

CHINESE FILMS IN MULTICULTURAL MALAYSIA: A REVIEW ANALYSIS OF STORYTELLING EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION

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Abstract. The dissemination of Chinese films in Malaysia plays a vital role in shaping the image of Chinese culture and fostering cross-cultural understanding. With the acceleration of globalization, Chinese cinema has gained increasing visibility in Malaysia, attracting diverse audiences through its distinctive storytelling, aesthetics, and cultural values. This study investigates the narrative evolution and cultural adaptation of Chinese films in the Malaysian context and examines how they contribute to the construction of China's cultural image. By employing a synthesis analysis, the research offers a comprehensive evaluation of relevant thematic literature, providing valuable insights into the dissemination and cultural representation of Chinese cinema in Malaysia. The findings reveal a high level of acceptance and engagement with Chinese films among Malaysian audiences. Chinese cinema has emerged as an effective medium of cultural exchange between China and Malaysia, contributing to the construction of a rich and multifaceted cultural image of China and serving as a key instrument of cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, challenges persist, including varying audience preferences, language barriers, and market competition. By analyzing these factors, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of Chinese cinema's potential as a diplomatic tool and proposes strategies to enhance its cultural influence in Malaysia's multicultural society.

Keywords: Chinese cinema, communication, cultural image, Malaysia

Introduction

In the era of globalization, it has become a widely accepted consensus that literature and film serve as vital tools for shaping national and cultural identities and for expressing ideas and emotions on the global stage (Wang, 2025; Gautam, 2024). With China's growing international influence, Chinese cinema has emerged as a significant cultural vehicle—often referred to as a "cultural business card"—that plays a critical role in narrating China's stories and promoting the Chinese spirit worldwide (Qi and Sawatdee, 2024; Zhou, 2024). In recent years, the dissemination of Chinese films in Malaysia has garnered increasing attention, reflecting broader trends in cultural globalization and transnational media flows. As a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, Malaysia offers a unique context for examining the reception, interpretation, and cultural resonance of Chinese cinema abroad (Lee, 2022). Historically, Chinese-language films—particularly those from Hong Kong—have enjoyed widespread popularity in Malaysia, especially within the local Chinese community. The growing presence of Chinese films in the global film market has infused new vitality into cultural expression and audience engagement (Yuan et al., 2024; Su, 2021).

Chinese cinema acts as a medium of cultural exchange, shaping Malaysian audiences' perceptions of Chinese society, history, and contemporary developments (Kang et al., 2021; Carstens, 2003). Through narrative techniques, visual aesthetics, and

thematic representations, these films contribute to the construction of China's cultural image in Malaysia (Liang et al., 2023; Khoo, 2008). Moreover, international collaborations, co-productions, film festivals, and distribution strategies have further deepened bilateral cultural ties between the two nations. However, several challenges persist, including linguistic differences, divergent audience preferences, and intense competition from Hollywood and other regional film industries. Understanding the narrative evolution and cultural adaptation of Chinese cinema in Malaysia is thus essential for enhancing China's soft power, promoting its national image, and facilitating intercultural communication. This study aims to examine the cross-cultural communication and cultural significance of Chinese films in Malaysia, while exploring their potential as instruments of cultural diplomacy. It contributes to a broader understanding of the global influence of Chinese cinema and its narrative role in shaping perceptions of China. By leveraging the international dissemination of Chinese films, this research supports efforts to convey the spirit of the times, project Chinese characteristics, communicate Chinese values, and ultimately shape a positive cultural and national image through the medium of film.

Literature review

International communication of Chinese films

Cross-cultural communication plays a critical role in the international success of films, particularly those aiming to engage audiences across diverse cultural contexts (Desai et al., 2018; Pandey, 2012). In recent years, the globalization of Chinese cinema has emerged as a prominent area of scholarly interest, especially in relation to China's soft power initiatives and cultural diplomacy. When Chinese films are disseminated to Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, their cultural narratives are often interpreted through the lens of local social norms, values, and historical experiences. Scholars such as Tian and Wang (2025) have explored how Chinese films function as a medium for constructing national identity and promoting cultural heritage abroad. Similarly, Zhou (2025) underscores the significance of China's strategies to internationalize its film industry through co-productions and expanded overseas distribution. Existing research has identified several key factors influencing the international success of Chinese films, including language barriers, cultural proximity, and audience receptivity (Gao et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2021). Scholars have also examined the role of government initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which promotes cultural exchange through media and cinema (Zhou, 2025; Sheng et al., 2023). Despite China's efforts to expand its presence in the global film market, many scholars argue that its cultural impact through film remains relatively limited when compared to the dominance of Hollywood (Crane, 2014; Davis, 2014).

