The Visual Language of Hollywood Movies Remade in China: Analysis of Posters on the Basis of Cross-culture Communication

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Abstract: In recent years, as remade movies from Hollywood in China are booming, an increasing number of successful cases have been made. Movie posters are always the first greed to the audiences and they help a lot at leaving people with a good first impression of the movie and triggering their interests. Since the original stories are based on American society and culture, remade ones in China need to be adapted to Chinese culture and posters, at the first sight, make a big difference. Thus, the comparison of posters of remade movies from the stance of cultural background needs further study. This article identifies the cultural factors influencing the illustration and perception of the remakes' posters. In the following parts, we will analyze the selected five sets of posters from the perspective of four branches of interactive meaning in multimodal discourse. Furthermore, we will explain the differences demonstrated by interactive meaning through cultural context. We will discuss a proper way and attitude to localize the foreign stories and illustrate them well by combining cultural elements and features.

Keywords: movie poster, remake, cross-culture communication, multimodal discourse

1.   Introduction

In recent years, more and more fabulous American movies have been remade and adapted by China, yet they seem to fail to suit the appetite of local audiences. The remade movies are movies shot by another director but telling the same story. The remakes that we are talking about in this study are movies originally shot by Hollywood and they are remade by China in order to adapt the story better in the Chinese cultural context. It is important to distinguish the remade movies that have bought the copyright from plagiarized works that have not. And the most obvious feature we can see in the Chinese remade-movies is that the posters almost share nothing in common with the original ones. Why are posters so different while stories resembled? Posters, the "ID card" of a movie, are the first greed that movies make with the audiences. Thus, to adapt to the Chinese context, the posters should be designed elaborately with thorough concerns of visual grammar perceived in Chinese culture. Making localized posters is the first step for Chinese remakes to attract spectators and gain box office.

Most of the previous studies focused more on the content of the remade movies, which analyzed how were cultural elements displayed in movies deciphered and translated between different countries and cultures [1]. On the other hand, many studies have also paid attention to cultural communication through remakes, like kung fu movies in cross-culture communication [2],

Hollywood movies remade from Asian ones [3]. Standing on another perspective, loads of studies have made comparisons between posters in different countries, either different versions of one single poster, or posters from different countries. And in which, multimodal discourse analysis has been widely applied. It is still pretty scarce to connect movie posters with remakes, based on the visual grammar set in different cultural contexts. Thus, analyzing movie posters from the point of cross-culture can help Chinese-remade movies gain more attention to grasp the "visual appetite" of indigenous audiences.

This study is aiming at filling up the gap in the cross-culture analysis in the field regarding movie posters. Moreover, the study focuses specifically on the interactive meaning of the theory of the multimodal discourse analysis, which is divided into four categories: contact, social distance, perspective and modality [4]. This study will be developed based on five selected poster cases from 2010 to 2020, which belong to *Everybody's Fine (一切都好)*, *My Best Friend's Wedding（我最好朋友的婚礼）*, *Only You（命中注定）*, *Brewster's Millions（布鲁斯特的百万横财）* and *12 Angry Men（12 公民）*. The choices are considered mainly because of the representative Chinese and American cultural features shown in these five sets of posters. They are comparatively successful examples of remade movies in China. Take *Everybody's Fine (一切都好)* as an example. According to the aspect of modality in interactive meaning, the colours in the original one is gentler and much more moderate while the Chinese version is surrounded with bright red which is regarded as the colour of happiness and reunion. Under the analysis of interactive meaning, this study will associate the cultural features with cross-culture theories of Hofstede, in order to explain why posters of the same story but in two countries are so different on the stance of cross-culture communication. And discuss when it comes to cross-culture communication, how can China make a foreign story suit into Chinese culture and popularize it through posters.

To illustrate the underlying cultural phenomena in the posters through interactive meaning in multimodal discourse, this paper will be divided into four parts as follows. The first part is going to do a review of literature relevant to cross-culture, movie posters and multimodal discourse. In the second part, we will move on analyzing through posters, using the theoretical tool of the four-aspect interactive meaning of multimodal discourse and explore cultural backgrounds. The next part will discuss the outcome and give some suggestions on the implement. In the last part of this study, the conclusions will be drawn and the limitations of this study will be examined

2.   Literature review

Hofstede [5] explained five dimensions to evaluate different culture. When it comes to movies in the context of cross-culture, multiple developments have been achieved. To capsulate, they are mainly focusing on foreign movies and remade movies. Shao & Pan [6] discussed and gave some suggestions on how to give Chinese movies more and better chances to have cross-culture communications. Liu [7] did research on the cross-cultural acceptance of Chinese audiences varied from ages and genders toward the movie *The Lord of the Rings 3*. Song [8] explained the fundamental principle of understanding of cross-culture movies, using theories related to encoding and decoding. But how about posters? What role dose movie poster play during the process of cross-culture communication?

