gun with just, and its holder shows a power of benevolence. In the movie, a policeman near the retiring age escorts four prisoners with a gun of five bullets, all of which have been shot in order to protect, save or help the people—none of them are really shot to kill. By the way, Chinese movies present violence not in the way as Hollywood movies, in which the blood splashes and flies about, showing a complete worship for mechanical violence. In this sense, the movie *Five Bullets...* fully reflects the humanitarian expression of China's mainstream movies.

Diego Gambetta, a sociologist, has ever told a story recalled by a head of Sicilian Mafia that, when he was young, his father (a member of Mafia) asked him to climb onto a wall and then jump down with the promise to catch him. At the beginning, he

was reluctant; but with his father's insistence, he jumped, but his father did not catch him and he tumbled completely. By this his father intended to make him know: "You must learn not to trust others including your parents". This story has reoccurred in the Chinese movie "*The Orphan of Zhao*". In this movie, when the orphan of Zhao jumps down from the roof, Tu Anjia withdraw his open arms and let the orphan fall onto the ground heavily. He intend to tell the orphan that nobody, with no exception of his foster father, was worthy of being trusted, and the only thing he can trust was the sword in his hand. Tu wanted to teach a philosophy, the brutal "rule of jungle", to the child, so that he could uphold strength and power. When the orphan go to the roof again and jump down with his sword, Cheng Ying catches him, which tells the child that in the world there is still something more important than sword, i.e. love and benevolence. Maybe from that moment, the orphan firms his life belief: he did not choose power but humanity. The most fundamental difference between the movie *The Orphan of Zhao* and the traditional operas is that it has abandoned the ethic of revenge based on the "blood relatives" and changed that "you killed my family, and I will kill yours", a black logic of returning evil for evil.

In ancient war times, how could the soft humanity resist the shining spears and armored horses battlefields? The so-called "lifelong love and benevolence" and "love and benevolence for salvation" are only people's anticipation for peace. Even Confucius sighed with regret, "Difficult is it to attain to what is called the perfect humanity of the superior man!" Mencius also regretfully sighed, "Those, however, who now-a-days practise benevolence do it as if with one cup of water they could save a whole wagon-load of fuel which was on fire" Therefore, benevolence and love is especially cherished and yearned for by people, and is bound to become the ideal way for mankind's cultural salvation and moral reconstruction of the real world.

Following the will of heaven

Despite no dominating God, there is the will of Heaven transcending everything on earth in the value system of the Chinese culture, which was regarded superior to other laws and regulations in ancient China and determine the rise and fall, life and death of all things in the world. As Mozi said, "He who obeys the will of Heaven, loving universally and benefiting others, will obtain rewards. He who opposes the will of Heaven, being partial and unfriendly and harming others, will incur punishment." (*Mozi, Will of Heaven I*). It means that people who obey the will of Heaven shall respect and love others and share benefits, and thus will be rewarded; those who oppose the will of Heaven are to separate themselves from others, disgust others, and thus harm each other and incur punishment by Heaven. Obviously, the will of Heaven in Mohist spirit world is harmoniously interlinked with human relations. It is particularly important that Mozi argues that the sign of the righteous standard to obey the will of Heaven is that "The strong does not plunder the weak. The honored does not demean the humble. The clever does not deceive the stupid", reflecting the compliance with the will of Heaven in secular life and social and

political fields as well in traditional Chinese culture. It shows that the will of Heaven is not an insular absolute spirit, but a cultural concept with the same orientation as the ethic and a concept integrated with the ethic. Lao She, a famous Chinese modern novelist, says in one of his literary works, “Everything is dominated by the will of Heaven. Those who obey the will of Heaven will prosper, otherwise, perish” (*Magic Boxer*, Act III), emphasizing that everything in the world follows the ethical rule that one turn, good or evil, deserves another.

