



Research on the Other Narrative in Nonverbal Symbols of Animated Films from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract— In the era of the new media era, the nonverbal symbolic communication in animated films has become widely popular in contemporary social media, and its role is increasing indispensable. In intercultural communication, the traditional barriers of linguistic communication are gradually being dissolved by communication through language symbols carried out within the mobile internet framework, bringing about great changes in intercultural communication methods. Based on the relevant theories of intercultural communication, this paper focuses on the Otherness Narrative of nonverbal symbol as the research object, and then analyzes the dilemmas of the symbolic misinterpretation and stereotypes in intercultural communication. The aim is to provide theoretical reference for enhancing the effectiveness of intercultural communication in animated films.

Keywords— *animated films, cultural decoding, intercultural communication, non-verbal symbols, the Other Narrative.*



I. INTRODUCTION

As for the rapid globalization, intercultural communication is necessary for cultural communication and interaction. As a unique form of cultural art, animated films can spread widely throughout the world with their rich imagination, vivid character images, and exciting story narratives, which are not limited by language or geography, thus becoming an important medium for intercultural communication.

In addition to the transmission of animated films with the help of linguistic symbols, an important part plays non-linguistic signs, which are significant for transcending cultural barriers and forming a view of the Cultural Other. Different countries and regions have their own

characteristics when using nonverbal symbols in animated films, and the portrayal of other cultures is naturally influenced by their own culture. This influence may cause the accurate presentation and understanding of the Cultural Other, or it may generate misunderstanding and prejudice.

This study intends to analyze the types, functions, and narrative strategies of nonverbal symbols in animated films, explaining how they achieve the representation, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the Cultural Other in intercultural communication. The findings are expected to provide a theoretical basis for improving the effectiveness of intercultural communication in animated films.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Interpretation of Core Concepts

2.1.1 Intercultural Communication

Research on intercultural communication emerged in the United States in the mid-1950s. American anthropologist Edward T. Hall first proposed the concept of intercultural communication in his book *The Silent Language*. Hall (1959, p. 206) believed that communication primarily conveys information through contextual cues and nonverbal symbols, emphasizing the role of culture implicit in time, space, and nonverbal behaviors. After the 1970s, with the expansion of the global media industry and transnational cultural trade, the research perspective expanded to the circulation of media and cultural products between countries and on a global scale, and the focus shifted to theoretical construction and cultural pattern analysis. In 1980, Geert Hofstede (1983) proposed the Cultural Dimensions Theory, which was later supplemented to six dimensions, becoming a classic framework for intercultural comparative research. In 1976, Hall (1976) further distinguished between "high-context culture" and "low-context culture", providing significant support for the study of communication models. In high-context cultures, the information is usually transmitted via nonverbal symbols, context, and history, while in low-context cultures, it is a more direct and clear verbal expression. This kind of theoretical division gives an important reference and theoretical basis to understand and compare the communication models in different cultural backgrounds, which is still being used as a research method in intercultural communication. Stella Ting-Toomey's (2003) Face-Negotiation Theory is about the differences in maintaining Face among different cultures in conflicts. Western cultures express their opinions directly and clearly and try to solve conflicts by themselves. In contrast, East Asian cultures value indirectness and saving face more, and they would usually choose to avoid hurting others' identities. Stuart Hall (1997) further deepened the understanding of cultural identity in his research, proposing that cultural identity is not fixed or only one kind, but fluid and multi-layered. Individuals constantly shape and adjust themselves while interacting with different kinds of culture.

2.1.2 The Other Narrative

The Other Narrative is a narrative strategy that observes, interprets, and exhibits foreign cultures from the perspective of otherness, with local culture as the reference. In the article *The Other Narrative in Cultural Differences*, the connotation of the Other Narrative is thoroughly explored, pointing out that it means treating the counterpart's culture as the object of narration in intercultural communication, and presenting that culture through understanding, interpreting, and narrating. The core of this narrative strategy lies in breaking cultural centralism and abandoning the self-centered cultural perspective in order to attempt to understand and interpret different cultures from the perspective of others. Animated films display the Other Narrative when the creators depict and present the cultures of other countries or ethnic groups through their own culture. This presentation may not be based on in-depth research and understanding of other cultures, and their own cultural prejudices may influence it.