Cultural exchange in Malaysia's multicultural society

Malaysia's distinctive multicultural context-comprising three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians-provides a unique environment for cultural exchange and cross-cultural media reception. Studies on media reception (Scammell and Bielsa, 2022) and hybrid cultural identities have examined how different ethnic communities interpret foreign media content, including Chinese cinema (Yin, 2015). Research by Kang et al. (2021) and Hee (2019) indicates that the Malaysian Chinese community is more inclined to engage with Chinese films due to shared linguistic and cultural affinities. In

contrast, Malay and Indian audiences tend to experience Chinese cinema differently, often accessing it through dubbed or subtitled versions. Furthermore, evolving media consumption patterns reveal that younger Malaysian audiences increasingly view Chinese-language films via digital streaming platforms, thereby circumventing traditional access barriers associated with cinema (Chew, 2024). An essential factor in this cultural exchange is the degree of cultural adaptation. The reception of Chinese films often hinges on their thematic content, narrative structure, and portrayal of values. Studies suggest that international films achieving widespread success typically undergo a process of localization to align with the preferences and sensibilities of target audiences (Amira and Cylia, 2024; Okonkwo et al., 2023).

Distribution channels and challenges for Chinese films in Malaysia

With a significant ethnic Chinese population and longstanding cultural ties to China, Malaysia has become a receptive market for Chinese films. The shared language and cultural heritage create a strong resonance with Chinese cinematic narratives, positioning Malaysia as a strategic platform for the global expansion of Chinese cinema. Chinese films have consistently performed well at the Malaysian box office, reflecting their cultural alignment with local audiences (Gao et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2021). This success is driven by shared values, familiar storytelling traditions, and the emotional appeal of the narratives. In 2025 alone, Malaysia-home to over 30 million people-emerged as the third-largest international box office market for the Chinese film *Ne Zha 2*, contributing to its position as the fifth highest-grossing film globally. This achievement is closely tied to the diverse distribution channels utilized, including theatrical releases, television broadcasting, and digital streaming platforms, which collectively ensured broad accessibility for Malaysian audiences (Wahab and Norashiddin, 2025; Hill and Lee, 2022). Nevertheless, these distribution channels also encounter several challenges. Local content regulations and censorship policies can influence decisions regarding film releases, TV broadcasts, and streaming availability. Filmmakers and distributors must carefully navigate these regulatory frameworks to ensure compliance while preserving the cultural integrity of their productions. Moreover, as audience preferences evolve and competition from other international film industries intensifies, the Chinese film industry must continue to innovate and diversify its content to sustain its appeal. A nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to box office success and the effective use of distribution channels is essential for maintaining the momentum of Chinese films in the Malaysian market.

Materials and Methods

In this study, a review analysis was conducted to evaluate the development, opportunities and challenges of Chinese films in Malaysia. A systematic approach was adopted to ensure a comprehensive examination of relevant literature. This study employs a review-based analytical approach to investigate the construction of the cultural image of Chinese films in Malaysia. The unit of analysis consists of peer-reviewed journal articles. Data collection is conducted through a three-stage process: literature search, article selection, and systematic review. The search strategy incorporates keywords such as "Chinese films" AND "Malaysia" OR "Malaysian audience," targeting publications from 2015 to 2025. The focus is on English-language

journal articles sourced from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight.

Results and Discussion

Cultural symbols and themes in Chinese cinema

Traditional cultural elements in historical and mythological films

Chinese cinema has long emphasized the exploration of ancient history and mythology, using these themes to reflect traditional cultural values. Among the most prominent genres recognized in Malaysia are martial arts films and mythological narratives-both of which serve as iconic representations of Chinese historical cinema on the international stage. Notable mythological films such as *Fengshen* (Creation of the Gods), *Ne Zha*, and *Demon Hunter*, alongside martial arts films like *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, and *The Promise*, have enjoyed significant popularity. In the early 21st century, prominent directors known for their realist works-such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Feng Xiaogang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Wong Kar-wai-shifted stylistically to engage with the martial arts genre (Stafford, 2014). Through the lens of martial arts, these directors not only offered new interpretations of historical narratives but also enhanced the commercial appeal of their films. This wave of directors contributed to the revitalization of the ancient historical genre, attracting substantial investment and global attention.