In many movies on the same of the traditional Chinese culture, the will of Heaven is often taken as the narrator to change of the outcome. The non-secular expression of secular conflicts in Chinese movies meets the expectation for justice, brightness and goodness of the general audience in the subordinate social status. In particular, Chinese movies often connect the fate of the characters with the “will of Heaven”. In the movie *Wu Xia* (Martial arts, 2011), it was thundering and lightning when the villain fights a duel with Liu Jinxi (the protagonist), finally the villain was hit by a lightning. This seemingly accidental ending shows the will of Heaven that villains are doomed to destruction. In “*Wind and Cloud in Late Qing—One Armed Hero*” (1993), the traitor Yuan Shikai (acted by Zhao Changjun) was not killed by the righteous men, but died from the bell suddenly falling from the beam, indicating the punishment by the Heaven for his treason. In *New Dragon Inn* (1992), the thug (acted by Liu Xun) of Dongchang (an eunuch-led espionage agency in the Ming Dynasty) was not killed by a sword, but was squeezed to death between two millstones. He finally suffered the consequences of his own deeds. In “*Wind and Cloud in Late Qing—White Lotus Cult*” (1993), the villain named Zhan Chengtian (acted by Ji Chunhua) was spiked through the pit of his stomach by a split bamboo when he jumped down from a high platform; in *Yellow River Fighter*, the sinful Princess Wang died in the vast raging Yellow River, implying that the mighty current of history buried the usurper ruthlessly. Such plots tell that “good and evil will be rewarded”, and no matter how powerful you are, no one can escape the destiny. It is also true of the sorcerer (acted by Fei Xiang) of the State of Sirius in *Painted Skin 2*, who was good at witchcraft, sorcery, Taoist and other magic. Neither General Huo nor the demon hunter can defeat him, but he was pecked into a skull by thousands of birds descending from the sky. It is obvious that no matter how strong the vicious power is, it is the Heaven that has the final say. It is of more moral suasion that Xiaowei becomes a human as she wished after exchanging her beautiful skin for the heart of Princess Jing, but a conspiracy is uncovered: her heart will be taken out to save her fiancé whose heart was once taken away by Xiaowei and Quer. It seems that thinks robbed from other are doomed to be returned back. The cycling narrative logic of the movie implies that either good or evil will be rewarded, life and death will recur, and neither human beings nor demons can escape the will of Heaven. As mentioned above, the violence aesthetics in Chinese movies has always been the moral aesthetics. Whether the horror movies or the ghost movies, the modern movies have increasingly become “intertextual” in function. Sometimes a serious movie is not as dissuasive as a ghost or horror movie.

Returning to the idyllic spirit

In China, the religion is a “reclusive” culture while the Western religion is the “secular” one. Most Chinese Buddhist sanctuaries (monasteries) are situated in great mountains and rivers away from the secular life. These inaccessible mountains are exactly the ideal places for Buddhists to escape the suffering of reality. At the same time, they are the holy land for them to look for the truth of life beyond the reality. On the contrary, churches of Christianity and Catholicism are basically built in prosperous cities. They intend to “manage” the secular affairs. Looking through the window of the hotel, you often see towering spire of the churches and crosses decorated with neon lights in the United States, Russia, and even South Korea. The Western religion has an obvious secular tendency. Analyzing the intrinsic relationship between a nation’s cultural spirit and the socio-economic development, Max Weber pointed out: The Protestant doctrines are to secularize the religious ideals and its core is to popularize the ascetic awareness, that is, the religious precepts are introduced to the secular lives so that the lives of the public become a way of religious practice, whereby promoting the socio-economic development. Chinese Buddhism pays more attention to afterlife and the realization of its highest ideals has the ascetic color. The individual practice is to be completed by leaving the secular world.

Theoretically, it is impossible for two different religious forms to assume the same meaning presentation system in the movie. Our analysis on the religious ethics of martial arts movies is actually based on such an assumption and conjecture—it appears in the narrative mechanism of Chinese martial arts movies that religion not only guides the spirit orientation of the movies, but actually can appeal the audience. As a narrative object designed to meet the mental desire of the public, the movie can be universally recognized only by establishing the narrative texts conforming to the public ethics. Therefore, Chinese movies blend the religious ethics with the plots rather than directly convert them into violence as Hollywood movies do. The religious ethics, while providing the reasonable moral basis for justice, highlights its “reclusiveness”.

Though the justice is promoted and the wicked are weeded out through bloody violence in Chinese movies, the movies usually present a pastoral world without killing and blood and tears after the fights are over, as a kind of correction of violence. In the movie *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), Fang Gang, the one-armed hero, defeats Jin Daosuo with one arm and a broken sword and settles peril for Qi family. He actually becomes the overlord, or at least becomes the only one candidate for head of Qi Family. However, with no intention to rule, Fang Gang bids farewell to his master Qi Rufeng, saying that he will travel to the remote corner of the world after paying the debt of gratitude for his master, and lead a pastoral life together with his rescuer. At his words, Qi Rufeng decisively breaks the golden sword in his hand and throws it on the ground! At this point, Zhang Che, a Hong Kong action movie director known for the aesthetics of violence, has completed his ultimate denial of violence on the screen. In *Dragon Inn* (1967) directed by Hu Jinshuan, after a fierce fight, the villain called Cao Shaoqin, head of Dongchang is killed, but Xiao Shaoci who wins the fight does not lead the family of Yu to revenge or assault the local authorities to regain their lost power. Instead, they choose to withdraw from the

world of endless strives and live in seclusion in the vast mountains. Therefore, as a narrative factor into the movie, religion changes the thematic significance of the movies and characters' personalities as well.

