

Exploring the Globalisation of East Asian Cinema from a Transnational Perspective—John Woo and His Film Face/Off as an Example

Luyin Cao

University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
caoluyin946@outlook.com

Keywords: Globalisation, Transnational Cooperation, East Asian Cinema, Hollywood Cinema, John Woo, Cultural Fusion

Abstract: Since the wave of globalization, “globalisation” and “transnationalism” have become key concepts in describing world development. As a medium of cultural transmission, film transcends national boundaries and occupies an important position in Hollywood’s global strategy. This article takes John Woo and his film *Face/Off* (1997) as examples to explore the transnational cooperation of East Asian cinema. John Woo, who successfully fused Chinese and Western cultures, achieved success both in Hong Kong and Hollywood. *Face/Off* showcased his emotional transformation, breaking geographical restrictions and gaining global recognition. This article analyzes the interaction between East Asian cinema and Hollywood, John Woo’s transnational career, the themes and character portrayal in his films, as well as the relationship between his style and global acceptance. It emphasizes the importance of transnational cooperation and looks forward to more cultural exchanges and integrations.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the wave of globalisation in the economic sphere in the last century, it has affected many areas of society and culture as a whole. The term “globalisation” has become a key concept in describing worldwide development. However, as the term “globalisation” has been imprecise and too broad, more scholars have begun to discuss the term “transnational”. While the term “globalisation” is usually applied to any (political, social, cultural or economic) process or relationship within a nation, the term “transnational” is more commonly used to describe the scale, distribution and diversity of such exchanges, as well as their impact at the local level and the consequences they can have within and beyond the nation state ^[1]. In some specific cases, transnational may even bypass all national institutions. Film is a communication medium with great advantages that is more capable of transcending national borders. Through the film industry, Hollywood conveys American values to the world, indirectly influencing the audience’s way of life and thinking, this trend of Hollywood films has also been blowing into the entire East Asian film market for a long time. However, the cultural industry, especially the film industry, has always occupied a very important place in the global strategy of the United States. Through the film industry,

Hollywood conveys American values to the world, thus indirectly influencing the audience's way of life and way of thinking, and has already generated huge economic benefits and a large number of loyal followers around the world. This Hollywood film popular trend has also influenced China and the entire East Asian film market for a long time. Transnationalism is fast becoming a standard term when it comes to East Asian cinema, as a growing number of Japanese, Korean and Hong Kong films are collaborating with Hollywood or having their rights acquired by Hollywood for remakes^[2].

Since the 1980s, Chinese-language filmmakers have also been gradually making their mark on the international film scene, John Woo was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award at the 67th Venice International Film Festival in 2010. The Hong Kong director, who mainly shoots action-commercial films, seeks to transcend the binary definitions of art and commerce, and to integrate Chinese and Western cultures, in order to not only cater to the globalised marketplace, but also to disseminate the uniqueness of Chinese culture in his works. In particular, in John Woo's pinnacle work of his Hollywood period, *Face/Off* (1997), Woo has combined Chinese and Western cultures to the extreme, and with the power of the Hollywood film industry, it has become his most recognisable work amongst non-Chinese-speaking audiences around the world. This essay takes a transnational perspective to analyse John Woo's role as an East Asian director in the global film market and the impact of his film *Face/Off*, on the globalisation process of East Asian cinema.

