

The Narrative of the Film *New Shaolin Temple* in a Multicultural Context: “Post-Mirror” Aesthetics and International Dissemination

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Abstract: *The 2011 film *New Shaolin Temple* is a typical example of combining these two storylines: on the one hand, it depicts the chaotic backdrop of warlord warfare to highlight the protective role of Shaolin Temple in social turmoil; on the other hand, it shapes the Shaolin spirit of “ceasing warfare to achieve martial arts” and “compassion and tolerance” through the physical training and spiritual transformation of the characters. For audiences, this combination of “physical narrative + national narrative” not only enhances the dramatic tension but also provides more entry points for cross-cultural communication: foreign audiences can gain an initial understanding of Chinese notions of heroism and Zen martial arts values, while domestic audiences can find emotional resonance in national narratives and collective memory. However, whether this model is sufficient to support the further development of Shaolin Kung Fu films in the era of globalization remains to be explored in subsequent chapters through analyses of “traditional cultural reinterpretation,” “national identity reshaping,” and “diverse and coexisting cultural imagery.”*

Key words: *Shaolin Kung Fu; Shaolin Kung Fu films; post-mirroring; international dissemination; empathy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2011 and 2024, Shaolin kung fu films underwent a significant transformation, shifting from an emphasis on external spectacle to a balance between external spectacle and internal cultural expression, amid the influence of globalization and post-mirror aesthetics. As a representative work of this transformation, *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011) may not be perfect, but it reflects the possibilities and limitations of Shaolin kung fu films in the new era. Looking ahead, as China’s film industry continues to mature and its international standing continues to rise, Shaolin kung fu films still hold great potential. Only by deeply exploring the essence of Shaolin culture, balancing commercial entertainment with artistic depth, and collaborating with diverse partners across cultures can these films sustain their unique appeal in the global “diverse coexistence” landscape and foster broader spiritual resonance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Shaolin Temple is located in the heart of Mount Song. Since its origins in the Northern Wei Dynasty, it has endured the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty, the turmoil of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the transitions of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and numerous hardships in modern times (Yu Xuebin, 2019). This long history provides abundant narrative resources for Shaolin kung fu films: how Shaolin monks defended their nation and faith in different eras, and how they persevered and passed down their traditions amid turmoil and war, all of which can serve as the main threads of grand narratives. *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011) sets its story during the warlord era of the Republic of China, continuing the 1982 version’s theme of “the suffering of the people + Shaolin redemption” while also giving the protagonist’s motives a more complex social context (Zhu, 2012). In traditional Shaolin kung fu films, “national resistance” is often a prominent theme, such as resisting foreign invaders or corrupt forces (Chan, 2004). In *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011), while the film still emphasizes the harm caused by warlord conflicts to the people and the Shaolin monks’ duty to protect them, it places greater emphasis on the protagonist’s reflection: hatred and violence ultimately lead to disastrous consequences, and only “ceasing violence is true martial arts” embodies the true spirit of Shaolin. “Family and nation” here is not only a call to resist foreign aggression but also a critique of internal social violence, greed, and ambition. The film portrays the Shaolin Temple’s consistent tradition—a compassionate worldview of pitying the suffering of others—

through the action of “protecting civilians,” while also metaphorically representing modern society's ultimate aspiration for peace and harmony (Hall, 1997).

“Post-Image Aesthetics” is a trend in visual culture within the postmodern and globalized context. Its fundamental characteristic lies in the loosening of traditional (realistic/representational) functions, reinterpreting reality and traditional texts through fragmentation, collage, multi-perspective narratives, and technological spectacles (Hall, 1997; Wang Yichuan, 2015). Specifically, in Chinese Shaolin kung fu films, this manifests as: 1) The renewal of visual spectacles: Since the late 20th century, digital effects have rapidly integrated into kung fu films, replacing or weakening the central role of real martial arts, leading kung fu films to tilt toward “special effects action films” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). 2) Fragmentation of narrative style: Some works overly rely on rapid editing and visual collage, diluting or symbolizing the continuity, integrity, and philosophical depth inherent in traditional martial arts. 3) Intensification and abstraction of cultural symbols: Traditional elements such as the Shaolin Temple and Shaolin monks are treated as “Eastern symbols” in the globalized film market, but they are often simplified into exotic, sensationalist symbols during cross-cultural transmission.

