

The Western Expression and Chinese Story from the Perspective of Intercultural and International Communication——Taking the Movie The Last Emperor for Example

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Abstract: Cultural differences, such as self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, values, beliefs, thinking processes, and habits, caused by differences in regions and races, can affect communication between people from different cultures and international backgrounds. So, communication barriers often appear in advertisements, songs, or movies. Some key concepts of intercultural and international communication can help develop two-way cultural communication and promote cultural progress and diversity. This paper will take the scene of the film —The Last Emperor, directed by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci in 1987 as an example and analyze how the Chinese story carried out the double transformation at the level of market and values by using the two concepts of orientalism and cultural imperialism, so that the "other culture" suffered identity rewriting. At the same time, this paper will focus on how these concepts are defined, framed and formed, and finally discuss some of the effects or consequences.

Keywords: Chinese Story; Orientalism; Cultural Imperialism

1. Description of The Last Emperor and audience reaction

The Last Emperor used a Western perspective to tell the story of Puyi, the last emperor of China, who lived from being the emperor to an ordinary citizen. This is a description of Chinese history, but the difference is that the narrator is an Italian director rather than a Chinese one. In other words, Bertolucci crosses cultural and ideological boundaries by photographing important figures in Chinese history from a western perspective. It can be seen from Bertolucci's interview that he likes to express his views on emotions, family, society and other aspects directly through the movie, and is good at digging into human nature to show the inner world of characters^[1], so the characters in his camera are always extreme and subjective.

Moreover, the fact that English is the language of the entire film production indicates that the main audience of the film is western audiences. After its release, the film became a box-office success in the west and won numerous awards at major European film festivals^[2]. Some reviews have shown that westerners, the main audience, have responded more positively to the film than the Chinese. Although some western audiences questioned the authenticity of the film, most often expressed 'I love it' or 'I have learned a lot about history'^[3]. In contrast, the Chinese response was largely negative. They think that the film exaggerates or distorts the truth and has a certain western idea of saving the east^{[4][5]}.

2. Orientalism

Some of the film's mysterious, even bizarre Chinese scenes and symbols of Buddha and smoke embody the concept of orientalism. Orientalism was first put forward by Said. It is a way of thinking that distinguishes 'east' from 'west' based on ontology and epistemology, and is defined as a biased way of thinking or cognitive system that westerners despise eastern culture and willfully invent 'eastern culture'^[6]. In short, orientalism is not the real discourse about the east, but the westerners' intentionally or unintentionally with the attitude of imperialism to understand the eastern world. And the description and

understanding of the east are characterized by the essence and stereotypes. More importantly, Said identified orientalism based on Michel Foucault's discourse and power, and regarded orientalism as a way for the west to control, rebuild and reign in the east. That is, orientalism's soft power is a set of rules, ways of thinking, and ruling systems for the east based on the Eurocentric theory.

This way of thinking existed long before Said discovered it. However, before the Second World War, the western imagination of the east was not demonized. There were also some beautiful visions, such as Marco Polo, the earliest Venetian, showing the east to the west^[7]. With the development of industry, the west entered industrialization, while the east lagged behind the west in the economy, military and other aspects. Making the west's imagination of the east develop in the direction of 'orientalism'^[8]. From the perspective of orientalism, the impression of China has been formed since the mid-18th century. China experienced war, colonization and intellectual reform during this period^[9], and the west constructed the image of China as 'they' from the negative side — stagnant, autocratic and brutal — to highlight itself as a progressive, free and civilized country, which established the perception of the western mainstream media and confirmed China's place in the western world's ideological order^[10]. This is also the 'rational' justification for the expansion of western colonialism and imperialism in China. The film is about China during that period of decline.

In the eyes of the west, China in that period was 'mysterious, feudal, backward and ignorant'^[11]. So, this movie is filled with a lot of mysterious, even weird Chinese scenes. For example, Cixi lived in a space shrouded in shadow and smoke and surrounded by Buddha statues. 'Smoke' gives the audience a mysterious feeling that is hard to see, while 'Buddha' is considered as a symbol of feudal superstition^[12]. The dark red hue was eerie and decadent. This gloomy atmosphere not only implies that Puyi inherited the decadent imperial power, but also shapes the backward, ignorant and feudal image of China, catering to the western audience's viewing psychology and satisfying the fixed thinking mode of the west to the east. Obviously, Bertolucci does not have a comprehensive understanding of the history and culture of the east, and consciously or unconsciously weaves the east into the code system of the west. Therefore, the symbols in the film inevitably imply western civilization with a sense of self-superiority and the right to control the discourse. As Foucault put it, the seemingly neutral eastern discourse was distorted by power^[13].