2. The Globalisation of East Asian Cinema

In the context of the globalisation of East Asian cinema, East-West transnational co-operation is among the earliest and most common cases, in which Eastern cinema and Hollywood co-operate more closely, and it emerges because of market demand. Hollywood repackaged Hong Kong films and remade them in the aesthetic mode of mainstream Hollywood films, trying to make Hong Kong's cinematic fantasies part of mainstream Hollywood films as well^[3]. The interaction between East Asian cinema and Hollywood is primarily categorised into martial arts films, pan-ethnic films, transnational collaborations, and remakes. Firstly, martial arts films occupy a significant position in the American film market and are even highly popular across Western countries, exemplified by films such as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), and John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). These films not only have an oriental charm, but also a uniqueness that also satisfies the Western audience's curiosity about East Asian culture. The historical background and ideology of East Asian cinema have national characteristics, and this form of collaborative East Asian cinema expresses an "Asian aesthetic", an exotic, feminine and mysterious "Asian aesthetic". Each film in the new wave of Asian cinema is beautifully decorated, like a tapestry, with an emphasis on detail, visual images, colours and styles, all centred on a woman or a feminised man^[4]. Furthermore, the prevalence of "Asian aesthetics" is driven by the need to outsource production. "Filmmaking is a crucial industry for revealing the mechanisms of contemporary transnational production and the global circulation of commodities, capital, images, and people."^[5] Hollywood's use of relatively cheaply paid Asian directors and, more importantly, its confidence in the huge potential of the Asian film market while still holding the rights to outsourced productions, has allowed Hollywood to reap even more lucrative profits than before. This is because the rise of East Asian cinema has also fragmented Hollywood's economic position, but East Asian transnational collaborations (which refer to East Asian films mass-produced by Hollywood) have been produced by Hollywood in an attempt to protect itself from the fragmentation of its economy. The transnational collaboration combines film culture and economic forms, breaking through the limitations of some countries' inherent model and expanding the market for East Asian films, hence the growing role of East Asian directors in Hollywood.

However, a major challenge for these East Asian directors who are invited to Hollywood to make

films is the question of how they can combine their own artistic style and national uniqueness with Western culture and the Western market. Whether it is an East Asian director or a film director from other regions, in the process of making a film, no matter how Hollywood elements are incorporated into their works, they are all visualising tradition and reality, facing and dealing with the tension between globalisation and modernisation, nationalisation and localisation, as well as the problems of integration and regeneration arising from the collision of different cultures. Film, as a special medium, has a more obvious uniqueness in cultural communication. Film itself is a universal language that does not need to over-emphasise national differences, and should rather go for combining different cultures and conforming to a more diversified market. Globalisation provides a two-way process of “universalist particularisation” and “particularist universalisation” to the development of culture ^[6]. This means that the impact of globalisation is manifested in two extremes: It moves from the West to the East, and from the East to the West in the opposite direction. It is worth noting, however, that this globalisation is not a one-way cultural export or acceptance, but involves a two-way interaction and mingling. In the process of globalisation, East Asian films have been influenced by Hollywood and other Western cultures, and have also been spreading their own cultural characteristics to the West. This two-way cultural exchange not only enriches the diversity of the global film market, but also promotes understanding and respect among different cultures. At the same time, for East Asian directors, how to better integrate into the Western market and culture while maintaining their own cultural characteristics has become an important issue that they continue to explore and practice.

3. John Woo's Transnational Film Career

Growing up in the slums of Hong Kong, John Woo lived in a complex environment where there were not only ordinary civilians, but also drug dealers, gangs, gamblers and prostitutes. Since he was a child, John Woo has witnessed too much ugliness in the world, and many violent episodes are buried deep in his memory. However, it is these experiences that provide much of the creative material and foundation for his films, and it could be argued that they are the source of the violent aesthetics in his films. This also has to take into account the particular historical context prior to the handover of Hong Kong, where most of John Woo's crime films have been seen to express political anxiety about the possible loss of Hong Kong's identity after 1997 ^[7]. In addition, John Woo grew up with a love of western musical films. The biggest influence of musical films on him is in his film production process, he choreographed violent action to create it combined with dance, to enhance the beauty of the action and the use of the body's emotional expression. These laid the foundation for his subsequent film aesthetics. Woo has commented, “When I shoot action sequences I think of great dancers, Gene Kelly, Astaire. In action I feel like I'm creating a ballet, a dance.”

