

A Brief Analysis of China's Contemporary Swordsmen Film

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Abstract

“Chivalry, Military force, and Emotion” are not the only symbols of the traditional swordsmen film, and heroes are not omnipotent and perfect persons any more. The current Chinese swordsmen film could best showcase this point, and is undergoing criticism and deconstruction. We can see that a large number of Chinese directors such as Tsui Hark, Peter Chan, Xu Haofeng, and Wong Kar-Wai began to re-examine the aesthetics and culture of swordsmen film after the wave of “historic costume blockbuster” in the mainland China. They have tried to give new charm to the Chinese swordsmen films by displaying their own styles and features.

Key words: Imaginary swordsmen film; Micro swordsmen film; Lyrical swordsmen film

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INTRODUCTION

At present days, China's swordsmen film has entered into an era when it is more diversified. This is totally different from the past when the classic and traditional swordsmen films including Chang Cheh's “One-Armed Swordsman” and King Hu's “Come Drink With Me” could be the representatives of the times. The personalities of characters, plot, narrative modes, and even the new special

effects and packaging have made today's swordsmen films directed by the well-known directors enjoy more personalized and unique styles. The concept and type of “Swordsmen” begin to be deconstructed and restructured, and the swordsmen films directed in the modern times give us a wide variety of possibilities and ways out. No matter what way does the directors use to interpret the swordsmen film in their hearts, it injects passion and vitality to China's swordsmen film.

1. TSUI HARK'S IMAGINARY SWORDSMEN FILM

Tsui Hark is a director who advocates whimsy thoughts and ridiculous ideas. He is always engaged in studying new film technology, indulging in creating new images and new forms of film, and continuing to provide audiences with imaginative and novel sensation. In 1979, he filmed “Butterfly Murders”, a very avant-garde swordsmen film that integrated detective, mystery, horror, mythology, science fiction and martial arts together. At that time, this film was regarded as an “anti-type” movie (Wang, 1994). In his recent work, “Di Renjie, the Mysterious Detective”, the shooting techniques and ideas are almost the same as those of “Butterfly Murders”. But it adds various types of elements and makes use of high-tech shooting techniques, which finally help him to achieve remarkable success. Then later in 1983, his film “The Legend of Zu” showed that he had special preferences for swordsmen films in terms of selecting the materials.

However, Tsui Hark's current swordsmen films such as “Flying Swords of Dragon Gate” and “Di Renjie” series have made a positive attempt and exploration, and have achieved good results in the market, which also points out a new way for the development of Chinese swordsmen film.

Tsui Hark attaches great importance to the influence of technology on film. In his recent swordsmen films,

he begins to use 3D technology for shooting, such as shooting the “Flying Swords of Dragon Gate” and “Di Renjie” series. Among others, the film “Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon” is considered to represent the highest level of Chinese film’s special effects, and marks the highest peak of Chinese movie’s special sale season.” (Lie, Chen, & Yao, 2012, p. 40)

Of course, we can also see that “Di Renjie” series basically take the route of visual spectacle, which puts aside logical stories, but allows viewers to enjoy the special effects and scenes made through real gold and silver. Various fanciful imagination and virtual scenes are displayed. So applauses and cheers from the audience could be basically ensured. But the concept of swordsmen has been broken off in “Di Renjie” series, replaced by mysterious things. “Magic flavor begins to build up, swordsmen scenes begin to appear less, fighting scenes are shot with higher technologies, and 3D technology becomes more adept.” (Lie, Chen, & Yao, 2012, p.42) So swordsmen film becomes the vanguard of the film technology revolution in the hands of Tsui Hark. Yet such innovation and change fail to change the nature of the swordsmen film that it is not good at telling stories. The attention of viewers has been drawn to the visual effects of films. So they will not care, if basically logical clues have been given to them to appreciate the films. And this swordsmen film itself is advertised for its spectacular viewing experience, so we do not need to be too harsh and particular about it. At present days when pure swordsmen film is on the wane, such imaginary swordsmen films represented by those directed by Tsui Hark maybe give some guidance to the development of Chinese swordsmen film. “Martial arts, as a distinctive element of Chinese culture, owns significant value for its existence. Putting martial arts as the main type but integrating other types together is a good approach to enhancing advantages and avoiding disadvantages, and a good method of complementing each other’s advantages, and a great shortcut to advancing with the times.” (Lie, Chen, & Yao, 2012, p.43) Imaginary swordsmen film “has combined the weird folk culture that is in the marginal position of Chinese traditional culture with the Taoist philosophy, and with the images supported by high film technologies.” (Huang, 2012) It is also a feasible way to the development Chinese swordsmen film.