The film attracted the interest of some western scholars after its release. Some believe that the differences between the west and the east were seen in *The Last Emperor*, and the history of the east was further analyzed from the western discourse system^{[14][15][16]}. Others criticized the orientalism in the film, saying that the film did not expose the audience to the truth^[17]. However, due to the cultural differences between the east and the west, they unconsciously mixed the imagination of eastern China into the analysis of the film. To truly understand and perceive culture, an inter-discourse approach is needed — to eliminate any transcendental concept of culture and avoiding preconceived ideas^[18]. Furthermore, the east should take action and export cultural products to change these stereotypes.

3.Cultural imperialism

In addition to orientalism, cultural imperialism also has some specific manifestations in this film, such as western universalism and western values of saving the world. The concept of 'cultural imperialism' was first proposed by the American scholar Schiller after collecting a lot of evidence. He believed that cultural imperialism was that some countries were forced to accept the value in the world system under the action of external pressure^[19]. In short, cultural imperialism can be defined as the rulers bringing their values and ideologies to the governed as a cultural export and making them accept this expression in the form of knowledge. The theory of cultural imperialism contains an active-passive and dominant-victim framework.

Cultural imperialism emerged after the Second World War. Although emerging nation-states are free from western colonial rule politically, they still rely heavily on developed capitalist countries economically and culturally. The end of the Cold War established a power structure of one superpower and many powers. The western developed countries, represented by the United States and Europe, use their economic strength to promote and spread their ideology and values of cultural products to third-world countries, and the ideological and political impact on the original colonies continues^[20].

In this context, Bertolucci also publicly or covertly promoted the social ideas, ideologies and values in *The Last Emperor*.

For example, western individualistic values are integrated into the image of Chinese women. According to Hall's cultural model^[21], China belongs to a high-context culture — discourse tends to be implicit and does not directly express one's own views. Especially among traditional Chinese women, their discourse tends to contain more coded information. But in the film, the female image of the queen is different from the tradition. The queen is more direct about her personal opinions, such as 'kiss me', 'if your majesty thinks it is old-fashioned to make the rain and the wind with a stranger, we can be like a modern couple, to begin with.' In other words, when the film portrays the female image, it blends into the western low-context culture and spreads the value of dashing to express oneself in individualism. In addition, the film also conveys that western culture is superior to the east and that the west saves the east ideology. Puyi's position under the eaves and crown, or back to the light in the shadow, represents the emperor's lack of personal freedom. It was not until the arrival of Johnston, Puyi's teacher from the west, that bright light and colour appeared in the film. The sun shines brightly on Johnston, symbolizing the hope it will bring to Puyi and the Forbidden City. In the process of learning from Johnston, they are in the window under the light in contrast to the room in the other dark place, the symbolic significance is obvious. Johnston, as the representative of western civilization, existed as a teacher and saviour, bringing the enlightenment of western civilization to the Chinese emperor.

Due to the spreading influence of this film, western values and ideologies have a potential impact on developing countries, which is more conducive to maintaining the international status of western developed countries. But it also weakens China's cultural power. Cultural imperialism points out to the audience the potential power of western culture to the third world countries, and also suggests how people should critically view some cultural interpretations. In terms of film cultural ideology, we should not only see the invasion of 'cultural imperialism' but also understand the cultural communication trend shown by the map of 'world civilization' in the information society in the 21st century.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the discussion of cultural imperialism and orientalism in the context of *The Last Emperor*, some misinterpreted cultures, ethnic and cultural inequalities and communication barriers with eastern audiences were found in the process of the cultural and ideological export from the first world countries to the third world countries. To some extent, these phenomena promote the development of eurocentrism and western culture and weaken the cultural power of eastern countries. Therefore, how to reverse the stereotype and shape the real Chinese story is still an important topic for future research.

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