

Exploring Heroic Characters in Red Chinese Movies: A Multimodal Perspective

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Abstract. Red Chinese movies depict heroic individuals who make significant contributions to the nation, and these films play a vital role in constructing the national image of new China. This paper explores the images of heroic individuals in red Chinese movies using multimodal action theory. The findings indicate that these individuals are characterized by their selfless sacrifices for their country, fearless perseverance, embodiment of international communist ideals, and unwavering devotion and warmth. The study also reveals that facial expressions, body movements, and language serve as critical mediational means in shaping these characters, while other forms of mediation are underutilized. Recommendations include employing more mediational means to create more nuanced and complex characters in future red Chinese movies.

Keywords: Multimodal action theory; Chinese image; Red movies.

1. Introduction

Red Chinese movies have gained recognition for their portrayal of heroic Chinese individuals who embody revolutionary spirit and contribute to China's development and prosperity. However, while narrative context, virtual-real relationship, and aesthetic innovation theory are commonly employed by scholars to analyze red movies[20,22], minimal attention has been given to the characterization of the heroic figures depicted in these films. Moreover, the study of images of people in Chinese studies seldom utilizes multimodal action theory - a three-dimensional approach that examines characters through their various mediational means. This stands in contrast to Western scholarship, where it is widely used[1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,12,13,14].

This paper focuses on four red Chinese movies - *My Early Days in France* (2004), *The Eternal Wave* (1958), *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014), and *Tunnel Warfare* (1965) - which depict China's foundation from 1912 to 1949. The study examines the heroic Chinese characters portrayed in these films, including the Communist Party of China, the People's Liberation Army, and the Chinese Militia, by selecting four individuals and one group. The analysis employs multimodal action theory, along with different mediational means such as facial expression, body movement, and language to reveal the images of these characters. Through this study, it is suggested that the red movies should incorporate more mediational means to create three-dimensional and well-rounded heroic characters.

2. Conceptualizing Multimodal Action Theory

Mode refers to the channel and medium through which the speaker communicates with things [24]. The mediated action theory is developed by Vygotsky[11], Wertsch[10], Scollon[15], and Norris[16]. Mediated action is social actors acting with/through mediational means/cultural tools, and social actors can be people or animal [18]. Mediational means are the aspects of the environment, objects, language, numeracy, and even body parts when used by social actors in action or interaction [15], they are the things needed to perform the action [18]. Meanwhile, the mediated action is delineated into three units of analysis as the lower-level, the higher-level, and frozen mediated action [16]. The lower-level mediated action is a mode's smallest meaning unit such as a step for the mode of walking, an utterance for the mode of spoken language, or the sniff for the mode of smell [19]. A higher-level action is always made up of an abundance of chained lower-level actions [16,17].

3. The Images of Chinese Heroic People in Red Films

To investigate the representations of Chinese heroic figures, this study analyzes five individuals and one group from four films through the lens of the multimodal action theory of social actors and mediational means. Specifically, the chosen characters are Deng Xixian and Zhou Enlai - members of the "Young Communists in Europe" who study abroad and later help construct China, Li Xia - a telegraph operator who covertly transmits intelligence for the party, Yang Zirong and Bai Ru - members of the Chinese People's Liberation Army who valiantly fight against bandits to safeguard people's lives in Northeast China, and the Chinese Militia who successfully engage in military skirmishes with the Japanese army by utilizing underground tunnels. Despite their differing affiliations, these figures share several common traits portrayed throughout their respective depictions.

Table 1. Analyzed five people and one group in four films

Type	Representatives	Movie
Communist Party of China	Deng Xixian, Zhou Enlai	My Early Days in France
	Li Xia	The Eternal Wave
Chinese People's Liberation Army	Yang Zirong; Bai Ru	The Taking of Tiger Mountain
Chinese Militia	Chinese Militia	Tunnel Warfare

3.1 Sacrifice One's Interest to Serve the Country

In order to leave for France to study, Deng Xixian departs with his parents. Here the analysis of the scene.

