

The Research on the Role of Qipao on the Female Image Portrayals in the Hong Kong Movie in the Mood for Love

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Abstract: Clothing can show the charm of the film and help shape the character's image. An appropriate garment can even express the character's ideas and feelings and highlight the artistic charm of the film. As one of the significant elements of Oriental dresses, qipao serves as an external expression of Chinese culture. The profound cultural heritage of cheongsam shows the unique aesthetics of Oriental art and has now become an essential cultural symbol in movies. The film *In the Mood for Love* allows qipao to significantly promote the development of the film plot and highlight the background of history. *In the Mood for Love* narrates love under a historical background partly through the character Su's body. Qipao is also used as a symbol of the female body throughout the film, remarks on the heroine's restrained morality and her deepest desire for love. Various qipaos in the movie show exquisite fabric design and profound cultural heritage — the soul of *In the Mood for Love*. Qipao provides the film with a deep reflection of culture and a significant level of aesthetics.

Keywords: female figure, Qipao, film's garment

1. Introduction

The Hongkong movie *In the Mood for Love* was published in 2000 as a successful and thought-provoking classic romantic drama. However, different from most romance films, the director Wong Kar-wai aimed to show an immoral story of an extramarital affair. The movie portrays the story between Chow Mo-wan, played by Tony Leung, and Su Lizhen, played by Maggie Cheung. In the film, both characters are originally married, and each of their spouses has an affair. While experiencing the pain of being cheated, Chow and Su gradually develop ambiguous feelings toward each other. However, though the obscure love growing between them is nevertheless deep and moving, both characters are unable to cross the line beyond the moral. Though Chow has told Su about his feeling and asks Su to go to Singapore with him, Su is unable to respond to chow's love.

In the Mood for Love was one of the most respected works of Wong Kar-wai. The movie went through a long gestation period because of Wong's careful consideration of every tiny detail, including the historical background, customs, filming technique, etc. When the movie went into the production period, Wong's rigorous attitude toward the pursuit of perfection did not dissipate at all. Wong chose to provide all the scenes and costumes exactly from the film story to the cast for the goal of the greatest sense of empathy. The whole producing project took 15 months to complete, which also took place in different shooting places, including Hongkong, Thailand, Cambodia,

Singapore, etc. The process of filming is definitely inspiring, but only extremely cautious. The details of historical background or customs are deeply studied by both actors and directors, thus output a wonderful product for audiences.

Though the theme of an unspeakable relationship between two characters is nevertheless unusual and artistic, the reason for the great success and high comments the movie received is undoubtedly more than merely a remarkable storyline. Close attention to the details in the movie and its aesthetic perception shown in the frames indeed promoted the movie's success to a great extent. Not only the beauty of the composition structure is vividly displayed, but the importance of careful choices for customs is also unignorable. Throughout the development of the film industry, customs are always inseparable from the movie itself. Customs are the tools to convey the inner connotation hidden behind the film's storyline. Qipao(cheongsam) appears throughout the movie as the clothing the director Wong Kar-wai chose for the leading female character Su. After counting, the leading female character Su Lizhen wears 23 qipaos in total. Qipao is a dress popularly worn by Chinese women in the 20th century. Unlike most conservative traditional women's clothing, qipao is designed to show women's body shape. However, due to the traditional oriental culture of being reserved, though successfully drawing out the graceful shape of a female, not much skin is exposed when wearing qipao, and qipao is not even a hundred percent tight-fitting. In this way, the qipao can show the unique oriental charm of Chinese women by looking both sexy and mysterious simultaneously. By noticing the fantastic fascination of qipao, director Wong Kar-wai made a great decision to give this garment to the character Su as a way to create her great attractiveness with a complex temperament directly. The actress of the female character Su, Maggie Cheung, created one of the most classic 'qipao woman' figures in Hongkong film industry. Her body shape and her understanding of the way how character Su walks also perfectly show the beauty of qipao. Character Su in the movie definitely uses qipao as a way to express her external elegance and inner spirit cryptically.

