A Global Discourse Perspective: How Movies Build and Disseminate Country Images

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Abstract

Because of globalization influencing every aspect of the international community, space for global discourse and public discussion where audience form their understanding of other countries based on a range of discourses and their consumption of cultural products is maintained according to countries' comprehensive national power. Stigmatized and otherized by the existing discourse structures which determine country images in the international society, China is in great need of new ways to construct its image. Movies as economic and cultural products are useful in creating space for public discourse, and furthermore, communicating and constructing country images. However, so far, Chinese movies have not fulfilled such roles and require improvements, such as focusing on individuals' life experiences and daily details, establishing unique cinematic discourses with Chinese characteristics so as to take advantage of the positive effects movies can have on building and disseminating country images.

Keywords

Media Discourse; Discourse Structure; International Communication; Country Image; Film Studies.

1. Introduction

From a global discourse perspective, competition between countries is no longer limited to traditional fields, such as politics, economy, or military power. International influence and global discourse including national soft power and country image have become important battlefields of comprehensive national power. Since China has been at a disadvantage for long in the global discourse hierarchy suffering from distorted and demonized reports by western media and China's country image is prominently otherized and stigmatized, it's very important to acquire international discourse power, tell China's stories effectively, communicate China's beliefs, and reconstruct its country image.

Media's contribution to international communication is effective in increasing China's international influence because how media express China's voice is the center of attention in the battlefield of international popularity. Besides building flagship media organizations of international communication, China can also draw its cultural power from art and with its help shape a positive country image. Represented by movies, audiovisual products are not only commodities but also special cultural products with cultural and ideological influences, which are vehicles for a country's cultural, political, economic beliefs and values, and social ideals and an epitome of a country's image and ideology. Art as a form of communication can show the world a country's social environments, cultural atmospheres, social spirits, people's personalities and ideal values at different stages of national development from a variety of perspectives and effectively avoid audience's hostile interpretation of potentially political

content like news based on the presumed ideological positions of the communicators and the negative effects of cultural discount on the construction of country images.

2. Literature Review: Studies on the Relationship between Media Discourse and Image

2.1. Discursive Control and Image Building

Foucault proposes the two concepts of discourse order and control in his Orders of Discourse. He argues that discourse is constructed under the influence of an invisible mechanism and becomes an intangible system deciding how people act and think[1]. He reveals the deep connection between discourse, knowledge and power, i.e., discourse is the vehicle, knowledge is the surface and power is the core. Among individuals, groups or countries, controlling and being controlled are actualized with the help of discourse order. Involving many aspects, discourse order determines who has the power to shape images and people's recognition of its legitimacy. When self-reinforcing power is keen on maintaining the status quo by oppression and exclusion, when the interests behind such power are compromised, the influence of discourse order is wider and the difficult rebellion against the old order is more liberating and revolutionary.

Related to a variety of powers, the concept of discourse has a focus on how to express and what to omit. Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory provides insights into filtering information. He believes that information requires filtering and the existence of gatekeepers is connected with other social systems[2]. The development of the Gatekeeping Theory realizes that behind the gatekeepers are powers, which means that influenced politically and economically by specific individuals or groups who have control over discourse dissemination, discourse in journalism involves practical gains in real life and abstract ideologies or images.

In the international community, discourse leads to one country oppressing another one at a deeper level and cultural hegemony of the ruling class who achieves dominance by establishing and controlling rules in cultural fields. Gramsci reveals the obscure relationship between discourse and image and suggests that the oppressive attribute of discourse is connected with image building and that inequality among countries, to some extent, is presented as cultural hegemony in his Prison Notebooks[3]. Some countries don't have the power to disseminate their own cultures so they lose their rights to building their own images which are determined by other dominant countries. Western countries' exertion of such rights is baseless and unauthorized.