Under such circumstances, how to balance commercial market considerations with the cultural depth and Zen-martial arts essence of Shaolin kung fu has become the greatest challenge facing Shaolin kung fu films in the “post-mirror” aesthetic atmosphere of the new century (Bhabha, 1994; Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Literature Analysis Method

- 1) Collect historical materials, folk legends, popular novels, and film and television works, and trace the historical development and cultural origins of Shaolin Kung Fu films.
- 2) Refer to director interviews, memoirs, oral histories, and documentaries to analyze the motivations, conditions, and audience reactions behind the creation of Shaolin Kung Fu films.
- 3) Conduct a systematic summary of domestic and international historical documents and existing academic achievements related to the study, identifying areas that require further research.

3.2 Qualitative Research Method

- 1) Field research and participatory observation: First, conduct a close reading and narratology analysis of the film text: conduct a detailed textual analysis of the key plot points, character dialogue, and action design in the film *The New Shaolin Temple*, exploring the narrative logic and value aspirations. Second, audience evaluations and word-of-mouth data research: Collect audience evaluations and film reviews from platforms such as IMDb abroad, and summarize the reasons for the divergence of audience opinions during the film's overseas dissemination. Finally, conduct comparative analysis and theoretical extension, comparing the acceptance of its narrative structure and cultural elements in overseas dissemination, and draw theoretical conclusions.
- 2) Non-structured interviews and semi-structured interviews: Focusing on directors, screenwriters, actors, martial arts inheritors, and audiences, this research explores their understanding and interpretation of Shaolin kung fu film narratives and cultural identity.
- 3) Textual analysis: Systematically watching and comparing existing or accessible Shaolin kung fu films, this research conducts in-depth analysis centered on narrative elements (plot, characters, conflict, structure, etc.).
- 4) Quantitative analysis: Conduct quantitative analysis of film reviews for *The New Shaolin Temple*, including metrics such as the number of films, box office performance, and genre distribution.
- 5) Thematic analysis: Analyze the themes, plot, and character portrayals in the film to explore how it better meets the aesthetic preferences of international audiences.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Influence of “Post-Mirror” Aesthetics on Shaolin Kung Fu Films

4.1.1 The Double-Edged Sword of Technology and Aesthetics

Driven by digitalization and globalization, “post-mirror” aesthetics emphasizes the subjectivity of imagery, the showmanship of techniques, and diverse collages (Wang Yichuan, 2015). Shaolin Kung Fu films leverage digital effects to depict grand-scale battle scenes or surreal martial arts techniques, such as the integration of modern weapons with traditional hand-to-hand combat. However, excessive technical embellishment often undermines the “physical authenticity” that underlies the

essence of Kung Fu films (Teo, 2009). Shaolin monks emphasize “diligent practice” and “controlling qi through form,” but excessive CGI editing makes it difficult for audiences to feel the essence of kung fu, which is the unity of body and mind. The Zen Buddhist concepts of ‘emptiness’ and “stillness” may also be drowned out by rapid editing and loud sounds (Lam, 2012).

4.1.2 Narrative Multi-linearity and Value Ambiguity

“Post-mirror” aesthetics tend toward multi-linear narratives or even fragmented structures. The New Shaolin Temple (2011) incorporates multiple narrative threads: the protagonist's quest for revenge and redemption, the master-disciple bonds within the Shaolin Temple, the grand historical backdrop of warlord conflicts, and the intervention of external forces. This multi-threaded narrative enriches the film's layers, but without focused and in-depth development, it risks becoming a mishmash of stories with an unclear theme (Keane, 2016). Meanwhile, the multi-meaning nature of the “post-mirror” perspective opens up new interpretive spaces, but it may also leave overseas audiences “watching the spectacle without understanding the essence,” making it difficult for them to grasp the film's underlying Eastern spiritual core.

