

Section 3. Linguistics

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CHANGES OF THE IMAGE OF CHINESE PEOPLE IN WESTERN MOVIES UNDER THE SPEECH ACCOMMODATION THEORY

Abstract. As a carrier of culture and art, the movie inevitably becomes an important means of the cultural output of a country. Western movies especially American movies represent certain Western values and spread the Western language. The image of Chinese people is not uncommon in Western movies. However, with the rise of China, the change in China-Western relations, and the variation of the international situation, the portrayal of China in Western movies has also changed. This article selects six typical Western movies from the 1930s, 1980s, 1990s, and 21st century, *Fu Manchu's Mask*, *Charlie Chen – the Black Camel*, *the last emperor*, *M. Butterfly*, *Mulan*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*, which to a certain extent represent the attitude of mainstream American ideology towards China. This paper uses the Speech Accommodation Theory to analyze and research some lines about an image of Chinese people in Western movies and summarizes the manifestations, reasons, and coping strategies of image changes in Western movies.

Keywords: Speech Accommodation Theory, Western Movies, The Image of Chinese People.

An Overview of Speech Accommodation Theory

Speech accommodation refers to the speaker's efforts to change or conceal his or her identity to be more acceptable to the speaker. Speech Accommodation Theory was put forward in 1971 by Howard Giles and was initially proposed as a social psychological model, it is mainly used to explain people's psychological motivations in the process of communication. It has evolved as an increasingly sophisti-

cated model of the dynamics of interpersonal (and subsequently, intergroup) influence in a talk [1]. However, today, its influence has greatly exceeded the original theoretical goal, and it has been widely used in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, language acquisition, and communication research. It focuses primarily on accommodation made when conversing with members of culturally diverse groups. Speech Accommodation Theory is mainly used to explain the psychological motivation

and emotional factors of communication strategies such as convergence, divergence, and language maintenance during the transformation of speech style [10]. Speech Accommodation Theory studies the psychological mechanism of the two speakers in verbal communication, which has three essential characteristics: subjectivity, asymmetry, and recipient-centered. This paper adopts the characteristics and principles of Speech Accommodation Theory to analyze some lines in Western movies, especially American's, analyze the characteristics of the image of Chinese people in Western movies, and further explore the deep meaning behind the screen language.

Kraus, Streit, Karan et al., have published a large number of works and papers. In his article *A Review of Studies on Speech Adaptation Theory*, Liu Zhengguang (2001) reviewed the introduction, characteristics and development of the theory of communicative adaptation, systematically expounded the theory and its characteristics, pointed out the research problems to be solved, and advocated that the theory of communicative adaptation should be developed in the direction of interdisciplinary studies. In 2010, Su Jinying and Li Jingwei pointed out in *Review of Speech Adaptation Theory and Identity Research* that there is an important connection between speech and identity. Language reflects and shapes the speaker's identity, and the speaker's identity affects the choice of language. Deng Jilan (2012) applied the Communicative Adaptation Theory to the conversation between husband and wife in her master's thesis *Analysis of the Applicability of the Theory of Communicative Adaptation in the Marriage and Family Relations in the Chinese Context – A Case Study of 'the Golden Wedding'*, which was another attempt to apply the theory of communicative adaptation to the field of cross-cultural communication, and proved that foreign theories can be applied to the case analysis of China.

In a word, there is room for research on both the subject of the image of Chinese people in Western movies and the application of Speech Accommoda-

tion Theory. In addition, no one has used the Speech Accommodation Theory to analyze the image of Chinese people in Western films, so this topic has a certain degree of innovation and exploration.

II. Analysis on Images of Chinese People in Western Movies in the 1930s

In the 1920s, Hollywood became the center of the American film industry [3], and a demonized "Chinese imagination" had gained a broad cognitive base in American society even western society. This vision is rooted in the discourse of the Yellow Peril when Genghis Khan invaded Europe and in the cultural impact of the first Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century on the local European immigrant community. The introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 legalized the discourse of Yellow Peril. Until the end of World War II, the mainstream image of Chinese people in Hollywood movies viewed China almost exclusively as an invader and destroyer of Western culture [3].