Sovereign states need to gradually take back their rights to disseminate their cultures, take down the contextual barriers and create bonds between their cultural symbols and their audience and push their symbols out there for localization and globalization so as to rebel against the existing discourse order, achieve Self-expression, rebuild their country images. Roland Barthes's semiotics also justifies using symbols in intercultural communication to reshape images. Relying on certain media organizations with a diverse audience and wide influence to break down the existing discourse order and help countries obtain more widely acknowledged symbols is an important part of the general plans of building country images.

2.2. Discourse Communication and China's Image

Against the background of media convergence and globalization, discourse system of media's international communication accumulates an abundance of national image symbols. Social media is deeply rooted in the international community so overseas audience construct their understanding of foreign countries' symbols via a series of intercultural media agendas and discourse communication. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, a global emergency, China's image suffers from being misread and misunderstood by the discourse of

international media. How to lessen stigmatization and otherization of China in discourse is a pressing theoretical and practical issue in the field of international communication. In-depth examination into the relationship between discourse of international communication and construction of country image is key to improving country images.

In China's academia, the issue of country image has been a heated topic for research and discussion. Scholars try to explore this issue and come up with effective ways to shape China's country image with the help of different theories and from different perspectives. They dig deep into and extend the extant theories from western scholars who study discourse control and image building.

Ruan believes that discourse is an important step of international politics resulting in the establishment of international order. Because of political, economic and cultural differences and the head start enjoyed by developed countries, many developing countries are at a disadvantage or even speechless in global discourse and their country images are smeared[4]. Drawing inspiration from Foucault's studies, Li believes that symbols define the meaning of the world and give the world its values, and discourses construct many social practices in a variety of fields across the world[5]. Furthermore, many scholars study discourse and image from the perspective of global governance and reveal the relationship between global discourse, and national symbols and images.

Scholars also do case study on certain countries which are successful in building their country images and how they construct their images provides valuable references for China. They also focus on how these countries disseminate their cultural symbols, beliefs and values in the international community, get recognition and build positive country images. For example, Zhang reveals how the US influences the world through the power of media and build its country image based on its political and diplomatic activities and its plan for international communication in his Discourse Power[6].

When it comes to China, scholars of global discourse and country image focus on acquiring international discourse power by China's international media. After studying how foreign media depicted China's image at the beginning of the 21st century, Zhou emphasizes the importance of acquiring international discourse power in his in-depth argument[7]. Liang proposes new paradigms for acquiring international discourse power from the perspective of global responsibility and future development[8]. Scholars, such as Li[9], Tan[10], Wang[11] propose more detailed ways of and suggestions on building country images from the perspectives of global media agendas, public diplomacy activities and development of mainstream media. As for movies' constructive role in building country images, scholars, such as Meng[12], Rao[13], Jia[14] study the practicality and effectiveness of movies in building China's country image from the perspectives of cultural symbols, cultural consciousness and communication strategies and the role of movies in building and disseminating country images has gained more and more attention from the academia and industry.

3. International Discourse and Public Space: Analysis of Movies' Role in Building Country Images

Movies have different attributes, such as commodities in the cinematic industry, an indispensable part of the market economy, an important pillar of the cultural industry, enriching people's cultural consumption, and an integrated art form which can be categorized as art. Movies are a special kind of art with strong cultural and ideological influences, and artistic and aesthetic values. Movies can reflect a country's comprehensive national power, including its soft power of ideology, belief, value and religion, hard power of economy, scientific research and military strength. Movie content presents or mirrors the reality or the cultural landscape of a country, an ethnic group, an era or a community and visualizes

abstract spirits as concrete moving pictures. In international communication, movies as a special window with cultural and economic influences on global discourse and public space showcase a country's social environment, cultural atmosphere, social spirits, people's personalities and ideal values at any phase of development from diverse perspectives.

3.1. Public Influence of Discourse in Movies

Though there exists a hierarchy among countries in global discourse, the hierarchy is not stable, changing with variables, which leads to changing global discourse including country image. Scholars, such as Susan Sontag and Bourdieu, suggest that changing the hierarchy of global discourse may lead to transformation of country image and media with public influence plays an important role in the transformation.

