

Oriental Cultural Image Construction and Gender Studies in Chinese American Films from a Postcolonial Perspective: A Case Study of Crazy Rich Asians

Meixuan Li

School of Communication Science, Northeast Normal University, Jilin, China

limeixuan556@nenu.edu.cn

Abstract. In the post-colonial era, Orientalism and Gender Order are one of the key topics in today's research. Researchers have found that there is sometimes a relationship between Middle Easternism and gender order in cultural works, which can reflect the Western understanding and thinking of other cultures to a certain extent. However, there is still a research gap on whether contemporary Western Chinese films truly realize the expression of cultural equality. Therefore, the background of this study is based on the complexity of cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization, especially the stereotype and gender bias of the West against the East. The research focuses on the cultural image and gender representation of Chinese characters in *Crazy Rich Asians*, and how they reflect and challenge the post-colonial framework. Using textual analysis and cultural studies methods, combined with cinematology, gender studies, and post-colonial theory, the author provides an in-depth interpretation of the plot, characters, and visual elements in the film. The study found that although the film has innovated in expression and expanded the traditional Oriental image to a certain extent, in some aspects, the characters and plots in the film still reflect a cultural interpretation based on the Western perspective and the stereotypical performance of gender roles. The conclusion of the study points out the importance of cultural awareness and gender equality in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese films and proposes strategies to promote cultural diversity and gender equality to promote a more just global cultural dialogue.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Orientalism, gender order, ethnic Chinese films, cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

Crazy Rich Asians was the first film in the world of Western Hollywood to feature an entirely Asian-faced cast in every role.

When it was released in the United States in 2018, it received 92% favorable reviews on Rotten Tomatoes and topped the North American box office for three consecutive weeks. However, after its release in China, Douban only got a passing score of 6.0, and the box office was dismal. So why is the same film receiving such polarized reviews in the Western and Chinese markets? Can not help but provoke thought.

This study focuses on the shaping of Middle Eastern cultural images and gender order in Western films under the background of globalization and cultural diversity. With the further development of globalization, the appearance of Middle Eastern elements in Western films is increasingly frequent, but it is often accompanied by stereotypes and cultural misinterpretations of the East [1]. Whether the Chinese film has realized the equal expression of culture is still worthy of in-depth study. In the post-colonial era, people in the third world pay great attention to the creation and transmission of cultural images in cultural communication works under the discourse system dominated by the West. Among them, with the continuous development of world globalization and the integration of Eastern and Western cultures, Chinese films, as an important type of world films, have become the type of films with the cultural identity of the Chinese nation in the context of today's globalization. At the same time, as the main carrier of cultural transmission, film imperceptibly affects the ideology of the audience. Therefore, it is of great significance to understand cultural expression and communication from the perspective of post-colonialism, because it is not only related to the depth and breadth of

cross-cultural communication, but also involves the issues of cultural identity and gender equality [2]. From the perspective of post-colonialism, this study specifically analyzes the Middle Eastern cultural image building and gender expression of *Crazy Rich Asians*, and explores how Chinese films achieve true cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization.

This study uses literature analysis to search and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can well analyze film texts, reviews, theoretical frameworks and related research, so as to reveal the implicit cultural and gender issues in the film, which is conducive to the research. The ultimate goal of this study is to reveal the complexity of the Middle Eastern cultural image and gender order in *Crazy Rich Asians*, and to propose a possible path to achieve cultural equality and gender equality in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese films. In order to achieve this goal, this study not only analyzes the film text itself but also combines the intention of the director, the performance of the actors, the feedback of the audience, and the comments of the critics, in order to provide a multi-dimensional analysis framework [3]. Through this comprehensive research method, this study aims to provide new perspectives and insights for understanding the role and influence of Ethnic Chinese films on the global cultural stage [4].

