VALUE MOTIVATIONS
IN RECENT CHINESE AND AMERICAN POPULAR FILMS

SURF CODE 2021030
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The US and China, the world's largest superpowers and film box offices, are commonly believed to opposingly value individualism and collectivism, respectively. Drawing upon Schwartz theory of basic values, this project explores the value motivations in recent Chinese and American popular films, performing a content analysis of the 50 most domestically successful films from each country between 2010 to 2019. The study reveals that American films have been adopting more collectivist values while, in contrast, Chinese films tend to increasingly prefer individualist values. Additionally, in terms of film mode, action films tend to embed more collectivism than non-action films.

Introduction

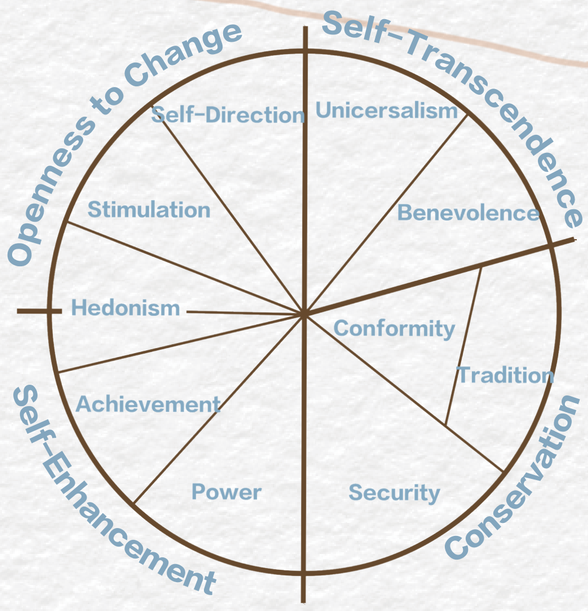
The mainland Chinese film industry has grown rapidly in the last decade and is beginning to compete with the American film industry. By June 2021, the Chinese box office surpassed North America to become the largest film market in the world (Thomala, 2021). These two film markets, with the intensification of globalization, affect each other and can impact each other's local values. The expansion and interrelation of film production allow for a comparison between China and the US, as these two countries become increasingly competitive global superpowers.

This SURF project is a quantitative analysis of the five highest-grossing films in both the mainland Chinese and American film markets between 2010 and 2019 (100 films total). Using films as a window on a country's value tendencies, it adopts the Schwartz (2012) theory of human values (10 values in 4 dimensions) to analyse what motivates film protagonists. This study contributes to research on the mutual influence of Chinese and American culture by analyzing the individualist and collectivist values in their popular films.

Methodology

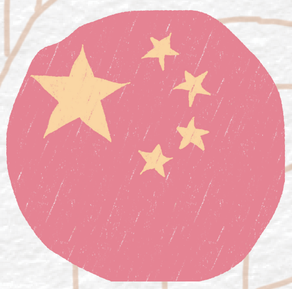
Content analysis focuses on examining texts by systematically coding and categorizing content in a verifiable and reproducible way. It allows for the analysis of a large sample and for an efficient research process, though it simplifies texts into codable elements (Bryman, 2012). Purposive sampling was employed to define the sample: 100 films in total, the 5 top domestically box office grossing in each market of from 2010 to 2019 (2020 was excluded due to COVID-19 disrupting film exhibition, as was an anthology film due to the difficulty of distinguishing protagonists).

Value categories were based on Schwartz (2012), who theorizes ten basic human values that fall into four dimensions (see figure). The values in the conservation and self-transcendence dimensions are concerned with promoting others' interests (i.e., collectivist), while the values in the openness to change and self-enhancement dimensions are concerned with promoting one's own interests (i.e., individualist).



In the process of coder training, film mode was detected as a crucial factor affecting value motivations. Specifically, most of the sampled films are action films, films "associated with a particular kind of scene or spectacle (explosions, chases, combat)" (Tasker, 2015, p. 12), and can be reasonably expected to incorporate more violence and tension than other modes, and therefore different values. Consequently, this mode was also coded.

Three pairs coded the films and Recal (http://dfreelon.org/utils/recalfront/recal-oir/) was employed to test inter-coder reliability on 10% of the sample. As a guide, "coefficients of .90 or greater are nearly always acceptable, .80 or greater is acceptable in most situations, and .70 may be appropriate in some exploratory studies for some indices" (Lombard et al., 2010, para. 13). The average pairwise percent agreement of action mode, self-direction, and stimulation was 100%; of benevolence 93%; of tradition 87%; of universalism, hedonism, and power 80%; and of achievement, conformity, and security 67%. Excel was utilized to help data collection and analysis.



