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*Representations of Chinese and European Elderly Characters on Screen since the 1990s*

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With the globalization of the ageing problem, old age has become more frequently represented in media. The aim of this dissertation therefore is to compare differences among the portrayals of Chinese and European elderly characters on screen through a number of case studies.

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of films have featured old actors/actresses around the world due to the global ageing trend, from which audiences begin to learn about old age and other relevant issues depicted in films. In addition to that, the expanding range of elderly-themed films has challenged youth-oriented contemporary culture, as these films construct a relation between on- and off-screen realities about the discourse on old age. In particular, on-screen reality refers to generic verisimilitude, while off-screen reality is considered cultural verisimilitude. Therefore, the discourse on age is formed by the combined action of generic verisimilitude and cultural verisimilitude. Concerning the representation of elderly characters on screen, it is sensible to identify how and in what manner the above two patterns of verisimilitude influence the constitution of age discourse.

There has been much literature examining the representations of older people in cinema. According to the literature review, age studies linked to film studies have primarily focused on Western countries, neglecting ethnic minorities, especially Chinese elderly. As such, there is still a literature gap regarding comparisons of different depictions of Chinese and European old age on screen. The research aims to determine whether there are distinctions between the cinematic portrayals of older Chinese and European characters in relation to their relationships with their adult-children, small grandchildren, death and lovers, and specify to those differences regarding the on-screen depictions while exploring the off-screen realities behind the comparison.

Dispositive Analysis was applied to examine the ways aged characters are represented in films in the Chinese and European contexts respectively. Dispositive Analysis consists of discourse analysis, and the analysis of actions and objects related to old age. In particular, there is a close relationship between Dispositive Analysis and age studies in films, because cinematic narratives of
older people include a linguistic aspect as well as other aspects of discourse, such as music, visuals, actions, etc. For example, an older woman is always sitting on a sofa along with her pet cat, looking at her telephone and clock in silence, and as such it is reasonably assumed that the old woman is living alone and is lonely. Here, actions and objects play a more important role portraying an old woman.

The objects and focus of this research project are drama films, as the genre can be considered the largest genre which contains numerous films featuring old age. Moreover, drama films are those films in which characters dominate the stories, and in order to explore elderly characters comprehensively, drama films seem to offer more research objects. There are four research topics in this dissertation, entitled: the representation of late life love in Chinese and European films; conflicts between older parents and their migrating adult-children on screen; To be or not to be: When Chinese and French elderly widows meet death in cinema; what ever happened to grandparents and grandchildren on the road? Representations of Chinese and German grandparenting in films.

The findings have demonstrated that both Chinese and European elderly characters are negatively portrayed as infirm, marginalized, sexually dysfunctional, etc. Concerning the different cinematic representations, Chinese old age is more conservative than its European counterpart when it comes to romantic relationships; Chinese old people, especially older fathers, tend to be portrayed as soft-spoken, dependent and to have declining authority in the family, while European old age is independent, friendly, with a willingness to share their time with children. For example, a Chinese elderly mother choosing to commit suicide is a way she might believe that will contribute to the whole family, but for European older widows it is to maintain and complete their individual dignity. The underlined contexts behind discourse analysis refer to different old age cultures which are derived from cultural traditions, socio-economic development and film censorship systems.

This study has provided certain suggestions for future research. One possibility focuses on the audience of elderly-themed films to explore the effects of communication on different audience groups; some scholars pay attention to midlife on screen, as middle age is a period that people begin
to perceive feel the threat of old age. Future research could explore the representation of middle age in Chinese films.