III. THE OTHER NARRATIVE DIMENSION OF NONVERBAL SYMBOLS IN ANIMATED FILMS

3.1 Visual Symbols: The Concrete Representation of Cultural Other

3.1.1 Cultural Encoding and Decoding of Color Symbols

Semiotician Professor Zhao Yiheng (2013) pointed out that the essence of a symbol is to transmit some sort of meaning by means of a sort of tool. Visual symbols also possess this characteristic. Judging whether an element is a visual symbol depends on whether it transmits information through visual channels. Simply put, anything people can see and understand, like words, images, or colors combined, is called a visual symbol. Color plays an extremely important role in animated films. Not only creates atmosphere and express emotions, but it also has a lot of cultural connotations, serving as an important means to concretely represent the Cultural Other. People have different perceptions and symbolic meanings for the same colors in different cultures, and these differences can be very obvious in the use of color in animated films.

In Eastern culture, red is usually regarded as a symbol of joy, auspiciousness and prosperity, and it has been fully

demonstrated in many animated films. In *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the Chinese animated film, Sun Wukong's costume is mainly red. The red cloak billows in the wind, not only highlighting Sun Wukong's bravery and powerful aura but also conveying the fondness and reverence for red in traditional Chinese culture. In Western culture, however, red is often associated with concepts such as danger, warning and passion. In Disney's animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the Queen's red cape contrasts sharply with her black robe. The red cape symbolizes the Queen's evil, jealousy and intense possessiveness, bringing a strong visual impact and psychological hint to the audience. This different interpretation of red reflects the differences in values, aesthetics and other aspects between Eastern and Western cultures.

Through ingenious color configuration, animated films construct unique scenes of Cultural Other, enabling audiences to initially understand and perceive foreign cultures through visual perception. *Coco* is set against the backdrop of Mexico's Day of the Dead, using a lot of colors characteristic of traditional Mexican culture, such as orange marigolds and the blue Land of the Dead. The endless orange marigolds in the film not only create a strong festive atmosphere, but also concretely present Mexicans' unique views on life and death to the audience. The blue Land of the Dead gives a sense of mystery and depth, forming a sharp contrast with the real world, and further reinforcing the film's expression of the Mexican perspective on life and death. In the process of watching the film, the audience seems to be in a Mexican cultural context through these color symbols, gaining a more intuitive understanding of its traditional culture and values.

3.1.2 Intercultural Translation of Symbolic Metaphors

In addition to color symbols, visual symbols such as totems, costumes and architecture in animated films also carry rich cultural connotations. They convey the deep meaning of Cultural Other to the audience through symbolic metaphors. In the process of intercultural communication, these symbols need to be skillfully translated to adapt to the understanding and acceptance of audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Totem culture encompasses various cultural phenomena derived from totemic concepts (Zhang, 2023). The *Kung Fu*

Panda film series is a classic example of intercultural translation of symbolic metaphors. In the films, the panda Po, as the protagonist, is himself an important symbol of Chinese culture. The panda, China's national treasure, represents the country's unique biological resources and cultural characteristics. Through the careful portrayal of the panda image, the films vividly showcase its cute, kind and brave personality traits, enabling global audiences to have a deeper understanding of the values such as friendliness and resilience in Chinese culture.

The films also integrate a wealth of traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as Chinese-style gardens and Peking Opera makeups. The exquisite layout of Chinese-style gardens, as well as the rich colors and patterns of Peking Opera makeups, have become important symbols to present Chinese culture in the film. These symbols have become more vivid and interesting through exaggerated and anthropomorphic treatments, making them easier to accept and understand by global audiences. This successfully completes the process of demystification of Cultural Other.

