

Kung Fu Panda: The Value of Chinese Culture in Digital Films

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Abstract: The digital film *Kung Fu Panda*, produced by DreamWorks Animation of Paramount Pictures, has immediately become a hotspot worldwide since it was released in 2008. The essential reason for its bloom lies in that the film integrates Chinese culture with the spirit of the age; more specifically, by using digital film technology professionally, Chinese culture is embodied in the elements of the film, such as characters, dialogues, actions, music, scenes, etc. In a word, digital film technology brings out eye-catching brilliance when fused into Chinese culture; at the same time, Chinese culture presents immeasurable artistic and market value in digital films.

Keywords: *Kung Fu Panda*; Chinese culture; digital film technology; artistic value.

1. Introduction: *Kung Fu Panda* Steps onto The World Stage of Digital Film

The digital film *Kung Fu Panda*, produced by DreamWorks of Paramount Pictures in 2008, instantly became the most popular film for the global audience. The reason is that the film combines the spirit of the times with Chinese culture through digital film technology. DreamWorks adopts first-class digital technology to process the unique Chinese cultural elements into an exciting digital animation movie for all ages. Using exquisite digital technology, the film skillfully presents Chinese Culture through the characters, dialogue, action, music, and scenes of the film.

Digital film technology allows the movie's theme, means, range, and purpose to break through traditional film barriers, making Chinese culture more attractive in the movies. The character's prototype design, the digital image processing, and the dubbing in and outside of the scene upgrade to a high level of quality. Using digital imaging technology, the abstract concept, even dreams can be turned into a visual form of virtual reality. Po, the noodle shop owner's son, is one of the plain folks, but he has a strong sense of justice and is ready to help the weak, and he won't live the daily life of the vulgar. He grows up from a small potato to a hero in martial arts and defeats the Snow Leopard Tai Lung.

"Chinese culture is the great contribution of the Chinese nation to humanity." The primary content of Chinese culture consists of unique language, beneficial science and technology, brilliant literature and arts, philosophy, and religion, comprehensive and profound morals and ethics, etc." [1] Chinese culture plays a vital role in the development of the Chinese society, and the growing of Chinese nation. The digital animated film *Kung Fu Panda* highlights the Chinese culture with great artistic and market value in digital cinema.

2. Digital Film Technology Creates Virtual Images That Can Not Be Finished in A Conventional Way

Before the invention of digital film technology, some

images in literary works could not be found in real life to match. However, with digital movie technology, all the roles can be performed through cartoons previously. *Kung Fu Panda* meticulously presents images, art forms, scenes, and characters in Chinese style. It makes the audience enjoy the spirit of Chinese culture intuitively.

2.1. Meticulous film with images, artistic design, and scenes of Chinese style

The production of *Kung Fu Panda* is meticulous with pictures, art, and scenes. The story, with tense rhythm and humorous sense, is successful in sharp martial arts in two aspects – in terms of plots, the dazzling chopsticks content, the jailbreak of snow leopard, the fantastic panda boxing are swift and forceful; in terms of moves, the carp flip, trestle, horse stance and hitting at specific acupoints make the virtual images are vivid. The pictures are elegant and beautiful with delicate art design; the character modeling is exaggerated and lovely with exemplary descriptions of the details; the dubbing is so vivid that it makes the audience feel as if they were in a natural scene; the Chinese elements are precisely integrated with the film languages.

However, digital film technology has not been abused. Digital film technology is used carefully and rigorously to the point, which clearly shows the strict attitude of DreamWorks in Hollywood on movie production. The art director has researched Chinese art for eight years. The 2D dream world of Po at the beginning is joined with 3,000 pleasant paintings naturally, which is a smooth transition to pure digital animation later on. The film sound effect is supervised by Oscar-class music master Van der Ryn, and Oscar-class musician Hans Zimmer also undertakes the background music. The visual product is fantastic. Just the scene in which Po was rushed up to the sky in the rocket chair has engaged dozens of Chinese cultural elements with festively carnival spirit in visual and sound effects, such as "rocket," "blasting," and "pyrotechnics," etc.

As Yin Hong, a famous movie reviewer at Tsinghua University, once said, "The animation art history tells us that China's art and music tradition and national cultural characteristics are a treasure-trove for Chinese animated film. However, relying solely on the revival of the tradition is

inadequate. With the rapidly developing times and the ever-changing fashion culture, Chinese animated film should explore how to integrate tradition into fashion to please the audience with meaningful artistic innovation.” [2]

2.2. The images with Chinese characteristics by digital film technology

The all-digital film is completed by digital technology in the stages of pre-design, shooting period, post-production, distribution, and screening. It shows the charm of the new technology to create new narrative images beyond the effect of the previous film. The manipulation of reality produces a surreal reality, which makes the digital film show fantastic extraordinary results in the narrative and character creation.

