

Cinematic Cultural Diffusion: American and Chinese Films

WANG Ning

Harbin Engineering University, China

Abstract: The process of borrowing from one culture to another is complex and it involves cultural diffusion (the spread of one culture item from one culture to another). The focus of this paper is on the kinds of cultural diffusion and adaptation that one finds in the film industries of the United States and China. It focuses on the film *Sleepless in Seattle*, and highlights how portions of that film were borrowed and adapted for a new cultural audience in China by the film director Xiaolu Xue, in her film *Finding Mr. Right*. It is argued that culture plays a key role in what is borrowed and how it is borrowed.

Keywords: International diffusion, culture, films

1. Introduction

Cultural diffusion has to do with the spread of items from one culture to another (Kroeber, 1940). One of the more prominent forms of diffusion in modern times has been the spread of English as a Second Language. Braj Kachru (2005) has documented the use of English in the Indian subcontinent and Nobuyuki Honna and his colleagues have elaborated on the use of Asian English in Japan, Singapore, and China (Honna & Takeshita, 2000). They have noted that the process of borrowing a language involves both diffusion and adaptation.

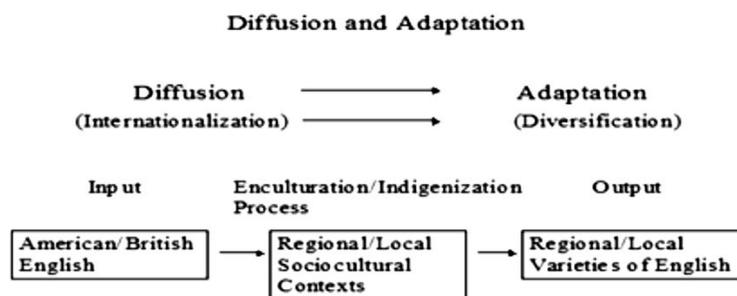


Figure 1. Diffusion and Adaptation

When English is transplanted into a foreign country, it is adapted to regional cultures. This same kind of diffusion and adaptation takes place in the film industry. The focus of this paper is to discuss the borrowing of American films and their diffusion and adaptation in Chinese films. In particular, the source of this borrowing is the film *Sleepless in Seattle*, that was based on a screenplay by Nora Ephron, David S. Ward and Jeff Arch.

2. The Story Line

Sleepless in Seattle is a 1993 American romantic comedy film directed and co-written by Nora Ephron, and based on a story by Jeff Arch. It stars Tom Hanks as Sam Baldwin and Meg Ryan as Annie Reed. It is not an original film but was inspired by the 1957 film *An Affair to Remember*. In both films, there is a climactic meeting at the top of the Empire State Building. The story starts in Seattle. An architect and also the protagonist in this film, Sam Baldwin, and his 8-year-old son Jonah move from Chicago to Seattle to escape the grief associated with his wife Maggie's death. Jonah thinks that his father needs a new wife to make a fresh start, and then he calls in on a national radio talk show called Network America where he talks to a psychologist, Dr. Marcia Fieldstone about his father's troubles. Rather than giving his name, his father is called 'Sleepless in Seattle' on the show. The tale of Sam's magical and perfect marriage is heard by *thousands* of women over the radio, including Annie Reed, who can't help but be fascinated by the tale. Despite being already engaged to Walter, Annie travels from Baltimore to Seattle to see Sam. She wants to figure out whether he is the person for her or not because of her infatuation with Sam's story. She even drafts a letter to Sam proposing they meet on Valentine's Day at the top of the Empire State Building. The letter is secretly sent to Sam by her friend and colleague Becky.

After her arrival in Seattle, Annie and Sam catch sight of each other from just across a road, and seem certain to meet at last. But Annie pulls back and flies back home. Meanwhile, the little boy Jonah, who is also a baseball fan, reads Annie's letter and likes that it mentions the Baltimore Orioles, but he fails to convince his father to go to New York to meet Annie. On the advice of his friend Jessica, Jonah replies to Annie, agreeing to meet her at the top of the Empire State Building. With Jessica's help, Jonah flies to New York by himself without Sam's permission. Once Sam finds out where Jonah has gone, he rushes off in pursuit. At that time, Annie is dining with Walter and confesses to her the entire *Sleepless in Seattle* story. They amicably end their engagement. After seeing the red heart sign on Empire State Building, she rushes to the top of the building. At last, they meet at the observation deck. The "camera pans around the outside of the Empire State Building, with the windows lit up like red hearts on each side, then the scene draws way back into space so that we see an outline of the entire United States with fireworks shooting high above as the film ends."¹