Many Chinese martial arts movies end up with that heroes yearn for an earthly paradise with no pains and sorrows rather than the worldly fame and fortunes. In *Shaolin Temple*, Jueyuan sacrifices his love with the shepherdess and converts himself to Buddhism so as to fulfill the behest of his deceased master "protecting Shaolin and upholding justice". It is totally different from Robin Hood who regains the throne and the beauty in the western movies. After finishing their missions, the Shaolin disciples often leave the secular world, and even stop the revengeful murders by sacrificing their own lives. In the movie *Shaolin Damo* (1990), the swordsman who has killed numerous people, when facing the recurrent murders, commits suicide to complete his repentance in the end! In the movie *Eight-Trigram Cudgel of Yang Wulang* (1990), Yang Wulang, together with the monks, repels the Liao armies and kills the traitor Xiao Tianzuo. Having revenged for the hatred of the family and the state, Yang Liulang advises Yang Wulang to reorganize the troop of Yang and fight for the lost territory. But Wulang, determined to convert himself to Buddhism, left his lover Ruolan, and reenters the temple for the universal salvation. In the movie *Suoming Xiaoyaolou* (Fatal Fun Pavilion, 1990), the heroin Shan E enters the pavilion and destroys the Eight-Trigram Battle Array. After a desperate fight, she kicks her enemy Bai Chong, who killed her father, into the bottomless pit of swords in revenge. Similarly, she finishes all the earthly affinities and lives reclusively. The real noble men take repressing the evil and advocating the good as their lifelong mission, and ignore the fame and wealth even they have already got them. At the end of the movie *Celestial Sword—Nine Swordsmanship of Dugu* (1993), Prince Xiahou (acted by Liu Ximing) and the princess of Late Tang (acted by Michelle Lee), after the victory, respectively throw away the sword symbolizing power and violence and the jade flute symbolizing wealth. Though an illusory ideal, it expresses people's long-cherished wish for eternal peace in the world. After fierce fights, warriors always are full of complex feelings for picturesque pastoral and their confidants once closely attached to each other (*New Biography of Assassin*, 1993)! The "closing ceremony" of *New Dragon Inn* (1992) is also full of spurn to the endless violence! A bloody massacre finally comes to an end. On the silence deserve. Jin Xiangyu (Acted by Maggie Cheung) burns with spirits the inn she has made painstaking efforts to run, a place full of bloody smell. She goes far away from the desert and the career of killing. What she longs for is a shelter with no deception and killing. Religions function differently in Chinese and Western movies, the latter of which intensify the violent conflict in the secular world.

In China's despotic feudal society, it is a life-long pursuit for many men of letters to live reclusively or be converted to Buddhism. Meditating at old temples in mountains and practicing religion beside the green lamps in the monasteries, they lived far away from the social strives and violent conflicts, leaving a piece of pure land for the tranquility of the heart. Chinese movies, "dip" in the traditional Chinese culture, highlight people's dream for pastoral scenery and peaceful life without killing, war and bloodshed. Such cultural orientation is not only reflected in the works of a director, or the movies of an area, but can be seen in movies of different

regions in different periods. Although we have already been far from that isolated and ignorant feudal society, the aesthetic imagination in the movies can be realized in the real world and the pastoral beauty on the screen cannot turn real, the transcending aesthetics has provided our soul with a place for rest.

In summary, in the language form of movie arts, the cultural value orientation is a “potential meaning” under the plot. It is more often than not expressed in the way of the “implicit signified” mentioned by Metz rather than the abstract sermons. Whether a movie is correct or not in terms of cultural values actually is quite important to determine the success or failure of its marketing. How to guide the audience to culturally recognize the movie stars, how to set cultural interests for the movie, and how to determine the cultural theme of the movie? In fact, they are all important factors influencing the profitability of a movie. The movie, in the final analysis, is a pop cultural product in the commercial market. If divorced from the aesthetics of the times, going against the consumption orientation in the cultural and market positioning, or deviating from the general trend in the cultural psychology, a movie is bound to have a bleak prospect in the market. Therefore, how to enhance the market competitiveness of Chinese movies is not just an economic issue, but also a cultural one.

Leilei Jia Vice President of Chinese National Academy of Arts; Research fellow; Ph.D. Tutor; Ph.D.; Director of Department of Film and TV Art, Graduate School of Chinese National Academy of Arts; Adjunct Professor of Peking University, Nanjing University, Nanjing Arts Institute and Zhengzhou University; Publishing the academic works such as “Introduction to the linguistics of Film”, “The Propagation of Image”, “History of Chinese Martial Arts Films”, “History of Contemporary Chinese Cinema” and “What Are Good Movies” and so on.