

The Transformation of Chinese Women's Identity in Hollywood Films—The Role of Zhang Ziyi as an Example

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Abstract

This article examines and compares Zhang Ziyi's star identity and image in China and the West by using several films in which she acted that enjoyed fame on the international stage, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, as case studies. The evolution of her Asian female identity in American cinema is further analyzed by combing through her career development in Hollywood. At the same time, it is useful to describe her as a symbol of the Asian consumer market by examining how her cosmopolitan identity, described as a "modern woman", is represented in advertisements or magazines for brands she represents. This paper seeks to reveal the development of Chinese female identity as revealed by the character of Zhang in Hollywood films. It finds that Zhang has shaped the Western perception of Chinese female immigrants with her outstanding performance through comparing her perceptions in the West and China. Moreover, her remarkable influence and identity symbol promote the localization of overseas brands in Asian markets.

Keywords: Hollywood film, female identity, Zhang Ziyi, Chinese feminism

1. Introduction

Zhang Ziyi is renowned as an actress to film enthusiasts in Asia as well as the West. Initially from mainland China, Zhang pursued and successfully graduated from China's top organization for acting, the Central Academy of Drama. She was soon after discovered by Zhang Yimou and casted for a leading role in *Wode Fuqin Muqin*, which translates to *The Road Home* (1999). However, her rise to fame was after Ang Lee casted the talented actor in the famous movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in 2000 (Cai & Dunn, 2019). The essay will investigate the stardom of Zhang Ziyi, in her role as a star in the West against her perception in her homeland society to enable a critique of feminism in these contrasting communities.

Initially, cinemas emerged as a tool of manipulation in mainland China, just soon after the 1949 independence. While cultural workers thrived on minimum wage, actors and the Communist Party were earning supernormal profits. However, in the late 1980s, the concept of stars in cinemas was adopted. The move was perpetrated by the movement of Open Door policy adopted too at this time (Cai & Dunn, 2019). Examples of actors' artists who benefited from this revolution in the film include Gong Li and Joan Chen. Though Gong only managed a Fifth Generation boost, in comparison Zhang is an outstanding symbol that transcends the aftermath of socialism and the rise of Chinese commercial film. Ziyi has managed to work on both platforms in the West, Hollywood, and Asia as well. Moreover, Zhang has broken the record as being the youngest contender of the Cannes Film Festival in 2006 (Damm, 2016). As such, she is closely followed by her massive audience in mainland China and the vast majority of Hong Kong. In light of this, it is worth noting that the actress has also veered into the world of advertising (Cai & Dunn, 2019). Making advertisement brands for Mercedes Benz and Maybelline just to mention a few. Regardless, the scrutiny will be based entirely on her acting career in favorite films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005).

Through a rigorous analysis of Zhang's portrayal in varying societal conceptions, it will be possible to investigate the role of Chinese female actress in instating an effect of gender discourse through the twentieth century (Jeffreys, 2018). In addition, her analysis from the western perspective will enable a close evaluation of the evolution of identities of Asian American women in the American media. Therefore, the essay presents an analysis of Zhang Ziyi's perception in the Asian community and her definition as a symbol of Chinese feminism on a global scale.

2. The Beginnings of Zhang Ziyi in Asia

It may be argued that Zhao Wei, Zhou Xun, Zhang Ziyi, and Xu Jinglei are the top candidates for China's "Four Young Dan Actresses". Be that as it may, it is only Zhang who is known to command a respectable share of fans in Asia and the West. Her career, while mainly based on Chinese heritage straddles the American way of making films (Meeuf, 2016). It is worth to note that her childhood embodies most of the set concepts proffered in movies that described here attitude. An analysis of her early childhood reveals that she was born to humble working-class citizens of Beijing. She was interested in dance since as early as eight years old and went ahead to enroll at *Central Academy of Drama* by the time she was 17 years back in 1996 (Meeuf, 2016). Upon which her skills eased her thrive in the tough world of entertainment. Zhang made her debut in the film *The Road Home*. The film is centered on a narration from a son's perspective. Apparently, the boy had just lost her father. However, there was an emotional attachment between his father, who was at that time a teacher, and a village lady, played by Zhang (Damm, 2016). Though she only emulated the role of young country ladies at that time, her competence in acting paves the way for a rewarding career that would shape the perception of Chinese feminism.

