

Trans-regionalism and "Non-regional Space": Chinese-language Commercial Films in the Context of Globalization

Xue HE

Cheongju University, North Chungcheong Province, Korea, 360-764

ABSTRACT

This article examines the "Chinese-language blockbuster" phenomenon that has gained momentum in recent years with the thoughts of Giddens, Tonglinson, and Appadurai on globalization as its concern. The article holds that, similar to Korean films and Japanese anime, the cross-border production, distribution, and consumption of "Chinese-language blockbusters" are mainly achieved through what the authors call "non-regional space" production. The so-called "non-regional space" refers to certain spatial symbols that transcend cultural and regional characteristics or have the original regional or cultural factors removed, and certain "universal" issues with spatial transcendence. The prefix "non-" before "space" does not mean that it is illusory and cannot be perceived, touched, or experienced. Instead, it is intended to show the anonymity, non-regionality, and universality of such spaces. The prominent feature of such spaces is their "transplantability", which not only forms a certain degree of reference to the sliding and metaphor of the original space to some extent, but also can transcend the ambiguous referential relationship with the original space and be consumed by cultures in other regions after being "transplanted".

KEYWORDS

Globalization; Chinese-language commercial films; non-regional space

Since the 1990s, with the acceleration of the process of world economic integration, the issue of globalization has resurfaced, becoming one of the focuses of debate across borders, cultures and ethnic groups, and also one of the "hot topics" in academic institutions and research organizations. The word "renewed" is used to indicate that "globalization" is not a new phenomenon; if we are not confined to the wording, the discussion about "globalization" did not start today. The history of capitalist development itself is a history of global expansion.¹ The colonial expansion of politics and economy was accompanied by the expansion of the cultural territory. In terms of film, although the transnational dissemination of the films of the Lumière brothers contributed greatly to the rise of the national film industries in many countries such as China, it cannot be denied that it can also be regarded as part of the global expansion of capitalism and one of the specific manifestations of the cultural reconstruction of the world map in the 19th century. On the other hand, the heated debates among Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty and beyond about "taking Chinese learning as the foundation and Western learning as the application", "adopting ready-made solutions", and "total Westernization" can seemingly find either explicit or implicit shadows in today's discussions on globalization.

1. 李太成主编 (2001)。《上海文化艺术志》(页 152)。上海:上海社会科学院出版社。

This article examines the "Chinese-language blockbuster" phenomenon that has gained momentum in recent years with the thoughts of Giddens, Tonglison, and Appadurai on globalization as its concern. The article holds that the cross-border production, distribution, dissemination, and consumption of "Chinese-language blockbusters" are mainly achieved through what the author calls "the production of non-locality". The so-called "non-local space" refers to certain spatial symbols and human themes that transcend cultural and regional characteristics or have had their original regional or cultural factors removed.² It contains at least two meanings. The first involves tangible and perceptible material and living spaces, which are manifested in the creation of specific scenes and image spaces without obvious regional characteristics in films. The second involves the thematic space constructed through various discourses and imaginations, which is generally presented as care for certain "universal" human issues in films. The prefix "non-" before "space" does not mean that it is illusory, cannot be perceived, touched, or experienced. Instead, it is intended to show the anonymity, de-territoriality, and universality of such spaces. The prominent feature of such spaces is their "transplantability", which not only forms a sliding and metaphorical reference to the original space to some extent in terms of cross-regionalism and "nonlocal space", but also can transcend the ambiguous discourse with the original space. Relations are "transplanted" and consumed by the culture of a different place. The reason for using "nonterritorial space" rather than "translocality" to refer to this phenomenon is that, in the author's view, the proposition of "translocality" still has the suspicion of a binary division between "local" and "distant", where it first presupposes an origin and then spreads or influences the distant through the practice of "trans-" crossing the boundary. The cultural domain; while "non-territorial space" may be able to transcend the above two divisions and cuts, and help understand the increasingly frequent and close flows, consumption and interactive references among various cultural phenomena in the global context. Similarly, "non-territorial space" and "de-territorial space" are both related and different. In the author's view, the latter emphasizes the removal of the existing actions more, while the former highlights a certain pre-formed state is the description and analysis of the already existing phenomena.

