



RESEARCH PAPER

The Filming and Impact of the "Shaolin Temple" Movie (1982)

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ABSTRACT

As a unique genre in Chinese cinema, Shaolin films have gained recognition worldwide. This article explores the essence of Shaolin films and, based on this exploration, introduces the background and filming process of the 1982 version of the movie "Shaolin Temple." By comparing real historical events at Shaolin Temple with the film's narrative, the article delves into the significant impact the movie has had both domestically in China and on the international stage. The main objective of this research article is to trace out the impacts of Shaolin Temple movie on different aspects of society and the culture. The methodological approach of this research article is based on the both the documents and the visual description which are obtained through different sources. The sources utilized for this research article are both in the form of primary and secondary sources. The results of the shows that the Shaolin films have greatly affected the society both in China and internationally which can be taken as a model for the development of the films in distinctive spaces. This is essential develop a new mode in the formation of films and their recognition.

KEYWORDS Shaolin Films, Filming Background, Domestic Impact, International Impact

Introduction

Since the early 20th century, martial arts have become a frequent theme and genre in martial arts films. The Shaolin Temple, as a gathering place for martial arts from all dynasties and folk traditions, has absorbed the essence of advanced skills and techniques, integrating the essence of Chinese martial arts. Since ancient times, it has formed the saying "Shaolin Kung Fu is the best in the world." Looking at reality, most audiences around the world have come to know and understand Chinese martial arts through watching martial arts films. In many martial arts films, there are elements of Shaolin, and Shaolin films have become an important genre within Chinese martial arts cinema. Due to the influence and guidance of films and television on the audience, it is necessary to define and explain the significance of Shaolin films. The author believes that true Shaolin films are those that have Shaolin culture as the story background, showcasing Shaolin Kung Fu, with Shaolin masters, disciples, or inheritors as the main characters.

As a unique genre of Chinese cinema, Shaolin films have gained recognition worldwide and gradually been accepted. In this process, the film "Shaolin Temple," released in 1982, played a significant role. This article will analyze the background of the film "Shaolin Temple," its overview, and the impact it had.

Literature Review

Reconstruction, authenticity, and management concerns have received more attention lately in critical heritage studies. Among these, Laurajane Smith's concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) has grown to be a potent weapon for challenging

the dominance of Western conceptions of heritage, particularly with regard to the way that heritage specialists, governmental organizations, and other actors included in the AHD think, speak, and interact with heritage. In addition to offering guidelines for defining and understanding the significance of heritage, some international conventions and charters, like the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (CCPWCNH), which was adopted by UNESCO in 1972, also serve as approving bodies that direct national policies regarding the conservation, management, and use of heritage. However, non-European contexts may have quite different understandings of heritage conservation and governance due to diverse historical and cultural foundations. Because of this, the emergence of a non-Western AHD will also require the enactment of the power dynamics inherent in certain national heritage contexts (Su, Song & Sigley, 2019).

Shaolin kung fu books and films had in helping the Chinese people develop a sense of national identity. The twentieth-century kung fu films and wuxia books served as crucial platforms for the preservation and resuscitation of national identity. They accomplished the dual goals of creating a contemporary Chinese national identity and reclaiming traditional Chinese culture. Shaolin, the birthplace of Chan Buddhism and the hub of Chinese martial arts, was revered as an emblem of natural power and morality and as such was frequently included as a theme in books and motion pictures. Chinese novelists and film makers helped the Chinese people create a modern national identity by inventing a cultural identity through the use of Shaolin kung fu and legendary Shaolin heroes (Zhouxiang, 2020).

Material and Methods

For this research article a multi-facet methodological approach is applied to obtain the desired results along with the qualitative research techniques. This study article's methodological approach is predicated on the visual description and the documents, both of which come from various sources. Primary and secondary sources were both used as sources for this research article. The study's findings indicate that the Shaolin films have had a significant impact on society both domestically and globally, and this suggests a paradigm for how movies should be developed in unique settings.

Background of the Film "Shaolin Temple"

In the 1970s, Chinese film production was at a relatively primitive stage, with outdated creative concepts that hindered the progress and development of the industry. Martial arts films in China demanded high standards in terms of filming environments, technical levels, and martial arts performers. These constraints limited filmmakers even if they had excellent scripts and ideas, as they were restricted by the conditions and technological limitations of the time. Moreover, foreign and private capital were restricted from entering the Chinese film industry, imposing further limitations.