Table 2. Scene Analysis

Time	Shooting scale	Social actors	Mediated actions
06:48-07:27	Close shot, medium shot, long shot	Mother	holding Deng Xixian's hand, touching Deng's head, going down the steps, crying
07:27-07:33	Close shot, medium shot	Mother, father	bowing one's head and Sobbing
07:33-07:36	Medium shot	Deng Xixian	crying
07:36-07:40	Medium shot	Mother, father	looking back, crying, going up the steps
07:40-08:14	Close shot, medium shot, long shot	Deng Xixian	going down the steps, constantly looking back, crying

Several mediated actions are performed by three social actors, Deng Xixian and his parents, each of the action can be categorized as a lower-level mediated action. By combining them together, a higher-level mediated action of Deng and his parents' farewell is accomplished. Meanwhile, the action is accomplished with the help of various mediational means, including the environment (the setting of the scene), the gaze (Deng and his parents looking at each other), the body (holding Deng's hand, touching his head, looking back, etc.), and the facial expression (crying) etc. Clearly, it is not difficult to see that it is the various mediational means, as the smallest unit of mode, that forms up the mediated action.

We can have a clear understanding of the characteristic of Deng by analyzing of his mediated actions, especially through the mediational means. Here, the scene is set in Deng Xixian's hometown on the road leading to the doc, which is alluding to the separation between Deng and his parents. The camera cuts between Deng Xixian and his parents. Deng's sadness to part from his parents is vividly depicted through his lower-mediated action of constantly looking back and crying. With red eyes and sobs (facial expression), he receives the shoes made by her mom (body movement). Meanwhile, the depiction of the social actors of Deng's parents and their lower-level mediated action (holding Deng's hand, touching Deng's head, going down the steps, cry) adds the distress to the atmosphere.

The film also includes Deng's monologue (the mediational means of language): "More than half a century has passed, but I have never been back to my hometown to see my mother and father."

Bearing the responsibility for learning and a pure desire to serve his country, Deng has to embark on a journey to France, he has to put aside his love and affection and devote himself to a broader and greater cause. Undoubtedly, this is not only Deng's own idea, but also the true experience of a group

of young Communist students in Europe who have given up a relatively comfortable and stable life, far from their familiar homeland, and endure back-to-back unexpected tests, in order to continue learning advanced Western ideas, thus applying them into Chinese practice.

3.2 Not Afraid of Suffering

Young European tourists to France are faced with many difficulties. On the one hand, they are in poor economic conditions, some of them even have to live on the street; On the other hand, the revolutionary ideas they advocate are frequently under siege from other parties. But the hardships are not enough to hinder their progress. In the face of siege by other parties, they argue with them with iron teeth; In the face of dire economic conditions, they continue to carry out revolutionary movements.

When Beiyang Government borrows money from the French government to fight the civil war, the Young Communists in Europe make speeches urging the Chinese Ambassador to France to stop this humiliating behavior. In the film, Zhou Enlai stands in the center of the conference hall and strongly criticizes Beiyang government's ignorance in passionate tone, through which his deep anger can be felt visually and audibly.

Table 3. Shooting Scale

Time	Shooting scale	Social actor	Mediated actions
47:30-47:38	Medium shot	Zhou Enlai	Giving speeches, walking around the stage, swinging his arms
47:38-47:50	Deng Xixian siting down		
47:50-48:05	Medium shot	Zhou Enlai	Speaking, walking, looking around, frowning

The camera uses a medium shot in order to show the body language (mediational means) of Zhou. Also, with his other mediational means of language, and facial expression, he expresses his firm revolutionary will to fight against the Beiyang Government and the ambassador to the end. Zhou speaks in a firm tone as if he knew he would succeed. What's more, he makes a speech with body language including walking around constantly and swinging his arm to intensify his emotion. He frowns when angry, and has frequent eye contact with the audience. Finally, he successfully urges the French minister to stop disgracing the country and makes great contributions to the revolutionary movement.