2. Literature Review

The research status of Ethnic Chinese films at home and abroad can be traced back to the 1990s, with the concept of Chinese films proposed, the research gradually deepened. In general, the international research and development of Ethnic Chinese films has been influenced by many aspects, including cultural differences, social environment, and cultural elements of film content. These factors together shape the unique charm and research value of Ethnic Chinese films. In the United States, Chinese filmmakers are faced with the challenge of cultural barriers and barriers, but their films have become an important bridge of cultural exchanges between the East and the West. For example, the film *Don't Tell Her* has attracted wide attention after its release in the North American market, but the construction of the film's narrative text and the expression of its cultural connotation differ greatly from the domestic social and cultural environment [5]. In Thailand, Chinese filmmakers have successfully opened the Chinese market by conveying cultural elements through films. For example, the film *Grandma's Grandson*, which incorporates Chinese elements such as Teochew dialect and folk music, has struck a chord with Chinese audiences and garnered high box office and praise on the Chinese mainland. In the field of Oriental cultural image building and gender research in Chinese films from the perspective of post-colonialism, the research conclusions of many famous scholars have provided profound insights. As one of the leading figures in the field of overseas Chinese film studies, Professor Zhang Yingjin's research has not only opened up innovative research perspectives such as city/urban studies and media archaeology, but also promoted the development of Chinese film studies in overseas academic circles. In his research, Professor Zhang emphasizes the return of national character in Chinese films in the context of globalization, as well as the importance of shaping and conveying the image of Chinese culture in the post-colonial context. Li Leiwei, a Chinese-American critic, divided the history of "Orientalism" in the United States into two stages: "old Orientalism" and "New Orientalism". He believed that American film and television works were the best carriers of the concept of "New Orientalism" and carried out a new round of colonial strategy in the East through mass media and other forms [6]. This theory provides a critical perspective for the study and understanding of the portrayal of the Middle East in Western films. Chen Aimin pointed out in his research that the United States, as the producer and controller of the discourse of "New Orientalism", conveys its cultural hegemony over the East through film and television works [6]. These studies provide a theoretical basis for the analysis of Oriental images in *Crazy Rich Asians*. In the cross-cultural interpretation of *Crazy Rich Asians*, He Xinli's research focuses on the film text coding, audience acceptance, and the tension between the two, exploring how the film breaks through the negative discourse of the West against the East, and why Chinese mainland audiences respond

with "counter-gaze" [7]. This research reveals the complex interaction between film text and audience reception, as well as power relations in cross-cultural communication.

Throughout the studies of Chinese films by Chinese and foreign scholars, they provide a multi-dimensional analytical framework, from post-colonialism and Orientalism to cultural hegemony, and provide profound theoretical support for understanding the image building of Oriental culture and gender studies in Chinese films. Through this literature, this study can further explore how *Crazy Rich Asians* achieves cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization, and how Chinese films seek cultural equality in the post-colonial era.

3. Analysis

3.1. Shaping of Oriental Characters Image

In Said's Orientalism, he reveals the West's stereotypical view of the East and the hegemonic discourse system, which deprives Easterners of their right to speak and mercilessly endows them with the characteristics of backwardness, numbness, madness, ignorance, and barbarism [8]. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the portrayal of Oriental characters is influenced by the stereotype of the East from the West described in Said's Orientalism. In the film, the Asian community, especially Lin Pei's mother, is portrayed as a hedonist who is crazy and obsessed with money. Lin Pei's mother is noisy and pretentious, and her father is rude, which everywhere reveals the pompous and upstart rustic attitude [2]. This shows that in today's Western world led by Hollywood, the material wealth of the rich in the East is behind the barren and scarce spirit, and they believe that the sudden wealth of the East is the "local tyrant" type of wealth, which is full of low-level desires. This kind of image shaping is undoubtedly the embodiment of Western self-culture as the center of a sense of superiority.