Back in the late 50s, posters are treated as a kind of artistic medium. Later in the mid-90s, movie poster was simply reduced to show who was in the film instead of their function of expressing the spirit of the film. Arguments about the artistic role and the commercial role of the movie poster once had been fierce, regarding posters contributing a lot to the first impressions movies left on audiences and to elicit them into the cinemas. Studies have been developed to shed light on both of the views. As for the commercial function of the posters, some studies analyzed posters from the perspective of the movie industry. On the other hand, most of the studies focus on the visual design of posters,

sharing the logic that through analyzing the features or graphic patterns that can help viewers to understand the movie better and trigger their interests, suggestions have been given on designing posters to suit audiences' appetites. For example, Yuan [9] discussed and gave some suggestions on how to design posters better to attract audiences, based on the "Model of Ideal" from Diderot. Moreover, several studies dig into the sociological meanings of movie posters. Wu [10] discussed the hand-painted posters of movies featured in females. Cultural elements embedded in movie posters is also a popular topic among scholars. Many Chinese scholars reckon cultural characteristics in posters as a medium to introduce Chinese culture into the world. Like Shen & Sun [11] discussed the use of calligraphy in movie posters and Wang [12] analyzed Chinese graphic patterns in movie posters, in the context of cross-culture.

This study is going to compare five sets of posters of five different movies from the perspective of the interactive meaning of multimodal discourse, which is a tool that has been widely used in the poster analysis. These five movies were remade by China, from the original American ones. Why the posters of Chinese-remade ones are so different from American ones? And why did some of them help promote the movies while others failed? Based on these questions, this study tries to discover the social culture hiding at the back of the posters.

1996, Kress and Leeuwen [4] put forward the conception of visual grammar, verifying that except language, other semiotics like images and colours are also equipped with functions of conveying meanings and information. Thus, the multimodal discourse had been extended into the field of visual perception, which consists of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. This study will specifically focus on interactive meaning, which is composed of four systems: contact, social distance, perspective and modality. In the context of interactive meaning, this study mainly talks about how does a poster attract viewers and get them involved in the process of understating the poster and the story delivered by the poster.

3.   Contact

The contact means the emotional connection between presented participants and the viewers. There are two ways of contacting, which are offering and demanding. Mostly, when the participants are
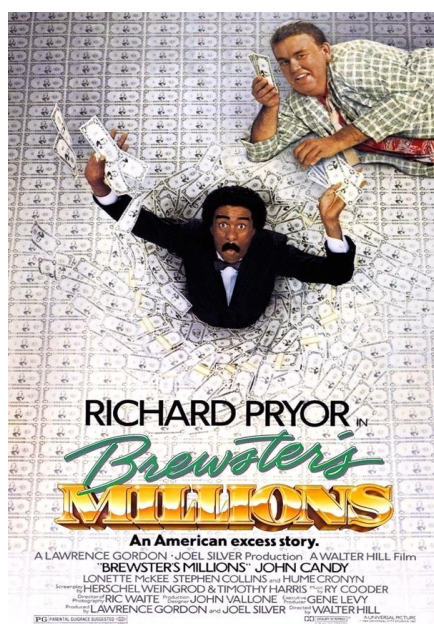

Figure 1: The poster of *Brewster's Millions.*

Figure 2: The poster of *Hello Mr. Billionaire.*

having eye contact with viewers, they are demanding emotional attachment. When offering, participants in posters are looking at somewhere else, to make viewers feel like an onlooker. Compared with the American version, the Chinese poster of *Hello Mr. Billionaire* is demanding relations and feelings of admiration through the eye contact from the character sitting in the centre. All of the other roles are looking at him and serving around him. Also, from the facial expression of the character, viewers can easily share the rejoice and enjoyment that he has.

Another example can be seen in the posters of *12 Angry Men* and its Chinese version, *12 Citizens.* In comparison with the American version, all of the 12 citizens are showing up in the poster and looking straight forward into the viewers' eyes, with solemn faces, which in Chinese perception, can be reckoned as a signal of demanding opinions and justice from viewers.

Based on Chinese social culture, the poster has strongly stricken the chore with viewers, which comes from collectivism, a culture dimension according to Hofstede [5]. According to Hofstede, collectivism refers to a culture thinking more about the group and the society rather than individuals. China, as a country ranking low (about 56 in 74 countries) in individualism, always emphasize the collective as a whole and the importance of justice and fairness. Looked at earnestly by presented participants activating the collectivism embedded in Chinese people, arousing the sense of responsibility, viewers tend to become a part of them and take part in the discussion, which leads to them expecting to get to know the story and expressing their opinions. Therefore, the demanding contact presented by the Chinese version of *12 Citizens* works out well in attracting Chinese audiences to get a precise gist of the movie.