They also actively write the "Youth" magazine, spreading the revolutionary fire in foreign countries. The film shows Deng (social actor) in close-up with his various lower-level mediated actions of carefully spreading out the wax paper (mediational means of body movement), frowning and gazing at the paper (mediational means of facial expression), inscribing, wiping sweat, and recollecting (mediational means of memory). All of these lower-level mediated actions, each one of which is mediated in multiple ways, are part of the higher-level mediated action of Deng's writing. Here, Deng determines to write the magazine with the dim light in a study room to share his experience in France, he carefully spreads out the wax paper. Perhaps because he is really eager to share his knowledge, it takes him great strength to inscribe the characters while continuing to wipe the sweat. All his experiences, including the suffer of the French lower-class people, especially his friend Michel, and his parents' send-off for him when leaving China both comes to his mind. The more he thinks of his comrades' suffer and his parents' expectation, the more firmly he write. Therefore, Deng, as a social actor, his determination and perseverance are manifested through the mediational means including body, thoughts, and memory. Deng stays up all night to write the newspaper, but the next morning he works tirelessly to send his new paper around Paris with a smile of pleasure and satisfaction on his face. This is the joy and happiness of the revolutionaries, who has given everything to their cause.

Li Xia, a Communist Party member, lurks in the enemy territory to help the intelligence transmission for the party. Li's unyieldingness is manifested through the comparison between Yao

Wei, a Kuomintang member who also lurks here, and him (two social actors) from their mediational means of facial expression and language.

Both Li and Yao are on the rack because of their enemies' suspects. We can tell from Yao's face that he is nervous and in a strong fear of the excruciation. Soon, he discloses the secret of Kuomintang to the spy for Japan. Whereas, Li remains firm all the time, he grits his teeth to overcome the unimaginable pain of the excruciation (mediational means of facial expression), having a taunt face to cover his pain, and the only words he throws is "I will say nothing" (mediational means of language). Li's unyieldingness is shown through his language and facial expression, and we can feel his determination and his loyalty to the party.

3.3 Spirit of International Communism

The heroic Chinese people also embody the spirit of international communism, that They concern not only about the lower class of Chinese people, but also the working class of France. Deng Xixian meets Michel, a French worker, in France. He lives in poverty and is oppressed by the upper-class in France, and his daughter is unemployed. At the end of the film, Deng sits on the train to Moscow and sees Michelle, who drags a heavy luggage cart as his work to make money with legs lameness. The film gives a long close-up of Deng's (social actor) response, including his gaze and facial expression (mediational means). His gazing at Michel remains a long period with grief and sympathy. He doesn't have any other mediational means except for the facial expression of gaze, because he is totally shocked by the situation of Michel. He realizes that not only do the proletariat in China faces the oppression and exploitation by the bourgeoisie, but also do the proletariat in France. Therefore, he finds it necessary to carry out the revolutionary movement and spread the revolutionary spirit not only in China, but also all over the world. Thus, his universal fraternity is depicted.

Deng Xixian, as well as other young Communists in Europe who go to France, standing together with Michel in their struggle for the proletariat of the world, and they are committed to spreading the fire of revolution to all parts of the world. This willingness to help the world in times of poverty must be a true reflection of the early Communists.

3.4 Earnest and Devoted

In order to transmit the telegrams, Li Xia endures unimaginable hardships with perseverance, even forget sleeping and eating. When the Japanese spy have suspected Li as a communist, Li immediately asks his wife to leave, whereas, continue to send the telegram to Yan'an, the center of China's communism, himself without taking any dangers into consideration. The chart illustrates the relevant scenario.

Table 4. Scene Introduction

Time	Shooting scale	Social actors	Mediated action
01:46:48-01:45:52	Close-up	Li Xia	Saying: "This is the command of the party", looking at his wife firmly
01:45:52-01:47:07	Close shot, medium shot, long shot	Li Wife	Solemn expression, tearful eyes, turning away, looking back at Li Xia, closing the door
01:47:07-01:47:12	Close-up, medium vista, panorama	Li Xia	Bowing his head, typing the telegram
01:47:12-01:47:29	Telegram received from Yan 'an		
01:47:29-01:47:33	The special agents of Japan set out to arrest Li Xia		
01:47:33-01:47:34	Close-up	Li Xia	Reading notes and typing telegrams
01:46:34-01:45:38	Yan'an finishes receiving the first telegram		
01:45:38-01:47:51	The special agents of Japan arrive downstairs at Li Xia's home		
01:47:51-01:48:25	Close shot, medium shot	Li Xia	Tapping the telegraph, turning to look at the door
01:45:26	Li Xia is captured		

We can analyze of Li Xia's characteristic through the shooting scale and the mediational means. In terms of the mediational means of Li's body movement, he continues to reading the notes and typing the telegram, even he knows that the Japanese spy is coming to capture him. In terms of his facial expression, he looks at his wife firmly when she wants him to stop typing and leave the place to avoid the capture. In terms of language, he says "this is the command of the party" to show his determination that he will not leave. The mediated action with all these mediational means help build the characteristic of Li, showing his devotion and determination to carry out his mission and his everlasting earnest when facing the danger. Li is finally captured, yet he types a line in the telegraph: bye, comrades, I miss you! His devotion is depicted through his moving words.