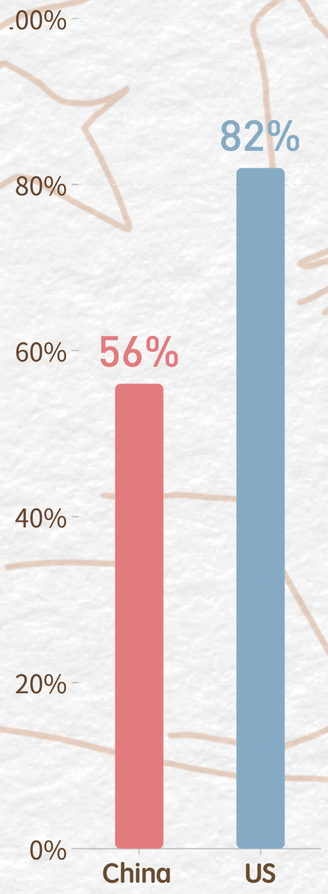
Most Prevalent Values

100% SELF—DIRECTION

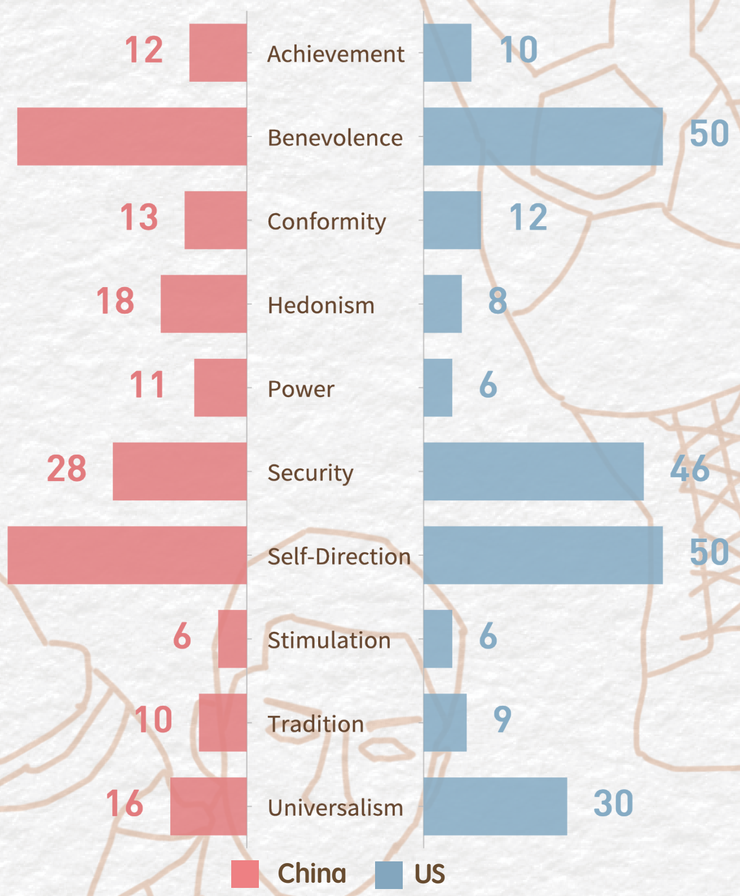
98% BENEVOLENCE

74% SECURITY

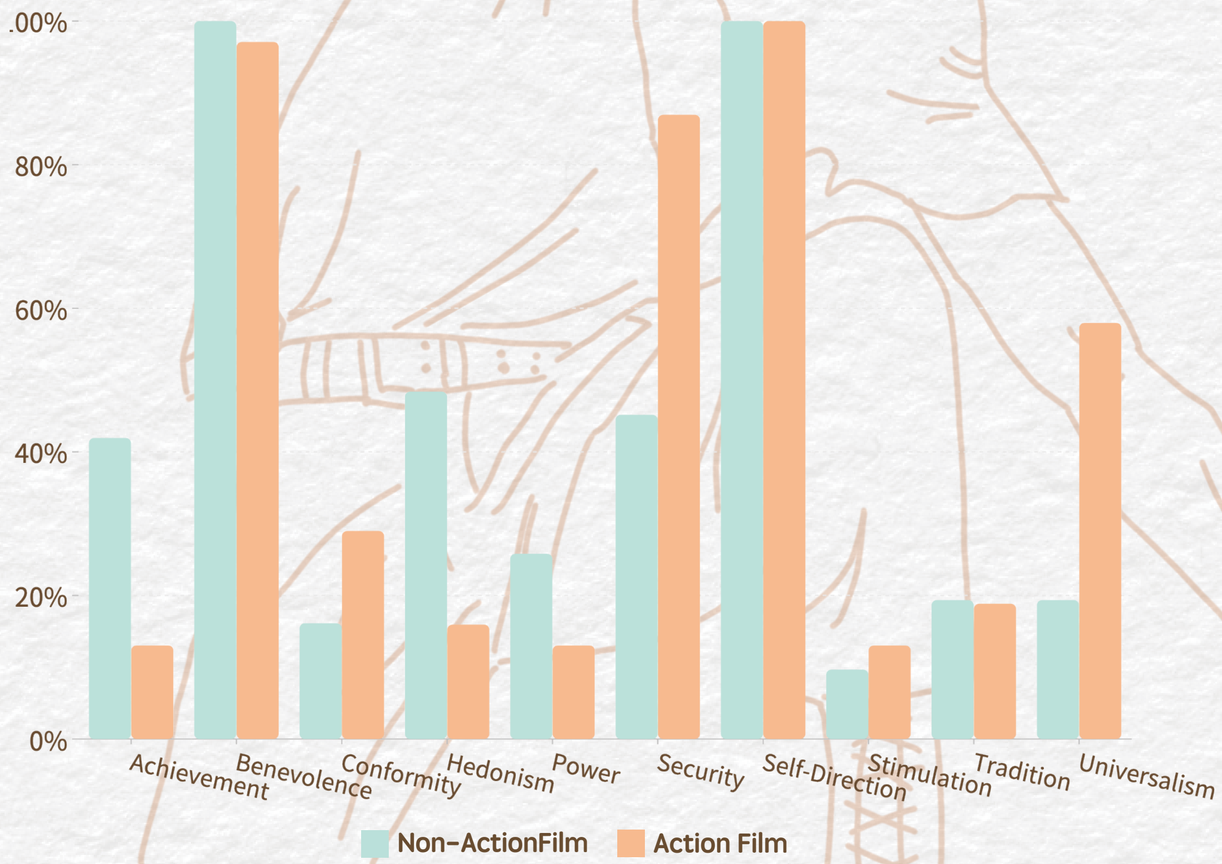
Action Films as Percentage of Films



Total National Values



Values by Mode



Finding

In the Chinese sample, self-direction exists in all 50 films and benevolence in 48. The other values vary dramatically between 0 and 4 occurrences per year. Stimulation has the least proportion of all values in the Chinese sample, with an average of 0.5 occurrences per year.

In the US sample, self-direction and benevolence exist in every single film. Security ranks third with 46 occurrences, followed by universalism, which appears 27 times in a decade. The other values stay in a relatively small range, fluctuating between 0 and 2 occurrences per year. Power is the least common value that motivates actions in American films.

In the total sample, 69 films were action films. The proportion of action films in the US was higher than in China, at 82% and 56%. Benevolence and self-direction appear in most films, regardless of mode. Conformity and security occur twice as often (on average) in action films, at 29% and 86%, respectively. Universalism appears nearly three times more in action films than in non-action films, at 58% and 19%. Achievement, hedonism and power appear more in non-action films.

Discussion

As the findings suggest, self-direction and benevolence are the dominant values that motivate the protagonists' actions in both Chinese and American films, most of which are action films. In terms of individualistic versus collectivistic values, Chinese films and non-action films are surprisingly leaning more towards the former than American films and action films.

First, findings indicate that there may be a universal ideology in which independent will and benevolence are appreciated as important and desirable qualities of human beings. While self-direction focuses on the individual, benevolence focuses on society and others (Schwartz, 2012), and though they belong to two opposing value dimensions they motivate the actions of the protagonists in Chinese and American films, showing the balance and diversity of values in the two cultures.

