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The Role of Cultural Proximity on Preference of Chinese Malaysians in Chinese Film

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Abstract

This paper is to identify the cultural factors that contribute to the preference of Chinese Malaysians in Chinese films that attempt to maintain their cultural identity in the multicultural context of Malaysia. Because of the historical and cultural relationship between Chinese Malaysians and Chinese, cultural proximity was used as the main theory to determine the factors that preference of Chinese Malaysians in Chinese films. This study focused on Chinese Malaysian students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and applied semi-structured interviews in qualitative research methods. Moreover, this study found that language and education, customs and festivals, religion and lifestyle, arts were the main factors influencing Chinese Malaysians' preference for Chinese films.

Keywords: Chinese Film, Cultural Proximity, Chinese Malaysians, Audience Analysis, Intercultural Communication

Introduction

Background of Study

Malaysia and Singapore have long been leading the overseas box office of Chinese films, and the contribution of overseas Chinese audiences cannot be ignored. Overseas Chinese from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan constitute a diverse audience for transnational media (Carstens, 2003). To satisfy the needs of a global audience separated by cultural barriers and geographical borders, there has been a surge in needs for cultural products, especially from China (Zhao & Ang, 2020). According to the Current Population Estimates of Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2020), the number of Chinese Malaysians accounted for 22.6% of the total population of Malaysia. As the ancestors of Chinese Malaysians were Chinese immigrants, they inherited traditional Chinese culture and established Chinese education in Malaysia. With the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Silk Road International Film Festival was established in 2014 to provide a platform for the exhibition, exchange and study of outstanding films from countries and regions along the Silk Road (Hu & Gao, 2019).

Problem Statement

The Chinese film box office is growing year by year, and Chinese film companies can do more and more business abroad (Richeri, 2016). Chinese Malaysians have a long history of participation in Chinese media through Mahua literature and film companies such as Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris. However, a survey on the preference of Chinese Malaysians for Western or Chinese films showed that 16% of adults chose Chinese films. In addition, 34% of students chose Chinese films (Carstens, 2003). Nonetheless, the presence of Chinese Malaysians has contributed to the globalisation of the Chinese film industry and developed a more international prospect (Barker, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the role of cultural proximity on the preference of Chinese Malaysians in Chinese films.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the factors of cultural proximity in Chinese films among Chinese Malaysians.
2. To investigate how to influence the preference of Chinese Malaysians through cultural proximity in Chinese films.

Literature Review

Chinese Film

In the 1920s, Chinese films were exported to Southeast Asia. From the 1950s to the 1960s, Hong Kong films swept Singapore and Malaya. After the 1960s, Malaysia gradually established a local Chinese-language film industry. There is a strong historical link between Chinese films and Chinese Malaysian audiences. Malaysian cinemas offer a choice of films in various languages, due to the context of Malaysian multi-ethnic language. Language as a carrier for cinema is used as a way of classifying films in Malaysia so that films can be divided into Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English films. In recent years, imported English films have dominated the box office, with the number of imported Chinese films on the decline (Wang, 2020). However, according to the data (National Film Development Corporation Malaysia [FINAS], 2019), as shown in Table 1, the annual grosses of imported Chinese films were ahead of local films until 2018. Besides, Chinese Malaysians have responded well to Chinese films. The release of the Chinese film *Better Days* in 2019 became a single-week box office winner, followed by increased screenings to attract a large Chinese Malaysian audience.

Table 1. Box office revenue of local films and Chinese films in Malaysia

Year	Local Film (RM / Million)	Chinese Films (RM / Million)
2015	52.99	102.98
2016	83.06	100.35
2017	57.57	89.30
2018	170.40	72.17
2019	144.71	93.70

Chinese Malaysians

Chinese Malaysians have had three major migrations in history. They brought traditional Chinese culture, which formed a unique multicultural background with Malay and Indian cultures in Malaysia. Chinese Malaysians are the local ethnic group and the second-largest ethnic group in Malaysia. They are also the second largest overseas Chinese

community in the world after the Thai Chinese. Most of their ancestors came from the southern provinces of China between the early 19th and mid-20th centuries. Chinese Malaysians generally dominate the business sector in Malaysia. They have retained traditional Chinese culture and Chinese Malaysians in different towns speak different dialects (Tan, 2000), but Mandarin is widely used as the standard language for the younger generation. Early Chinese immigrants absorbed the Malay or indigenous culture and formed distinct sub-ethnic groups known as Peranakans and Baba-Nyonya (Tan, 1997). Chinese Malaysians include Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochew, Foochow, Hainanese, Kwongsai, Henghua, Hokchia and others. The last census on sub-ethnic groups was shown in Table 2 (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2000).