3.5 Smart and Brave

In the face of repeated successful incursions by the bandits, the Chinese Liberation Army's defense is in trouble. In time, Yang Zirong volunteers to infiltrate the enemy by disguising himself as a bandit. However, not long after Yang's set out to the bandit, he encounters a fierce monster -- a tiger. Yang and the tiger fight to the death: Yang climbs a tree, but the tiger chases him. Yang falls down the tree and the tiger pursues after him. All in three minutes, through the use of CGI [23] the continuous transformation of the scene (trees, snow), the constant switching of the camera (the tiger's ferocity and Yang's calm but firm expression of mediational action), the tiger's louder and louder roar, and the faster and faster soundtrack create a fierce and tense atmosphere, which can not help but make the audience feel nervous for Yang. In the end, Yang successfully shoots the tiger to death, which deeply scares the image of his indomitable courage into the audience's mind. At this point, the film also reaches its climax.

As I have stated, the mediated action is the combination of the social actor and the mediational means. Clearly, this scene is formed up with the interaction of the mediated action of the two social actors, namely Yang and the tiger. They chase after each other, and have their own facial expression and body movement, that the tiger is feral, while Yang is brave and calm. Meanwhile, both of them are vigorous and are in a rapid change of their posture in the chasing competition, attack the enemy. It is not difficult to conclude that each unit of their chasing can be considered as a lower-level mediated action, and they together form up the higher-level mediated action of the whole process of the chasing. The frequent interaction of the tiger and Yang's lower-level mediated action provide the sense of intension for the audience, therefore, the ultimate success of Yang's conquer of the tiger is of great extent to manifest his bravery.

The militia is also brave. In the portrayal of the militia, the film focuses on the scene where they work together to dig the tunnel (mediational means of body movement). The film uses a montage of their efforts to resist the Japanese aggression: they light up the lamps and boil the oil, and discuss together how to defeat the enemy (mediational means of language); They lie underground, plant landmines and sing "The people's war is the invincible power, their unity, with the unique wisdom to join forces against the Japanese is invincible power" (mediational means of language). In the end, the militia finally usher in the victory of the war of resistance against Japanese aggression, they sing again: "If the aggressor dares to come, we will fight together. If the aggressors dare to come, we will march on all sides" (mediational means of language). The militia carry half the sky in the war of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.

3.6 Warm and Thoughtful

Among the Chinese Liberation Army, there are not only brave soldiers who are good at fighting, but also warm and thoughtful, which is mainly reflected in the health worker Bai Ru. In the attack against the bandits, Bai Ru always guards around the wounded and carefully rescues them. She is meticulous, full of female tenderness and consideration. Bai is fully manifested by the mediational means of her language and body movement. When bandits attack the village with their powerful weapons, Xiao Shuanzi, a young boy who loses his parents, is in immense fear. Bai holds Xiao Shuanzi in her arms firmly and says to him, "Don't be afraid. We are here!" This is a woman's

motherly tenderness, thoughtfulness and care. From Bai Ru, the audience feels the maternity of a revolutionary soldier.

4. Conclusion

In light of multimodal action theory, this paper analyzes how red Chinese movies shape the images of the Communist Party of China, the People's Liberation Army, and the Chinese Militia. The study reveals that these characters are characterized by their selfless sacrifice for the country, unwavering perseverance, embodiment of international communist ideals, and deep devotion and warmth. These traits compose the prototype of the images of the people of New China, and they are portrayed through the mediational means of language, facial expression, and body movement employed by the social actors. However, the mediational means of memory, emotion, body, Umwelt, and culture are underutilized, particularly the use of thought as a means to convey social actors' struggles and contradictions. As a result, the heroic images portrayed in the movies appear overly perfect and unrealistic. Therefore, it is recommended that future red movies adopt more mediational means to create characters with more three-dimensional and realistic characteristics.

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