

Research on the Creative Principles of Chinese Thriller Films

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Abstract: The Chinese thriller film, as a specific genre, exhibits unique principles and characteristics in its creation, which is also significant in terms of cultural heritage and creative expression. Nevertheless, the current systematic investigation of the research principles and creative connotations of the sample remains inadequate. The objective of this paper is to analyze the research principles of Chinese thriller-horror films and identify the sources and evolution of the narrative materials underlying them. The analysis employs both the literature analysis method and the case study method. The former is used to examine the expression of the combination of thriller imagery and traditional Chinese cultural symbols in the film, while the latter is employed to explore the cultural elements belonging to the Chinese nation's tradition. Additionally, the analysis considers the distinctive characteristics of the film in terms of artistic scene layout, sound, and color, as well as the significance and role of such films. By examining the fundamental principles of Chinese thriller film-making, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the distinctive appeal and artistic nuances of Chinese thrillers, offering insights that can inform and inspire the creation of Chinese films.

Keywords: Thriller Genre Films, Creative Backgrounds, Cultural Symbols, Folk Imagery.

1. Introduction

With the development of the film industry, the genres and subgenres of Chinese films have been continuously created, but the thriller genre about thriller horror stories has always been on the verge of the creation of the film market. Films with ghosts and spirits are more commonly referred to as “horror films” and “ghost films”, but there is no unified definition of the genre of films that can arouse the fear of the audience in Chinese academic circles. Moreover, due to various reasons, such as policy and film market, the mainland has strict requirements for the production and censorship of thrillers, so there is less research on it. To address this theme, this paper summarizes the literature and analyzes the foundations of the creation of thriller genre films, including, according to Dai and Fu, the creative materials of the genre, the combination of thriller imagery and folk culture, the psychology of the audience, as well as the social significance and function, using folk films and Chinese mainland thriller genre films as examples [1][2]. In this paper, the study of its creative principles is not only conducive to the excavation and inheritance of traditional Chinese culture as well as the promotion of the innovation and development of folk culture due to the fact that the creation of Chinese thriller genre films often incorporates cultural connotations with unique Chinese characteristics, but also helps the creators to better understand the mechanism and principles behind it, providing the film market with positive creative ideas and excellent works that meet the demand. In addition, as a branch

of the movie market, the domestic thriller genre also has an educational function, and through the study of this topic, the ideological connotation behind it can be deeply explored and interpreted, showing a positive social ideological orientation.

2. The Cultural Basis for Creating Chinese Thrillers

2.1. Life-and-Death Philosophy

Given that life and death are irreversible and irresistible laws of nature, the unknown and unpredictable nature they entail undoubtedly exacerbates people's fear of the issue. Mr. Li Qing specifically expounded on the concept of death in traditional Chinese culture in *The Concept of Man in Chinese Culture*, in which he stated that in the eyes of the vast majority of Chinese, death is a frightening and threatening thing, and that due to the mysterious, irreversible and unknowable nature of death, coupled with the horrific depiction of the afterlife by religious theories, as well as what is believed to be the agonizing demeanor and the "hideous" after-death appearance, there has always been an instinctive fear of death [3]. In the long and rich historical cognition of the Chinese nation, death has always been a word that carries the color of taboo and avoidance. However, it is precisely this kind of recognition that has played a vital role in the progress and development of human society. It is on the basis of an in-depth study of creatures and objects that were once seen as a source of superstition and abomination that the natural sciences flourish. In the face of this irreversible phenomenon of life, people naturally seek ways to escape and alleviate it. This has given rise to the existence of religion and various imaginations, which has also become an important historical context for the development of Chinese ghost and god theory. And in Chinese thrillers, this concept of life and death is often used to create a tense atmosphere. For example, some movies will demonstrate the impact of the concept of life and death on the human spiritual world by imagining the soul and the afterlife.

