Don't think, feel: Mediatization of Chinese masculinities through martial arts films

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article demonstrates representations of racialized speech styles of Chinese masculinities in popular *wushu* 'martial arts films'. For the detailed analysis, I concentrate on four blockbuster films that represent general depictions of *wushu* heroes and their expected Chinese masculinities. By focusing on discursive practices employed in the films, such as the heroes' reticence and use of formulaic or philosophical speech styles, in combination with visual arts, I discussed how these mediatizations index masculinity in ways that mesh with the audiences' expectations for Chinese martial arts figures, as such figures have developed through mediatization.

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1. Introduction

Dominant ideologies concerning gender differences or ideas about masculinities and femininities have largely been treated as people's commonsense matters in scholarly discussions within gender studies. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, p. 43) refer to this line of thought as naturalization. In their definition, naturalization refers to the process through which something comes not to require explanation. They link the idea of naturalization to Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 43), arguing that 'the most effective form of domination is the assimilation of the wider population into one's worldview,' and '[h]egemony is not just a matter of widespread ideas but includes the organization of social life more generally.' Agha (2011a, p. 164) claims that hegemonic ideas spread through mediation and mediatization because semiotic mediation is an ongoing process in social life that unfolds through linkages among semiotic encounters that yield multi-sited chains of communication (see also Agha, 2005a,b). Mediation is like communication that links people or elements of society; it is a process that involves the exchanges of meanings and ideas (Agha, 2011a,b; Jaffe, 2011; Johnson and Ensslin, 2007; Scollon, 1998). Mediatization describes specially formalized types of communication/mediation, such as that which occurs through institutionalized means like news reports, political speeches, or press conferences. As part of an institutionalized process, mediatization involves all the representational strategies and choices of the production and editing of resources concerning language in the creation of media products such as text, image, and talk (Agha, 2011a,b; Jaffe, 2011).

Popular media have the power to 'naturalize' their own conventions and to make the viewers complicit in that naturalization in both popular and academic discourse (MacDougall (2002, p. 150). As for hegemonic gender ideologies, people usually buy into them without thinking too much about it. People readily expect and accept a given ideology of masculinity because it appears so natural within cultural and historical contexts. In today's social life, many people associate images of jocks, macho men, knights, action movie heroes, cowboys, James Bond, or even butch lesbians with masculinity (Reeser, 2010, p. 15). However, as Connell (1995, p. 76) points out, hegemonic masculinity 'is not a fixed character type.... It is, rather,

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the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.' In other words, the specific form that masculinity takes is always culturally and historically fluid.

A number of scholars have pointed out that, in mainstream Euroamerican cultural and historical perspectives, ethnically Asian males have generally been marginalized or excluded from hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Chan, 2000, p. 372; Connell, 1995; Louie, 2002; Reeser, 2010). Hirose and Pih (2010, p. 209) mention that 'Asian men have been seen as weak, nerdy, feminine, and asexual compared to the idealized form of white masculinity.' At the same time, African American masculinity entails more violence and empowerment than white masculinity (Reeser, 2010). While demonstrations of physical strength and size have been essential to the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the mainstream film industry, e.g., the body type represented by someone like Arnold Schwarzenegger in many action movies (Boyle, 2010), Asian men have been feminized, especially compared to Caucasian men, and denied masculine roles, with a few exceptions. In the US cinema, where both Asians and African Americans represent minorities, African American men generally play more masculine roles than Asian males. In the rare instances of Asian men playing exceptionally masculine roles, they are usually portrayed as martial artists. In other words, Asian men are often perceived as effeminate, a condition only remedied when martial arts skills are involved, in which case they are portrayed as masculine, though this is often masculinity of a different sort than that defined by more western features exhibited by masculine Caucasian or African American characters.

Since Bruce Lee's kung fu films in the 1970s, martial arts films—also known as *wushu* 'martial arts' films[1]—have increasingly begun to portray Asian martial artists as masculine figures. Lee introduced Chinese martial arts to western audiences and 'rewrote the history of action cinema in both Hong Kong and the United States' (Shu, 2003, pp. 51–52). Martial arts, as something exotic and new to the eyes of westerners, became increasing popular, eventually becoming a globally recognized film genre in its own right. Today, high-budget martial arts films featuring prominent East Asian action stars are mainstream blockbusters (a far cry from the cult status of their cinematic predecessors), and the featured stars project confirmed masculine images to viewers in a global market. Martial arts films have become an attractive commodity to viewers who do not share the same local and regional cultures; as Miyoshi (1995, pp. 69–70) states:

> All major films are produced for the world market, transcending the local idiosyncrasies. A people's everyday life, where 'difference' is vital and significant, is ignored. In the international bazaar of exportable goods, difference is in style only as in clothing, cooking, or entertainment.

Asian masculinity as projected by *wushu* films largely confirms Miyoshi's (1995) point above. Although Chinese masculinity and culture are represented as distinct from western norms, such differences can be ignored by viewers so long as the story remains engaging and entertaining.

As pointed out by several recent works (e.g., Bucholtz, 2011; Bucholtz and Lopez, 2011; Inoue, 2003; Jaffe, 2011), specific voices or speech styles are mapped onto specific racialized bodies through a process of mediatization in movies, TV shows, or novels, and these mediatized and racialized voices or speech styles have largely been taken by most viewers at face value. That is, although it depends on producers' purposes or viewers' positions, what is being presented in media tends to appear to audiences as generally authentic or authoritative. In Bucholtz's words, they establish 'an essentialist connection between the "right" body and the "right" voice,' and construct 'the naturalized evidence of authentic modern—and, often, gendered—identities' (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 255). The Bakhtinian idea of stylization is relevant to how authentic identities are constructed in media discourse. Scripted speech often makes use of double-voiced discourse. The concept of double-voiced discourse describes the way that a single discourse may be representative of multiple layers of identity for a speaker and his or her stylized Others:

> It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they - as it were – know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other.…. A potential dialogue is embedded in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages. (Bakhtin, 1981/1935, pp. 324–325)

When mediatized discourse and images draw on audiences' familiarity with previously introduced media materials, their intertextual natures help newly introduced materials gain familiarity in an audience's perception, assisting them to make associations with already known ideas. In this paper, I focus on media discourse and visual representations of popular Chinese martial arts films to investigate how multi-layered constructions of Chinese masculinity are accomplished through mediatization. I examine such projections of Chinese masculinities through the voices and speech styles used in martial arts films to investigate what types of discursive practices manage to appear 'natural' to global viewers, beyond cultural and historic gaps. To examine attributes of masculine or martial arts ideologies, I focus on what Agha (2011b, p. 172) calls 'figures of personhood'—'contingent, performable behaviors effectively linked to social personae for some determinate population.' Performing specific figures of personhood enables a performer to configure targeted personae, including prototypical icons such as martial arts practitioners. This idea is also connected to a process of 'enregisterment,' an ideological association between specific linguistic forms and social identities. In other words, when particular linguistic forms start having ideological links

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[1] Chinese traditional martial arts are often referred to as *wushu* 'martial arts.' In this paper, I will use the terms 'Chinese martial arts films' and '*wushu* films' interchangeably.