The film also portrays Rachel Chu, who is smart and good at math, as well as Lin Pei's older brother, who wears black-rimmed glasses and looks greasy and creepy. In the American animation *Family Guy*, there was a picture of Western students asking Asian students to do math problems. In some dramas and TV dramas, there is always an Asian boy, who is an IT technical man and a bookish image wearing glasses, such as Jian Yang, an Asian character in *Silicon Valley*. But not all Asians are good at math, and not all Asians are nerds who just learn. This depiction coincides with the image of the East in Orientalism criticized by Said, reflecting the stereotype and cultural misreading of the East in the West, which is tantamount to enhancing the new stereotype image of Asians on a large scale through the film media.

In addition, the film also depicts the traditional female image represented by the male protagonist's mother, which is deeply influenced by the traditional feudal culture of the East. In the film, even though the mother of the male protagonist is excellent herself, she still chooses to give up everything, return to the family for her husband, take care of her husband, and teach her children. Even though she once suffered from her mother-in-law's dissatisfaction, she also subtly accepts it and continues this demand for her daughter-in-law to be the female protagonist [2]. This image building reflects the cultural prejudice caused by historical factors. Ancient East, indeed, paid attention to male superiority, three obedience, and four virtues, but in modern times, women's power has gradually risen, they have paid more attention to their own value creation. Therefore, this image has deprived women and Orientals of the right to speak, and the understanding of China's role and status remains in the 20th century. This kind of image shaping in the film is undoubtedly a simplification and distortion of Eastern characters, ignoring the diversity and complexity of individuals.

3.2. Eastern Culture

In Orientalism, Said criticizes how the West constructs and represents the East as "the other," emphasizing the power inequality behind this representation. In the world film landscape, Chinese films have always been in the position of "other" in culture, and Western films represented by Hollywood are full of imagination construction of Eastern culture [9]. The director of "*Crazy Rich Asians*" expresses his own identity for the Asian people in the film's frame with an unabashed display

of wealth - crazy wealth, intentionally associating the show of wealth with the Chinese. Throughout the whole film, the flaunts of wealth run through and influence the development of the whole film. Although the gap between the material prosperity of the East and the West is gradually closing, the Eastern world is always regarded as a cultural weak person by the hegemonic gaze in the eyes of Westerners no matter the popularization, development or dissemination of culture and spirit [9]. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the director reflected a lot of Chinese elements in the scenery and costume, such as red lanterns, Chinese furniture, mahjong, dumplings, porcelain painting and so on. However, most of the Chinese cultural symbols are simply piled up, and there is no in-depth study of their cultural connotation and background, but it shows a sense of "neither one nor the other". These typical Chinese culture in the eyes of Westerners, in the 21st century, is already a stereotypical and old Chinese symbol, which is no longer suitable to be integrated into the 2018 film aesthetics to present, and this kind of cultural shaping cannot be resonated by local Chinese people. In the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, the depiction of Chinese people and Chinese society has a superficial tendency that is difficult to touch the essence [10]. Although the film ostensibly discusses the difference of values in different cultural backgrounds, it actually deeply reflects the deep-rooted cultural centralism, the superiority of local culture and the stereotype of the East in Western film creation. Although the director has tried to show the unique Oriental characteristics through the construction of landscape and culture, the symbolic splice that only stays on the surface and the lack of inward spiritual exploration undoubtedly makes the essence of the film present a kind of cultural exhibition like a merry-go-round, which cannot break away from the rigid inertia under the gaze of Western values.

3.3. Gender Order and Ideology

3.3.1 Perspective of Post-Colonialism Theory

Postcolonial theory focuses on the impact of colonial history on former colonial societies, particularly at the psychological and cultural levels. This theory explores how historical legacies affect the self-identity of individuals and groups, and how these effects persist in contemporary society [10]. In the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*, we can observe how this influence is reflected in the portrayal of Chinese characters. These characters are often portrayed as the "other" of Western culture, which not only reveals the cultural centrism tendency in Western film creation but also reflects the inherent cognition of different cultures. The presentation of Chinese images and cultural values in the film, while seemingly demonstrating cultural diversity, may inadvertently reinforce certain stereotypes about the East. Such representation may result from a misunderstanding or simplification of Eastern culture rather than deliberate cultural hegemony. By analyzing these images, we can explore how Chinese films can challenge and reshape these stereotypes through cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization, and how to promote mutual understanding and respect between different cultures while maintaining cultural characteristics.