2.2. Traditional Chinese Folk Superstitions and Taboos

"Folklore, that is, the people create, the masses learn, educate themselves, and become customary [4]." Customs and folklore refer to folk customs that are transmitted in the form of traditional customs and habits, mainly including folk festivals, folk beliefs, games, gestures or postures with a certain meaning, folk medicine, ritual activities, folk dances, folk dramas, superstitions, etc., and thriller elements are often deformed from them and presented in films. In the thousands of years of feudal society, people had superstitious thoughts about some unexplainable phenomena lacking scientific knowledge. Some agreed taboos, such as "don't look in the mirror in the middle of the night" and "don't comb your hair in the middle of the night," have been passed down from mouth to mouth, and people are overly superstitious about the existence of ghosts and gods, and are tainted with legends related to life and death, which have been shrouded in an unknown and horrifying atmosphere artificially created, and have become agreed taboos.

The thrillers basically revolve around the deaths that result from breaking these traditional taboos. For example, in *Red Cheongsam*, the heroine's insistence on wearing the old cheongsam of the dead man causes a series of strange things to happen. Taboos often exist as plot points for indexing or creating terror, so "looking in the mirror in the middle of the night to see horror ghosts", "cutting hair in the middle of the night", and "wearing a shroud to violate taboos to attract ghosts" have become a common plot design technique. In recent years, a number of funeral-related customs have appeared in domestic thrillers, of which "the seventh day after death" is a typical representative and presents a new thriller plot with "reviving on the seventh day after death" as the material. The "Seventh day" in the folklore was born in the period of North and South Dynasties, influenced by religion and Buddhism, which put forward the Doctrine of Transcendence from the World, that is, people

believing that the souls of the dead will return to the human world on the seventh night after death, and this is especially true in the case of wrongful souls who died in vain. In addition, superstition and witchcraft have given rise to a series of related films. Practices like Miao sorcery and corpse driving in Xiangxi, imbued with religious elements, have formed a large group. This group, rooted in religion, has inherited witchcraft culture since ancient times, presenting a more complex, mysterious, and lesser-known horror image in films.

3. The Cultural Symbols in Creating Chinese Thrillers

“Every genre of cinema is a complete system of symbols with cultural implications [5].” Chinese thriller genre films often show unique and representative thriller elements to arouse the audience’s fear. These elements are deeply rooted in China’s rich history and culture, and through the combination of traditional culture and individual elements, they create a unique atmosphere of horror. Folklore elements present complex scenes in the thriller genre film. By combining elements from folklore with thriller plots, creators are able to create stories that are both culturally deep and emotionally resonant with audiences.

3.1. Passive Closure of Regional Religious Folklore

Since some folk cultures related to metaphysics are in a state of passive secrecy, people in the folklore are not ever afraid of such folklore, but only regard it as a norm of action in daily life, and those who are afraid are those who do not know about it. For example, due to various factors, the gods worshipped in each region are different, and many temples have been built in the mountains and fields, and incense is offered, but they only exist in individual regions. For those unacquainted with the local customs, the idol in question may evoke feelings of trepidation. However, for the indigenous population, due to the influence of geography, there has been a longstanding apprehension towards this deity. Consequently, aside from the variations in the veneration of deities across different regions, the phenomenon of fear is largely confined to those unfamiliar with the local traditions. Moreover, due to the differences in folk culture across regions, its privacy and exclusivity are so profound that outsiders are unable to comprehend it, thereby intensifying curiosity and novelty, particularly for individuals residing in areas with a limited number of religious and spiritual traditions associated with folk culture. In such contexts, the sudden encounter with this enigmatic folk culture, exemplified by the Mazu tradition in southern and northern Fujian, can evoke a sense of fear.

Therefore, one of the principles of Chinese thrillers in shaping horror plots is to create people's psychological hints. Under the effect of psychological hints, people believe that "a good conscience is a soft pillow", and believe in the karma of the six paths of reincarnation, and such psychological hints make folk superstitions and religions mysterious as well. Therefore, when the protagonists in contemporary thrillers are watered down and replaced with ordinary people in an ordinary urban setting, the audience has a stronger sense of immersion, and the effect of psychological implication is intensified. For example, in *Get in the Dark*, the interaction between people and paper dolls is spiritualized to create the effect of reincarnation of the deceased, resulting in a peculiar scene of interaction between people and paper dolls in the state of evil spirits under psychological implication.