Fortunately, the State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the State Council Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office had close ties with Hong Kong. Liao Chengzhi, then Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee and Director of the State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the State Council Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, showed great interest in the development of Hong Kong martial arts films. Liao Chengzhi, a martial arts enthusiast himself, suggested to Hong Kong filmmakers after watching the film "Fists of Fury" that they should produce martial arts films related to Shaolin Kung Fu or Tai Chi to showcase China's martial arts culture to the international community. Later, he continued to follow up on this matter,

providing many suggestions and ideas for the film's script, shooting locations, and actor selection.

Overview of the Film "Shaolin Temple"

Real Historical Events

At the end of the Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD), social warfare was ongoing. The abbot of the Shaolin Temple, Zhi Cao, was a monk with political foresight. Considering the military forces from various sides, he foresaw the unification of the Tang Dynasty and collaborated with the monks of the Shaolin Temple to defend the city of Huanzhou against the army of Wang Shichong. This collaboration resulted in the capture of the city in April of the fourth year of Wude (621 AD). Afterward, Li Shimin, the Prince of Qin, sent envoys to commend the achievements of the monks and met with thirteen monks who had contributed. Li Shimin praised the merit and behavior of the Shaolin Temple in the "Prince of Qin's Instruction." This instruction was later engraved on a stone tablet, placed within the Shaolin Temple, and is still preserved there. This collaboration laid the foundation for the prosperity of the Shaolin Temple. After the unification of the Tang Dynasty, the Shaolin Temple gradually prospered. This historical event gave rise to the story of the "Thirteen Monk Warriors Saving the Tang King," depicted as murals on the walls of the Shaolin Temple for future generations to remember.

Overview of the Film "Shaolin Temple"

Filming for "Shaolin Temple" began in 1979, with the Great Wall Company initially inviting Hong Kong director Chen Wen to shoot the film. Director Chen Wen selected Wu Gang, a contracted artist from the Great Wall Company, as the lead actor, while other roles were played by performers from the Henan Peking Opera Troupe. Wu Gang had a tall and handsome appearance, but his kung fu performance was too formulaic. Additionally, since all other actors were from a Peking Opera background, their stage-like performances were apparent in the film. The completed footage left the production company unsatisfied. Furthermore, the initial filming took place in winter, resulting in dull and unimpressive scenes. After considering these factors, the company decided to completely overhaul the project and start afresh.

Feeling guilty, Chen Wen recommended Zhang Xinyan to take over the direction, and this suggestion was quickly accepted by the company. Zhang Xinyan made two requests: first, to change the original script according to his vision, and second, to replace all the actors with martial arts professionals since he believed that the company's actors were not martial arts specialists. He wanted the film to showcase authentic Chinese martial arts and Shaolin Kung Fu. Zhang Xinyan had previously made documentaries with a delegation of Chinese martial arts representatives, understanding the unique styles and traditional techniques of each martial artist. To ensure authenticity, he decided to cast real martial artists and replace the original actors. The top management of the Great Wall Company agreed to this request, and they began searching for martial artists to play the lead roles. The main character, Jueyuan, was played by Jet Li, who was already a five-time all-around champion in national martial arts competitions. Yuhai, who played Master Tanzong, was a famous martial artist in Shandong Province in the 1950s, specializing in Seven Star Praying Mantis Fist. Yuchenghui, who played the antagonist Wang Renze, was a member of the Shandong Sports Institute Wushu Team and had already won the all-around championship in Qingdao at the age of nineteen with a staff routine. Jichunhua, who played the character Tuying, was a retired member

of the Zhejiang Wushu Team. In the end, "Shaolin Temple" featured 24 martial artists from various regions across China.

In addition, director Zhang Xinyan departed from the indoor set filming model prevalent in kung fu films at that time and decided to shoot outdoor scenes at the Shaolin Temple on Mount Song. Learning from the previous director's experience, he chose to film in the bright spring season to ensure vibrant and beautiful visuals, resulting in the picturesque landscapes presented in the film.