Fu Manchu is the first Chinese protagonist with a complete story chain and full character image in American literary works. Fu Manchu is a villain Chinese character invented by the British novelist Sax Rohmer, who is the earliest prototype of the "evil genius" in popular Western narrative. This character was a typical Chinese image with long pigtailed and long robes and mandarin coats. He always used "traditional" "Eastern" methods to do evil, such as poisonous snakes, poisonous mushrooms, poisonous spiders, and other poisons to kill people. The director exaggerates the wickedness and weirdness of Chinese people with camera language, which fully echoes the fear and rejection of Chinese people in American society in the 1930s.

Movie: *Fu Manchu's Mask*

Scene 1: Fu Manchu, to get the secret of Genghis Khan, captures a white expert on the expedition and tries to negotiate with him.

White Expert: "What do you want me to do?"

Fu Manchu: "I seek you to make you rich. What can those dead soldiers do for you?"

White Expert: "We British like to see them on holidays."

Fu Manchu: "Are they worth a million pounds to you?"

White expert: "My dear friend, I can't tell you what I don't have."

Fu Manchu: "But you can tell me where they are, for the money."

White Expert: "Not anything in the world."

According to the language divergence strategy of Speech Accommodation Theory, the white expert repeatedly maintained their own identity through language and distanced themselves from Fu Manchu. In the end, he explicitly rejected Fu Manchu's request and resolutely did not tell the secret he knew. This dialogue shows that the white expert was fearless for his organization and could resist the temptation of money. Fu Manchu, on the other hand, was cunning and narrow-minded. Such a plot implies that in the eyes of Americans in the Yellow Peril period, Chinese people valued money more than morality and loyalty, which is a misunderstanding and uglification of Chinese people.

Scene 2: The white leader walks into an antique shop run by a Chinese to find Fu Manchu and starts a conversation with the shopkeeper.

White leader: "What I really want is a comfortable rest, a magic dream perhaps..."

Shopkeeper: "Oh no, not can I do, not for a white man..."

(The white leader slips some money into the shopkeeper's hand.)

Shopkeeper (beaming): "Understand, My pleasure. Follow me."

Then the shopkeeper led the team to a room full of Chinese people smoking opium.

This episode also adopts the language convergence strategy of Speech Accommodation Theory. The shopkeeper refused the request of the white leader at the beginning but changed his attitude and way of speaking in the face of money. He readily acceded to the white leader's request and became obsequious. This dialogue vividly shows the vilification of China in American

movies at that time. White people can't smoke opium, but the Chinese will do anything to bribe them with money. Such plots both celebrate themselves and belittle China, and will no doubt raise eyebrows among the Chinese. During the period of the Yellow Peril, the United States used extreme expression techniques to disfigure the image of China, to express the discrimination against the yellow people represented by the Chinese, to emphasize the social status of white people, and expand the distance between them.

As Chinese immigrants entered the United States, their status was related to race relations in the United States. To a certain extent, the image of Charlie Chan on the American screen has become a symbol of Americans' friendliness towards China. Charlie Chan has a refined temperament. He is proud of his American identity and takes it as his duty to defend the American social order. Although lacks masculinity, he is an image of a person who does his duty to maintain the stability of white society without challenging the position of white authority.

Movie: *Charlie Chan – The Black Camel*

Scene 1: After Miss Finn was murdered, the housekeeper commented on the family's Chinese chef, Wu Guoqing.

Housekeeper: That Chinese chef showed the worst qualities of a savage nation...

Charlie Chan: An uncivilized nation? When people invented printing, the English were still fighting each other with pointed clubs!

In this dialogue, Charlie Chan ruthlessly refuted the housekeeper's words, which undoubtedly reflected the language divergence strategy. In the face of the housekeeper's accusations against other Chinese, this humble Chinese detective immediately showed his attitude seriously, dared to argue, and used witty words to defend his compatriots, while criticizing the British. Although he did not make a more radical resistance, Charlie Chan hinted at his dissatisfaction with the status of Chinese society through his words and deeds, which have a certain progressive significance and breakthrough.

III. Analysis on Images of Chinese People in Western Movies in the 1980s and 1990s

During the Cold War period from 1947 to 1991, the capitalist countries and socialist countries led by the United States and the Soviet Union were in a situation of war and confrontation in all aspects. China, as one of the socialist countries, was also affected by the Cold War. The victory of the Cold War has made the West a little tired of the international political structure. The West's power in world politics, economy, and the military is declining relative to other civilizations [5]. The world pattern has changed, and China's international status has continued to rise. After the 1970s, China-Western relations have recovered, and the image of China in Western movies has shown a trend of changing from negative to positive. Western movies no longer publicly criticize and criticize the socialist system, but the films of this period still created an image of a numb, imprisoned, and weak China, which urgently needed to be rescued by the Western countries.