1 "Production without geographical space" and the global expansion of capital

The significant position of spatial concepts in postmodern culture and social critique theories has been emphasized by many scholars, and there is no need to elaborate on this. From Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1992) to Edward Soja (Edward Soja, 1996), from Foucault (1986) to Jameson (Jameson, 1991), space either becomes the focus of their theoretical concerns or is used as the starting point for the development of their theories. It is precisely due to the speculative elaborations of these theorists that our understanding of space has become increasingly complex and mature. Space is no longer a lifeless existence independent of the subject and merely for the subject to be contained within, but rather a complex that gathers "subjectivity and objectivity, abstraction and concreteness, reality and imagination, knowability and unknowability, repetition and difference, spirit and body, consciousness and unconsciousness". In the view of Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1992), the maintenance, survival, and even further strengthening of the capitalist order after the war relied on what he proposed as "the production of space": the crisscrossing of highway networks, the popularity of large shopping malls, the mass replication and production of

suburbanized communities, the uniform spatial layout, and the resulting entire set of rules, all of

2 . Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions in globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

which provided a key guarantee for the consolidation of the capitalist system.³ The production of "non-territorial space" is inseparable from the development of capitalism. The global expansion and colonization of Western capitalism, in the spatial sense, is the rewriting and assimilation of the spatial "alterity" of non-Western countries. In the 1920s and 1930s, modernist skyscrapers not only shaped the character of Western cities such as New York and Chicago but also rewrote the urban lines of Eastern metropolises such as Shanghai and Tokyo, highlighting the anonymity and deterritorialized nature of spaces in different historical and cultural countries. If the production of "non-territorial space" is a certain aspect of modernity, then the development of late capitalism and the acceleration of the rate of economic globalization have transformed "non-territorial space" into an omnipresent existence that spreads to every corner of the world, constituting an important component of postmodernity. Today, if we travel around the world starting from a certain city, crossing the borders of nation-states and language boundaries formed by historical accumulation, we may have such an experience that cities that seem distant and were merely geographical terms in the past do not seem unfamiliar and can be easily recognized in a trance.

For a certain familiar city in memory: the equally busy and glamorous international airport, the equally crisscrossing network of expressways, the equally dazzling glass curtain wall buildings, the equally convenient and rapid subway network, and the equally flamboyant giant billboards. McDonald's, Starbucks, KFC, Disney, shopping malls, etc. not only rewrite the daily lives of ordinary people in different cultures and countries around the world, but also redefine familiarity and strangeness, regionality and de-regionality in the spatial sense.

2 Chinese-language commercial films and the production of "non regional space"

If various versions of "New World" are typical manifestations of capital's participation in the production of "non-geographical space" at the economic level, then the Chinese-language commercial "blockbusters" that gradually took shape at the

beginning of the new century, transporting, appropriating, rewriting and presenting geographical and cultural landscapes, allow us to see the cultural manifestation of "non-geographical space" production. These "transported" spaces seem to have a vague connection with certain scenes that the audience is familiar with, awakening certain lingering sub-layers deep in their memories. However, this allusion is blurred by the context after transportation, making the boundaries between the original space and the "transported" space, appropriation and appropriation no longer clearly distinguishable.

