The Change Analysis of Qin Shi Huang's Image Transformation in Media under New Media Context

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Abstract. The process of shaping self-identity is closely tied to the inheritance of historical culture, which helps form national identity. Historical dramas, serving as a bridge between real life and historical memory, play a crucial role in this. Qin Shi Huang, a prominent figure in Chinese history, poses unique challenges for modern film and TV creators. In today's digital age, it's essential to portray him within the framework of historical accuracy and social consensus, while avoiding novelty-seeking and historical nihilism[1]. The portrayal of Qin Shi Huang evolves with societal changes, reflecting shifts in collective memory, aesthetics, and values, making his image both symbolic and reflective of broader historical narratives.

Keywords: The First Emperor of Qin；film and television image；historical figures

1   INTRODUCTION

The Qin Dynasty, a pivotal era in Chinese history, is marked by Qin Shi Huang's unification of the six kingdoms, cementing his legacy. Over time, his portrayal in film and TV has evolved due to archaeological discoveries, shifting social values, and advancements in media technology. In the digital new media era, this portrayal has shifted from a centralized to a more decentralized character. His image is reconstructed through four key traits: temporal and spatial connections, national resonance, identity transformation, and integration, reflecting the Chinese people's cultural pride and strong identification with the concept of Huaxia. This paper also explores the challenges and solutions for portraying Qin Shi Huang in the new media age, emphasizing its significance for historical culture and future media creations.

2   THE EVOLUTION OF QIN SHI HUANG'S FILM AND TELEVISION IMAGE

The evolution of the cinematic and television representation of Qin Shi Huang constitutes a dynamic process characterized by its connotative implications. As traditional media transitions into digital new media, the identities of film and television creators and audiences have shifted from distinct entities to an integrated whole. Correspondingly, aesthetic sensibilities, perspectives, and value orientations have evolved from a singular focus on elite media to a multi-centered and decentralized framework encompassing mass media and personal platforms. Since the initial portrayal of Qin Shi Huang in film and television during the 1960s, his cinematic representation has undergone significant transformations—from a centralized model to multiple centers, ultimately leading to decentralization.

(1) Monocentric: The Hegemony of Other-Defined Narratives

In the 1960s, archaeological discoveries such as the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of the Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum had not yet been made, and the portrayal of Qin Shi Huang was entirely based on long-standing imaginations of historical documents, traditional folk images, and legends. The earliest film and television image of Qin Shi Huang appeared in the Japanese movie "The Great Emperor Qin Shi Huang," where he was portrayed as stereotypical, one-dimensional, and almost synonymous with tyranny. This metaphorical portrayal of Qin Shi Huang bears a strong orientalist connotation reminiscent of Said's ideas. Cognitive psychology views such stereotypes of specific regions as a direct result of people's processing of cognitive resources[2]. Regional cognitive resources encompass both tangible and informational elements that influence people's direct or indirect understanding of a region[3]. It was precisely because China had lost its discourse power over its own regional cognitive resources in modern times that the portrayal and metaphor of Qin Shi Huang's film and television image during this period could not escape the centralized definition imposed by others.

(2) Polycentrism: Diversified Interpretations Brought by the Rise of Local Voices

After China's reform and opening up, the "era of symbolic representation" began, where symbols became more important than material production[4]. Archaeological discoveries like the Terracotta Warriors and the "Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin Bamboo Slips" in the 70s and 80s brought clarity to the image of the Qin Dynasty. During this time, Qin Shi Huang's image became more humanized and three-dimensional in the public's view.In 1986, ATV's TV series Qin Shi Huang combined heroic and grand narratives, portraying the emperor's life in three stages: departure, enlightenment, and return[5]. As mass communication shaped collective values and attitudes toward historical figures[6], multi-centric portrayals of Qin Shi Huang emerged in the 1990s, replacing the one-dimensional Orientalist view and making him a symbol of ideological clashes.The 1995 series Qin Shi Huang and the Lady of Afan broke the tyrant stereotype by portraying a more complex character using Chinese aesthetics. The 1996 film Qin Song showed him as an ordinary, limited figure, while Jing Ke Assassinates the King of Qin explored his human side. In the 21st century, works like Through the Mists to Qin, Qin Shi Huang,

Prime Minister Xiao Gan Luo, and Hero further deepened his portrayal, influenced by discoveries like the "Liye Qin Bamboo Slips," adding more layers to his character.

(3) Decentralized: The multi-dimensional decentralized narrative spontaneously formed through the Internet

With digital media platforms like Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili, viewers can now share feedback, challenging traditional media's centralized portrayals of Qin Shi Huang. Decentralized creators (UGC, PGC, PUGC) bring new perspectives, turning him from an imperial hero into a more relatable figure. In shows like The Legend of the Qin Dynasty, he is given youthful traits to appeal to modern audiences. This trend is seen globally, as his image is fragmented and reimagined in various media, such as Japan's King's Kingdom and China's Da Qin Fu, where he symbolizes China's unification and rise.

3   THE CHANGING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IMAGE OF QIN SHI HUANG IN MOVIES AND TV DRAMAS

The change of Qin Shi Huang's image in movies and TV dramas has realized the due meaning of contemporary hero narration, that is, it has completed the evolution[7] from the stereotypical "human hero" to "heroic man".In the image of Qin Shi Huang, traditional political ideas merge with modern ones, linking historical achievements with personal ideals. This gives audiences an "epic sense" of participating in history through the decentralized portrayal of Qin Shi Huang, setting him apart from other historical figures. Overall, the shift in his image through digital media can be characterized by four main features: the connection of time and space, national resonance, identity transformation, and identity penetration.