The kung fu is a highlight of the Chinese martial arts culture. With digital film technology, DreamWorks created images of the Chinese martial arts and corresponding animals vividly and exaggeratedly. Kung fu animation uses advanced computerized special effects to increase the manipulating point of the animation actors to make the animal masters move fast, aggressively, and accurately and make the martial arts action more powerful. The digital film creates realistic visual effects with vivid images of Tigress, Monkey, Mantis, Viper, and Crane, which is beyond the product made by conventional film technology.

In creating unique images with special effects, it is necessary to maintain distinctive pictures and use them reasonably, which is a sign that reflects the production level. Although the fighters are animal roles, the producer should keep them in an air of solemn and comedic while avoiding making them out of touch. The film's climax part is A Po practices martial arts with his Shifu, the Grand Master. This martial arts fighting originates from the Hong Kong Film *Snake Shaped Hand*, in which Jackie Chan tries to grab a bowl from Yuen Woo-ping's father, Yuan Xiaotian. Using virtual technology, it made full use of the cartoon in martial arts to design many dramatic and exciting moves.

Kung Fu Panda has become an idol of many Americans as Superman and Batman with justice and courage from Hollywood. *Kung Fu Panda* "is no longer a fictional comic role, and has become a hero in the real life of Americans, who is the symbol of American culture, American dream and the American spirit.” [3] In China, *Kung Fu Panda* has also become the idol of many people.

3. Digital Film Technology Creates a More Realistic Space Than That by Conventional Method

Traditional film technology cannot create strange scenes in literary works or play scripts. However, with digital cinema technology, people make it. Various Chinese elements can be integrated into the movie naturally, creating scenes with refreshing characteristics of Chinese culture and visually presenting the magnificent imagination on the screen.

3.1. Digital technology creates fresh scenes of Chinese cultural elements

The art director of *Kung Fu Panda*, Raymond Zibach, has spent eight years on Chinese culture, art, architecture, landscapes, etc. He achieved excellence in every detail of the animation to reflect Chinese culture. The film learns a lot from Chinese paintings in the images following: the Chinese auspicious clouds, the crescent moon in the intro, the peach

blossoms flying in the vast and deep sky, the ancient building with high eaves, the thrilling cableway, twist stone bridge, the plank road built along the face of a cliff, and the branches of old trees...Not to speak of Tai Chi Yin and Yang reflecting the highest level of Chinese Kung Fu. Only by digital technology, these scenes can be vividly presented. The artistic conception of Chinese culture is cleverly integrated into the settings, immersing the audience in the atmosphere of Chinese classical poetry.

With the digital special effects of the characters, scenes, and art design, the fighting against Tai Lung, the snow leopard, is most thrilling during its jailbreak. The visual effects create more exciting scenes than life-action movies. Prison for the snow leopard, with a vertical depth of approximately 3,000 feet, appeared unassailable, which is not easy to forget. Maybe the design inspiration is from the paintings of the Great Wall of China and the paintings of Italian painter Pinoneixi in the 18th century, in which one thousand guards defend against Tai Lung, the prisoner with incredible destructive power. It has a strong expectation effect on the fierce fight between A Po and Tai Lung in the fighting later on.

3.2. Presenting Chinese culture with digital film technology needs imagination

John Stevenson bluntly pointed out that Chinese animation lacks imagination and traditional features. The spirits are textbook-style illustrations of idiom stories, folk stories, or fairy tales of parental themes. In his view, the animation should create room for imagination and describe the dreams and the pursuit process. A booming Chinese story usually embodies the characteristics of the Chinese spirit in technical and artistic style.

The martial arts movie advocates humanity's most excellent qualities – courage, sacrifice, heroism, redemption, and forgiveness. It covers human emotions' most vital moving elements with influential storytelling power. With unrestrained imagination, kung fu stories occur in a beautiful world where the film language, technique, and skills are applied to the extreme. Against the background of ink animation style, the designer uses digital technology to mix it with three-dimensional perspective animation, which ensures it looks natural and realistic.

The mainstream movies in Hollywood are "of the main theme, whose basic ideological strategy is to complete the purification of individual and maintain the principal order stable. It eases the rebellious mood and advocates personal freedom to demonstrate the humanitarian ideas." [4] The international route of Hollywood is also the localization strategy. The film naturally takes the narrative style of Hollywood. Still, the whole movie is full of magnificent images of Chinese style, which vividly presents the wisdom and faith in traditional Chinese culture using the narrative strategy of Hollywood.

4. The Digital Film Technology Combines Chinese Culture to Generate Great Artistic Appeal

Digital film technology has supplied infinitely broad territory for traditional films to renew and develop themselves. However, it is not wise to emphasize digital film technology, or it will inevitably fall into the stereotype of technological determinism. Only digital movie technology mixed with

national characteristics and cultural elements can invite more audiences with artistic appeal. As Goethe once said, "The more ethnic-oriented, the more universally acceptable."