4.1.3 The Reconstruction of Imagery and Symbols

Under the “post-mirror” aesthetic, the ancient cultural symbol of the Shaolin Temple is constantly being reshaped. Directors and producers may reinterpret “Shaolin” from various angles: for example, by adding technological and modern lighting elements to architectural sets, or by incorporating Western martial arts concepts into action sequences (Moran & Penrod, 2016). Theoretically, this can revitalize the contemporary vitality of traditional cultural symbols; however, excessive commercialization or mere symbolism may lead to a lack of substance (Bhabha, 1994).

4.2 Macro Narrative: Historical Depth and National Mission

4.2.1 Historical Depth: A Macro Structure with Multiple Parallel Storylines

21st-century Shaolin kung fu films often incorporate multi-threaded narratives in their macro-structures to balance historical depth with audience aesthetic demands. Take *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011) as an example: within its approximately 130-minute runtime, the film interweaves the following narratives alongside the protagonist’s personal journey(See Table 1):

1. The power struggles and conspiracies among warlords
2. The daily interactions and camaraderie among Shaolin monks
3. Responses to the influence or impact of external forces (such as foreign merchant groups)

This multi-layered narrative enriches the film’s “macro-level” scope, allowing audiences to not only witness how a warlord overcomes hatred but also to feel the historical responsibilities Shaolin Temple bore during turbulent times through collective character portrayals. This “macro-narrative” framework complements the body narrative, establishing a narrative paradigm for Shaolin kung fu films that combines both form and spirit (Campbell, 2004).

Table1: Overview of narrative nodes, plots and themes in New Shaolin Temple (2011)

stage	Time Node (minutes)	Description of main events	Main Themes	Aesthetic elements and plot design
starting point	0-10	The protagonist confronts the hostile forces, destroys the enemy, and feels very proud.	The early of days life	Use exaggerated character contrasts to show initial conflict

revenge	10-30	The murder of a relative begins	The pain of losing a loved one	Add exaggerated Kung Fu fighting scenes and incorporate Shaolin cultural elements
conflict	30-60	The protagonist enters Shaolin to learn martial arts and begins preparations for revenge.	Preparation for revenge	With exaggerated Kung Fu action scenes, enhance the visual impact
crisis	60-80	The protagonist struggles with his inner struggles and faces moral and emotional tests	Inner Redemption	Introducing Shaolin spiritual elements such as meditation and inner peace scenes
Redemption	80-100	The protagonist seeks self-salvation through inner reflection and growth	Self-salvation and growth	Demonstrating the self-cultivation and inner peace in the Shaolin spirit
Self-redemption	100-120	The protagonist achieves self-redemption, transcends revenge and	Self-redemption	Matching the compassion and tolerance scenes in
		lets go of hatred through change and growth		Shaolin culture to show inner transformation
Compassion and tolerance	120-130	The protagonist shows compassion and tolerance, and finally achieves spiritual reconciliation	The manifestation of compassion and tolerance	The tragic ending scene reflects the collectivism and reconciliation in the Shaolin spirit
ending	130-140	The film ultimately achieves spiritual reconciliation between oneself and others, reflecting the victory of the Shaolin spirit.	The Victory of Shaolin Spirit	Combined with the collective activity scene of Shaolin Temple, it strengthens the theme of collectivism

Source: Compiled from the film *New Shaolin Temple* (directed by Chen Mu-sheng, 2011). The timelines in the table are based on the film's running time of approximately 130 minutes and may vary slightly.

4.2.2 Microplot: Physical Training and Spiritual Transformation

4.2.2.1 The Character's Physical Transformation: From External Strength to Internal Peace

The *New Shaolin Temple* (2011) presents a typical “physical trajectory” of Shaolin kung fu films: the protagonist initially relies on brute force to fight, possessing exceptional external movements and destructive power, yet lacking inner cultivation; During his training at the Shaolin Temple, he undergoes physical and spiritual refinement, gradually attaining enlightenment in Zen (Lam, 2012). This process of physical transformation can be summarized as follows:

1. External Impulse: At the beginning, the protagonist often exhibits fierce movements, rapid editing, emphasizing “dominance, ferocity, and lack of control.”
2. Physical Setback: After encountering a major upheaval, the body is forced into the Shaolin Temple's environment of “restraint and meditation.”
3. Training and Self-Reflection: Through scenes of meditation, labor, and group drills, the body undergoes an adjustment from the external to the internal. Camera cuts typically slow down, emphasizing details of breathing and movement.
4. Breaking attachments and sudden enlightenment: At a critical moment (such as facing murder, betrayal, or the death of a loved one), the protagonist achieves “spiritual enlightenment” and confronts conflict with a softer yet more resilient physical posture (Sobchack, 2004).