In the 1987 film *The Last Emperor*, China is a backward, insensitive, and closed country that has been re-born by the advanced and superior civilization of the West. The film tells the story of Puyi, the last emperor of China, from the time he entered the imperial palace at the age of three to the time he left. Puyi is a witness of times, but also the victim of times [6]. He seems to be a puppet in the old society, numb to spend his life. Many of the scenes in the film show the decay and backwardness of China. Director Bernardo Bertolucci shot the time-lapse of the female prisoners, deliberately showing the poor, feudal, rigid image of the Chinese to cater to the Western imagination of the Orient.

Movie: *The Last Emperor*

Scene 1: Students are protesting loudly in the street after the civilian government agreed to cede Chinese territory to Japan. The new Mr. Johnston tells Puyi that students outside are protesting against the Chinese government.

Puyi: "That many people out there have had their heads chopped off?"

Johnston: "It is true, Your Majesty. Many heads have been chopped off. It does stop them thinking."

(A minister at Puyi's side tried to stop Mr. Johnston from speaking, but Puyi cut him off.)

Puyi: "The students are right to be angry. I'm angry! But I'm not allowed to leave the Forbidden City. I want to go out." "I want to see the City of sounds!"

This dialogue adopts the language maintenance strategy of Speech Accommodation Theory. Puyi did not stop the conversation though the minister interrupted but insisted on continuing to speak out his ideas, reflecting Puyi's independent thinking. This shows how the Chinese young people were at that time of the awakening of new ideas and the spirit of struggle. Puyi was not willing to have been confined to the palace, his thoughts had not been completely limited. This is a kind of affirmation and praise to the Chinese youth, which to some extent reflects the change of attitude of the western countries, mainly the United States, towards the Chinese people.

M. Butterfly is a tragic story told by Huang Zelin that a French diplomat living in Beijing, Rene Gallimar, is used by a spy, Song Liling, a Chinese male disguised actor who plays Madame Butterfly on stage, and finally commits suicide. Song Liling in *M. Butterfly* first appeared as an illusory butterfly [9]. Although Song Liling has the stereotype of being cunning, fickle, and feminine, she still has a certain degree of progress. He is beautiful, weak, and charming on the outside, but independent and tough on the inside, and he uses the stereotypes or fantasies of Western men about Eastern women to fight back against them. This subverts the traditional image of Chinese people from a Western perspective [11].

Movie: *M. Butterfly*

Scene 1: After being promoted to deputy consul of the embassy, Gallimar goes to Song Liling's house again and eagerly asks Song Liling to answer his question.

Gallimar: Are you my Butterfly?

Song: I don't want to say it.

Gallimar: I do know one thing. I have already given you my shame.

Song: I don't want to.

Gallimar: Are you my Butterfly?

Song: Yes, I am your Butterfly.

This dialogue exemplifies the language convergence strategy. Song Liling was silent at first to pretend that he was a shy oriental woman, but finally, to complete his espionage mission, he had to agree to Gallimar's request and go along with him. It was precise because of Song Liling's confirmation that Gallimar's arrogance as a male imperialist inflated. He then helped his director make a judgment about the Vietnam War, arguing that the East welcomed Western colonial rule, just as Eastern women were obsessed with Western men. And Gallimar was also bewitched by Song Liling's femininity. This shows Song Liling's witness and also satirizes Western colonial rule.

Scene 2: Comrade Chin arrives at Song's late one night to express her dissatisfaction with Song's behavior.

Chin: Don't you understand how degrading those images are to woman? And how do you have to behave this way when he's not even here?

Song: Comrade, to better serve the great proletarian state. I practice my deception as often as possible. I despise this costume. Yet for the sake of our great helmsmen, I will endure it, along with all the other bourgeois western perversions.

Chin: I'm not convinced that this will be enough to redeem you in the eyes of the Party.

Song: I'm trying my best, to become somebody else.

This dialogue embodies the language divergence strategy. Although Song's refusal to Chin seemed weak in front of the authority of the superior, he still fought for himself. This shows Song Liling's disapproval of Comrade Chin, trying to distance each other and showing his thoughts, embodies his inner stubbornness and bravery, which is conducive to breaking the Western thinking of images of Chinese

people, and reflects the changing trend of Chinese images on the Western screen.