Culturally, martial arts and metaphysical myths serve as symbolic carriers of traditional Chinese values, resonating deeply with domestic audiences while sparking curiosity and cultural interest among Malaysian viewers. These films act as bridges for cultural exchange, introducing foreign audiences to the philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of Chinese heritage. Contemporary Chinese mythological and martial arts films continue to draw upon traditional cultural motifs while seeking to address contemporary issues. These films often highlight universal values such as peace, harmony, and coexistence, or explore emotional and existential dilemmas relevant to modern life. While these productions frequently incorporate visually appealing elements, global perspectives, and modern themes, a common critique lies in their tendency to overemphasize ideological messaging at the expense of character development. This has led to the portrayal of superficial character traits and a lack of emotional depth, making it difficult for audiences to form lasting impressions of the protagonists.

As a result, although Chinese mythological and martial arts films enjoyed widespread popularity in the early 2000s, their appeal has gradually waned in recent years. Criticisms related to weak plotlines, underwhelming performances by lead actors, and a lack of originality and imagination have negatively impacted both critical reception and box office performance. Compared to other genres, these large-scale productions have struggled to maintain the same level of audience engagement and commercial success in the contemporary film market.

The modern Chinese image in action and commercial films

Early Chinese action films helped construct an image of China in Malaysia by leveraging the cultural symbol of kung fu. These films emphasized national dignity and historical sentiment, portraying resilient Chinese figures such as Wong Fei Hung and Ip

Man. In recent years, however, the focus of action and commercial films has shifted toward high technology, military strength, and collectivist heroism. This evolution reflects China's transformation from a traditional defender of sovereignty to an emerging global actor, as exemplified by films like *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth* (Yang, 2023; Xiang and Wang, 2022). Hong Kong action and comedy films have also enjoyed broad popularity in Malaysia, particularly among the Chinese community, due to linguistic and cultural proximity. Jackie Chan's action-comedy hybrids, Stephen Chow's satirical comedies, and the depiction of underworld cultures in quirky gangster films have captivated not only Chinese Malaysians but also viewers from Malay and Indian backgrounds. While some of these films successfully crossed ethnic boundaries through action-comedy elements, the genre's over-reliance on formulaic themes occasionally resulted in the simplification of Chinese culture. For instance, the *God of Gamblers* series reinforced stereotypes, such as gambling being intrinsic to Chinese identity. Thus, while Hong Kong cinema has functioned as both commercial entertainment and a vehicle of cultural identity in Malaysia, its influence has declined in recent years amid the globalization of mainland Chinese cinema and the transformation of the Hong Kong film industry. To maintain relevance, it must now seek new ways to reshape its cultural discourse.

Patriotic-themed films also constitute a significant part of Chinese cinema. Unlike earlier patriotic productions that received limited acclaim, recent films have embraced a new formula for success: "epic war backdrops + heroic characters + star-studded casts." These films adopt internationalized narrative techniques and address global human concerns to enhance their commercial appeal. For example, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* and *Operation Red Sea* integrate patriotic messaging with Hollywood-style special effects and dynamic editing to portray China as a "responsible global power." However, critics such as Wang (2025) have described these works as "nationalistic spectacles." The narrative emphasis has shifted from historical retrospection to personal heroism, aligning more closely with contemporary viewing preferences and making patriotic values more palatable to international youth audiences. This evolution in storytelling shows the influence of Hollywood, with films like *Wolf Warrior* employing linear narratives focused on individual protagonists with clear motivations and missions. To appeal to international audiences, Chinese action and commercial films often minimize overt political content and instead foreground universal human themes—such as the apocalyptic survival scenario in *The Wandering Earth*. Nevertheless, some scholars have noted the implicit "Sinocentric" narratives in such works, as seen in the controversy surrounding *Wolf Warrior 2*'s portrayal of "China saving Africa." Although the heavy reliance on military and science fiction themes may limit the expression of China's cultural diversity, these films challenge the dominance of Western cinematic discourse and provide a lens through which China's modernization is both projected and negotiated (Guo, 2017).