2. Literature Review

With the recent coming back of granny chic clothing, there is an increasing attention rate on traditional clothing such as qipao. A trend of movies based on the background of the old days is coming back again; thus, the audience can see the figure of qipao again on the cinematic screen more frequently. As an undoubted classic in cinema or qipao fashion, a rising number of movie producers and scholars are getting interested in studying the movie *In the Mood for Love*. According to Yating Pan and Chunhua Gu's study, director Wong Kar-wai used more than 20 sets of cheongsams to show Su Lizhen's personality and different moods. By wearing different qipao of various shapes and colors, Su shows her happiness and sadness of being betrayed furthest. In different situations, Su Lizhen's cheongsam always appropriately conveys the emotional and psychological changes of the characters [1]. Tao Zhang also indicates that clothing design plays a role in shaping film and television characters, such as revealing the identity of the characters, indirectly pointing out the characters' personalities, and letting the audience empathize with the characters' current mental state [2]. In addition, Xiaojun Chen points out the fact that even the color lightness of customs can purposely reflect the character's mental changes. For instance, Dolores Umbridge's pink suit in Harry Potter can promote the audience's disgust of the evil spirit behind her sweet outfits; and the use of contrast color can also strikingly reveal the characters' antagonism [3].

Not only does *In the Mood for Love* use qipao as an essential concept conductor, in fact, as Shihan Cheng mentioned in her research: the style of the film director and the concept of the costume designer is the creators' coding of their unique art expression symbols, while the audience's aesthetic feeling and emotional resonance are a kind of 'decoding' when the

establishment of 'coding' succeed [4]. In this case, the movie can successfully produce a classic figure which bonds a character with a certain garment. As Yifan Wang writes, film works create an intuitive visual impact, which can powerfully spread the common cultural concept of producers. An inspiring movie can reveal the director's style and the characters' characteristics and also meet the aesthetic needs at the same time [5]. Meanwhile, the most effective customs are also designed for the characters and actors. Thus, choosing an appropriate performer plays a significant role in the production process. Qipaos in *In the Mood for Love* is not as baggy as the earliest qipao but wraps around the body shape. The actress is also crucial to look appropriate in the qipao with tedious patterns, and Maggie Cheung has an alluring temperament and slender body and is undoubtedly the best-fit performer for the character Su [6].

In addition, it is interesting to note that customs are sometimes extra important for female characters. Zixuan Fan points out that a female's role and consciousness of ego can usually be seen as a miniature in social ideology [7]. Take the qipao as an example; the shape of the qipao always represents the historic node in China. In 1911, the Revolution overthrew the imperial system, the old cheongsam was improved, and western clothing elements were absorbed in qipao design as well. Qipao during the 1910s tended to be simple and elegant, paying attention to the natural beauty of women. When the capitalist economic crisis broke out in the 1930s, women's wear returned to the non-functional tendency of pursuing elegance. The 1930s cheongsam highlighted the beauty of the slender neck and skinny shapes and began to pay attention to the curves of women's chest and waist parts. When it came to the 1940s, qipao ushered in the second peak; the cheongsam's design point focused more on the proportional beauty of the waist and hip. Sometimes qipao worn by the wearer in the film can also show the changes in The Times. For example, in movies with historical background during the 1930s and 1940s, some women characters might be dressed in excessively gorgeous and slim qipao as a symbol of the worldly turmoil and the extravagance of Chinese upper society. As Yuanxiu Liao mentions, a lot of female characters in qipao are bullied, insulted, and weak. In another Chinese film, *Blood Brothers*, Shu Qi played the image of the dancer, a figure of a helpless woman who fails to grasp her own fate. And what this image unintentionally describes, and shows is also the epitome of an era and a display of history [8]. Thus, Su in *In the Mood for Love* also represents a female figure, and maybe, especially under the background of 1960s Hongkong. *In the Mood for Love* designed more than 20 qipao customs for Maggie Cheung. The style of these 23 cheongsams is all high collar, round skirt, cross sleeve, and over-knee designs. Different colors and patterns not only significantly present an exquisite female character but also implies the social environment. Zhenxiu Liu claims that all the cheongsams show Su's desire for love: different colors and patterns can show Su's change in emotions [9].