2. Xu Haofeng and Peter Chan’s “Micro Swordsmen Film”

In the aesthetic fatigue of the films where immortal swordsmen fly all over the sky and kill people from thousands of miles, where explosion repeatedly happens, and where swordsmen’s moves have the same power as that of artilleries, someone will no doubt critique and reflect on the road that Chinese swordsmen film is going on. Therefore, scientific swordsmen film and micro swordsmen film which stress the “de spectacle” of

meridian movement and blood circulation begin to enter people’s attention (Huang, 2012). Some swordsmen films are represented by the “Swordsmen” directed by Peter Chan and “The Sword Identity” directed by Xu Haofeng showcase the true martial arts scenes, and restore the true details of martial arts. It results in a new wave of “micro swordsmen film” and “scientific swordsmen film” in the whole world of Chinese swordsmen film.

The film “Swordsmen” puts on the cloak of modern scientific knowledge, makes the ancient martial arts manifest itself in a rational manner, and blurs or gets rid of the feature of swordsmen film to be romantic and imaginary, telling a story that a killer pursues an ordinary life (Huang, 2012). We can see the 2D animation of blood vessels, bones, and meridians, as well as the pictures of medical science and physics involved in the process of clearing up mysterious cases. In addition, Haofeng Xu talked about his work, “The Sword Identity”, “the crisis of pursuing technology and beauty is to lose a sense of judgment, which is the thing that shocks the audience’s soul rather than the visual sensation. Respecting the real scenes and digging out the new dynamic things from real martial arts is the remedy to aesthetic perception.” (Chen, 2013). In this sense, we could see that film directors are pursuing a cautious attitude and details.

It is worth noting that these two films have abandoned the dazzling fighting scenes and fantastical tricks which would be seen in the previous swordsmen films; instead, they gave much spotlight to the martial arts itself, and tried to restore the most authentic martial arts scenes and martial arts moves. Whether it is to add medicine and detective elements or to display the dull real martial arts, the directors have realized that the audience is already tired of the illusory concept of swordsmen. They believe that perhaps the impact on viewers could be created by using a different expression method. Of course, Chinese swordsmen film is inseparable from the martial arts. So the real fighting scenes and martial arts itself will give audience different experience and feelings, in addition to directors’ constantly thinking and exploration in terms of making innovation and changes in the way of martial arts. This is the same case as the one that people get tired of the bustling cities and long for returning to the countryside to see the field views. After all, it is a good attempt.

In addition to the relatively realistic shooting of martial arts, making a concrete analysis of specific events, giving new understandings to such traditional martial arts heroes as swordsmen, and digging deeper the characters’ mental activity are also the focus that “micro swordsmen film” is putting on. Take the character Liu Jinxi in the film “Swordsmen” for example. From being evil to be good, from being a public person to be a hermit, he serves as a worker to print papers in a remote village. He is forced to use his martial arts because of his old events troubling him. Such themes and stories are already old-fashioned, and we will find it very easy to see such the

plots of "Swordsmen" in the films including "A History of Violence", "Taken", "One-Armed Swordsman" and even "House M.D". All these films have the plot that Masters come back from seclusion to start another reign of terror because of family or personal reasons. The difference is that the film "Swordsmen" adds a character, detective Xu Baijiu. The real swordsman Liu Jinxi cannot solve all the problems. During the most of his time, Liu endured things silently. He is also in an anxious and languishing state. Liu Jinxi and Xu Baijiu have a very delicate relationship with each other. It is the scientific approach designed by Xu rather than the superior martial arts of Liu that has beaten the evil leader.