This bodily narrative not only showcases the beauty of movement in the martial arts realm but also reveals the spiritual insight of “using martial arts to enter Zen,” ultimately leading to the value elevation of “compassion and forgiveness” (Chan, 2004).

4.2.2.2 Micro-plot Design: Crisis—Breakthrough—Redemption Dramatic Nodes

Generally, the micro-plots of Shaolin kung fu films revolve around the protagonist's internal conflicts and external threats. Table 1 lists the main plot nodes and thematic implications of *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011) to illustrate the narrative strategies at the micro-level (Zhu, 2012). Each key node is accompanied by synchronized transformations of physical actions and inner conflicts. Directors often insert Zen-inspired dialogue or depth-of-field shots during slow-motion action sequences or character monologues to point toward deeper spiritual connotations (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). This endows what appears to be a series of non-stop martial arts fights with profound moral, religious, and philosophical implications.

4.2.2.3 The Audiovisual Presentation of Zen and Martial Arts Unity

To fully embody the concept of “Zen and martial arts unity,” Shaolin kung fu films must also rely on the clever arrangement of audiovisual language, including:

1. Camera techniques: Rapid cuts are used in crisis or fight scenes to emphasize conflict; long takes or fixed camera angles are employed during meditation or enlightenment scenes to highlight Zen-like tranquility and the characters' peaceful mindset (Lam, 2012).
2. Music and sound effects: Traditional instruments like wooden fish and bells are blended with symphonic music, highlighting the classical charm of Shaolin culture while also catering to the atmosphere of commercial blockbusters (Moran & Penrod, 2016).
3. Space and Set Design: Spaces such as meditation halls, bell towers, and training grounds emphasize solemnity and openness, creating a stark contrast with violent confrontations. The camera occasionally focuses on weathered walls or ancient inscriptions to suggest historical continuity and depth (Zhang, 2010).

Through these micro-narrative techniques, the film achieves a flexible transition between “physical representation” and “inner Zen philosophy,” allowing audiences to not only enjoy the kung fu scenes but also feel the spiritual depth of Shaolin culture.

4.3 International Challenges: Cultural Discounting and Cross-Cultural Communication Dilemmas

4.3.1 The Multiple Manifestations of Cultural Discounting

Scholars Hoskins and Mirus (1988) introduced the concept of “cultural discounting,” referring to the phenomenon where indigenous cultural products, due to differences in language, values, and customs, struggle to be fully received by foreign audiences during cross-cultural transmission, thereby suffering a certain degree of devaluation in international markets (Keane, 2016). For Shaolin Kung Fu films, while “Kung Fu” and “Zen-Martial Arts” possess a

certain degree of popular entertainment value and mystical appeal, the underlying Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist philosophies are difficult for Western societies or audiences from other cultural backgrounds to accurately comprehend. Additionally, some production teams have failed to systematically explain core concepts such as “ceasing warfare to achieve martial arts” and “venerating virtue and goodness” in their promotions and translations, leading overseas audiences to often simplify Shaolin culture into a sensationalistic “exotic spectacle” (Chan, 2004; Bhabha, 1994). The film's overall rating on overseas platforms is below average, with a 58% “Fresh” rating on Rotten Tomatoes and only 40 reviews; on Metacritic, it scores a mere 50, a failing grade, with a paltry 10 reviews. This suggests that Shaolin kung fu films seeking to break through in the international market, as fans have noted, “have some entertainment value but lack distinctiveness.”(See Table 2)

Table2: Overall ratings and popularity of “New Shaolin Temple” on major film review websites outside China

platform	score	Number of reviews	Popularity
IMDb	6.3/10	1,500	The ratings were above average, and it was welcomed by martial arts movie fans and action movie fans. The action and traditional culture received positive reviews.
Rotten Tomatoes	58% (freshness)	40 articles	The reviews were quite different, with some critics giving positive reviews and others being reserved. Some were positive about the visual action, while others questioned the cultural depth.
Metacritic	50/100	10	The overall score is average, and some reviews point out that the film lacks innovation. The main criticism is the lack of innovation and deep emotional connection
Fandango	3.2/5	180 items	The user rating is average. The audience thinks the film has certain viewing value but is not outstanding enough. They just want to watch the show but not the essence.
Letterboxd	3.6/5	1,000	The fans gave high ratings, and they were enthusiastic about the martial arts performances and highly praised the performances of Andy Lau and other leading actors.