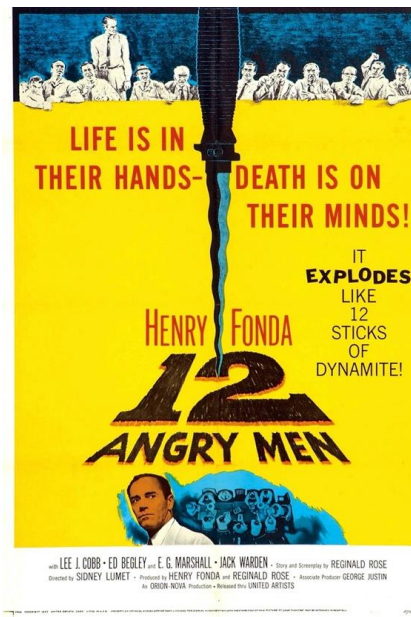Figure 4: The poster of *12 Citizens*.

Figure 3: The poster of *12 Angry Men.*

4. Social Distance

Social distance refers to the relationship between participants and viewers, which can show how close they are. Different shot skills are used to illustrate different distances. The long shot is on the behalf of impersonal distance, the medium shot is used to show personal distance and intimate distance can be built through the close-up. Chinese versions of posters, especially posters of love stories, are more likely to show personal distance instead of intimate distance. In the American version of *My Best Friend's Wedding*, we can only see the face of the character while characters from waisted up are shown in the Chinese version. In other words, the American version is using a close-up showing

intimate distance, but the shot in the Chinese version is a medium shot of personal distance. As a consequence, Chinese viewers may feel not as close with the characters in the poster as American viewers. Then where do the differences in poster design come from? Long embedded in Chinese culture, people are reserved in order to show politeness and respect when socializing. Especially in themes related to love, the expression is timid and implicit. Therefore, the Chinese version of the poster is comparatively keeping social distance with viewers. Moreover, establishing a little distance can make Chinese viewers feel that they are invited to stand in front of characters and communicate with them from a wider angle and to obtain more information at the same time.
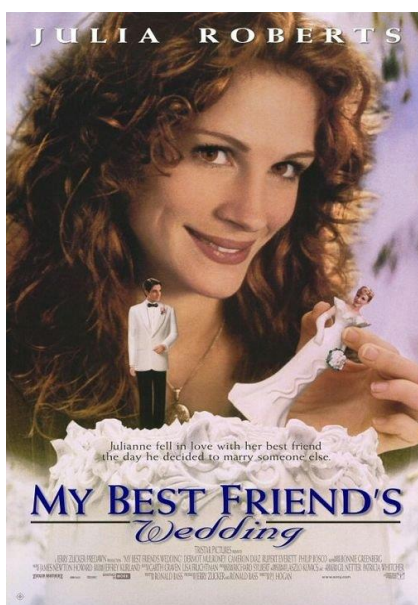

Figure 5: The poster of *My Best Friend's Wedding*.

Figure 6: The poster of the Chinese version of *My Best Friend's Wedding*.

5. Perspective

Perspective is a way to demonstrate the objective or subjective attitude that viewers have toward the participants in the posters. And also, the relationship between viewers and participants is shown in the angles of the camera shooting the poster, which are basically divided into two branches: horizontal and vertical. The horizontal angle is composed of frontal angle and oblique angle. The vertical angle has three levels, which are high level, eye level and low level. The horizontal angle is showing whether participants are inviting viewers to join the world of them through a subjective view or the participants show no concern about the outer world through the objective view formed by the oblique angle of the camera. The subordination of power is illustrated by levels of vertical angle. If the poster is shot at a high level of angle, it is implied that viewers are in the domain of power while a low angle reversed the relationship. Eye-level of angle is telling an equal relationship without power affiliation. Compared with American posters, it is more common that power affiliation can be seen in the Chinese version. From the poster of *Hello Mr. Billionaire,* we can see there is only the central character sitting down and looking at us while other characters are serving around him. From the frontal angle and the eye level of the poster, it is inviting viewers to join him enjoying the rejoice and luxurious wealth brought to the character from a subjective view. Also, there is a strong contradiction between the countryside background in the poster and the wealthy states characters are showing. The meaning demonstrated by the poster and the scene can easily be understood by Chinese viewers which is a man from a village suddenly becoming a billionaire. The reason why it suits the Chinese culture environment that well is that China is high in power distance according to Hofstede's theory. As for power distance, it means that the culture can easily accept the inequality in the society caused by power. Thus, a group of people serving around in order to please the billionaire is quite acceptable in Chinese culture and the phenomenon, we can say, has existed for a long time ever since ancient China.