So the decline and limitations of personal heroism in this film have been fully reflected. Swordsman has been restored to an ordinary person, and martial arts cannot ensure a successful ending. In fact, the film "Reign of Assassins" directed in the recent years also made such an attempt.

However, it is Xu Haofeng that has achieved the peak of "micro swordsmen film" and "scientific swordsmen film". You cannot find any exaggerated fighting scenes, let alone those pretty exciting and dazzling ones. Even the dialogue between characters is dragged into the past time when the rhythm of life is a bit low. In the film "The Sword Identity", the opening fighting in a street lasts five minutes with 24 shots, an average of 12 seconds for each shot. Compared to the similar films such as King Hu's "A Touch of Zen" in which the fighting in the reeds has an average of 5 seconds for each shot, Bruce Lee's "Way of the Dragon" in which an average of 4 seconds for each shot is made for the duel scenes, "Shaolin Temple" with 2.3 seconds for each shot (Chen, 2013), we can see that Xu Haofeng did not aim to produce a coherent swordsmen film.

The film "The Sword Identity" is adapted from the novel "The Nanjing City in the Late Ming Dynasty" in which anti-Japanese-pirates hero is mistaken for Japanese pirate who is then surrounded by the government officials, which later become a big joke. And this incident is finally made into an epic story telling the story of an anti-Japanese-pirates hero. It is filled with black humors. The film also has a lot of plots that are humorous, for example, four major sects are hit by a woman holding a stick, almost annihilated; a group of disciples kill each other for a singer, and so on. So we can see a subversion and inversion of Chinese swordsmen film with these absurd plots.

In fact, Xu Haofeng has drawn upon a lot of directing methods from others, for instance, a fatal move appears in the fighting scenes so that the final result is decided without letting the audience see clearly. This method is used in the Japanese film "Zatoichi" series, so is the Akira Kurosawa's "Peg Sword". But the latter needs wind or fog to create an atmosphere and to blur the fighting process. To some degree, the method used by Xu Haofeng is a

realistic one in which the actual fighting is brought to an end with a fatal move (Ormond, 2011). Xu Haofeng clearly tells you that the previous swordsmen films are fantasies and false ideas, while swordsmen film could be produced by focusing on the realistic aspects and by coming down to earth.

Different types of films often ridicule their own features. Many important directors strive to define their own type of films, or at least make some reflection which is also to identify differences (Xu, 2012, p.3). Whether it is Ye Chan or Xu Haofeng, their swordsmen films are proceeding and developing on such a road. Micro swordsmen film has provided Chinese swordsmen film with an opportunity to make self-criticism and self-repositioning, different types of films must first establish a special value rather than a special feature" (Xu, 2012, p.21), which I believe is the secret of micro swordsmen films.

1.3 Wong Kar-Wai and "Lyrical Swordsmen Film"

Swordsmen had nothing to do with expressing emotions. But it has something to do with the national interests, uprightness, sinister in rivers and lakes, and flashes and shadows of swords, no matter how many wonders have been produced, and no matter how many truths have been restored. Whether it is values or genre features, the audience will find it hard to understand why there are less and less fighting scenes in a so-called swordsmen film but only with several elites telling some enigmatic truths in the end such as "self, the heavens, all the living creatures." But when told that the film is directed by Wong Kar-Wai, the audience will flock to the theatres.

Wong Kar-Wai has no intention to establish any relation with the traditional Chinese swordsmen film. What he wants to expose in his films is history, culture, truth, and is the subtle emotional relationship between people. The theme of swordsmen is nothing more than a skin. He likes to make changes between the skin and the flesh to give audience brand-new films. From the "Ashes of Time" to "The Grand Master", or from Wong Kar Wai's classic films such as "Days of Being Wild" and "Happy Together", we can find that Wong Kar-Wai could always expose the complex relationships that are delicate and difficult to detect but that could touch people's heart by means of lyrical lines and scenes. He could also mingle the ambiguous relationships together and let the audience enjoy a stylized beauty.