Table 2. Demographic distribution of various dialect groups

Dialect groups	Percentage in Chinese population (%)
Hokkien	37.65
Hakka	20.39
Cantonese	19.91
Teochew	9.30
Foochow	4.74
Hainanese	2.31
Kwongsai	1.01
Henghua	0.51
Hokchia	0.34
Others	3.84
Total	100

Cultural Proximity

According to the concept of cultural proximity proposed by Straubhaar (1991, 2003, 2007), audiences want to choose media products that are proximate to their cultural background. La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) point out that the frequent emphasis on similar language is an essential determinant of audience preference. For La Pastina and Straubhaar, cultural proximity is mainly based on languages background, but they also emphasise the proximity of other cultural elements. There are other cultural factors at play, such as body language, education, gender image, humour, family, religions, ethnicity, dress, gestures, music, personal experiences, lifestyle and organisational relationships (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). Thus, cultural proximity is multifaceted, and there is a complex interaction between culture and audience. Some cultural factors are geographical, while others are psychological.

Apart from its use in media studies, cultural proximity is also widely used in trade and tourism studies (Felbermayr & Toubal, 2010; Ryan, 2002). In media studies, it is primarily used in TV programs and dramas that influence dispersed ethnic and transnational audiences, including Korean dramas in Asia (Kim, 2004), Arab media in Islamic regions (Georgiou, 2012), Spanish media in Latin America (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008) and Indian media in Nepal (Burch, 2002). In the study of cultural proximity, Trepte (Trepte, 2008) summarises four factors: (a) the geographical distance between the importing and exporting countries of a television programme; (b) the exchange of people (such as tourists or migrants) between the two countries; (c) the exchange of goods and commodities; (d) and similar political and economic

systems. However, there is a lack of research on the influence of cultural proximity on overseas Chinese in Chinese films.

Methods

This study uses semi-structured interviews to explore the cultural factors that influence the preference of Chinese Malaysians in Chinese films. Because of the diversity of Malaysian culture, using cultural proximity provides insight into the reasons why Chinese Malaysians prefer Chinese films. Due to Covid-19, the researcher had to use Skype to conduct online interviews. This study selects UPM, the largest public university in Malaysia with the largest number of students. Besides that, ten Chinese Malaysian students were selected as participants for the semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling. They come from Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang, Johor, Perak, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang and Sarawak, essentially covering Malaysia. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with each student for an hour, then transcribed the video into text and performed a cluster analysis on the text.

Findings and Discussion

Language and Education

Most Chinese films currently take multiple companies to co-produce, so most of them have Mandarin dialogue, with a few Cantonese dialogues for Hong Kong films and Hokkien for Taiwan films. However, Chinese Malaysians speak at least three languages, as they usually speak more than one Chinese language. Even when films feature dialects from other parts of China, the Malaysian government requires all films shown in cinemas to be accompanied by Chinese subtitles. So most Chinese Malaysians can understand the dialogue of Chinese films. Although the names of some items are not quite the same, the audience can still grasp the meaning of the words in time through the film footage. There are also some expressions unique to Chinese Malaysians. They want their children to attend Chinese primary schools. Mandarin is the language of instruction in Chinese schools, and they learn simplified Chinese characters and Hanyu Pinyin from an early age. In addition, some national secondary schools offer Chinese as a language subject. Some Chinese Malaysians continue to use Chinese as a medium of instruction in independent high schools.