6. Modality

In the context of interactive meaning, modality refers to the authenticity or credibility of the content that is illustrated and conveyed by the objective. In accordance with visual grammar, Kress and Leeuwen [4] proposed eight criteria to analyze the level of the modality, which are classified into three types: high modality, middle modality and low modality. These eight criteria are colour saturation, colour differentiation, colour coordination, contextualization, illustration, illumination, brightness and depth. Different genre of the movie triggers different cognition and culture subconsciously. Let's take romance movies and family movies for example. The movie, *Only You,* tells a love story. Analyzing the modality of these posters through eight criteria, we can say that both the American version and the Chinese version are of comparatively high modality. For instance, it is clear that the colour differentiation is high, blue and red, black and white…Also, colours are bright and in high saturation in order to leave the viewers with the impression of a romantic love story with passion. Moreover, both of the posters are presented by real people and reproduced the actual scenes. Love sparks and romance between couples are universally similar. In spite of the culture, the region or the age, romantic love always brings people a sense of feeling throbbing and happiness. To awake certain feelings lying inside viewers' hearts, posters of romance movies are similarly with high colour saturation, colour differentiation and so forth, which can be concluded as high modality.
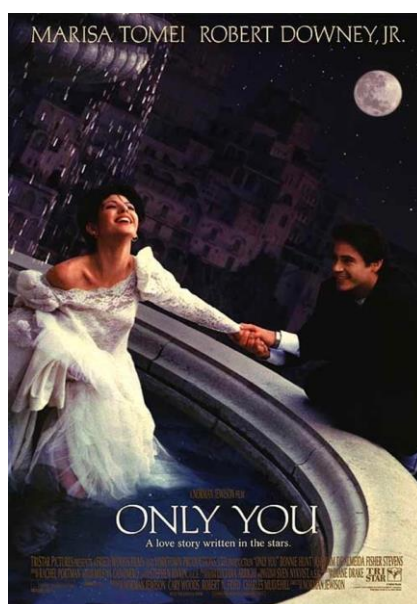
Figure 7: The poster of *Only You*.

Figure 8: The poster of the Chinese version of *Only You*.

As for family movies, influenced by different family outlooks, the Chinese version of the poster will be slightly different from the American version. Most Chinese remade family movies' posters are in higher modality than American ones. We take *Everybody's Fine* as an example. Comparing two versions of the poster, we can tell the differences in colour saturation, colour differentiation, brightness and contextualization. With bright and eye-catching red covering the background, the Chinese version of the poster strongly conveys the happiness and the reunion of the big family as the bright red in Chinese culture stands for happiness and joy. The main characters standing in the centre of the poster are wearing dark colours, which forms a strong contrast with red in the background. It is noticeable that other patterns in the poster are hand drawn instead of reproducing the real-life scene, unlike the American version. In Chinese tradition, the family outlook is emphasizing the strength and the bond among family members who should take care of each other as a kind of responsibility.

According to Hofstede's theory, China is a long-term oriented (have a rather long-run goal and strongly respect the tradition) country, which can be seen from our long preserved and respected tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. Therefore, the Chinese version of family posters are always with high modality to strike the chord with the significance of family bonds embedded in Chinese culture.

7.   Conclusions

To capsulate, we hold the point that posters of remade movies need to show, except the theme and the stories of the movies, the typical cultural elements in order to attract local viewers. This paper

Figure 9: The poster of *Everybody's Fine*.

Figure 10: The poster of the Chinese version of *Everybody's Fine*.

offers a view of focusing on the posters with consideration of the movies instead of the movies only when it comes to remade movies. We have attempted to explain why posters of the same story that is filmed by different countries share little similarities through the perspective of cross-culture communication. We analyzed a couple of posters picked from movies remade by China from American ones through the interactive meaning of multimodal discourse as a tool. For the purpose of explaining these differences, we explored the cultural phenomena lying behind the visual grammar displayed by the posters. Standing on the view of cultural differences between China and America based on Hofstede's theory, we tried to explain how these cultural differences are illustrated by posters and perceived by viewers, through the view of four angles of interactive meaning, which are contact, social distance, perspective and modality. Compared with previous research and articles, the most important contribution of this paper is that we extended to explore the cultural differences of comparing Chinese and American movie posters.

Consequently, there is still much to be done to unify theory building and verification in the field of movie posters and cross-culture communication. Thus, there are some limitations to this study, which could lead to further research. One is that we constrained the posters in remade movies which is only a small scale of the certain field. Future studies might dig deeper and expand the scale of the posters to get more universally applicable conclusions. Moreover, this study only focused on the interactive meaning of multimodal discourse, other branches such as representational meaning and compositional meaning can be the topic of future studies. Also, cultural difference is not the only way to explain the distinctions between different movie posters in different countries. Differences in audiences or different film shooting styles and techniques may also offer a direction for further studies to explain the differences of movie posters. With further explorations, we believe more interesting conclusions and methods could be found in boosting the theory and practice in the field of movie posters.

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