3. A Cinematic Cultural Adaptation

How was this film borrowed and replayed for the audiences of the Chinese film industry? In the year 2013, film director Xue Xiaolu produced a film called *Finding Mr. Right* (English version name) in which a similar dramatic scene of two lovers' reunion took place at the top of the Empire State Building in New York City. The film starred Tang Wei and Wu Xiubo and was released under the title of *Beijing Yu Shang Seattle* (《北京遇上西雅圖》 Chinese name; literally, "Beijing Meets Seattle"). It was a story inspired by the screenplay of *Sleepless in*

¹ *Sleepless in Seattle* movie synopsis. Retrieved on May 17th, 2016 from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108160/synopsis>

Seattle by Nora Ephron et al. The lead female protagonist Wen Jiajia is a young lady in Beijing who lives a luxurious life provided by her wealthy but already married boyfriend. She is forced to give birth in Seattle, away from her home, due to some particular circumstance problem. She is picked up at Seattle airport by a Chinese man called Frank, who also takes her to the house of a Taiwanese named Mrs. Huang who rents rooms to pregnant women. Under the roof of Mrs. Huang, Wen Jiajia has conflicts at first with her apartment roommates. One of these is Zhou Yi, who is a pregnant lesbian who has been impregnated with borrowed sperm from a top student at Yale. The other is Chen Yue, who hopes her baby will be born as an American citizen. After experiencing various life challenges, they get along well and become good friends. During her pregnancy, Wen Jiajia's rich boyfriend suddenly cuts off her financial resources because he is facing a criminal investigation in China. Frank who was formerly a famous heart surgeon, naturally assumes the responsibility of taking care of Wen Jiajia and the newborn baby. They fall in love with each other through constant close contact. At the same time, Jiajia's newly divorced boyfriend turns up. Jiajia's mission is accomplished and she has to return to Beijing. But her improved life in China is not as she expected. Eventually, she makes up her mind to be a single mother who earns her own money. At the end of the film, one finds the protagonists at the top of the Empire State Building. They find each other and the romance continues.

How did the Chinese film differ from the American version? What did Director Xue Xiaolu borrow from Hollywood films?

4. From *Sleepless Nights in Seattle* to *Finding Mr. Right*

Film is one of the main expression forms of a national culture. When borrowing elements from Hollywood films and television works, Chinese film directors often assimilate American film culture into Chinese films, fusing borrowed elements with hot topics of reality in China. In *Finding Mr. Right*, Director Xue uses many elements from *Sleepless in Seattle* as a source of reference, for instance, the positioning of the main characters, the main story line and story development, scene and context, and also the *chick flick* film mode.

4.1. Positioning of Main Characters

In *Sleepless in Seattle*, the hero is a widowed father with an eight-year-old son. His affection to his deceased wife touches countless women listeners' hearts. His solitary life proves to be empty, and he is motivated to once again seek love. The heroine is a Baltimore journalist. Although she already has a fiancé, she is dissatisfied with the relationship. She is also deeply touched by the film *An Affair to Remember*, pursuing and dreaming of a romantic soul mate.

Meanwhile, in *Finding Mr. Right*, the hero, in order to find a suitable way of education for his daughter who is attending primary school, abandons his career as a famous heart surgeon, but finds that in the United States, he can only do a driver's job in a confinement center. His wife is an ambitious career woman, and they divorce soon after the husband's arrival in the United States. Even so, his ex-wife is constantly on his mind and he is reluctant to take off their wedding ring.

Compared with *Sleepless in Seattle*, the heroine's background is relatively more complex;

she is an unmarried pregnant woman, and the baby's father is a rich but married man. In such a situation, after his birth, the baby cannot be registered with the father's name or identity, as other normal children. In order to give the child a legitimate birth procedure, she chooses to give birth in the United States. At the beginning, the actress is a troublesome person who often tries to prove money is everything, and she spends money like flowing water. As the story progresses, we find that the heroine is not a vain woman. The reason she squanders money is because she wants to fill her desire for love and fulfillment. She chooses the city of Seattle because she was impressed by *Sleepless in Seattle*. She dreams to have the same kind of romantic and touching love as is shown in the film.