Meanwhile, as a movie directed by a male director, the highlight and countless close-up shots of Su's body shape in qipao may be considered a symbol of women being stared at and controlled by men in love and marriage. Guangzu Yang and Ruibing Xie write in their study that the female body is the representation of male desire. Both Su Lizhen and Chow Mo-wan fall in love during the process of healing each other. In particular, Su Lizhen in tight cheongsam implies her role as a married woman bound by social morality. In the movie, her identity is not Su but Mrs. Chen, a shadow under her marriage; thus, women's sorrow is shown [10]. This love between Su and Chow is not allowed by social morality. Even Su's husband as a marriage pledge has collapsed, Su is morally not allowed to have feelings for others than a marriage partner. It can be said that Su Lizhen's bleak life is closely related to the shackle with the premise of marriage.

The studies and researches above reveal some information about the role of customs in movies. However, the current research help understand customs' role in presenting characters' emotions and the implications of both historical and social background. However, though there are already various studies focusing on qipao's role in *In the Mood for Love*, close attention to itself, there is

still scope for further research to break through. This research will focus on qipao's relation to Su's act in love and Su's choice about her life as an inevitable result. Furthermore, this study will prove the role of qipao in shaping the female image in the movie.

3. Methodology

In order to start this research, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of previous studies on *In the Mood for Love* and qipao itself. Thus, multiple databases were used. Google scholars were used to looking for ideas about the connection between customs and film production. In addition, CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) was used for searching the history of cheongsam and its figurative meaning in movies as a crucial symbol to present the female's role in certain social or cultural backgrounds. The information about the functions of clothing design to imply a character's characteristics was also learned by viewing academic journals such as Journal of Suihua University, West Leather, Movie Literature, Home Drama, Movie Review, YINSHAN ACADEMIC JOURNAL. Furthermore, the repeated watching and observation of *In the Mood for Love* was needed. Due to the specific study tendency of this research, the focus on the main character Su Lizhen, especially the change in colors, styles, and shapes of her qipao in different plots was done.

4. Results

It is quite obvious that qipao in *In the Mood for Love* has become an insurmountable classic among countless film costumes. The portrayal of female costume in the film is undoubtedly very detailed; it can be said that qipao has indeed become the third leading role in the film, which not only greatly delineates the image of the heroine and the taboo love in the film but also symbolizes the deeper connotation behind it. Qipao serves as the only custom worn by heroine Su, which has indeed proven the director's wise decision. Qipao perfectly shows the body shape of Su in the movie. For example, the director Wong filmed copious extreme close-up shots of both qipao and Maggie Cheung's body shapes. Qipao is also playing a role in implicating the spiritual core of oriental women in both traditional culture and moral standards, as Su in the movie, though willing to generously show her beauty, she still failed to break herself away from her unsuccessful marriage as a real independent individual. Her beauty is nevertheless attractive and distinct, but under the social pressure on women, she is only brave enough to attract men but not break free from the bound of time and women's reputation. However, at the same time, Wong still chose tight qipao as a way to show Su's sexual passion. As a pretty woman in a sorrowful marriage, it is absolutely normal that Su might require an exit to express either her emotions or lust. As a woman living under the strict asks of society, unfortunately, Su eventually fails to follow her free will for love, but in the aspect of custom analysis, the combination of sexiness and dignity on qipao is the best choice to symbolize Su's contradictory emotions and situation.

5. Discussion

In *In the Mood for Love*, the perfect combination of qipao and heroine Su's body shape greatly sublimates the visual effect. It successfully creates the classic image of the "cheongsam woman" in the Chinese film industry. Su, in the movie, is a charming character for all men. As Chow's friend in the film says, frequent contact with Su, who has such beauty, might be dangerous for married Chow. If only looking at the superficiality, beauty and attractiveness are all Su can express through qipao. However, looking deeper into the garment itself, the style of such tightness also oppresses the wearer all the time. Qipao wraps around Su's body, as contradictory as her inner struggles, showing her enchanting charm but meanwhile stopping her from intemperance. Qipao is Su's weapon of charm but also a moral bound; she is always pretty and elegant but also always behaves

fitly and properly, speaks politely and carefully, walks slowly and gently, and acts softly but faint-heartedly. The qipaos she wears, though tight and fashionable or with various patterns on them, are still mostly dark in color. Su only wears red when she meets Chow, but even dressing in red, Su still chooses dark red as she can never freely and openly express her feeling for Chow. Both the shape and color of the qipao Su wears reveal her complicated and forbearing mental state.