IV. Analysis on Images of Chinese People in Western Movies in the 21st century

The West's victory in the cold war brought not victory but exhaustion and the power of the West in world politics, economy and military are declining relative to other civilizations [5]. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the United States has been the world's largest developed country and China the world's largest developing country. Although China and the United States have many differences or gaps in ideology, strategic interests, and cultural traditions, the two countries have established extensive ties for many important common interests. The two countries can work together in many ways to promote independence in world politics and common development in the global economy, which is of great significance to promoting world peace. Improving and developing China-Western relations is the common demand of the two peoples. The Cold War was full of competition and conflict. Now that the Cold War is over, cooperation is dominant. Therefore, in the 21st century, China and the West have both competition and cooperation, and cooperation has become the mainstream of the development of China-Western relations.

The movie *Crazy Rich Asians* released in 2018 tells the love story of the modern version of Chinese economist Rachel and her boyfriend Nick [8]. The film was overwhelmingly praised by American mainstream media film reviews but could not open the Chinese market, because it catered to the thinking mode of Western audiences by distorting the image of Chinese people and promoting Western values, but deviated from China Human aesthetics and identity. Zhu Ruiqiu, the protagonist of the film, is a Chinese girl who grew up in the United States. She is smart, independent, and brave, and finally breaks the prejudice of class. But many other Chinese women in the film are portrayed as frivolous and ignorant, so in the final analysis, the film did not completely change the prejudice against the Chinese.

Movie: *Crazy Rich Asians*

Scene 1: When Zhu Ruiqiu goes to Nick's house to make dumplings for the first time, the family chats happily, but Nick's mother is not happy because she doesn't like this lowly-born Chinese girl. Rachel intends to take the initiative to break the deadlock.

Rachel: It's very great seeing you guys all like this.

Rachel: That's a beautiful ring, Auntie Eleanor. I've never seen anything like that.

Nick's mum: Nick's father had it made to me when he proposed to me.

Rachel: That's very romantic.

In this conversation, Rachel adopted a language convergence strategy, actively communicated with Nick's mother, and praised her ring, hoping to shorten the distance with Nick's mother and try to win her approval. However, in the subsequent development of the plot, Nick's mother told Rachel that Nick's father bought the ring because he was not recognized by Nick's grandmother, and belittled Rachel. Throughout this plot, Rachel's characteristics are obvious: strong, hoping to be recognized by Nick's family, but at the same time a little humble. At the end of the movie, Nick and Rachel gained support from their families through the ordeal. By creating such an image, Western movies can not only show the hard-working side of the Chinese but also imply the embarrassing status of the Chinese abroad. However, compared with the previous two periods, the image of the Chinese in Western movies has improved.

Disney created live-action *Mulan* in 2020, but it caused huge controversy. The live-action film *Mulan* was adapted from the 1998 Disney animated film *Mulan*, both of which combine cultural elements from China and the United States, more or less conveying American cultural values. But the difference is that in the live-action adaptation of the film, the profound reference to feminism is particularly emphasized, especially the addition of the character of the witch, which shows this connotation. Hua Mulan is a well-known Chinese female image, and her portrayal reflects the image of Chinese people on the Western

screen. In the eastern context, Hua Mulan serves in the army for her father, fights on the battlefield, and returns with honor and unarmored, showing her loyalty and courage. However, American movies pay more attention to the awakening of Mulan's female consciousness. Therefore, this Disney version of *Mulan* tells the story that Mulan inspires her true life consciousness in the harsh and brutal war by taking her father's place in the army and then realizes self-liberation and redemption. In other words, the theme of the film is more inclined to express the common self-individual life consciousness in western culture, that is, the western "individual heroism".

Movie: live-action *Mulan*

Scene 1: Hua Mulan has just entered the army. She is knocked to the ground by someone while queuing for registration. A soldier tries to pull her up.

Soldier: "Need a hand, little man?"

Hua Mulan (drawing sword): "Insult me again, and you will taste the tip of my blade."

Soldier (drawing sword): "Lower your sword!"

Hua Mulan: "Or what?"

From this dialogue, we can discover the use of the language divergence strategy of Speech Accommodation Theory. Hua Mulan was very unhappy that the soldier called her "little man". Therefore, she expressed her dissatisfaction by drawing her sword, glaring at him, and speaking fiercely. Similarly, the soldier went from trying to help Hua Mulan to quarrel with her. This shows that two people want to open up the distance between each other through language and to express their uncloseness. This plot reflects Hua Mulan's strong self-esteem and unyielding character, and also lays the groundwork for her to show individual heroism and successfully defeat the enemy. At the same time, it also reflects a shift in attitudes toward the Chinese in the 21st century in the United States, which means they can recognize the good qualities of the Chinese people but still embrace Western cultural values.