4.1. Integration with Chinese traditional aesthetics, Buddhism and Taoism

Stevenson believes it's better to find the meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures to make the American audience accept martial arts movies. Martial arts movies have the same purpose as Western films; the core spirit is to advocate heroism through the contest between good and evil. Truth sometimes lies in the hands of the little people who will grow into heroes through hard times. This way, the movie will obtain a satisfactory box office in the United States and other Western and Eastern countries.

In the film, the traditional Chinese cultural elements are presented everywhere metaphorically. "China's lofty object is sage, hero, and natural splendor. Therefore, the lofty delight is conversion to origin in some degree." [5] The words and deeds of the Grand Master appear plain, but they are of Buddhist Zen. In his leisure, he likes standing on top of a stick looking out, which suggests that it's better to prepare for danger in times of peace; when he practices, he faces a pond of peaceful water like a mirror, which implies practicing martial arts without distractions; the martial arts secrets is nothing but a cloth without any words or sketches, which indicates that the highest realm of martial arts is free from all stereotypes. Grand Masters, who fathomed life and death by letting nature take its course, went to heaven calmly and gracefully – He turned into peach blossoms. He flew slowly into the bright sky in the night, which interprets the mysterious oriental aesthetics visually. In addition, many dialogues also reflect profound Taoism connotations full of metaphors with deep meaning, which requires the listeners to have a very high perception.

In a word, the slow, small, and humble Master Turtle appeared with no offensive power, but he defeated Tai Lung, integrating the martial arts of Tigress, Monkey, Mantis, Viper, and Crane. Master Turtle was sophisticated in Tai Chi, by which he could conquer the unyielding with the yielding, defeat the strong by the weak, and beat the powerful by using force cleverly. Since Grand Master passed away, could the panda take on the critical task of defeating Tai Lung? After the panda learns martial arts, he finds that the military secret is just a blank cloth, from which he can only see his reflection. By chance, he heard of his father giving away the secret of making noodles – the exclusive secret recipe is "no secret" – "If you want to do something special, you just need to believe it is something special." A Po was suddenly enlightened and fearlessly went back and fought against Tai Lung to the death. It is an axiom emphasized in Buddhism and Taoism.

4.2. The digital collision and blending of Chinese and Western cultures

In this digital film, the performance of the Chinese culture results from the re-interpretation and re-presentation of various cultures. However, some differences between Chinese and Western cultures can not be put into peer-to-peer translation. For example, before we answer why the panda's father is a duck, we should have learned that as a nation of immigrants, the United States is a large, integrated society with racial diversity. "Melting Pot" is an analogy about the United States, which means American society can fuse and assimilate various cultures into American culture. From this

point, it is reasonable that the panda's father turned out to be a duck.

After understanding the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, we would not be confused with whether A Po is a Chinese Panda or an American Panda. The cultural background of *Kung Fu Panda* is the mysterious Orient story in Westerners' imagination, which can be found in the trace of A Po's Yankeeified characteristics and emotional expression. For example, A Po, the green-eye panda, would shrug while he was talking, which gestured as American; he spoke in an Anglicized accent, which was in the tone of American. The film is a beautiful story of the exchange and collision of Chinese elements and the American spirit.

In Western logocentrism, "The distorted and dismembered 'imaginary orient' becomes 'the other' to verify the west itself, and enhance the image of 'fictitious orient' to the east in return, which bring the east into the power structure of western logocentrism, thereby the west finished the process of colonizing in culture and language." [6] In McLuhan's opinion, it is natural that the East feels the political temptation and industrial challenges in our film industry. The film has an aggressive, robust, supreme structure as an alphabet and printed text. [7] From the appreciation perspective, *Kung Fu Panda* presents the charm of the oriental primordial mystery, such as Qigong, Bagua, Tai Chi, superstition, and folk culture of the East, which recognizes the West and subverts the post-colonial discourse power.

5. Conclusion: Chinese culture bears huge market value and social value for digital films

Qi Baishi, one of the most famous artists in China, once said, "If you want to present the spirit of the subject, you must describe the shape of it; however, after you grasp the spirit of the subject, you can paint it better in form and content. You will make it after much practice rather than by chance." As for China's animation industry, we are not inadequate in ordinary production staff or high technology and advanced equipment, but the planning and directing staff with deep culture deposits, artistic accomplishment, and unlimited creativity. Without action and temperament on national culture, the creator will not reach the core of the national spirit and consequently produce empty and pale works if he solely depends on a shallow understanding of Chinese culture.

With a vast population base and rich cultural heritage, China has priceless diamond mines. Because of great artistic and market value, Chinese culture shines dazzling brilliance when stimulated by digital film technology. Of course, technological determinism is not acceptable. As Andre Bazin once said, if we regard scientific discoveries or industrial technology critical to the film industry as the driving force behind the movie invention, we put the cart before the horse from the psychological point of view. [8] Mixing up Chinese cultural and digital film technology will work wonders. We need artist designers like Burnett Palissy, obsessed with movies, to make Chinese culture more attractive to the audience worldwide with digital film technology.

6. Biography

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7. Note

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