The protagonists in the two films have several common features:

- A single father lives alone with a young child; moreover, both are loyal to their love and marriage but empty in emotion.
- A pretty woman who is experiencing an unsatisfying love, both are touched by a romantic film and long for true romance.
- The children (often easily ignored characters) are the catalyst of love, hoping that their fathers can find happiness.

4.2. Main Story Line and Story Development

As outlined by the story line above, the story development in *Sleepless in Seattle* flows as follows:

The heroine hears the hero's story on the radio → she flies to Seattle → she fails in finding love because of a misunderstanding and she returns home → she encounters the hero at the Empire State Building, and there is a happy ending.

The storyline of *Finding Mr. Right* differs from *Sleepless in Seattle* at first glance; however, if we draw it into the flow chart, it is not difficult to find that there are many similarities between the two films in the development of the mainline structure:

The heroine comes to Seattle to give birth → she wants to go to the Empire State Building to feel the atmosphere in the film, but fails → she goes back to Seattle and then brings her baby into the world, at the same time she gradually falls in love with the hero → her lover takes her home, and both return to their own lives → the heroine leaves her lover, then returns to the Empire State Building, finally she reunites with the hero, and there is a happy ending.

In the two films, the starting point is in Seattle, and the end scene is at the Empire State Building. The plots in the stories vary from each other due to the different cultural backgrounds between the two countries. But simply speaking, the story could be abridged as follows: two persons are attracted by each other, then they have some misunderstanding or conflict, finally they reconcile and end up together in a growing relationship. While in American films they

prefer falling in love with soul mates at first sight, in Chinese films people tend to emphasize the process of falling in love over a long period of time. So the main frames of both beginning and end are consistent in the two films. As for the main story line, the plot changes significantly because of cultural differences between the two countries.

4.3. Scene and Context

In *Sleepless in Seattle*, every time the heroine Annie encounters emotional entanglements, she will watch *An Affair to Remember* with her female friend, though she has already learned the lines by heart. At the end of the film, at the exit from the elevator of The Empire State Building, Annie's dialogue with the security guard echoes *An Affair to Remember*:

Annie: Listen, can I just take a look? There's someone I was supposed to meet.
He's probably not there, but if I don't at least look, I'll always wonder about it.
Security Guard: Cary Grant, right?
Annie: You know that movie?
Security Guard: One of my wife's favorites.

This dialogue somewhat pays tribute to the classic film *An Affair to Remember*, while Director Xue in *Finding Mr. Right* continues to draw on *Sleepless in Seattle*. There also exists the scene where the heroine Wen Jiajia watches the film *Sleepless in Seattle*. In addition, she often references or imitates Annie without seeming to be conscious of her behavior. An example of this is at Frank's ex-wife's wedding when she introduces herself by using the name of Annie.

Besides the choice of language and names, the two films also have the same background music and scenery at the end of the film. The more comparisons you make, the more similarities in scene and context appear in the two films.

4.4. Chick Flick Mode Adaptation

"Chick flick" is a subtype between romantic film and comedy film. It especially indicates the humorous and romantic light comedies with young women as leading actresses. Normally, its narrative structure follows the pattern of Hollywood melodrama and romantic film, including the actions of the first time of meeting, emotional fermentation, being impeded, good things being usually preceded by rough goings, and a happy reunion at the end. It is generally considered that "chick flick" is a kind of film that mainly tells a romantic story with the intent of appealing to a female audience. However, a "chick flick" is obviously different from a female film. The latter includes a traditional affliction element, with social context and mainly appeals to housewives. By contrast, the "chick flick" adopts the theme of individual striving by fashionable, young and independent women and it caters to the taste of young city students and white-collar female audiences.