3.2 Auditory Symbols: Intercultural Bridge for Emotional Resonance

3.2.1 Cultural Identification and Emotional Transmission of Musical Symbols

At the auditory level, by reducing dialogue lines and weakening linguistic symbols with strong cultural identification, there is a greater reliance on nonverbal elements such as music, sound effects, expressions and actions to transmit emotions and information (Huang, 2025). As an important auditory symbol, music in animated films can directly arouse the audience's emotional association with the Cultural Other. The musical styles and characteristic musical instruments from different regions constitute the cultural labels of musical symbols, becoming an important means for animated films to display Cultural Other.

In *Coco*, traditional Mexican musical instruments like guitars and trumpets run throughout the film, adding a rich Mexican flavor. The musical melodies in the film incorporate elements of traditional Mexican music, such as Latin rhythms and folk melodies. These melodies not only possess strong regional characteristics, but also can touch the audience's emotions and arouse resonance. The theme

song *Remember Me* in the film expresses the longing for departed loved ones with its affectionate melody and touching lyrics. This emotion is universal to human audiences from any cultural background, who can be moved by the sentiment conveyed by the song.

Beyond characteristic instruments and traditional melodies, the animated film *The Red Turtle* only relies on environmental sound effects and a minimalist soundtrack to create an emotional atmosphere, avoiding language barriers and achieving Intercultural emotional transmission. The film features almost no dialogue. Instead, it creates an emotional atmosphere of loneliness, tranquility, and hope through environmental sound effects such as the sound of waves, bird songs and wind, along with a minimalist soundtrack. When watching the film, the audience does not need to rely on language to perceive the emotional changes within the protagonist through these auditory symbols and resonate emotionally with the characters in the film. This dialogue-free expression breaks down the language barrier, allowing the film to transcend intercultural boundaries.

3.2.2 Narrative Tension of Silence and Pauses

As a special auditory symbol, silence has a universal emotional expression function in intercultural contexts. It can leave more thinking space for the audience, enhance intercultural emotional resonance while allowing personalized interpretation. In the Japanese animated film *5 Centimeters per Second*, moments of silence and pauses appear frequently. These instances not only create a faint atmosphere of sadness and melancholy, but also invite audiences to ponder deeply on themes such as love, growth, and life. When watching the film, audiences from different cultural backgrounds may have different understandings and perceptions of these scenes of silence and pause due to their own life experiences and cultural differences. Yet, each can find elements that resonate with their own emotions within them, thereby achieving intercultural emotional exchange and resonance.

IV. DILEMMAS AND OPTIMIZATION PATHS OF THE OTHER NARRATIVE

4.1 Symbol Misinterpretation and Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication

According to intercultural communication theory, the use of cultural symbols should take into account the

cultural background and cognitive habits of the audience to reduce the phenomenon of Cultural Discount (Hall, 2015). The cultural context dependence of nonverbal symbols in animated films may lead to misinterpretation, which in turn triggers the generation of stereotypes. When depicting Eastern culture, Western animated films often engage in a symbolic construction of Eastern mysticism. In Disney's animated film *Mulan*, the film employs Eastern cultural elements such as feng shui and talismans to portray the mysterious aspects of Eastern culture. Feng shui and talismans carry rich philosophical and religious meanings within Eastern culture, but in the film, they are more used as a visual spectacle to attract the audience's attention. This approach is likely to strengthen Western audiences' stereotypes of Eastern culture, simply reductively framing it as mysterious, ancient and incomprehensible. This symbolic construction from an Orientalist perspective not only fails to accurately convey the essence of Eastern culture but may also deepen misunderstandings and estrangement between different cultures. Once formed, stereotypes will have a profound impact on the audience's cognition, hindering genuine communication and understanding between different cultures.