2.1 More Opportunities

Zhang made perhaps her most epic rise in entertainment in 2011 when she starred as Jen Yu in the epic movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The movie had surprisingly amassed a total of 17 million dollars as gross production costs (Hopkins & Varma, 2018). Though shot and produced basically for the Asian population, the film outdid its anticipated sales in western countries. By June of the same year, it had grossed more than 128 million dollars in the US alone (Wong, 2019). The film was unique to the culture in the West as it portrayed immense capabilities among women. To be specific, female actors were portrayed as being warriors with strength, mobility, active, and almost defied gravity (Gruenewald & Wang, 2018). Thus, in comparison, they matched all-male capabilities. Initially, in her strife to present a classic Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey had presented women as subservient beings that were answerable to men (Wong, 2019). In contrast and by playing Jen, Zhang defies this position of women in marriage. Instead, she undertakes the role of pursuing perpetrators of political atrocities and bringing them to justice. She earns her position as the leader of Xianjiang bandits and successfully pursues other dangerous and villain bandits. Through this presentation of Jen, Hollywood is challenged in their notion of female portrayal, their abilities, and the roles adorned to them by society (Wong, 2019). What made this stance unique was that up until now, women who dared to engage in acts of rebellion or revolution would always meet negative consequences. However, for Jen the end is rewarding as she literally flies off with the freedom to pursue her wildest ambitions.

Though the response was surprisingly outstanding in the West, it was subpar in Asian communities. Instead, only comedies such as *Sophie's Revenge* (2009) made a noteworthy success in South Korea and China, only spreading within Asian borders. The romantic comedy was not received well in the West (Hole et al., 2016). In spite of this, most of Zhang's films that followed her early success achieved blockbuster popularity (Andrews, 2020). Examples, according to Kupfer (2016, p. 3) include *The Legend of Zu* (2001), *The Warrior* (2001), *House of Flying Daggers*, and *The Banquet* (2006), just to mention a few. Among these, only the film *2046* (2004) flopped.

As she evolved, Zhang took on more diverse roles that engaged the concept of feminism. A perfect analogy for this is the film *Love for Life* (2011) directed by Gu Changwei. The movie entails the tale of love between De Yi, and Qin Qin, played by Zhang. The two are brought together as their lives take a turn to the worst once they are diagnosed with HIV emanating from irresponsible blood transfusion (Andrews, 2020). The two are forced to console one another as their initial relationships with their respective spouses fall apart. It is later revealed that the two suffered due to the illegal activities undertaken by the brother to De Yi to boost blood trade. In an attempt to help the two love birds, De Yi's father develops a commune that would help the infected to cope. Therefore, through the film the film becomes the first ever in China to engage the topic of HIV and its stigma in society. To understand this, it is worth noting that most citizens in China perceived HIV as a taboo (Damm, 2016). What is more, is that the political system that oppressed the female gender made it even more difficult for them to cope (Jeffreys, 2018). By bringing this topic to light, Zhang garnered massive and mixed support both in Asia and in the West. The public image she shaped from this endeavor further widened her fan base in Asia and strengthened her perception as a philanthropist.

3. A Transition to Hollywood

As she transfers to Hollywood, Zhang also embraced the common notions in the West. It is during this period that Zhang played as a princess in the film *The Warrior*. Set in the period of the Ming Dynasty, the movie portrays Zhang as a patient princess relying on the bold sacrifice of Korean warriors to save her life (Gruenewald, & Wang, 2018). This is in contrast to painting an image of a resilient and strong woman. The concept embodied the conventional notions in the West that adored men as symbols of strength, whom more often than not, rescued the princess and lived happily ever after. However, the pursuit of fame in the West would prove to be more tasking. Her other minor role during this transition was a cast at *Rush Hour 2* (Andrews, 2020). She wears tight and erotic dark fabric and fights with the zeal and danger of a man. Though it may be argued that this endeavor aimed to attempt her success with the *Crouching Tiger*, it aroused mixed emotions. As an action heroine who is Asian, a majority of the audience were intrigued with the portrayal of a sexy goddess who stands her ground (Gruenewald, & Wang, 2018). The success of this portrayal soon sparked the launch of *Kill Bill* (2003) and *Charlie's Angels* (2019), which all emulated the concept of an Asian action figure. As a result, it defined how a majority of Americans perceived Asian women immigrants, as being erotic and sexy, yet dangerous.