John Woo's films also have a very distinctive traditional Chinese cultural identity, which is due to his own childhood interest in ancient Chinese books, such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*, etc. The righteousness of these heroes and characters demonstrates the unique righteousness and chivalry in traditional Chinese culture, and the unique righteousness and chivalry in traditional Chinese culture demonstrated by the righteousness of these heroes and characters has deeply influenced him. He was deeply influenced by the righteousness and chivalry of traditional Chinese culture shown by these heroes. This also laid the spiritual and cultural foundation for the action films he created later on, which was highlighted by his expression of brotherhood. The male protagonists created by John Woo are fighting for loyalty and true friendship, not for anything other than emotions like money and capital ^[8]. Whether it be *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), *Once A Thief* (1991), or *The Killer* (1989), John Woo's films are always very delicate and sincere in their portrayal of the feelings of two men, where they show mutual respect, stand by each other through thick and thin, and even risk their lives for each other. In 1993, John Woo was invited to direct the Universal

Pictures-financed film *The Ultimate Target*, which shifted the focus of his work to Hollywood. In 1996 he directed *Hard Target* starring Jean-Claude Van Damme and in 1997 *Face/Off* (1997) starring Nicolas Cage and John Travolta, which set a new record for an American film at the box office and consolidated Woo's position in Hollywood.

During his time in Hong Kong, John Woo was adept at incorporating the “spirit of benevolence and righteousness” that resonates with the Chinese, and during his time in Hollywood when he made *Face/Off* (1997), he also tapped into a “family concept” common to both China and the West. John Woo said, “To make an international film, you must understand the local culture and their thinking and behaviour, but my usual way of making a film is to try to find out what we have in common, no matter which place or nationality we come from. For example, we Chinese, whether we come from China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), we can find the common so-called spirit of benevolence and righteousness, and we also like to help other people, but we just show it in a different way, foreigners are a bit more implicit, while the Chinese are more bold.” In *Face/Off*, John Woo has found a good balance between Chinese and Western cultures - “the concept of family”. In the face of the cultural differences between China and the West, John Woo, on the one hand, strengthens the elements as the core of the story, and on the other hand, continuously connects with the reality, life, and Hollywood, and his priority is to endeavour to tell a good story that can be understood by both the East and the West.

4. The analysis of theme, plot and characterisation in *Face/Off*

Face/Off is the culmination of John Woo's career in Hollywood and is an expression of Woo's change after his arrival in Hollywood. John Woo focused on male bonding in his Hong Kong films, but in the Hollywood films, male bonding basically disappeared and was replaced by a new kind of feelings - heterosexual love, marital love and family love. John Woo did this to accommodate America's revered individualism and unique personal heroism. In this film, although there are two male protagonists as in the past, they do not have an emotional identity that transcends the boundaries of good and evil as in the past, but rather, the two men are in an absolute antagonistic relationship and are marked by symbols of hatred - “killing the son” and “taking the wife”. This tendency to take conjugal and familial love as the main emotional appeal is clearly the result of John Woo's identification with the mainstream American cultural narrative. Instead of indulging in purely male bonding, John Woo's *Face/Off* is about a man's dedication to his family, a shift that is meant to appeal to American audiences^[9]. Although the film *The Changeling* has incorporated very many elements of John Woo's personality: churches, doves, exploring the complexity of human nature, etc. In the story, John Travolta Tower and Nicolas Cage are still essentially one FBI agent and one evil terrorist, with the positive and negative characters still marking very distinct symbols. In the film, the setting of the protagonist's goal of defending his country is a submission to the American culture and the American audience. However, John Woo's detailed portrayal of the characters still incorporates the warmth that is characteristic of the Orient, i.e. atmosphere. John Woo brought to Hollywood the possibility of playing vulnerable, failing and destroying male characters. For example, Nicolas Cage in his role as a hospital confessed to his wife in the scene, John Woo convinced him to shed tears while recounting the past. Heroes shed tears plot setting in the general Hollywood film history is really rare. John Woo's move shows a very Chinese hero's humble and compatible temperament. His protagonists are soulful, emotional and reluctant. Usually in a family context the heroic figure is the standard bearer of honour, integrity and moral values^[10].