Especially in a Chinese film, it is more likely that the Chinese audiences are able to understand and empathize with the role of the qipao because of the oriental spirit hidden behind this garment. The origin of the qipao was the Qing dynasty, when women remained not allowed to expose their bodies. When it came to the time of the Republic of China, due to the influence of western culture and the emergence of women's rebellious will, qipao started to show its unique way of free and sexiness. Thus, qipao combines the senses of both traditional and rebellious; the contradiction in it is indeed symbolizing the situation and personalities of Chinese women. In the movie, Su is undoubtedly served as a figure of the group of pretty and reserved women. Wong definitely made a good choice on the garment choice; the historical background of the movie is also making the image of Su more vivid.

Most importantly, qipao, as a possibly important narrator in the story, has reflected the sexual passion and women's role in marriage, relationships, and society compared to men. Tight garments and Maggie Cheung's skinny body has formed a fabulous combination from a visual point of view; the actor Maggie appears a gentle and elegant look even in a most tawdry patterned qipao. Su is not only sexy and pretty, but her elegance also hints at something more inside her – she is free enough to show out her beauty, but she fears expressing her thirst for love and care. It is undeniable that Su is talented and capable, but all she does at work is handle meaningless business about her boss's personal schedules and lovers. At the same time, her husband is always busy that she hardly has anyone to talk to. Thus, Chow's appearance is light for her. Chow is also passionate about reading; he even asks Su to help with his writing. It might be the only person ever to allow her to freely express her talent. It is the time when Su starts to wear red qipao every time when she sees Chow. Red served as a symbol of her passion, her excitement of being approved, and most importantly, her love. However, just like the qipao she wears, Su is fancy and flawless on the outside, also indeed talented and literate, but her essence is still vulnerable and dependent. She unconsciously identifies herself as a married woman; her identity is spread out around men – a woman in a marriage who has feelings for another married man. This is the core reason for her tragic love and sorrowful marriage. The reputation of a 'good woman' and 'qualified wife' means too much to Su and also to all women. Most women in cheongsam look easy and appealing, as the way how qipao designers want them to look, but under the oppression of the time and the excessive male gaze, women like Su still lack the courage to resist their misfortune and the consciousness of independence; mostly, their inner spirit can not be easily changed by their appearance.

6. Conclusion

The development of film culture constantly shows how customs play an indispensable role in visual presentation. In contemporary Chinese films, the element of cheongsam has become a significant way to reflect an era and culture. Under the elaborate decisions of many directors and designers, the cheongsam has also shown more symbolic significance in film production. Thus, In future film development, qipao and other symbolic garments should be more emphasized due to their expression meaning to better reflect the role of Chinese culture and beauty. Director The director Wong Kar-wai also showed his extreme professionalism in aesthetics, his perception of culture, and his superb understanding of qipao's beauty in the film *In the Mood for Love*. Qipao can represent the culture and represent the era of the film but also serve as a narrator, showing the mood and identity of the heroine. Qipao shows the body of a female in an aesthetic way by showing the

attraction of sex and the spirit of implicit beauty, but it is absolutely not the only thing that qipao is capable of illustrating; the cultural background throughout oriental history is acting both positive and negative effects on women. Not only the love outside marriage between Su and Chow is a predestined tragedy, but also countless women, especially married women, failed to get rid of their miserable marriages and destiny. The audience can reconstruct the definition of the qipao through movies, reshape the image of women in the past with the current female consciousness, and perhaps examine the current developing feminist ideas from another level of time. Towards the end of the film, the following sentence appears: 'That time is over. Everything that belonged to that era does not exist.' Does it hint the love between Su and Chow is forgotten by the world? Or does it imply that women like Su Lizhen also 'no longer exist'? This film may be a nostalgia for history: to recall such kind of love story, to recall the touching stories hidden behind this period of Hong Kong. The portrayal of Su Lizhen and the garments she wears in this nostalgia is indeed a sense of desolation. Hidden under the beautiful qipao is a reflection of women's bodies and spirits.

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