3.2. Spatial Specificity of Modern Urban Legends

Modern urban legends generally refer to the various rumors, rumors, or unsubstantiated stories that circulate in contemporary cities. These legends often contain paranormal phenomena, supernatural events, mysterious disappearances, etc. Compared with urban legends, real-life violent crimes are closer to life, referring to real violent incidents, such as serial killers, kidnappings, etc. These incidents often cause widespread concern and panic in society. Under the confluence of these psychological

panic-inducing elements, modern urban legends and real-life violent crime have become one of the sources of inspiration for the creation of Chinese thriller genre films. Filmmakers often draw inspiration from these legends and events to create thriller films with a modern social backdrop and a sense of reality.

With the deepening of the director and the audience's understanding of the thriller genre and continuous attempts, the selection of the theme has been adapted on the basis of the novels and folk legends. Master of Yin Yang is not limited to Taoist monks with religious overtones, but also the images of ordinary people, such as Master of Feng Shui, Fortune Teller, and Paper Maker. Unlike traditional Taoist priests who are responsible for punishing evil and promoting good, they are more likely to support their families with crafts related to metaphysical superstition, such as life and death, marriage, and foreknowledge. Due to the taboo on the subject of life and death, modern urban legends circulated in this way are even more horrifying than the traditional novels of ghosts and monsters as well as the folklore.

When Master of Feng Shui becomes the main character, the setting of Chinese thriller horror films takes place in modern times. The weakening of the heroes who uphold justice has resulted in the protagonists becoming ordinary people, and the environment is now more akin to that of a modern city. Consequently, urban legends with a sense of fearful vicariousness have become the material for the creation of thrillers. For example, *Double Pupils* tells the story of cultivation to immortality in a modern city, with traditional legends and a modern setting, without people fighting against ghosts; or *The Bride*, in which the protagonist connects the story of himself and his wife to their past lives through the divination of a fortune-teller.

4. The Creative Expression of Chinese Thrillers

The traditional Chinese thriller film employs a combination of scene, color, and sound to present a powerful visual impact, often with the intention of frightening the audience. And these films often feature a set of distinctive characteristics, including closed scenes, a strong impact of color, and horror eerie music.

4.1. Enclosed Ancient Architecture Scene

In Chinese thrillers, scenes of traditional Chinese architecture are a common motif. Mansions are the most common type of building depicted in these films. First and foremost, it exudes a sense of grandeur. From the room upwards, one can observe the wooden beams, the internal wood paint with the change of time aging and peeling off, and the matte texture of the wood, which cannot play a reflective effect. The structure of the house cannot be well transmitted and reflective, and this results in an easy appearance of gloomy scene atmosphere knots. Secondly, the traditional architecture of ancient Chinese culture, particularly the family mansion, has the capacity to evoke a sense of heritage and continuity across generations. It also possesses a unique ability to convey a narrative that is not found in other architectural forms. This narrative potential can be employed as a central theme in the construction of a thriller narrative.

In addition, traditional Chinese architecture is imbued with feng shui principles. This is evident in the external orientation of the building and the internal layout, which is strictly aligned with the direction of Feng Shui. The influence of feng shui superstition and folk customs renders these edifices a natural setting for the occurrence of paranormal phenomena, particularly in the case of mansions with historical significance. For example, in *Zombie World (2002)*, the design of traditional buildings plays a great role in creating the atmosphere.

As psychological research has demonstrated, brief periods of isolation can precipitate a range of adverse psychological effects, including anxiety, paranoia, irritability, and hallucinations. Thus,

enclosed spaces cause waves of emotions in the protagonist, amplifying anxiety and fear. This is one of the reasons why traditional Chinese architecture tends to create an atmosphere of horror. Wooden beams and flying eaves almost form a confined space, giving the audience a sense of suffocation from which they cannot escape, and the design of closed scenes, such as elevators and abandoned schools, has the same effect.

4.2. Color Design and Its Symbolism

Vittorio Storaro once said: "Color is part of the language of cinema, and we use it to express different emotions and feelings, just like the use of light and shadow, symbolizing the conflict between life and death [6]." In Chinese thrillers, the most common color is the cooler shade of lime green. Whether it is the environment or horror imagery, the brightness of lime green is reduced to shape its eerie look. The skin color of the dead, however, is physiologically light green, commonly known as iron blue. The blue-green color presented in zombie movies is also related to the official uniforms worn by the zombies. Since the Qing Dynasty followed the five elements and required the color of the official uniforms to have the attribute of water, the shade of stone green was applied, and with the large-scale production of zombie films, this stone green color was also incorporated into other scenes along the streets of the city.