In international communication, movies have a diverse and wide audience so its influence is not limited by nationality, religion, gender or occupation. Judged subjectively by the audience with group knowledge selecting, processing and influencing their viewing, movie content becomes part of public discourse, and as a result, influences a country's position in the hierarchy and its image. Therefore, it's believed that discourse and expression in movies can infiltrate into public discourse and lead to transformation of country image so countries or regions with a strong movie industry naturally enjoy an advantage in public discourse via their discourse in movies, leaving a positive impression on the audience from other countries.

3.2. Movies' Role in Building Space for Public Discourse

International discourse is dynamic, so is the construction of country images. A variety of media using their own channels or forms to communicate with their international audience. Their messages after processing and promoting become discourse of deeper meaning and larger implication. Space for public discourse is consisted of international discourses from countries and regions all over the world. The structure of public discourse space is closely related to the social hierarchies the subjects are in and their positions. Four structural factors, i.e. discourse production, discourse relation, discourse condition and discourse symbols are four important indicators of public discourse power eagerly sought after.

Movies as an important international communication tool naturally play an important role in the space for public discourse. Movies produce discourses based on their source cultures and value systems, process content about social environment, cultural atmosphere, social spirits, people's personalities and ideal values in a humanistic and artistic approach and promote such content in the public discourse space. Thank to their artistic attribute, when mirroring the realistic society from diverse perspectives, movies can beautify sensitive content, portray country images in a culturally and artistically positive way and deliver them to the public discourse space which is enriched as a result.

3.3. Mechanisms for Building Country Images in Public Discourse

In the current stage of multidimensional globalization, media technologies are developing rapidly and the hostility and complexity of the environment for media in international communication are increasing. How to choose the most influential interpretive system with the most communication effectiveness from intense competition of public opinions to form an interpretation of country image is an urgent issue in the field of international communication in this day and age. Increasing a country's comprehensive national power, developing its soft power, delving deep into its national culture, focusing on its people's spiritual world and ideal vision will fundamentally and continually provide concrete, interesting and true-to-life materials for global communication. A country should figure out its position in the hierarchy of international communication, gain a foothold in public space and connect itself with the outside world through communication and build friendly relationships for discourse exchanges in order to disseminate its country image in a healthy space for public discourse.

Based on discursive logic, movies become useful in building country images in the national discourse system and public discourse space. Movies visualize social reality and artistically express social metaphors and conceptualize spiritual projections, as well as reflecting country image and ideology in a concentrated way. Movies involving and exploring public agendas should express a country's attitudes and beliefs so as to show overseas audience this country's physical and moral image. It's practical to rely on movies to shape comprehensible and understandable country images and explore effective means of communication in public discourse, and rely on communication to win identification with the suggested country images in movies from the international community.

4. Breakthrough and Self-expression: Chinese Movies Tell China's Stories Effectively

Audiovisual products, such as American movies, Japanese anime and Korean movies receive good market feedback and, at the same time, disseminate their respective abstract content, such as cultures, values and ideologies, to other countries[16]. Their selling cultural products expands their international influence and squeezes the market space for other countries' cultural products, adding more pressure on their cultural development and transmission and reducing their residents' identification with and confidence in their own country images.

Thanks to the supports and efforts from different stakeholders, China's film market is developing rapidly. More and more Chinese movies are able to rival those from countries with highly marketized film industries, achieving high box office and receiving positive reviews. Chinese movies are accelerating their process of "going global", telling China's stories effectively and taking back the right to shape China's country image. However, due to cultural and political differences, and ideological conflicts, Chinese movies' overseas revenue or political and cultural communication effectiveness are still lacking, which is not conducive to relying on media to shape an objective image of China in the international community and increase China's international influence so it's necessary to find solutions to and means of creating breakthroughs in international discourse.

4.1. Movies' Focus on Individual Life and Real-life Details

In international discourse, the common subjects are ethnic groups, societies or countries and the content is normally broad and abstract, covering the whole world and focusing on large-scale social systems, such as politics, economy or culture. Country image is a personified existence in discourse competition. However, individuals are very different from and far away from the abstract image so target audience have a vague understanding of individuals. Therefore, in the battle for international discourse, focusing on individuals and details should be an important part of the image-building plan.