3.3.2 Cornell's Gender Order Theory Perspective

Cornell regards gender as a way to define the order of social practice and puts forward the classification of gender temperament, including dominance, subordination, complicity, and marginal masculinity. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the presentation of gender order is not limited to the portrayal of gender roles but also involves the dynamic relationship between race, class, and gender. The gender roles in the film, such as the heroine Rachel, show the self-identity of women in the new era and the challenge to the big family issues in traditional Eastern society, which not only reflects the gender power relations but also reveals the deep meaning and practical significance behind the film.

3.3.3 Combine Post-Colonial Theory and Cornell Gender Order Theory

By combining the post-colonial theory with Cornell's gender order theory, gender studies and ideology in *Crazy Rich Asians* can be analyzed more deeply. Postcolonial feminism pays attention to the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and identity, and points out that colonial hegemony and patriarchy are two sides of one body. The "self" consciousness in Europe is constructed through the patriarchal characteristics represented by conquest, while the "other" identity in colonies is

constituted by the temperament that is traditionally considered feminine, such as the inability to speak out and passive acceptance [11]. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, this intersectionality is reflected in the film's portrayal of Chinese female characters, who not only have to deal with racial and cultural challenges but also the expectations and limitations of gender roles.

4. Cross-Cultural Communication Paths in the Context of Globalization

The "Third Pole Culture theory" was put forward by Mr. Huang Huilin in 2009, advocating that in the context of globalization, the world culture should present a pattern of diversity and coexistence, and each culture should be given a fair and independent opportunity for development. This theory provides us with a framework to analyze and understand the status and role of Chinese culture in international communication.

4.1. Show Multicultural Authenticity and Cultural Confidence

Crazy Rich Asians, as a Chinese film, has broken the stereotype of the West on the East to a certain extent, but at the same time, it still has the stereotype of the Eastern cultural image. In global cross-cultural communication, Chinese films need to transcend these stereotypes and show the diversity and authenticity of Eastern culture. This echoes the uniqueness and pluralism of Chinese culture emphasized in the Third polar culture theory, which should not be regarded as a derivative or secondary to Western culture, but as a cultural pole with independent values and characteristics. The success of *Crazy Rich Asians* reflects the power of cultural self-confidence to some extent, but it also exposes the problems of cross-cultural communication and Western value fixation. In global cross-cultural communication, Chinese films should be more confident in showing the uniqueness and depth of Chinese culture, while critically examining and challenging any form of cultural prejudice and inherent cognition.

4.2. Gender Order and Cultural Identity

The integration of Cornell's gender order theory and post-colonial theory provides a new perspective to analyze gender studies and ideology. In cross-cultural communication, gender cultural difference is a factor that cannot be ignored. Different cultures have different definitions and expectations of gender roles, and this difference shows the influence of social, cultural, and historical factors in shaping an individual's gender identity. For example, in some Western countries, men are often traditionally assigned the traits of being strong, competitive, independent, and dominant, while women are assigned the traits of being gentle, dependent, and caring for others. In some Asian and African countries, men are given more important roles in respect, inheritance, and decision-making. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, the presentation of gender roles and cultural identity is complex and multi-dimensional. Female characters in film not only face cultural challenges but also the expectations and limitations of gender roles. In global cross-cultural communication, Chinese films need to explore the relationship between gender and cultural identity more deeply and show the value of gender equality and cultural diversity. This will not only help to challenge and reshape gender stereotypes but also promote mutual understanding and respect between different cultures and achieve cross-cultural communication and cultural integration in the true sense.