The image of modern China in action and commercial cinema is multifaceted. It serves both as an expression of cultural confidence and as a product shaped by the demands of globalization. These films seek to deconstruct Western-centric narratives, yet they often risk creating new cultural stereotypes. As such, there is a growing need to examine the interplay between audience reception and cinematic policy to foster a more nuanced and inclusive portrayal of contemporary Chinese identity on the global screen.

Transmission of values in Chinese family ethics and social-themed films

In addition to historical epics and action blockbusters, Chinese cinema has demonstrated a growing strength in portraying contemporary narratives, particularly those centered on family ethics and social issues (Hu et al., 2024). As society evolves, emotional needs, psychological transitions, and complex social realities have become increasingly prominent subjects within cinematic art. While traditional large-scale productions are gradually losing their appeal, Chinese films focusing on familial and societal themes are steadily gaining recognition. Family ethics films often highlight the tension between tradition and modernity. For instance, Stephens and Lee (2018) explores the emotional reconciliation between mother and daughter through a time-travel narrative, preserving the value of traditional filial piety while incorporating modern expressions of individual emotion. Similarly, Wang and Fouseki (2025) depicts the fragmentation of familial bonds amid rapid urbanization, subtly critiquing the social costs of modernization. These films underscore the interconnection between family and nation, presenting domestic harmony as a metaphor for social stability. At the same time, they reflect both the warmth of traditional Chinese familial values and the challenges posed by contemporary societal change.

Social-themed films provide a candid depiction of societal realities, simultaneously offering criticism and promoting mainstream values. Earlier works, such as Pfundmair et al. (2019) focused on exposing the darker aspects of society. However, more recent films like *Dying to Survive* in 2018 adopt a more constructive narrative approach, shifting from problem exposure to problem-solving, and showing deep concern for marginalized populations. Additionally, recent commercially successful films such as *No More Bets* of 2023 and *Lost in the Stars* for 2023 incorporate elements of suspense and crime to explore topical social issues. These films not only achieved strong box office performance but also stimulated extensive public discourse in Malaysia. Due to geographical proximity and shared social concerns-such as fraud and marital security-these narratives resonate with Malaysian audiences, generating widespread engagement and emotional investment. Looking ahead, if Chinese cinema can continue to balance social critique with commercial appeal, films in this genre have the potential to serve as a new cultural ambassador, furthering the global reach of Chinese cinematic storytelling.

Malaysian audiences' reception and reinterpretation of cultural symbols in Chinese films

Narratives in Chinese cinema are deeply rooted in the country's cultural heritage, drawing upon traditional storytelling forms, historical events, and philosophical frameworks such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese nationalism. These cultural symbols are often embedded in the narrative structure, character arcs, and moral themes of Chinese films to construct storylines that resonate with domestic audiences. Themes such as filial piety, collective responsibility, and national pride are prominently featured in films like *The Founding of a Republic* and *Hero*. However, cultural elements that strongly appeal to Chinese audiences may pose challenges for Malaysian viewers, who may not possess the same cultural background necessary for full comprehension. In cross-cultural communication, filmmakers often encode cultural values and symbolic meanings in their works, presuming a shared cultural context that facilitates interpretation and emotional resonance. When these cultural elements are exported to Malaysia-a multi-ethnic and multicultural society-the process of reception becomes more complex. Audiences from different ethnic backgrounds may interpret the same

symbols and messages in divergent ways, influenced by their own cultural frameworks. Non-Chinese Malaysian viewers, for instance, are often drawn to Chinese films for their entertainment value, particularly martial arts and action sequences seen in the works of Jackie Chan and Wu Jing. However, these audiences may overlook or misinterpret culturally embedded symbols such as the Confucian ideal of filial piety or the philosophical underpinnings of martial arts, perceiving the films more as action-comedy entertainment than as cultural expressions. To enhance the appeal and cultural intelligibility of Chinese cinema in Malaysia, several strategies may be adopted. First, greater localization through Chinese-Malaysian co-productions or the provision of Malay-language dubbing can facilitate broader access. Second, a careful balance must be maintained between commercial viability and cultural depth to avoid reductive or stereotypical representations. Finally, leveraging social media for targeted and contextualized promotion may help mitigate misinterpretation and foster a more nuanced appreciation of Chinese cultural content among diverse Malaysian audiences.