Five years later and after learning more English, Zhang was again casted for the role of starring at the *Memoir of a Geisha*. Though it has not yet changed much, Chinese and Japanese actors were considered as being others in the US (Hole et al., 2016). Thus, when either was casted for the role of the other, no difference was realized for countries in the West. However, the differences were noticeable back home. For this film, Zhang played as a Sayuri, a Japanese geisha who defied the odds of humble beginnings to emerge as a successful warrior (WULANINGTYAS, 2018). Though the movie was among the most successful acts by Zhang in the West, it was abolished and declared illegal in China. The Communist Party could not withstand her portrayal as a Japanese with whom China had long standing differences from historical atrocities (Kimura, 2018). Regardless, Zhang won three Oscars from the film in the US.

The strive in the US demanded constant evolution, and as such Zhang later embraced the role of a monster of sexual assault. Even though this topic had already been engaged at this time, it was yet to be extended to other cultures in the world. Hence, it presented an opportune moment for Zhang to engage the topic from her home country. In the film *The Horsemen* (2008), Zhang is casted as an adopted daughter to a Caucasian family in the US. The family later sires their own biological daughters (Callaham, 2012). However, the father goes ahead to sexually abuse Kristin, Zhang, for over a decade. The resentment transforms her into a monster of vengeance. Symbolically, Kristin is China, and the family represents the US. That even though the US strived to save China from colonialism, the damages they inflicted later were devastating. Hence, China grows resentful and discards the proposed idea of capitalism. Consequently, Kristin symbolizes potential danger to the US from immigrants externally and internally (Gruenewald & Wang, 2018). Also, it may be argued that the film signifies the warm welcome offered to Zhang in Hollywood, yet she is revered for her outlook and potential cause of harm.

It is therefore certain that as portrayed by *The Horsemen* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Asian American artists continue to be discriminated against when casting films. In spite of this, western society has been embrative of the notion of strong, sexy, and resilient women. As the *Crouching Tiger* defines Zhang's role in the international sphere, it too does portray China and its perception (Andrews, 2020). Zhang is young, beautiful, exotic, and as capable of fighting like a man. In comparison, China is young economically, attractive to investors, and ready to fight economically, politically, and socially in the global arena. However, this is not the perception from China. Her homeland judges her harshly of transgressions that are considered minor in the West. When she went naked in the *Horsemen*, there was a major backlash. Also, her exemplary act at the *Memoirs of a Geisha* did not receive as much embrace as it should have in Asia.

4. The Implications of Zhang and the Liberalized Media

Zhang has so far been referred to as the International Zhang in mainland China. As much as these presents their perception of her success in acting, they do not spare their rage against her meddling with the socio-cultural conceptions of China (Hole et al., 2016). The backlash has particularly been fostered by the ever-growing need and usage of social media, as more and more citizens are informed of current and emerging manifestations in the world of entertainment (Jeffreys, 2018). A perfect analogy to present this concept is the fact that Zhang had allegedly turned down a Shampoo ad in China and endorsed it in Japan because she would be paid more. The move sparked outrage as citizens in China perceived this as a lack of patriotism (De Mooij, 2018). Unfortunately, this only symbolizes a fraction of the sensitive subjects that she has chosen to respond to. As such, renowned China's magazine, China daily, metaphorically linked Zhang to the century long struggle in China that preceded their freedom (Kimura, 2018). To make matters worse, she had worn a revealing dress while she snubbed Chinese brands in her marketing endeavors (Andrews, 2020). A majority of Chinese citizens perceived this as a gross debasement of their race. The fact that the actions of only a single star would spark such outrage from an entire nation speaks volumes about her recognition as an emblem of China.

4.1 Criticism in Asia

It is worth noting that not all of her ads or media appearances raise eyebrows on the concept of feminism and local backlash. Instead, even with all this scrutiny, she has managed to reach renowned institutions like Coca-Cola, Pantene, and Louis Vuitton to their target markets in Asia. Despite the criticism in terms of gender roles and racial ambiguity on the global stage, the renowned actor has managed to lead a satisfactory life in front of the limelight where criticism lurks (Gruenewald, & Wang, 2018). Also, as a result of the economic boom in China over the past decade, the stardom, as well as the Chinese celebrity culture have been revived. The effects have been a growing popularity of these stars among the Chinese speaking nations.

