

# *The Influence of Geographical Space on the National Image Display of Chinese Films*

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**Abstract:** This research mainly analyzes how Chinese films display national image through geographical space. The research studies focus on how "the fifth generation" and "the sixth generation" of the Chinese mainland directors show the national image of China through the medium of geographical space. The results show that since 1978, geographical space has become an important means of the "fifth generation" and "sixth generation" in Chinese mainland directors to show their national image. China's "fifth generation" directors show China's image and culture to the world by displaying the grand geographical space with national cultural spirit metaphor, while China's "sixth generation" directors show China's image from the micro level by displaying specific Chinese urban and rural space to the world. Although these films show the image of China are all inferior in the box office competition with Hollywood and other international blockbusters, with the establishment of postcolonial context, these films that show the image of China once became the "Oriental spectacle" vision of western scholars, they can inadvertently completed the task of disseminating the image of China.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the birth of national consciousness, the construction of national image often depends on specific works of art and mass media. However, different media have different biases in disseminating national image. Harold Adams Innis thought there were both communication and media have a bias, which was broadly divided into the bias of verbal communication and the bias of written communication, the bias of time and the bias of space. He found the media can be divided into two categories, and there was a fundamental difference between the two parts: the medium that favors the space and the medium that favors the continuation of time. For example, stone inscriptions and clay texts are enduring, so the text they carry has an eternal character. But they are not easy to transport, not easy to produce, and not easy to use. On the contrary, papyrus and paper are light, easy to transport, easy to use, and capable of transmitting information over long distances. However, the information they transmit is limited to the present and relatively short-lived. At the same time, the nature of the media often creates a bias in civilization, which favors the concept of time or favors the concept of space [1]. As a more and more popular mass media, film plays an increasingly important role in the dissemination of national image. A good example is that American "Hollywood" films spread the national image and cultural value of the United States

well. On the other hand, different from literature and other art forms, the film can vividly display the geographical space, and the audience can directly construct the regional image without using abstract thinking. Throughout the history of China's hundred years of film, it can be clearly found that geographical space have always existed in films. However, in the early Chinese films, the geographical image often appeared as a film narrative background.

Until the 1980s, the Chinese "fifth generation" directors, represented by Zhang Yimou, began to take the geographical space as the core of the film narrative, creating a batch of films with the geographical space and culture as the main expression subject, and winning awards at the international film festival and showing the Chinese image to the world. In this kind of films, the regional images are not only the background of film narration, but also the symbols with strong cultural metaphors. The regional images of the Yellow River, land, red sorghum, Suzhou River, etc. go out of the geographical significance, and become the abstract cultural metaphors deliberately for directors.

## **2. Two Forms of geographical space in the Process of Displaying National Image**

Since the 1980s, China's "fifth generation" directors, represented by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, have turned to express the national culture reflected by the geographical space. Different from the "fifth generation" director's expression of the geographical space, the "sixth generation" director, represented by Jia Zhangke, transferred the express of the geographical space to the previously absent marginal areas, and the absent areas in the films of the "fifth generation" such as the marginal villages, towns.

### **2.1 The national image displayed by China's "fifth generation" directors**

After 1978, China's "fifth generation" directors began to use geographical space to display national image, and spread national culture in the films. This change makes the geographical space from the narrative background of previous films to the front stage of cultural communication. In the films, the Chinese "fifth generation" directors often displaying the huge space of China, such as the Huangtu Plateau, the Qinghai Tibet Plateau, the land in the northeast, and reflect on the barbaric and backward culture in the national culture.

Moreover, in the film, the yellow color of land not only becomes the color of the nation, but also penetrates into the blood of the nation and precipitates into the gene of national character. In the movie *Red Sorghum*, Zhang Yimou regards region as the Narrative symbol to eulogize the national spirit. The wild red sorghum in Gaomi of Shandong Province is a symbol of life and the regional spirit. In the movie *Hoh Xil*, the director of Lu Chuan, metaphors the mysterious and unique ecological landscape of Tibet as Holy Spirit. The uninhabited area of Tibet in the movie has an incomparably blue sky, lofty and magnificent snow mountain, Tibetan antelope running in this rough and beautiful wilderness, and the audience is always surrounded by this holy and beautiful landscape in the process of watching the movie. And the blue sky, the lofty snow mountains and the silent wasteland also become the core element of the film narrative.

### **2.2 The national image displayed by China's "Sixth Generation" Directors**

The basic characteristics of post-modernism are mainly to dispel the center and the whole [2]. The films directed by the China's "sixth generation" directors are often painted with postmodern color. In the process of their dialogue with the western postmodern spirit, they turn their attention to the ordinary world. As Jia Zhangke in Shanxi, Zhang Ming in Sichuan, Wang Xiaoshuai in Guizhou, the metaphor of geographical space and national regional culture has developed to the source of

director's creative inspiration. Not like the China's "fifth generation" directors let the West understand the Chinese culture through the grand geographical space, the China's "sixth generation" directors let the western audience understand the real China through a real and micro specific geographical space.