In the film *Face/Off* (1997), John Woo focuses on portraying the strength and gentleness of the female characters. Starting from *A Better Tomorrow* and continuing through *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987), *The Killer*, and *Once A Thief*, the female characters portrayed by John Woo in his films often

seem to play insignificant roles. In *A Better Tomorrow*, the only female character is Jie's wife, who is depicted as a woman needing protection. In *The Killer*, Jenny is portrayed as a weak figure. And in *Once A Thief*, the character Hong Dou remains on the periphery of the film's main plot. After his foray into Hollywood, John Woo has significantly raised the status of female characters. In *Face/Off*, the FBI agent's wife has completely escaped the shadow of Jie's wife in *A Better Tomorrow*, she is no longer dependent on the man and plays a decisive role in the film. The director should work with "women as intrinsic to the development of the new postmodernist paradigm"^[11]. This is related to the status of women in Western countries, and in the movie-watching habits of European and American audiences, especially in action movies, female characters should be superior in stature and quick in action.

John Woo also made use of the star power of the actors during the filming process. He chose two popular Hollywood movie stars to give full play to the acting genius of Nicolas Cage and John Travolta in the film, which perfectly meets the need for character transformation. Casting the right actors is undoubtedly one of the most important factors in the success of the film. John Woo allows the audience to feel the psychological transformation of the two acting superstars when they see the change in their eyes, so that his "emotion" is precisely conveyed through the medium of the film. Feelings are personal and physiological, emotions are social and they precede the individual^[13]. Emotions are the way the body can be transformed into readiness for action in a given situation. All films are about emotions. It's one thing to show emotion and feeling on the big screen, it's another thing entirely to focus the film primarily on emotional intensification. Using different camera speeds (Unique Woo's style), John Woo goes beyond the level of expressing human feelings towards intensifying them through the body language of the performers and screen images. His focus is no longer simply on human feelings or human relationships, but on emotions, which allows the art of cinema to break the fourth wall and hit the audience right in the heart with emotions. Therefore, John Woo's films are able to transcend geographical limitations and be accepted by global audiences. Without emotion, the film would not connect with the audience, the actors would not be able to perform the different roles, and the narrative would not be able to develop. Both Cage and Travolta agreed afterwards that Woo had staged performances that were very much in keeping with their styles and conveyed the right emotions.

5. Conclusion

Faced with the strong cultural influence represented by American Hollywood films, East Asian directors cannot simply use Orientalism to win Hollywood's favour, but neither can they simply reject it. Much of Hollywood's achievements stem from its openness and inclusiveness. Transnational cinema is bound to be the trend of the entire film industry in the future. With John Woo's efforts to tell enjoyable Chinese stories for a global audience, the Chinese film market could attract the attention of more businessmen. The success of *Face/Off* (1997) represents the possibility that Chinese culture, and even East Asian culture, can merge with Western culture. On this basis, the director can also develop his own style in terms of ideas and connotations, which is not a conflict. We hope to see more cultural interactions between national and foreign films in the future, so that audiences around the world can enjoy more diversified cultural and artistic works.

References

- [1] Bergfelder T. *National, transnational or supranational cinema? Rethinking European film studies*[J]. *Media, culture & society*, 2005, 27(3): 315-331.
- [2] Hall S. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* [M]. *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory*. Routledge, 2015: 392-403.
- [3] Collier J, Marchetti G, Kam T S. *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and New Global Cinema: No Film Is an Island*[J]. 2007.

- [4] Cousins M. *The Asian Aesthetic*[J]. *Prospect Magazine*, 2004, 21.
- [5] Szeto K Y. *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood*[M]. *SIU Press*, 2011.
- [6] Robertson R. *Globalization: Social theory and global culture*[J]. *Sage Publications*, 1992.
- [7] Williams T. *Space, place, and spectacle: The crisis cinema of John Woo* [J]. *Cinema Journal*, 1997: 67-84.
- [8] Yau, Ching-Mei Esther, ed. *At full speed: Hong Kong cinema in a borderless world*[M]. *U of Minnesota Press*, 2001.
- [9] Bordwell D. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* [M]. *Estados Unidos, Harvard University Press*, 2000.
- [10] Hall, Kenneth E. *John Woo: the films* [M]. *McFarland*, 2014.
- [11] Ford S. *Hong Kong film goes to America*[M]. *Hong Kong Film, Hollywood and New Global Cinema. Routledge*, 2007: 64-76.
- [12] Shouse E. *Feeling, emotion, affect*[J]. *M/c journal*, 2005, 8(6).