Scene 2: Mulan gets separated from the army during the battle and fights alone with the witch.

Witch: "I ask again, who are you?"

Hua Mulan: "I'm Huajun, a soldier in the Emperor's Imperial Army!"

Witch: "Then you will die pretending to be something you're not."

From this sentence, it is not difficult to see that Mulan and the witch both adopted the language maintenance strategy of Speech Accommodation Theory. Each side was maintaining her own identity and did not change her speech mode because of the other side. The witch was instructing Mulan to realize her self-worth, but Mulan insisted that she was just a soldier serving the king. This also reflects the American cultural element of the film – individual heroism. From this, we can see that in the live-action *Mulan*, the United States combines Mulan's bravery with the "individual heroism" advocated by the United States, which not only reflects the praise of Chinese heroines but also conveys the spiritual connotation of its own country. In the 21st century, the West has mixed feelings about China. China and the Western countries have extensive common interests as well as various contradictions and conflicts. This determines that the image of Chinese people on the screen is not good or bad, and the direction of the depiction of the image of Chinese people in the United States is relatively stable. Under such a trend, the United States combines Chinese elements with American elements and integrates Chinese and Western cultures.

V. Implications of China's Coping Strategies

This paper selects six American movies in the 1930s, the 1970s to 1980s, and the 21st century, namely *Fu Manchu's Mask*, *Charlie Chen – the Black Camel*, *the Last Emperor*, *M. Butterfly*, *Mulan*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*, to explore the different images of Chinese people in Western movies especially American movies due to various reasons under different historical backgrounds. In addition, this paper combines the theory of communicative adaptation, which combines the superficial change of the image of Chinese people in American movies with the deep

adaptation theory, and explores the different adaptation strategies adopted by the West in different periods and for different purposes.

It is found that the image of Chinese people in Western movies and the speech interactive communication strategy adopted by the West to China have changed mainly according to China's national status and the relationship between China and the West. In other words, when China's national strength is weak or China-Western relations are hostile, The West adopts corresponding communication strategies to demean the image of Chinese people in the movies, and the image of Chinese people in American movies is negative and evil; when China's international status is high or China-Western relations are good, the West adopts corresponding communication strategies to maintain or beauty the image of Chinese people, and the image of Chinese people in Western movies is positive and friendly.

Image is socially constructed in the constant interaction and communication between the molder and the molded. The study of images of Chinese people in Western movies should be fully aware of the important role of the communication and interaction between China and the West in the formation of the image, jump out of the local and temporary problems, but the study in the context of social history, and pay more attention to the reality of the national image. The image of Chinese people in Western movies is like a mirror, through which China can complete self-identification, self-criticism, and self-transcendence. In other words, China can know its status in the world and try to improve itself. At the same time, the image of Chinese people in Western movies will also be distorted in the discourse of modern power in the West. We should have an insight into the ideological elements in China's image, guard against the cultural hegemony of the West, strengthen exchanges and communication between cultures, and strive to make the image of China develop in a more diverse, open, and inclusive direction.

First of all, we must correctly view the image of Chinese people in foreign movies, and rationally think about the reasons behind it. Secondly, we must learn to shape and promote our images, make full use of China's advantages in population and natural resources, and promote Chinese culture and core values through media such as movies and the Internet, to export China's advanced ideas and culture to the world. Finally, it is necessary to continue to improve comprehensive national strength and maintain a harmonious relationship with all countries in the world, which is conducive to the establishment of people's images and long-term development.

VI. Conclusion

This paper analyzes six movies of different periods, combined with the Speech Accommodation Theory, aiming to analyze the changes in images of

Chinese people in Western movies. The relationship between China and the West is all-around and complex. It is not only directed to realistic interests but also rooted in historical discourse logic. We must notice the complex situation behind the image of Chinese people on the screen, and adopt corresponding strategies to shape and maintain our international image. The international situation is changing with each passing day, and the image of Chinese people in Western movies is constantly worth analyzing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Wenjuan Lang and Meiyuan Liu conducted the research, collected and analyzed the data; Wenjuan Lang wrote the paper; all authors had approved the final version of the paper.

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