Jia Zhangke is one of the best directors in the "sixth generation". His film creation not only has a strong regional trace, but also his experience in Fenyang county gives him the source and Inspiration of creation. The director likes to put the narrative vision in the micro geographical space, showing the daily life and destiny of individual characters in the small region.

The "sixth generation" directors often like to use the means of long lens documentary to show the ordinary world and individual destiny. Reflected in the movies, the director often pays attention to the real representation of the environment of the characters, the real representation of the specific historical environment of the characters, and the real representation of the personalities and emotions of the characters.

### 2.3 The role of regional dialect in the publicity of national image

Eric Mark Kramer, an American scholar, mentioned in *Intercultural communication in the context of globalization* that in a specific group, language plays the role as adhesive, connecting members belonging to this group, and at the same time, delimiting the boundary between this group and other groups [3]. The regional culture of China is often reflected in dialects. It can even be said that dialects are the core symbol of China's geographical space differentiation. Therefore, using dialect as the narrative means of film can better reflect the real culture of a place, and make the film more authentic and dynamic.

However, after the founding of the new area China, except for the dialect film "catch the young", which was shot in 1963, before 1978, almost no dialect film had been shot by the mainland authorities [4]. The reason is largely due to the influence of the promotion of Putonghua in China at that time.

After the reform and opening up, China's "fifth generation" directors, represented by Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, turned the core of their creation to the national culture and geographical space, and made a batch of new folk custom films to show the Chinese rural customs.

The emergence of dialect movies also makes the audience have two different viewing psychology: the first is to gain a kind of identity in the process of watching movies. Because in a specific dialect context, the audience in the dialect area will have a natural sense of cultural identity to the dialect movies in this area. When the dialect film is shown, the audience in the dialect area can feel a kind of identity based on language through the dialect.

The second is that the audience gets a kind of psychology of seeking novelty in the process of watching movies. In the past experience, movie audiences often show great interest in things they haven't seen or heard before. This kind of curiosity about novelty makes dialect movies popular in areas other than movie audiences. Because dialect is closely related to the culture and humanity of a region. It is not only the language phenomenon in the special geographical space, but also the long-term accumulation of the regional history and culture. Regional dialect can let the audience outside the geographical space understand the situation of the region from the perspective of voice, and expand the depth and breadth of regional cultural communication.

### 3. Chinese Film Image in the Context of Globalization

After Marshall McLuhan put forward the concept of "global village", the concept of globalization was quickly accepted by the public and society. In the trend of globalization, the integration of culture and media has become an irresistible tide of the times. In this billow,

traditional and modern, local and foreign cultures are interwoven, so as to build a trend of multicultural development in the context of globalization. Under the influence of this context, film inevitably becomes a part of global culture. In fact, after the birth of the film, it quickly became an important driver of cultural globalization with its powerful audio-visual cultural form.

In the context of globalization, in the face of the strong entry of Hollywood movies, Chinese native directors have to start to think about how to make the voice of Chinese films in the western film hegemony.

With the publication of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward W. Said, the postcolonial criticism goes into the perspective once again [5]. China's "fifth generation" directors once won the highest awards of three major European film festivals in the 1990s, and also nominated the best foreign language film Oscar four times. By analyzing these films, we can find that no matter Zhang Yimou's "Red Sorghum" or Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine" all put the display of Chinese geographical space and customs at the core. This kind of film built up the "Oriental spectacle" in the minds of Westerners.

The Chinese "sixth generation" directors exposed the specific space and the real life state of the characters in it. Thieves, prostitutes, women's trafficking and so on, construct another kind of "Oriental spectacle" in the eyes of Westerners.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the Chinese "fifth generation" and "sixth generation" director's films winning awards in foreign countries, this kind of cultural output mode, which has been internationalized by exposing ugliness, was once criticized by the Chinese academic circles. But the more embarrassing problem for the "fifth generation" and "sixth generation" directors is that these films, which have won awards in foreign countries, have almost suffered a disastrous defeat at the box office in China. Before Hollywood films had fully invading to China, the films of "the fifth generation" directors had made outstanding box office achievements for a period of time, such as Zhang Yimou's "Red Sorghum" and other films. But with the full invasion of Hollywood films, the "fifth generation" directors started to learn the Hollywood mode.

On the contrary, "the sixth generation" director's film have long existed as an "underground film", unable to enter the cinema. In fact, due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, most of the films made by the "sixth generation" directors can not pass the examination and approval of the film authorities, so they lose the chance to show in China. After winning the award in foreign countries, these films can only be spread through network viewing and other forms. However, with China's accession to the WTO, the film authorities have also adopted a tolerant attitude towards the creation of the "sixth generation" directors. In 2004, the state film administration restored Jia Zhangke's qualification as a director.

Now, with the "sixth generation" directors winning many awards in foreign countries, many movie audiences outside China have regarded the "sixth generation" directors' films as a window to understand Chinese culture.

Through numerous explorations, both the Chinese "fifth generation" and the "sixth generation" directors have gradually realized that geographical space and the customs are the guarantee for films to win international awards and gain domestic public praise.

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