Second, though Chinese culture is commonly viewed as more collectivist than American culture, the data demonstrates the opposite in film protagonists' motivations. The reason may be that Chinese films differentiate themselves from American films based on values. American films regularly appear in the Chinese box office top ten, though the inverse is not true. American filmmakers, however, now consider the Chinese market during film production. Thus, the value motivations of both countries' films are connected, albeit unevenly.

Finally, action films often feature heroes saving the world from dangerous villains, and thus primarily focus on collectivist values such as conformity, security, and universalism. Developments in visual effects technology have contributed to the growing popularity of action blockbusters in both countries (A Look at the Demographics of China's Movie-Going Population, 2016; Gaille, 2015), yet the higher percentage of action films in the US affects the differences in values between the two countries.

Conclusion

This project reveals some of the dynamics of the interrelations between audience, film industry, and culture in Chinese and American films. In summary, although films from both countries share identical leading values, they seem to advocate opposite tendencies than is usually assumed, with more collectivist values in American films and more individualist values in Chinese. However, the high instances of self-direction and benevolence motivations in both countries' films echo back to scholars' critiques of the inadequacy of the individualist/collectivist dichotomy and the need to analyze how individualism and collectivism combine (Schwartz, 1990; Triandis, 1995). Further studies regarding the complexity of value combinations and a larger film sample would be worthwhile.

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