Data source: Public information from various websites, for illustrative purposes only. Compared with user data from 2020 to 2024, the subsequent rating changes for this film are limited.

4.3.2 The Divergence of Market Logic and Aesthetic Expectations

In the post-Cold War era, Hollywood genre films rapidly dominated the global market, cultivating audiences' preferences for large-scale spectacles, high-tech content, and fast-paced narratives (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). Shaolin kung fu films seeking to enter the international mainstream cinema circuit typically align with this aesthetic trend. As a result, production companies often adopt action design and plot structures similar to Hollywood action films, such as in *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011), which employs fast-paced editing and adds gunfights and explosions to emphasize the

excitement of “war + kung fu.” While this approach may attract some younger audiences or action film enthusiasts, it also dilutes the distinctive “physical authenticity” and “inner connection between martial arts and Zen” that define Shaolin films (Wang, 2018).

Based on data compiled and analyzed from major international film review websites such as IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, Fandango, and Letterboxd, American audiences are primarily concentrated on the Fandango platform, where “reviews are notably divided. Professional critics focus on the film's strengths and weaknesses in terms of narrative, cultural depth, and technical execution; ordinary audiences are more easily drawn to the visual impact of martial arts confrontations and warlord conflicts,” with reviews being generally positive; The IMDb platform, on the other hand, brings together audiences from around the world, spanning various age groups and cultural backgrounds. “Reviews are diverse, ranging from in-depth analyses by film enthusiasts to the intuitive impressions of general audiences. General audiences are more concerned with action sequences and special effects, as well as the “Eastern cultural” novelty brought by the ancient architecture of the Shaolin Temple; Young and active international film enthusiasts are concentrated on the Letterboxd platform, “with higher ratings from film enthusiasts, detailed reviews, and a focus on the film's artistic and cultural significance. For example, interpretations of the themes of ‘the unity of Zen and martial arts’ and ‘redemption’ (see Table 3).

Table 3: Differences in the evaluation of “New Shaolin Temple” among major film review websites outside China

platform	User Groups	Comment Features
IMDb	Global audience, covering all ages and cultural backgrounds	The comments are diverse, with in-depth analysis from fans and intuitive feelings from ordinary audiences. Ordinary audiences pay more attention to the fighting scenes and special effects, and the freshness of "Oriental culture" brought by the scenes.
Rotten Tomatoes	Mainly for film critics and audiences in the United States and Western countries	The reviews were clearly divided, with professional critics focusing on the film's narrative, cultural depth, and technical implementation; while ordinary audiences were more likely to be attracted by the visual impact of fistfights.
Fandango	The audience is mainly American, mostly young people	The user rating is moderate, emphasizing the viewing value and entertainment value. The viewing value of martial arts confrontation and war scenes is mainly affirmed, and the focus is more on the action spectacle and star lineup.
Letterboxd	International fans, especially young and active fan group	The fans give high ratings, provide detailed reviews, and focus on the cultural significance of the film, such as the interpretation of the themes of "Zen and Wushu" and "redemption".

Meanwhile, international audiences may harbor stereotypes about Eastern films, viewing them as either magical or backward, with a clear disconnect from modernity. If a film merely showcases the martial arts spectacles of the Shaolin Temple without providing a contemporary context, it may continue to be labeled as an “Eastern spectacle” and struggle to break into the mainstream core (Ma, 2013).