Storytelling in the Film

In the late years of the Sui Dynasty, the rebel general Wang Shichong seized control of a region and sent his nephew, General Wang Renze, to build fortifications on the banks of the Yellow River. Wang Renze, seeking to expedite construction, mistreated laborers. The martial artist known as "God-Leg Zhang" resisted and was killed, but his son Xiaohu escaped by jumping into the river. Xiaohu sought refuge on Mount Song, where he was saved by Shaolin martial monk Jueyuan. To avenge his father, Xiaohu became a monk with the Buddhist name "Jueyuan."

The Impact of the Movie "Shaolin Temple" in Mainland China

Spreading Records of High Box Office

For various reasons, first-hand information about the box office performance of "Shaolin Temple" is still lacking. However, based on scattered records, we can still imagine the evidence supporting the movie's box office miracle. This film was the first collaboration between Hong Kong and the mainland, and it premiered in Hong Kong during the Spring Festival of 1982. Alongside it, other films such as the Hong Kong comedy "Aces Go Places," the American adventure film "Raiders of the Lost Ark," Jackie Chan's self-written, self-directed film "Dragon Lord," and Lau Kar-leung's self-directed "Legendary Weapons of China" were also released. On the first day of release, "Shaolin Temple" surpassed "Dragon Lord" with a box office of 556,000 Hong Kong dollars compared to "Dragon Lord's" 550,000 (Li Derun, 1983). In the first six weeks, the total revenue reached 16 million Hong Kong dollars, with an audience of over one million, breaking the previous highest record of 11.02 million Hong Kong dollars set by Jackie Chan's self-written, self-directed "The Young Master" in 1979. (Shang Wei, 2009) Starting from this film, Jet Li became another kung fu movie star in the hearts of Hong Kong people after Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

From June onwards, the film was released in mainland China, sparking a wave of enthusiasm for Shaolin culture. Almost everywhere in the country, "Shaolin Temple" set new historical records for the number of screenings, audience size, and box office revenue. In Beijing, screenings began on June 5th in major cinemas. On that day, the newly launched "Stage and Screen" on China Central Television (CCTV) featured a detailed report on the film "Shaolin Temple." The film accumulated 8,845 screenings in Beijing, attracting 8.71 million viewers, with a distribution income of 881,900 yuan (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture, 1996). After the release of "Shaolin Temple," a whirlwind of martial arts films swept through the following years. From 1983 to 1986, almost all the top five highest-grossing films nationwide were kung fu films. In terms of absolute audience numbers, "Shaolin Temple" reached 350 million viewers nationwide, surpassing any other type of film (Zhang Baiqing, 2014).

Bringing Enormous Charm to Kung Fu Films

As a mass media product, the value of a film lies in the effective communication between the transmitter and the receiver. "Shaolin Temple" established a unique scene in its transmission and reception process due to its connection with a vast audience. Even though time has passed, many details experienced while watching "Shaolin Temple" remain vivid in the minds of viewers. The memories are filled with everyone's understanding of how the film became a phenomenon and demonstrate the charm of the film on the audience.

During the early days of reform and opening up, when resources were scarce, the economy was not affluent, and the film industry was underdeveloped, watching movies was not a necessary or easily accessible daily activity. However, the wave of enthusiasm for watching "Shaolin Temple" drove countless audiences to make great efforts to see the film. At that time, buying a movie ticket was a challenging task. In Nanjing, some residents stayed up overnight and lined up for tickets a day in advance to ensure they could watch the movie (Song Yu, 2013). Due to the overwhelming number of viewers, tickets were scarce, and many cinemas sold only about one-third of the tickets they officially released, with the rest going through personal connections (Jiang Shaobin, 2011). People's attention to the movie even affected social order. When "Shaolin Temple" was released in Gaozhou City, Guangdong Province, the enthusiasm of the audience surpassed any previous film, and the cinema had to request assistance from the police to maintain order for ticket purchases (Liang Xiong, 1992).

The "Shaolin Temple" craze spread from cities to rural areas. Villagers flocked to nearby town cinemas as if attending a fair. Buying tickets in the countryside required even more effort. Some people recalled, "At that time, living in the countryside, I called a classmate in the county more than thirty kilometers away, asking him to buy movie tickets in advance. Then, I walked to the county, watched the movie, and walked back home" (Liu Yueting, 2006). Local farmers in Baoding City, Hebei Province, came from dozens of miles away to watch the film. When a factory cinema was established at the junction of Zhejiang and Anhui provinces, the first film shown was "Shaolin Temple." Many farmers from both provinces traveled dozens of miles to watch it, prompting the cinema to schedule eight additional screenings (Xu Mengmei, 2013).