Customs and Festivals

Some of the Chinese films released during the Chinese New Year have a strong festive flavour. The film *Lost on Journey* tells the story of a toy conglomerate owner and a milkman breaking through all the barriers to get home for the Chinese New Year. At the end of the film, when he enters his home with tiredness, it is not only a moment of physical relaxation but also a moment of spiritual comfort. This shows the position of Chinese New Year in the hearts of all Chinese people. As well as gathering with family, the traditional dinner is the highlight of the celebrations. Dumplings become the most characteristic representatives. Moreover, the elders also give the youngsters a red envelope to signify that the new year will bring good luck. Besides Chinese New Year, red envelopes are also given on other festive occasions such as a wedding, birthday and shop openings, and the upcoming film *Big Red Envelope* in 2021 uses red envelopes as storylines. Chinese New Year has been set as a national public holiday in Malaysia. Chinese Malaysians also have many other festivals that define their annual rituals and social life, according to the Chinese calendar. They eat soup

dumplings at the Lantern Festival, eat rice-pudding at the Dragon Boat Festival, eat mooncakes at the Mid-Autumn Festival and sacrifice to ancestors at the Qingming Festival.

Religion and Lifestyle

Chinese temples and religious shrines are conspicuous throughout Malaysia. Most Chinese Malaysians follow Confucian values. They also express filial piety and social relations and consult Feng Shui. The traditional cultural spirit in Chinese films promotes the morality of Chinese families and fully meets the collective cultural psychology and traditional aesthetic needs of overseas Chinese. The film *Detective Chinatown* introduces the story of overseas Chinese Tang Ren and his nephew Qin Feng. The traditional Chinese elements of the five elements become the highlight of the film, as people once again see the unique and wonderful charm of traditional Chinese culture amid a busy and modern metropolis. The role of detective, originally more common in Western literature, became the substrate for the young Chinese director to portray his characters. The integration of Western storytelling models into Chinese storytelling connotations is itself an innovative product of international cultural cross-fertilisation and a creative expression unique to the new age director.

Arts

Chinese Malaysian artists practice a wide variety of arts, including Chinese painting, Chinese music, Chinese opera, Chinese martial arts, lion and dragon dance. These elements are often found in Chinese films, especially action films. The film *IP Man*, for example, has a plot that explores, aside from martial arts, father-son bonding, racial discrimination and Chinese culture. This film took ten years to create a Chinese superhero. In times of peace, he is humble and refined, and when the country is in danger, he stands up for himself and is not subservient. Although martial arts are an armed force, Chinese martial arts are one that contains the philosophy of Confucianism, martial virtue, or benevolence. Besides that, the suona is a traditional Chinese musical instrument. The film *Song of the Phoenix* tells the story of a respected old suona artist, Master Jiao, who leads his disciples in the pursuit and transmission of the spirit of the suona with unwavering passion and strong faith.

In addition to these cultural elements bringing Chinese films closer to Chinese Malaysians, there are also directors, actors and singers who act as cultural transmitters. Malaysian directors Tsai Ming Liang and Sam Quah are well known to audiences for their Chinese films. The Chinese films they produced have a Malaysian style. Actress Michelle Yeoh is even a representative of a Chinese action film star. Songs by singers Fish Leong, Michael Wong and Tan Kheng Seong are also often used in Chinese films.

From talking to these participants, the author found that most of them were fourth and fifth generation immigrants. Most of them had travelled to China, but the individual participants had not visited their ancestral home. Beside the subtle role played by cultural proximity in their choice of Chinese films, they also needed to seek cultural identity from Chinese films. Through Chinese films, they learn more about Chinese history and stories of their homeland.

Conclusion

Audiences generally prefer to watch films that are closely related to their cultural background, regardless of the language in which the actors speak and the way they rely on

subtitles to capture the storyline. Chinese language films screened in Malaysia show that language is not the only factor in Chinese Malaysians' preference for Chinese language films. Audience enthusiasm is closely linked to similar life experiences and a mature language environment. The cultural proximity and expressiveness of Chinese-language films meet the cultural needs of Chinese Malaysian audiences, and Chinese-language films have served to guide Chinese entertainment styles and family life. Chinese cinema has proven to fill a sense of void that Western cinema cannot. Chinese cinema uses its strong culture, emotions and beliefs without losing the realities of life such as love, family, redemption and determination. Chinese cinema can appeal to a wider audience by spreading traditional Chinese cultural traditions. The idea that audiences tend to choose media from a lifestyle, or the most relevant cultural context is crucial to how audiences around the world engage with their media.

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