4.2 Narrative Strategies for Balancing Cultural Specificity and Universality

4.2.1 In-Depth Cultural Decoding

In order to avoid symbol misinterpretation and stereotypes, creators of animated films need to conduct in-depth research on the symbolic connotations of the Cultural Other. This involves thorough cultural decoding rather than superficially appropriating cultural elements. When the slang, historical allusions, or social customs included in a work exceed the cognitive scope of audiences from different cultures, its artistic and commercial value continuously diminishes during the dissemination process (Chen, 2025, p53). Only by accurately understanding and grasping the core values and deeper meanings of Cultural Other can they skillfully integrate into the narrative of animated films, ensuring that cultural symbols truly serve the underlying narrative logic.

The Chinese animated film *Big Fish & Begonia* is a model of cultural decoding. Inspired by the traditional Chinese cultural saying "When the spring fades and autumn arrives, the begonia blooms", the film integrates a

large number of traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as Fujian Tulou, the philosophical ideas from Zhuangzi's *A Happy Excursion*, and mythical beasts from *Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas*. Through in-depth excavation and ingenious application of these cultural elements, the film shows the unique understanding of nature, life and love in traditional Chinese culture. Like Fujian Tulou, a typical form of traditional Chinese architecture, which is both the living space for the characters in the film and a symbol of the importance of family and reunion in traditional Chinese culture. Zhuangzi's *A Happy Excursion Philosophy* runs throughout the whole movie, which is to pursue freedom and transcendence in traditional Chinese culture. Mythical beasts from *Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas*, like dragons, phoenixes and Kunpeng, which are designed uniquely and have mysterious power, adding a lot of mythical elements. This profound decryption and organic integration of cultural elements creates a fictitious realm filled with the cultural charm of traditional Chinese culture by *Big Fish & Begonia*. It lets the viewers experience the full extent of the traditional Chinese cultural legacy as they enjoy the film.

4.2.2 Anchoring Universal Emotions

Apart from cultural decoding that goes deep into the core of culture, animated films can form an emotional bond with people around the world despite different cultures by anchoring to emotions that are universally common. Empathy communication is the process by which individuals understand and resonate with each other's emotions and feelings (Zhi, 2024, p.51). This kind of communication is not restricted to a particular culture, place, or language so that people coming from various cultures can understand it. Animated films make universal emotions into specific visual and audio images through non-verbal symbols, so as to cause emotional resonance among the audience.

Japanese animation films such as *Spirited Away* that touches inner world of the people all around the world about growing up, having courage, being human. In the movie, her eyes full of determination and bravery when encountering the unknown terror and sincere feelings for Haku and No-face give audience their pains and joys of growing up and the good and evil of humankind. Many

nonverbal symbols in the movie are about growth. Take for example the fantasy scene design of the mysterious world, it not only contains a lot of imagination, but also forms a tense and mysterious atmosphere, corresponding to Chihiro's adventurous journey. Use music, either melodious or suspenseful, according to the story and the character's emotions change, which enhances the film's emotions. The meticulous design of character movements vividly shows Chihiro's psychological evolution, from initial timidity and hesitation to later bravery and resilience, expressed through her body language and facial expressions. Through the deliberate and skillful use of these nonverbal symbols, *Spirited Away* successfully conveys the universal emotion of growth to global audiences. As viewers immerse themselves in the film, they find their own shadows in Chihiro's experience.

V. CONCLUSION

In the future, intercultural dissemination of animated films should be centered around non-verbal symbols, breaking free from cultural centrism biases and the Other Narrative to move from a one-way presentation approach to a two-way mutual learning model. Creators need to deeply explore the true meaning behind the cultures that are different from our own and use precise symbolic language to express their core values and meanings, skillfully utilizing the power of cross-cultural communication. Nonverbal symbols should become emotional bridges, helping people from different countries to appreciate the charm of foreign culture and to discover common spiritual pursuits. In this way, animation films will only be able to break away from the shackles of cultural discount and become an important force in the process of cultural exchange, helping to dissolve cultural barriers. Amid the waves of intercultural communication, they could promote a cultural community that's founded on mutual comprehension and respect so that different civilizations may have harmonious interaction and mutual appreciation within the interplay of light and shadow.

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