The relationship between Wong Xiaxiang's "Kung Fu" and the mainland space is manifested in at least two aspects: the unspecified street scenes and the central scene "Zhulancengzhai". On the one hand, the old Shanghai streets, buildings, shops, signs, advertisements, and passers-by' clothing seem to refer to a specific time and space. But on the other hand, the film does not intend to explicitly show the specific time and space to the audience. Instead, it vacuums the time and space and separates them from the rich historical and cultural significance contained in the original time and space. In other words, the strategy adopted by "Kung Fu" in handling time and space is quite reminiscent of what Tong Linsen and Appadurai call "deterritorialization" or

"translocality". The Shanghai street scenes borrowed and transplanted into the film "Kung Fu" seem to confirm the cultural and historical relationship between Hong Kong and the mainland on the one hand, narrowing the cultural distance between "post- 97" Hong Kong and the mainland on

3 . Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16 (Spring), 22 – 27. Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

the surface level. But on the other hand, it relates to the global film audience through the strategy of removing regional connotations, becoming one of the hotspots in the global film circulation and consumption market. This strategy also reminds us of the European and American films in 2006.

The Spanish film "Pan's Labyrinth", which has received wide acclaim in the market, was directed by the Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro (translated as "The Labyrinth of the Faun" in Hong Kong). The film is set against the backdrop of the dictatorship of the Franco regime in Spain after World War I, but the specific and tangible historical time and space are replaced by the Gothic fairy tale kingdom of the girl Ofelia. The elves, fauns, princesses and bloodthirsty monsters in the fantasy world gradually blur the images of the brutal officers/fathers and guerrillas fighting against dictatorship in the real world; the boundaries between reality and illusion, history and magic also disappear accordingly.

Chinese-language commercial films mainly produced in the Chinese mainland also present a trend of capital reshaping regional and human landscapes. In terms of themes, the complex and contextualized history is simplified (often presented in the form of a brief commentary at the beginning or end of the film), and instead presents cross-cultural motifs such as revenge, murder, incest, desire and betrayal. The complex power struggle after the decline of the Tang Dynasty is merely a casual footnote in Feng Xiaogang's "The Night Banquet", and what the film truly cares about is the interpretation of the Chinese version of "Hamlet" within the court. In terms of genres, whether it is Zhang Yimou's "Hero", "Ten Swords", "The City in Gold Armor", or "The Night Banquet" and Chen Kaige's "Wu Ji", Chineselanguage commercial films in the Chinese mainland unanimously show an obsession with martial arts films, and this genre has long become a familiar crossregional and cross-cultural symbol in the global image consumption system through the efforts of Bruce Li and Hong Kong films in the last century. In terms of image space, these films do not adhere to the integrity of the film space but instead introduce random switching and transplantation among bamboo forests, deserts, beautiful waters and snowfields, as well as highly decorative interior scenes of the court, following the principle of visual spectacle. In terms of the cast, cross-border combinations, especially those between Hong Kong and Taiwan male

stars and mainland female stars, replicate the successful model of Lee Angh's "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon". In terms of narrative language, similar to Korean blockbusters, the "sewing" effect created by the use of reverse shots, closeups and mobile photography, as well as the extensive use of zoom-in and zoom-out shots and "unnoticed editing", have become the dominant grammar of Chineselanguage commercial films in the Chinese mainland. All of these actually reflect the logic of capital rewriting the map of Chinese-language commercial films: The huge production and marketing costs cannot be recovered solely relying on the stillgrowing mainland film market, and even the sum of the Chinese-language film markets is not enough to guarantee the profitability of the films; only by joining the film industry... In a fluid ball system, Chinese-language commercial films can survive and develop. In other words, at the turn of the century, the audience group faced by Chineselanguage commercial films has exceeded the Chinese-language cultural circle and the non-Chinese-language film communities (including various international film festivals, university campuses and art house circuits) that were explored by art or experimental films from the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and the three regions in the

1980s and 1990s. Instead, it extends to the mainstream audience of the non-Chineselanguage cultural circle, that is, the audience group aged between 12 and 39, accounting for more than 65%. Under such circumstances, the grammatical logic and narrative strategies of Chinese-language commercial films have also undergone corresponding changes. Their notable features are the "de-territorialization" and "nonterritorialization" quoted and emphasized at the beginning of this article, which, from a certain aspect, confirm the relevant discussion of Tong Linson (1999) that local experience and local culture must be elevated to the level of the "single world" if they are to be

understood in the era of globalization.