In the mid-1990s, the Hollywood "female films" dominated by "chick flicks" were popular all over the world, such as *Legally Blonde*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *When Harry Met Sally* and so on. They not only achieved box office success, but also made famous a group of female stars

such as Anne Hathaway and Sandra Bullock. Chinese style “chick flick” follows this global trend. The film *Finding Mr. Right* carries on the “chick flick” mode in movie and narration style. Compared with the female films with tough career women or dominant female images, the “chick flick” presents modern, young city women as lead actresses. They usually deal with problems in a relaxed and cunning manner and they confront the difficulties and contradictions in life. Instead of aggressive characteristics, these women are often confused, pure, kind-hearted and hardworking. And they come from all walks of life, such as a silly girl, green hand in workplace, tomboy etc. The heroine in *Finding Mr. Right*, Wen Jiajia has almost all the qualities of “chick”. The reason why people are deeply impressed, are fond of and even have to admire this role, however, can be explained not only by her beauty, her slightly silly and funny character, but because “chick” is a full role and reflects authentic human nature with both good and evil traits.

As a Hollywood commercial film, the internal level of “chick flick” follows the American mainstream value that ultimately, “true love is supreme”. Throughout the “chick flick” films at home and abroad, no matter how many setbacks and hardships the *chick* in the film experiences, the director will finally show the audience a “happy ending”. The ending of *Finding Mr. Right* is no exception. Self-supported Wen Jiajia and Frank who has been reissued his doctor’s license, meet on the roof of the Empire State Building at the end of this film. There is not much suspense or novelty, and the audience is finally satisfied.

4.5. Adaptation of *Finding Mr. Right* in China

Because the theme in *Finding Mr. Right* concerns the hottest topics right now in China, such as giving birth in the United States, mistresses, living off a woman etc., this film was warmly welcomed by the audience in all cinemas in China and netted box office returns after only one month of nearly 500 million RMB. As a low-cost film which was filmed within 38 days with a production cost of only 30 million RMB, it indeed exceeded the expectations of most film experts.

This is the first time in China that a domestic film shows on screen the theme of giving birth in the United States. According the Hongxia You (2014), in 2008 there were only 4,200 persons from the Chinese mainland who gave birth in the United States. The number of Chinese giving birth in America has grown unbelievably fast, reaching close to 10,000 in 2012 (You, 2014). Thus giving birth in America has become one of the hottest topics in contemporary China. This explains why Chinese viewers are deeply attracted at the beginning of this film, when they find out the reason why Wen Jiajia has come to Seattle. Wen Jiajia wins plaudits for her stylish appearance and her special identity, but is equally derided for her material girl image. She buys everything she likes without any hesitation since she is funded by a neglectful and very married “sugar daddy” who never appears in the whole film. And this is another sensitive Chinese phenomenon, namely the Chinese concubine culture. There are numerous reports about the mistress issue and how some rich or powerful men maintain their *ernai*, *sannai*, *sinai*—second wives, third wives, or even fourth wives. Men in China are not very open about their extramarital solicitations, and how they solve their illicit love affair problems. As the audience learns why the heroine has arrived in the United States, Wen Jiajia exposes her mistress identity arrogantly. To a Chinese audience, the topic of extramarital affairs is far

from new. What is new to many is giving birth in the United States. Then the camera turns to the Confinement Center². The audience is exceptionally intrigued by the other supporting characters, one of whom is a lesbian using sperm donors to conceive children. The audience literally gasps when the shot of her and her newborn baby pans out to show a female partner standing by her side.

In brief, the film presents and adapts to a Chinese context the hottest and latest issues in China, such as mistresses, extramarital love affairs, emigration to the United States, homosexuality, sperm donation, economic crime and so on. Director Xue Xiaolu creates an entertaining and simultaneously poignant space for the whole story. It is easy to figure out in *Finding Mr. Right* the oblique references to *Sleepless in Seattle*; at the same time it is also a totally new Chinese version with so many typical Chinese elements.

4.6. How the Movie Has Affected Chinese Culture

The media is of great importance in people's lives as a display platform. Within the field of communication, media is the term used to refer to the particular medium used to deliver a message to a large, anonymous, diverse audience (Pearce, 2009). Media studies involve research on media effects, which refer to the influence that the media has on audiences, and media representations, which are portrayals of various cultural groups. And media, as a powerful social system, plays an important role in creating a person's sense of reality (Gergen, 1999).