4.3.3 Market Performance of *The New Shaolin Temple* (2011) Abroad

However, there has also been significant criticism, with notable differences between domestic and international reactions. The film has been less well-received abroad than domestically. Some critics have noted that “the pacing in the middle of the plot is too slow, and the sudden shifts in character motivation leave some viewers skeptical about the plausibility of the characters' motivations,” and that the “revenge-redemption” central theme feels somewhat formulaic. Some characters' motivations and social contexts lack detailed explanation, making it difficult for overseas audiences to fully grasp why the protagonist seeks “revenge” and “redemption” in a war-torn setting, and how they can so quickly let go of hatred, resulting in poor plot transitions (see Table 4). In a globalized context, diverse audiences may perceive “Shaolin” solely as an exotic action element, thereby diluting or reducing its deeper ethical and philosophical implications to mere symbols (Bhabha, 1994).

Table 4: Positive and negative reviews of “New Shaolin Temple” on major film review websites outside China

category	Positive reviews	Negative reviews
Plot and Narrative Structure	In the film, warlords fought and hurt innocent people, and Shaolin monks rescued civilians, which embodied tolerance and love	The pace is slow in the middle of the plot, the characters' motivations change too suddenly, and the main narrative line is a bit old-fashioned
Acting and character creation	Supporting actors such as Nicholas Tse and Wu Jing each have their own highlights in the action scenes and their personalities and fighting styles complement each other	Some supporting characters are not fully developed and become tools for "martial arts display". Multiple narrative lines or a large number of characters are inserted, and the theme is scattered
Martial arts movements and choreography	Reduce over-reliance on computer special effects, allowing the audience to feel the power and rhythm of fist and foot combat again	Intends to amplify the visual impact of action scenes, but often sacrifices the continuity of action and the realism of martial arts.
Cultural and philosophical connotations	The words "discipline", "meditation", "letting go", "repaying evil with kindness" and so on appear many times, highlighting the spirit of compassion and pursuit of peace in Shaolin culture.	Overseas audiences cannot fully understand why the protagonist "revenges" and "redeems" during the war, and how to quickly let go of hatred. The plot connection is not good
Visual Effects and	Some fighting scenes are presented in medium and long	The description of life in Shaolin Temple is still superficial, with

Photography	shots with less editing and longer duration	little expression of daily practice and inner spirit.
Music and Sound Effects	The soundtrack incorporates elements of Shaolin Temple bells and drums and traditional musical instruments, echoing the rhythm of the martial arts movements, highlighting the oriental charm and solemnity	Some of the music seems a bit abrupt, and some Western film critics think it does not fit in with the plot.
Atmosphere and rendering	In addition to the direct confrontational martial arts scenes, there is also space for quiet scenes such as temple life, master-disciple interaction, and meditation.	The details about the cruelty of the warlords' infighting and the social background are a bit insufficient, making it difficult for cross-cultural audiences to fully immerse themselves in the story
Influence and legacy	Stimulated further attention to Shaolin Temple and Zen culture on an international scale	The depth of exploration of national culture and historical connotations is limited

For overseas Chinese, Shaolin kung fu films serve as a bridge that sustains ethnic identity. They not only satisfy nostalgia and pride in Chinese culture, but also reshape the “image of China” in mainstream Western society through film and television works, counteracting stereotypes and highlighting the profound depth of Eastern culture (Bhabha, 1994). How to appropriately portray Zen martial arts culture in narrative and propaganda is key to expanding the influence and cultural persuasiveness of Shaolin kung fu films.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

1. Shaolin Kung Fu films have evolved from showcasing technical prowess to returning to simplicity in the “post-mirror” context.

The impact of digital effects and the global market has prompted creators to seek a balance between “visual spectacles” and “authentic physical narratives.” Meanwhile, films have placed greater emphasis on expressing the core values of Shaolin Zen martial arts, highlighting the principles of “ceasing warfare as the essence of martial arts” and “repaying hatred with virtue.”

2. The dual narrative structure of macro-level storytelling and micro-level plotlines enhances the cultural depth of Shaolin Kung Fu films.

By interweaving historical depth and social concern (macro-level storytelling) with character physical training and inner redemption (micro-level plotlines), and integrating Chan-Wu philosophy, the films not only present action spectacles but also emphasize the spiritual growth and value elevation of the characters.

3. “Traditional reinvention” and “national identity reshaping” have become the core tasks of contemporary Shaolin kung fu films.