Key factors affecting acceptance and interpretation

The cultural identification and acceptance of Chinese films among Malaysian audiences are not homogeneous but exhibit varied interpretations influenced by several key factors. These include Malaysia's multicultural composition, political and historical dynamics, and the role of streaming platforms and social media. Malaysia is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious society, where Malays constitute the majority, followed by Chinese (approximately 23%) and Indians (about 7%). This pluralistic social landscape allows for diverse and multifaceted receptions of Chinese films. Malaysian Chinese audiences are more likely to engage with these films through the lens of cultural identity, associating elements such as kung fu and martial arts with traditional Chinese values and the "Chinese spirit." They often demonstrate a deeper understanding of the cultural and moral narratives embedded in the films. However, among the younger generation, there is a noticeable shift toward prioritizing entertainment over the preservation of traditional values. In contrast, Malay and Indian audiences typically exhibit lower levels of cultural identification with Chinese films, often viewing Chinese cultural symbols as exotic or unfamiliar unless the films address universally relatable themes.

Political and historical contexts also play a crucial role in shaping audience reception. When diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China are favorable—such as during the height of Belt and Road Initiative collaborations—Chinese films tend to receive more screen time and are more positively received. Conversely, when films touch on politically sensitive issues, backlash may occur. For instance, *Wolf Warrior 2* was criticized by some Malay viewers for perceived excessive nationalism and propaganda, while *The Wandering Earth 2* faced skepticism over its portrayal of a shared human destiny, which was misinterpreted by some as a narrative of Chinese dominance. The rise of streaming services and the proliferation of social media also significantly influence audience interpretation. Viral short video clips featuring scenes from Chinese films—such as the high-tech visuals in *The Wandering Earth* or the suspenseful plot twists in *Lost in the Stars*—can create considerable anticipation. However, such fragmentary dissemination may lead to superficial or even distorted understandings. For example, *No More Bets* was mischaracterized on northern Malaysian social media as a horror film set in Myanmar, thereby diverting attention from its original anti-fraud messaging. In sum, Malaysian audiences' reception and

reinterpretation of Chinese filmic cultural symbols are filtered through layers of cultural identity, political context, and media influence. Chinese audiences in Malaysia tend to exhibit a stronger alignment with the cultural values portrayed, while non-Chinese audiences are more engaged with entertaining elements. Political sensitivities can limit the reception of ideologically charged narratives, and fragmented media consumption patterns may obscure the deeper cultural and thematic meanings originally intended by filmmakers.

Conclusion

Today's world is characterized by a new era of international cooperation and the rapid development of emerging technologies and media. The strategy of promoting Chinese films on a global scale reflects China's commitment to modernization and its integration into the broader process of globalization. Malaysia, through its historical evolution, has absorbed and integrated both Eastern and Western cultural influences. It has adopted a cultural strategy that emphasizes openness and international engagement. As a result, the dissemination and reception of Chinese films in Malaysia serve not only to enhance mutual cultural exchange and understanding between the two countries but also to contribute to shared development goals. The evolution of the storytelling techniques and cultural imagery of Chinese cinema in Malaysia is shaped by a complex interplay of historical ties, multicultural dynamics, audience preferences, and changing diplomatic relations. As this study illustrates, Chinese cinema has increasingly transcended ethnic boundaries, emerging as a significant medium through which Malaysian audiences-particularly those of non-Chinese backgrounds-can engage with Chinese culture. Malaysia's multicultural context enables a wide range of interpretations and receptions of Chinese films, positioning them not only as sources of entertainment but also as valuable instruments for fostering cross-cultural understanding. Key factors such as thematic relevance, genre preferences, and localized marketing strategies play a crucial role in shaping how Malaysian audiences interpret and accept Chinese films. Moreover, the growing potential of Chinese cinema as a tool of cultural diplomacy-particularly through cross-border collaborations, co-productions, and cultural exchange programs-has contributed to the construction of a multifaceted and increasingly favorable cultural image of China in Malaysia. These developments offer important insights into the broader international dissemination of Chinese films and their role in enhancing China's global cultural presence.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest involved in this research study.

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