(1) The connection from history to the present time and space

Rorty suggests that in post-modern secular culture, gods and heroes become more human, focusing on their ability to be "just good at being human."[8] Traditional historical epics, often lacking solid evidence, distance the audience from fully engaging with heroic narratives[9]. However, through interactive new media, viewers now help shape Qin Shi Huang's image, blending historical and modern elements. His relationships with figures like Lv Buwei and Zhao Ji, along with themes of family and patriotism, make his portrayal relatable while preserving the grandeur of his emperor status. This modern reinterpretation bridges historical distance with contemporary relevance.

(2) National resonance from individuals to nations

In modern films and TV dramas, the emperor becomes a symbol[10] of the nation-state, embodying national identity and values. Qin Shi Huang, as the unifier of China, resonates deeply with local audiences. The Warring States period provides a rich narrative backdrop, where his relationships with other states mirror modern international relations. His portrayal blends traditional values with modern national symbolism, making him relatable to contemporary viewers. Despite knowing his fate, audiences engage with his journey from individualism to realism, creating a deep emotional connection that enhances his relevance in today's society.

(3) The change from estrangement to affinity in identity

Ying Zheng's life fits well within heroic narratives, making his growth, emotions, and decisions easy to depict on screen. While earlier portrayals focused on his adulthood, modern depictions often start from his childhood, adding depth to his character. This shift reflects a blend of humanistic aesthetics and commercial interests, moving away from the centralized, "divine" image of Qin Shi Huang. Early portrayals emphasized his "divinity" but were later overshadowed by the tragic fall of his dynasty, creating a dual image of "winner" and "loser." With digital media, creators now present him as a more human and relatable figure, emphasizing family and national identity, turning him into a symbol of collective emotion for both creators and viewers.

(4) The penetration of identity from individual to group

While heroic emperors in historical dramas often reflect the emotions and struggles of contemporary individuals, their core remains tied to national cultural identity[11]. Audiences connect with historical figures on three levels: emotional resonance, national pride, and ideological alignment. For instance, Emperor Wudi of Han symbolizes national strength but lacks emotional depth, and Zhu Yuanzhang is shown as a civilian hero without strong ideological focus. In contrast, Qin Shi Huang's portrayal integrates all three—his unification of China reflects national identity, his ideological reforms signify change, and his personal struggles resonate emotionally, making him a relatable imperial, national, and revolutionary hero.

4   CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY YING ZHENG'S FILM AND TELEVISION IMAGE SHAPING

Digital new media has brought about an all-round change in the way Qin Shi Huang's film and television image shaping. When the traditional centralized media structure of film and television series disintegrates and the environment of decentralized character image shaping depends on new media interaction is formed, Qin Shi Huang's film and television image will face many new problems in terms of audience groups, film and television image shaping and image cognition.

(1) Contradictions brought about by the stratification of audience groups in the new media era

From the perspective of the development of network new media, it is further observed that affected by many factors such as age, identity, social and economic development, The audience distribution of movies and TV series also satisfies the concept[12] of Digital Refugees, Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives proposed by Marc Prensky. Digital refugees, unfamiliar with new media technology, lack the motivation to engage in shaping the decentralized image of Qin Shi Huang. Digital immigrants, though born before the digital age, actively adapt to new technology and contribute to the shift from centralized to decentralized portrayals. Digital natives, who grew up in the internet era, are skilled in using media for expression and interaction, and are the main drivers of this decentralized interpretation. The differing perspectives of these three groups, shaped by their experiences with technology, become more distinct as Qin Shi Huang's image decentralizes further.

(2) The confusion of decentralized image shaping collision

The decentralized portrayal of Qin Shi Huang in film and TV often results in chaotic narratives, with inconsistent character behavior and superficial images. Despite the rich history and folk stories surrounding figures like Lu Buwei and Zhao Ji, modern creators struggle with a lack of literary depth, relying heavily on creative interpretation. The rise of traditional Chinese culture, especially among young people, has influenced how Qin Shi Huang is reimagined online, blending his historical and folk image with modern realities[13]. This has led to a mix of genres—historical, idol, love, and workplace dramas—which often confuse the core themes[14]. For instance, in The Beauty of Qin Dynasty, Mingyue Heart, Ying Zheng's focus shifts from national mission to personal love, weakening his historical depth. To maintain Qin Shi Huang's integrity, creators need to balance modern elements with his grand historical significance.

(3) The ambiguity and lack of the common divisor of the image cognition

The decentralized portrayal of Qin Shi Huang across different generations and digital platforms has resulted in a fragmented and inconsistent image[15]. To appeal to a wide audience, his character is often depicted through a mix of family, state, and societal conflicts, weakening a unified historical identity. His relationships, such as those with Lu Buwei and Zhao Ji, are shaped by modern social issues like women's marriage rights and rising divorce rates. While these fragmented portrayals resonate with different audience groups by highlighting diverse traits, they often sacrifice narrative coherence and historical accuracy, leading to a lack of a unified public understanding of Qin Shi Huang's character in film and TV.

5   CONCLUSION

To address the challenges in portraying Qin Shi Huang in film and TV, it's important to balance historical accuracy with contemporary social relevance. Historical dramas should maintain fidelity to real history while reflecting current social themes. This requires creators to carefully handle historical details, role logic, and feedback channels, ensuring the portrayal of Qin Shi Huang resonates with diverse audiences. Attention to costumes, props, and the cultural environment, supported by archaeological findings, can ground his image in historical reality, enhancing authenticity.Qin Shi Huang's depiction must align with his role as a symbol of Chinese unity, focusing on clear historical logic rather than overly modernized actions. This requires a deep connection between the character's portrayal and the historical and national context. In today's fast-paced media landscape, where viewers consume content via short videos, creators should use symbols and keywords to maintain consistency and avoid fragmenting the historical image, ensuring it remains both accessible and accurate.

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