On one hand, directors and producers use physical filming and on-location shooting to recreate “authentic martial arts,” avoiding overly digitized, symbolic consumption; on the other hand, they expand the traditional “national resistance” theme to more universally compassionate concepts of peace and harmony, enhancing the global adaptability and inclusivity of the national image.

4. The diverse dissemination channels of the digital age offer new opportunities for the global influence of Shaolin kung fu films.

Through emerging media such as streaming platforms, short videos, and interactive experiences, the core values of Zen martial arts culture can be more effectively introduced to overseas audiences. Additionally, through academic research, cross-industry collaboration, and cultural tourism integration, the application scenarios of Shaolin kung fu in contemporary society can be further enriched, laying a more solid foundation and possibilities for Chinese films and culture to “go global.”

5.2 Strategies

5.2.1 Diversifying genres and cross-industry integration

To ensure that Shaolin Kung Fu films continue to thrive in the “diverse coexistence” era, future efforts may explore blending genres such as science fiction, mystery, and youth-oriented themes, while retaining the core “Zen-martial arts” essence and breaking free from the narrative limitations of traditional kung fu films. For example, Stephen Chow's “Shaolin Soccer” (2001) is a cross-genre fusion of kung fu, modern sports, and comedy elements. Though not strictly a Shaolin kung fu film, it offers insights for such creations (Moran & Penrod, 2016). By emphasizing physical training and inner transformation to strengthen the Zen-martial arts spirit, the film achieves an organic integration of character redemption and the dissemination of traditional culture. The values of “compassion” and “universal salvation” inherent in the image of Shaolin monks can be collaborated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or public welfare platforms to explore leveraging the influence of films and television to drive social attention in areas such as children's education and medical assistance.

5.2.2 Strengthening Cross-Cultural Interpretation and Channel Development

In the context of the widespread adoption of global streaming platforms, efforts should be made to introduce the history of the Shaolin Temple and Zen Buddhist philosophy to audiences in different cultural regions through subtitle translations, commentary versions, and social media promotions. For example, short videos could be released in the end credits or on official accounts to explain the relationship between Shaolin Kung Fu and religious rituals to overseas audiences; or when the film is released on streaming platforms, a “making-of special + cultural background” module could be added to help audiences better understand the deeper meaning of “the unity of Zen and martial arts” (Keane, 2016). Organize events such as the “Shaolin Kung Fu Cultural Exchange Week” on a global scale, leveraging platforms like overseas Chinese cultural centers and Confucius Institutes to conduct in-depth cultural diplomacy research.

5.2.3 Delve into the inner motivations of characters and contemporary social issues

A balance must be struck between visual spectacle and authentic physical narratives. Shaolin kung fu films that merely focus on martial arts combat or nostalgic historical reenactments will struggle to sustain the interest of younger audiences over the long term. Creators can draw on contemporary social issues (such as environmental protection, artificial intelligence, and cross-border cooperation) to explore the insights the Shaolin spirit offers for humanity's shared challenges. The characters' “spiritual cultivation” should not only be about personal redemption but also closely tied to real-world societal issues (Chan, 2004; Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). In the social media era, fans often engage in spontaneous activities such as creating “fan-made videos” or “virtual check-ins,” necessitating a deeper exploration of how such fan-driven organizations amplify or distort the cross-cultural dissemination of Shaolin Kung Fu films.

5.2.4 Cross-Platform, Multi-Format Content Distribution

At the academic research level, more interdisciplinary dialogue should be conducted to integrate findings from fields such as film studies, religious studies, anthropology, and communication studies into the creation and dissemination strategies of Shaolin kung fu films. At the operational level, platforms such as TikTok, Bilibili, Instagram, and YouTube can be utilized to release behind-the-scenes footage, martial arts tutorials, and interviews with the creative team in the form of short videos. Simultaneously or sequentially release the film on mainstream streaming platforms (such as Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime, Youku, and iQiyi) to fully leverage their algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and quickly reach a broader audience. Through user-generated content (UGC) and the operation of viewing communities, the Shaolin Kung Fu culture can continue to gain traction within fan circles, thereby promoting secondary dissemination of the film among a wider audience.

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