In international communication, Chinese movies' attention on individuals and Real-life details is especially important. The portrayal of unprivileged individuals and insignificant persons in Chinese society can display their living environments, life situations and visions in life, which is a small window into a bigger picture. Showing real details of Chinese society can reflect an era of development, economic growth and social inclusion, fill the void of muted individuals in international discourse, give voice to their mindsets, individual consciousness, life situations, aspirations and desires, invoke identification and resonance from overseas audience in a democratic way, draw movies' affective influence and moral power from real life, effectively showcase the profoundness and inclusiveness of China's stories, and build a more realistic image of China with the help of individuals and details.

4.2. Innovation of Discursive Logic with Chinese Characteristics

Some western countries with greater comprehensive national power thanks to their earlier capital accumulation and worldwide invasion have established international discursive logic with the help of their strong ability to export culture, which leads to cultural imperialism in globalization, gaps between countries' ability to export information and unfair allocation of information resources[17]. Therefore, rather than follow or approve of the existing discourse system, or fight against public opinion, China should establish its own discursive logic in consistent with the global trend of peaceful development and get a foothold in the field of international discourse with the help of the uniquely Chinese style. Filmmakers should focus on creating cinematic discursive logic with Chinese characteristics, giving voice to China in a Chinese way, telling China's stories and improving China's country image in practice.

Against the background of cultural globalization, learning from beneficial foreign cultures is necessary but Chinese filmmakers should stand firmly on the ground of Chinese culture and take advantage of thousands of years of cultural history and focus on stories with distinctly Chinese characteristics and promote development ideas and social reality representing Chinese culture, show China's aspiration of "helping the whole world after getting prosperous" and stance of peaceful development through moral concepts and ideal values, such as "benevolence", "love", and "harmony", create oriental charm so as to break the dichotomy between diverse symbols. Besides taking the initiative to express China's discourse in the international community, China's film industry needs to refute the interpretive system built by negative reviews and fight against stigmatization of China's discourse by producing good quality movies.

4.3. Symbols of Public Discourse in Cinematic Narrative

China should walk into the world confidently, peacefully and open-mindedly, build an attractive, amicable and appealing country image, abandon hostile discourse or narrative, create a new conceptual framework of discourse or narrative with Chinese characteristics and add more inclusive discourses or expressions. Space for international discourse is maintained by international members collectively so China as one of them should obey and follow public consensus, find commonalities among voices from different groups and the most common conventions about symbol production in order to solve the difficulties in building a positive image and dispelling the negative image caused by ideological differences and cultural discount.

Movie content and themes should deal with shared problems, topics and aspirations to enrich concepts and ways of thinking in public space, combine common symbols and public conventions with cinematic narratives, and form public discourse of good stories and strong resonance in future efforts. Chinese movies should convey China's attitudes, strengths and stories to the world, especially in important global agendas about world peace, global warming, the Covid-19 pandemic. Production and communication based on public discursive symbols are able to patch up differences, help international audience resonate with Chinese movies and understand the discursive symbols in them so as to further build and disseminate a positive country image.

5. Conclusion

In this age of rapid technological development, globalization is gradually getting faster and international competition in many industries is more intense. Faced with challenges and opportunities, China's movie industry is actively participating in international competition. Considering China is still suffering from stigmatization and otherization, telling China's stories and taking back the right to build its country image are extremely important. Cinematic

communication can effectively avoid hostile interpretation caused by audience's ideological assumptions about the communicators, such as, news organizations, and reduce the negative influence of cultural discount on image building so movies are tasked with shaping and disseminating a positive country image of China. Though Chinese movies have made a lot of progress in international communication and achieved relatively good international feedback, there's still a long way to go in this area. Chinese movies need to delve deep into Chinese culture and overseas markets, improve presentation, effectively convey China's voice, and shape China's country image.

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