A major revelation that also transcended the role of Zhang, is her controversial relationship with Eric Fok back in 2004 (Wing-Fai, 2014). Eric is a descendant to the wealthiest family in the whole of Hong Kong. However, this did not stay hidden for long as mainstream media in China was able to unveil photos and footage of their intimate relationship for the world to see. Not long later on, Zhang was reportedly involved with Vivi Nevo, the greatest shareholder for Time Warner and The Weinstein Company (Wing-Fai, 2014). Barely two years into the relationship, the allegedly engaged couples called it quits (Andrews, 2020). This succeeded in a controversial 2009 scandal that involved Zhang's nudity at the beach. The beach controversy was backed up by substantial video footage that showed Zhang undressing her thong and being affectionate with her boyfriend at their private beach (Jeffreys, 2011). While some of her fans came to her defense claiming that this was only proof of her sexual openness, others criticized her for being a sexual suspect.

Stardoms are built upon individual thoughts in a community and later transcend in society as reports by the media, and scandals that permeate public and private lives (Donovan, 2019). When other members of society unveil of these manifestations and disapprove of them, then the victims are likely to be criticized and berated. Among other controversies that have deteriorated the perception of the actress include the "earthquake donations gate" and the "ink splash gate" (Damm, 2016). The later involved an unpleasant encounter with paparazzi back in 2009 at Park Hyatt Hotel, Beijing. It was reported that as paparazzi awaited the arrival of Maggie Cheung, a group of young men appeared from nowhere and hurled insults at Zhang (Jeffreys, 2018). At one point, one of the men splashed ink on Zhang's advertising board. Preceding this gruesome act was that another actress Zhao Xinyu had claimed that she had evidence that Zhang was having an affair with a married fellow who happened to be Xinyu's friend. Hence, with her previous controversies, it sparked a retaliation. For the "earthquake donations gate", entailed claims that Zhang had actually contributed less in a Sichuan Earthquake donation of 2008 than she had claimed. Further inquiry into the matter showed that it was indeed true. Hence, it prompted Zhang to make a public apology and match her initial pledge to the donation.

In 2012, a major scandal emerged involving the corruption and murder of a famous British businessman Neil Heywood. Reports indicate that Bo Xilai, a mayor at Chongqing had been the perpetrator of the crime. For this reason, he was expelled from the communist party and lost his political position. Boxun, an Asian website in the US after a thorough investigation concluded that Xilai had indulged in grossly prostituting women for large sums of cash. Among the famous women that the website exposed was Zhang (Jeffreys, 2018). Notwithstanding the deterioration in her reputation, Zhang sued Boxun, Apple, and Next for the allegations. From the three scandals, it is certain that Zhang is more targeted than she is embraced in parts of Hong Kong and mainland China. While the targeting may be lenient in western countries, it is also undoubted that female stars come under aggressive scrutiny on subjects of heterosexuality, their role as role models, and their intimate relationships.

5. Zhang as the Embodiment of Chinese Consumer Market

On the other hand, Zhang is a symbol of the Asian consumer society as they veer more towards celebrity lifestyles, advertising, and fashion. Following the Open Door Policy that transpired in the 1980s, China reformed into an economic hub with star and celebrity culture (Lau, 2018). However, only a few stars dictate the way and flow of these trends, and Zhang is indeed one of the most important of these celebrities. Moreover, fashion companies strive to engender trends on social media platforms rather than promote individuality. This choice prioritizes more concise and easier to reach the target market.

Just as is the West, Asia has evolved into a market dictated by the most trending stories and celebrities. Zhang is famous in both the global platforms and the local platforms deep in East Asia. Hence, she enables Multinational Enterprises to reach this different ethnic community in mainland China and Hong Kong (Donovan, 2019). Among the magazines that the renowned celebrity has dominated include Harper Bazaar, Elle Men, Cosmopolitan, and Marie Claire just to mention a few. And she has been for years, most prominently since 2008 (Jeffreys, 2018). The perception of Zhang in the international platform has rightfully been presented in magazines that portray her as a modern woman. Her dominance as the representation of high-end consumption is not due to her role in films, but rather her cosmopolitan identity.