Take the recent film "The Grand Master" for example, it has already deviated from the basic requirements of commercial swordsmen film from the perspective of the production time (from 2009 to 2013) and costs. It is also the same as the case to produce the film "Ashes of Time". The production time dragged on. When it came to the spring festival, it was turned into a contemporary version "Eagle Shooting Heroes", which later proved to be a classic. In fact, long period of production will inevitably

make the film have its characteristics. For instance, the style of the film may be relaxed, and it doesn't rush into detailing the content and ideas; the director may be very particular about the photography and scenery, with the aim to give audience plenty of screen beauty; the dialogues between characters may seem to be designed at one stretch, but in reality, they are repeatedly scrutinized, each of which is like a life philosophy, containing implied mystery.

Although someone criticizes that the film "The Grand Master" puts more focus on the form rather than the content of the film, and that there are structural breaks (Wang, 2003), it is still under the banner of the swordsmen film, talking about the story of swordsmen, and it develops a new style, so success has been achieved. The previous swordsmen films attach more importance to the fighting scenes, so the audience rarely needs to think but just appreciate the fighting scenes after listening to some righteous words. However, "The Grand Master" leaves the audience room to imagine and to think. A lot of the half-comprehended truths are exposed there to let the audience figure out on their own. Such swordsmen film is lyrical and poetic. It includes the way of thinking and unique historical era background of traditional Chinese culture. Through the "swordsmen" topic that advances with the times, this kind of film finds its expression on people and things, and on feelings and scenery. In such films, we can not only find Confucianism, but also Buddhism. Wong intends to raise the level of the word "swordsmen", so the fighting is no longer the aesthetics of violence, but is cultural exchanges and is the collision of thoughts, which are just like the discussion on academic issues between two intellectuals. The success of the duel between Ip Man and Gong Yutian in the Golden Palace lies not in their level of martial arts, but in their knowledge and intellectual levels.

This kind of swordsmen film has been touched by Wong Kar-Wai before in his film "Ashes of Time". Time and audience proved that this road is feasible, for what the audience wants to see is fragmented style of artistic beauty, rather than a complete narrative film. Such swordsmen film based on characters' emotions and traditional culture at least proved that the value of swordsmen film does not need to be achieved by pulling swordsmen's weapons and by fighting against others, instead, lyrical and poetic ones could still give viewers a very satisfying viewing experience. But so far, except Wong Kar-Wai, there are few films that are with strong directors' own styles. We can only use the film of Wong as a special case and appreciate it as one type or genre of swordsmen film. Genre, after all, is to be constantly improved and re-structured. Since Wong Kar-Wai can find such a breakthrough, then inevitably there will be another way out.

CONCLUSION

China's traditional culture values the harmony between yin and yang. Qian is yang, while kun is yin. Only the unity of qian and kun can give birth to the universe of heaven and earth. Chinese swordsmen film also has the yin and yang sides. As for the yang side, the positive visual impact and bold imagination as well as assumptions brought out by the imaginative swordsmen film is the best proofs. And with regard to its yin side, the lyrical and poetic features, humane care and personal feelings in Wong's films could prove that. As the old saying goes, "the Way bears sensation, the sensation bears memory, sensation and memory bear abstraction, and abstraction bears all the world." Swordsmen film is like a starting point, or an everlasting source, which provides infinite possibilities of possible expression forms. The swordsmen film is originally a window rooted in China's traditional "swordsmen culture" and "Kung Fu culture", through which we can turn bad into good and turn abstract ideas into concrete ones. Without swordsmen film, we probably would not have intuitive experience of swordsmen and Kung Fu. Whether it is imaginary swordsmen film, micro swordsmen film, or lyrical swordsmen film, the same concept is illustrated through different ways, just like us having different understandings towards a sentence, or like the comprehension of Hamlet varying from reader to reader. We should show gratitude towards these different styled swordsmen films and their directors, for it is them that have enlivened this ancient film genre, and have made it full of strong vitality. China's swordsmen film develops from being audience-centered to detail classification of film types. There is no better one. All the swordsmen films are in an equal position.

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