As all kinds of media flooding into our daily lives every day, we are living in a whole media era. And the movie is an indispensable part of media, which shows us the constructive information and exposes us to things we have never experienced. Lots of these messages that people get from the movie are taken unconsciously. At the same time, the movie affects people without their awareness. Taking *Finding Mr. Right* as the example, it is persuasive to prove how a movie could influence people and their culture. It has brought a big boost to the tourism in Seattle. After this romantic comedy's debut in March of 2013, large numbers of tourists are traveling to Seattle to experience the city for themselves. Janet Christopher, vice president of tourism for Visit Seattle, was shocked by this influence on tourism, which is bigger than the influence made by *Sleepless in Seattle*. She said the city had seen a 90 percent increase in Chinese tourists over the past two years. And she credited the increase to a streamlined travel visa process and, more recently, to the hit movie. Since this movie has really struck a chord with young women, all of these women relate to it and they want to come and see if they can find their "Mr. Right" in Seattle (Cohen, 2013).

The movie not only had a tremendous impact on the tourism industry, but also brought the sensitive social issue of giving birth to babies in the United States into people's sight. A great number of people, especially many mothers-to-be, who had no idea about having babies in the

² According to Peir (2011), a "confinement center" is an Asian tradition which has been transplanted to immigrant communities in urban areas such as New York City. It is a nursery for both mothers and babies during the mother's postpartum period. While an official from the New York City Health Department "said it had no information on the centers" and the "as long as the centers were not offering medical services, they would not require a license", in 2011 there were four such centers in New York City (Peir, 2011, p. MB1).

U.S. before, came to be aware of the phenomenon after the release of *Finding Mr. Right*. Thus, an increasing number of new mothers join the “army of visitors” to America with their babies in their bellies. And the number of new mothers to the U.S. in 2014 rose fifty percent more than the statistics in the former year (Yansen, 2015).

All types of media function as a cultural socialization agent. Of all the different types of media, scholars have spent the most time researching the impact that television has had on personal, cultural, and societal perceptions (Mark, 2015). This movie is of no exception. It could not be ignored that this movie has changed Chinese people’s personal views, their cultural experiences, and it also influences the whole society of China to some extent.

4.7. The Theoretical Significance of Cultural Diffusion

When the concept of cultural diffusion was first conceptualized by Leo Frobenius in 1897, anthropologists were interested in how cultures influence each other. They studied patterns of borrowing from one culture to another and documented these borrowings with regard to cultural habits, language (lexical borrowing), and material culture (cultural objects). Much has changed since that time. When that research began, 90 percent of the population of the world lived in rural areas. There were very few major urban centers. Currently, however, 90 percent of the population of the world live in cities. Many of these cities are huge. They are called megalopolises. They stretch over hundreds of miles. Another change over time has been the creation of a society that is culturally mediated. Film, television, magazines, and other forms of mass media make the diffusion process from one culture to another almost instantaneously. If one only knows of cultural patterns of one film industry such as the United States, then what is happening in China remains unknown and the process of diffusion and adaptation goes unnoticed. However, if one has multilingual and multicultural experiences, then these processes became more obvious. The case in point is the Chinese film *Finding Mr. Right*. After watching this film, one is able to see that major scenes were borrowed and readapted for the Chinese film audience. Hence, in modern society, when one borrows a concept, it is kept and modified for local cultural needs.

5. Conclusion

Cinematic cultural diffusion is the spread of culture through the means of film adaptation, including aspects such as a fusion of some typical social phenomenon or specific cultural elements. Films are always advancing with the times and show people’s new attitudes towards love, life or marriage, and these points of view are more aligned with the lifestyle and thinking mode in contemporary reality. Therefore, the study of how a Chinese film borrows from the Hollywood film industry could provide a better understanding of the cultural diffusion process. The adaptation of these elements into Chinese films not only presents how Chinese people view American culture, but also offers insight into transnational or cross-cultural identity building.

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Author Note

Ning Wang is Lecturer of Foreign Languages Department in Harbin Engineering University. As a language teacher and a member of International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, she has published widely in the area of intercultural communication and teaching. Her main publications: *On Interpersonal Meaning of Deontic Modality in the Pragmatics Identity Construction* (Tsinghua University Press, 2015), *An Enquiry into Cultivating Intercultural Nonverbal Communicative Competence in College English Teaching* (Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2012), *Comparison and Application in Advertising between Western Countries and China*. (China Media Research, 2007) etc.