4.3. Cross-Cultural Communication and Harmonious Coexistence

The cultural conflict and integration between the East and the West in *Crazy Rich Asians* provide a vivid case for cross-cultural communication [12]. In the globalization of cross-cultural communication, Chinese films should promote dialogue and understanding between different cultures and seek the path of harmonious coexistence. This is consistent with the world outlook, outlook on life, and cosmology of "harmony" advocated in the third polar culture theory, that is, to seek common ground on the basis of respecting cultural differences and promoting cultural exchange and integration. The Global Civilization Initiative, with its "four common initiatives" as its main content, transcends

the differences between different countries, ethnic groups, religions and cultures, embodies the diversity, commonality, development and inclusiveness of civilizations, and is infused with the wisdom of "peace and harmony" of traditional Chinese culture.

5. Conclusion

Through analyzing the post-colonial perspective of *Crazy Rich Asians*, this research finds that although the film shows Oriental culture and emphasizes the dominant position of women to a certain extent, it still remains at the level of superficial cultural symbols in character shaping and environmental layout, and fails to deeply explore the inner spirit of Oriental culture. It reflects the imagination of the East from a Western perspective. Therefore, the research conclusion is that in the context of globalization, Chinese films still face the challenges of cultural stereotypes and gender order in cross-cultural communication, and deeper cultural consciousness and gender equality consciousness need to be integrated.

This study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for future research in this direction, which mainly affects the understanding of the role and influence of Chinese films in cross-cultural communication. Future studies should focus more on the new characteristics of cross-cultural communication and how to create and spread Chinese films under the new trend.

Finally, at present, this study only selects *Crazy Rich Asians*, a Chinese film, as a representative work for analysis and research, which may not be comprehensive enough in terms of time depth and scope. Further comparative analysis can be carried out in the future to facilitate deeper research on this issue.

References

- [1] Yu Yufei. Modern and Contemporary Chinese Images presented from different cultural perspectives: Social Identity of film Images. *Journal of Heilongjiang University of Education*, 2010, 29 (06): 176-178.
- [2] Lu Yuting. On Other people's Stereotype of Chinese Culture in Cross-cultural Communication: A Case Study of *Crazy Rich Asians*. *Jingu Wenchuang*, 2022, (14): 120-122.
- [3] Zeng Jingting. Other identity and self-reconstruction of image dimension under the consideration of "mirror Theory". *Journal of Changchun University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 2011, 23 (05): 99-101.
- [4] Chen Hao. Research on the path of cross-cultural transmission of Chinese films. *Cultural Industry*, 2022, (21): 25-27.
- [5] Jose Kun. "New Generation" Hollywood director the Chinese image construction in the movie. Nanjing art institute, 2023.
- [6] Gu Xiaole, Wang Song. The Mirror Image of "the Other" from the perspective of "Orientalism": Interpreting the image of Chinese in contemporary American films and television. *Literary criticism*, 2013, (9): 50-54.
- [7] He Xinli. Staring with the gaze. Wuhan university, 2020.
- [8] Ma Xiaoqing. Analysis of the image of Chinese in the Movie the Joy Luck Club from the perspective of Orientalism. *Journal of Mudanjiang University of Education*, 2014, (10): 13-14.
- [9] Cai Yonggui, Yu Xing. Interpretation of Chinese Female Images in Hollywood Films: A Case Study of The Joy Luck Club and *Crazy Rich Asians*. *Mudanjiang university journal*, 2023, 32 (4): 55-60.
- [10] Franz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Mask*. Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2023, 04, 128.
- [11] Tong Ziyi. Post-colonial Theory of International Relations: a theory of inclusiveness and pluralism. *Studies in International Politics*, 2024, 45 (03): 74-103+6-7.
- [12] Zhang Xin. Cultural conflict and fusion between the East and the West from *Crazy Rich Asians*. *Overseas English*, 2019, (13): 196+198.