3 Conclusion: The Reconstruction of the Movie Power Map

The digital revolution that has spread globally since the late 1980s and early 1990s has led to a brand-new era in which the Internet, mobile media, interactive screens, and other forms of communication are almost ubiquitous. In this context of increasing

"convergence" of global economy, culture, and media, media and communication

studies have entered an unprecedented period of uncertainty. The once relatively stable boundaries between media producers and consumers, mainstream commercial media and grassroots media, and different media platforms have become increasingly blurred. In the field of international communication studies, with the emergence of various new forms of communication, the theory of "cultural imperialism," which was well-known to many communication scholars in the past and refers to the dominant influence exerted by a certain "core" entity (a powerful nation-state or multinational company, a global hub city, etc.) on a series of "marginal" countries through the one-way flow of cultural products, has also been challenged. For some international media research scholars (Golding & Harris, 1997), the linear and one-way dominant influence has gradually gone away, and instead, a brand-new interactive connection period, a multifaceted and multi-directional cultural flow network emerging due to digital technology, is likely to replace it. Correspondingly, the problems faced by "core" and "marginal" entities have become increasingly similar. On the one hand, media convergence, ownership, competition, diversity, intellectual property rights, media access, Problems such as media, civic participation, etc. have successively become the focus when developed countries discuss media development and media policies in the changing digital technology environment. On the other hand, the acceleration of the rate of globalization (in which the media is both a facilitator and a recipient) has also drawn developing countries deeper and wider into the changing world pattern, often forcing them to confront topics similar to those of media development in developed countries, but at the same time posing challenges to their own existing power structures.

Although Chinese-language commercial films have shown either explicit or implicit compromises in terms of historical complexity, cultural "purity" and aesthetic "nationality" due to the role of capital and consumption logic, and have revealed certain aspects of cultural representation identity in the era of globalization under the guidance of the principles of "de-territorialization" and "non-territoriality", on the other hand, the rise of Chinese-language commercial films can also be regarded as a kind of The rewriting of the existing power map of films. The "worldliness" of the transnational and global production mode, narrative and image style of Chinese commercial films further challenges the concept of "national films" that have been more or less essentialized, and also provides the possibility for us to think about the relationship between "national films" and Western films (Hollywood) beyond the framework of the binary model of "domination/resistance". Although The unbalanced power relations on the world film map have not undergone qualitative changes. However, this does not mean that this imbalance can be rewritten by promoting "nationality", "regionality", or "national charm" and "national style". On the contrary, the focus of changing this power imbalance should and must be placed on the pursuit of "universality", including topics and styles with "universal" significance. Although "universality" has become a rather questionable topic under the influence of post-structuralism, feminism, and cultural studies theories, it can still be strategically applied to discuss the relationship between non-Hollywood films and Hollywood films. Fundamentally, the application of the "universality" strategy lies in dismantling the "universality" myth of Hollywood films and redrawing the map of power in

world cinema.

References

- [1] 李太成 主编 (2001)。《上海文化艺术志》(页 152)。上海:上海社会科学院出版社。[2 纪一新 (Robert Chi, 2005)。(功夫:华语电影与全球化的考古学)(Kung Fu Hustle: An archaeology of Chinese cinema and globalization, 为未发表论文)。上海大学、北京大学(编),《全球化语境中的中国电影与亚洲电影》论文集,2005 年。
- [3] 孙绍谊 (2006)。权力格局中的「普世性」策略:好莱坞与作为「利益相关者」的中国电影。《电影艺术》,第 5 期,页 47-51。
- [4] Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions in globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- [5] Foucault, M. (1986). *Of other spaces*. *Diacritics*, 16 (Spring), 22 – 27. Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- [6] Golding, P. & Harris, P. (Eds.) (1997). *Beyond cultural imperialism: Globalization, communication and the new international order*. London: Sage.
- [7] Jameson, F (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- [8] Lefebvre, H. (1992). *The production of space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.