In the visual effects of the film, red becomes the most prominent color after blue-green tones. In order to emphasize the atmosphere and emotional expression of the picture, the production team usually reduces the brightness of the red color, giving it an ochre or rusty red effect. This dark saturated red tone creates a dim and dull atmosphere for the whole picture, making people feel as if they are in a muddy and dirty world. In this case, horror elements, especially details such as women's clothing, shoes and hats, become the main carriers of the red color tone. They are presented in the form of dark red, giving people an eerie feeling, in sharp contrast to the original warm and festive red symbol. Such treatment not only adds more horror atmosphere to the movie, but also makes the audience feel strong sensory shock and psychological pressure through strong visual impact.

In addition to red, white is also a color that often appears in thrillers to create an atmosphere, in fact, both in thrillers often have a large red tone or white tone spread all over the picture and its use of creating an atmosphere, although the white application of the picture is far less than the red tone, but when it appears with red, it will present a more shocking visual perception. Because the two are often linked to traditional weddings and funerals, marriage and funeral are called red and white, and under the blessing of folk customs, yin and yang marriage is to reverse the concept of red and white, showing a chaotic and strange state outside the order. The appearance of red and white, which is endowed with special meanings, will make the audience invariably form psychological cues, thus transferring the terrifying thoughts to the meaning contained in the colors. For example, in *Mr. Vampire 1992*, the left side of the picture is covered with red kissing procession, and the right side is covered with white funeral procession, the two colors move forward opposite each other with a strong sense of visual impact, and collide and intertwine, which undoubtedly causes a strong sense of oppression to the protagonist in the center of the picture.

4.3. Sound Effects and Music Design

Sound design is of particular importance in domestic thrillers. In some films, music can serve as the soul of the movie, but it can also be used as a mere filler for visually uninspiring images. In most cases, it serves as a crucial element for enhancing or defining the emotional tone of the film and even the value evaluation system [7]. In order to achieve the thriller effect and create an eerie atmosphere, this kind of film often employs eerie background music with the water organ as the primary tone. The tone of this kind of music belongs to the partial tone, which has a harsh and uncomfortable

physiological reaction within the scope of people's hearing. This matches with the content of the image, amplifying the viewer's inner sense of discomfort and fear. Furthermore, in a thriller, sound design can also enhance the emotional expression of the film through a delicate portrayal and depiction. The sound engineer, through the meticulously crafted sound effects, such as low drumbeats and ear-piercing screams, effectively conveys the tension, fear, and other emotions present in the film, thereby enabling the audience to experience the emotional nuances of the narrative to a greater extent. In some instances, the musical elements of a thriller are designed to be directly involved in the narrative, as exemplified by the use of nursery rhyme music. To illustrate, in *Mr. Vampire*, there is a nursery rhyme entitled "Ghost Bride," featuring lyrics written in dialect, which is employed to narrate the tragic past of the ghost bride. This narrative device directly participates in the film's overall narrative, creating a horrific atmosphere, elucidating the characters' pasts, and setting a bleak and tragic tone for the entire film.

5. Conclusion

In the creation of Chinese thrillers, the concepts of life and death, cultural symbols, and creative expression play a crucial role. The unique concept of life and death in Chinese culture has given thriller movies a unique human attitude and aesthetic pursuit. Folk superstitions, taboos, and local religious legends provide rich creative materials for thriller movies, and at the same time reflect the Chinese people's fear of the unknown and supernatural. The incorporation of ancient architectural scenes, color design, sound effects, and music imbues Chinese thriller movies with a heightened sense of power and expressiveness in terms of audio and visual elements. In recent years, domestic thriller films have exhibited a diversified and internationalized trend in terms of creative style and content, with a greater emphasis on the exploration and expression of human nature, social issues, and the spirit of the times. In the future, Chinese thriller movies may further explore the combination of traditional culture and modern society, creating works with greater depth and breadth. This could enhance their international influence and aesthetic value.

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