The renowned Chinese sociologist Mr. Fei Xiaotong once mentioned that when "Shaolin Temple" was screened in his hometown of Shenzhen, surrounding farmers came from all directions in boats, bringing their children to watch the movie. Farmers going to watch a movie also meant eating and shopping, leading to a 60,000 yuan increase in the total town's business turnover within a week (Fei Xiaotong, 1986). Teenagers were fervent followers of "Shaolin Temple," and at that time, elementary school students couldn't resist the trend. If someone hadn't seen "Shaolin Temple," it seemed like they didn't deserve to be Chinese. In many people's memories, "Shaolin Temple" was repeatedly watched, creating a unique phenomenon. When the film was shown in Zhengzhou, young people and children never grew tired of watching it. They gathered together to discuss and imitate the movie scenes, competing to remember more and better. They even gestured and imitated while walking on the street, enjoying it endlessly (Que Bing, 2010).

Bringing Substantial Economic Value and Social Reputation to the Local Area

In 1982, the fate of Shaolin Temple took a turn. The release of the Hong Kong film "Shaolin Temple" brought this silent ancient monastery back to the historical stage, and Shaolin Temple finally seized the opportunity for a splendid revival and the ensuing tremendous attention.

According to ticket statistics from 1974 to 1978, about 200,000 visitors came to Shaolin Temple. However, by 1982, the number of visitors had exceeded 700,000, reaching 2.6 million in 1984. After the 1990s, the number of visitors stabilized at around 1.5 million annually. According to villagers around Shaolin Temple, in the early 1980s, Shaolin Temple was still "a dilapidated sight, with only a dozen monks, 9 of them being elderly, relying on 28 acres of land for their livelihood" (China Newsweek, 2006). With the prosperity of Shaolin Temple, it has officially been approved by the national cultural and tourism authorities to enter the ranks of national 5A-level tourist attractions. The revenue from the Shaolin Temple scenic area has become an important pillar for local GDP growth, consistently accounting for 38% of the regional fiscal revenue. At the same time, Shaolin Temple itself has attracted significant attention and influence, with millions of related news articles found online, making Shaolin Temple a focal point that captures public attention.

The enormous box office revenue and market impact generated by "Shaolin Temple" allowed people to see that the business opportunities contained in market-oriented films far exceeded the commercial achievements of previous films relying on government and policy support. This demonstration not only triggered a change in the industry's mindset but also discovered the economic effects extended from films as market resources. First and foremost, "Shaolin Temple" led to the rise and development of Chinese kung fu films. The early to mid-1980s was a period of rapid decline in Chinese film audiences, and various film production units faced tremendous economic pressure. Kung fu films became a lifesaver during this period (Wang Haizhou, 2004). "Shaolin Temple" in 1982 is considered a symbol of the revival of commercial Chinese films in the new era. The widespread dissemination of "Shaolin Temple" also created a new tourist destination – the Songshan Shaolin Temple scenic area. Since then, tourism income has become a pillar industry in the region. "Shaolin Temple" also gave birth to the emerging martial arts industry. After the film was released, a "Shaolin craze" and "kung fu craze" emerged nationwide, with thousands of young people going to Shaolin Temple to learn kung fu. Consequently, Dengfeng City saw the emergence of over a thousand martial arts venues and schools. The kung fu economy became a new industry in the local area.

International Impact of the Movie "Shaolin Temple"

Representing the Shaolin films of the 1980s and 1990s, "Shaolin Temple" not only gained popularity domestically but also spread internationally. The film "Shaolin Temple" set off a new wave of martial arts films in the global film industry, turning Jet Li into an international film star and sparking a kung fu craze in China. "Shaolin Temple" attracted attention from many countries' film capital during its production, and the overseas copyright revenue reached 20 million Hong Kong dollars (Zi Ying, 2013). In addition to Mandarin and Cantonese versions, there were also English, Thai, German, Japanese, French, and other versions, making it a true "international blockbuster" (Li Derun, 1983). "Shaolin Temple" continued to receive sustained reactions from foreign audiences after its release.