Rather than continuously scrutinize her for her openness, the West has successfully capitalized on Zhang as a

global epitome of high-end consumption of luxurious products. Omega Watches, Tag Heuer, and Visa Card all have benefited from her endorsement programs exponentially. The middle-class segment in China has thrived due to the introduction of urban life, ease in flow of international products and services, and a holistic transformation of day-to-day life activities (Kimura, 2018). Therefore, the demand for credit cards and luxurious commodities may be easily influenced by this class of citizens. The relation, however, has only been a virtually transnational. Whereby, consumers have an illusion of contributing significantly to the global fashion industry. Visa ads, on the other hand, capitalize on the typical roles of Zhang in films. A perfect example for this is the “James Bond” ad for Web 2.0 featuring Pierce Brosnan and Zhang. Bond is allegedly stuck traffic in Bangkok (Lau, 2018). As he has pressing urgent matters, he maneuvers brilliantly from one tuk-tuk to the other while the background emphasizes the beauty of the market in the background. Eventually, he arrives at a luxurious hotel to meet Zhang, who is clad in colorful red qipao. In this ad, Zhang emerges as a de-facto bong lady who symbolizes Chinese actions and perceptions. The driver, on the other hand, is starred by renowned Thai comedian Vichai Jongpraditporn who perfectly relates to the target market. The ad capitalizes on the fame of Bond films to easily reach target markets in Asia.

Perhaps the “Dining Out” commercial better presents Zhang’s role in the global stage when it comes to marketing. The ad capitalizes on her success in the *Crouching Tiger* to easily relate to the market in Asia (Zuo, 2015). In the ad, Zhang is seen dining soup at a restaurant outlet. However, she recognizes that the salt in the soup was a bit too much (Kimura, 2018). When she raises her concerns, the hotel staff are quick to defend their reputation and instead loudly hurl insults at her. It is at this point that she embodies the role of Jennifer in the *crouching tiger* and floats around and beats each and every one of the staff. Eventually, she is content to pay for the damage caused by the fracas but not the soup. However, she pays with a Visa Card with the reference “Dining Out?” the ad, therefore, brilliantly approaches the target with most awe inducing content from a global figure that they look up.

When Starbucks launched its outlets for the first time in China in 2000, it was determined to paint a picture of a proud and local brand rather than an international brand. Hence, who else to rely on for the delivery of this notion? Zhang Ziyi (Lau, 2018). Though the company went ahead to donate up to 5 million dollars towards a charity that would enable a majority of Chinese students to have easy access to education, they relied on Zhang to present their message (Real, K. & Percell, 2018). This initiative was particularly relevant as it would enable access to education for the less privileged girls in the country.

In 2005, Starbucks launched their 10,000th store, marking a significant milestone in their global investments and their progress in China (McDonald’s, 2014). The store was launched in the vicinity of the Great Wall of China. It is worth noting that Zhang played a crucial role in the realization of this landmark for China (Donovan, 2019). As often, MNEs such as Visa and Starbucks would often be criticized for their lack of diversity. With Zhang in the picture however, the organizations have achieved suppression of these effects on both the local and global spheres. Her heroine portrait bridges MNEs with the ever-growing market in Asia.

In contrast, Zhang is expected to uphold her dignity as a Chinese descendant by her fans back home. For years now, the authenticity of females has been under close and consistent scrutiny in their private and public lifestyles (Gruenewald & Wang, 2018). Moreover, in the age of heterosexual monogamy, they are anticipated to uphold their societal morality that stipulates the role of women in this subject. With the adoption of internet sources, the criticism for the lifestyles of these stars has surged though the audience has evolved to become more mediating.

6. Conclusion

Comparison of Zhang’s perception in the West and China reveals the complexity of the celebrity’s transnational nature that has undergone years of criticism of her discourse regarding race, gender, the West, and the Greater China. Though it may be argued that these discourses are preemptive, Zhang is a symbol of the emerging post-socialist consumer behavior in mainland China and Hong Kong. Moreover, she signifies China’s rise and economic, social, and political giant in the global territory. Since her humble debut in the film industry, Zhang has excelled in shaping the western perception of Chinese female immigrants as well as the roles entitled to stars that share the same heritage. Furthermore, sublime performances, though in the past, have been used to enhance marketing in the global state aimed at reaching the Asian market.

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