During the Spring Festival of 1982, most countries that purchased the rights to the film released it simultaneously with Hong Kong. In locations like New York in the United States, Bangkok in Thailand, Sydney in Australia, and Manila in the Philippines, "Shaolin Temple" broke previous records for Chinese films' box office sales.

Dissemination in European and American Countries

In a 2014 survey on the feasibility of China's film market competition strategy, conducted by the Chinese Academy of Arts "Study on Foreign Audiences' Aesthetic Acceptance and Consumption Trends of Chinese Films," the results showed that among familiar Chinese actors, Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li ranked in the top three. Jet Li had the highest recognition in North America (Chang Songmu, 2014). This survey confirmed the film's popularity in European and American countries at that time. In New York's Kim Theatre, there were instances of viewers breaking down the cinema doors to watch the film (Fei Honghuang, 2011). In Eastern European countries, especially in Poland and Bulgaria, "Shaolin Temple" received strong responses. In Poland, the audience exceeded 5 million, a remarkable achievement in a country with a population of only 37 million (Fei Honghuang, 2011). After the film's release, a "kung fu fever" quickly emerged, and kung fu became a specific term in the Polish language. Almost every teenager knew about it, and many sought ways to learn kung fu, with some even going directly to the Chinese embassy in Poland for help (Reference News, 1985). In the largest cinema in downtown Sofia, Bulgaria, 10 out of 41 cinemas screened the film. For several consecutive days, it was full house every day, and the local government had to deploy police to maintain order due to the large number of ticket buyers (Reference News, 1985).

Dissemination in East Asian Countries

Among East Asian countries, Japan was the first to purchase the rights to "Shaolin Temple." On the premiere day, many cinemas had to temporarily add standing-room-only tickets to meet the audience's demand. The North Hill Theatre in Osaka's Umeda district set the highest single-day box office record in Japan, with an audience of over 10,000. In just two months, the distribution company's revenue reached 2 billion yen (equivalent to over 130 million yuan at the time) (Li Honghui, 1992). In Japanese newspapers of that time, headlines like "The 'Shaolin Temple' whirlwind sweeps across the Japanese archipelago," "Shaolin Temple, a great film, has landed," and "Great success! Chinese film 'Shaolin Temple'" were prominent and significant (Fei Honghuang, 2011). In February 1983, the Japanese magazine "Priority" selected the "Top Ten Foreign Films," and "Shaolin Temple" ranked fourth. Among the top ten foreign male stars, Jet Li, the lead actor of "Shaolin Temple," ranked fourth, becoming the first actor from a new Chinese film to receive a foreign film award (Zhang Shouqiang, Yu Huaifu, 1993). Subsequently, Japanese audiences established fan clubs for "Shaolin Temple" and fan associations, among other grassroots organizations. Whenever a kung fu group with actors from "Shaolin Temple" visited Japan, the fan clubs would also visit with the group (Ding Yaping, 2015). One middle-aged woman even wrote letters to kung fu groups, claiming that she had watched "Shaolin Temple" 16 times. Despite facing many difficulties and losing confidence in life, the film gave her the courage to face life. When encountering unpleasant things, she found inspiration in the spirit portrayed in "Shaolin Temple" (Ding Yaping, 2015).

Conclusion

The movie "Shaolin Temple" has had a significant impact both domestically in China and internationally. From a cross-cultural communication perspective, "Shaolin Temple" not only propelled Chinese kung fu films onto the global stage but also facilitated the dissemination of Chinese culture portrayed in the film worldwide. Looking at the perspective of film and national image construction, "Shaolin Temple," in conjunction with the new initiatives of economic reform and opening up, added a vibrant dimension to the construction of China's national image. As noted by Jia Leilei, a researcher in Shaolin cinema, many overseas patriotic Chinese returned to the embrace

of their homeland after watching this film. They saw hope for China's future and glimpsed the dawn of a new era through the film's expression of open cultural ideals, feeling a positive and uplifting spiritual force. Therefore, "Shaolin Temple" can be seen as paving the way for foreign capital to enter China's film market, offering support and innovation. This venture, driven by market forces, marked a bold and innovative attempt in Chinese cinema during the 1980s.

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