

A Study on Communication Advantages from the Perspective of Geo-cultural Proximity: A Case Study of Hayao Miyazaki's Animations in East Asia

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Abstract—This paper focuses on the unique communication advantages of Hayao Miyazaki's animated films within the East Asian cultural sphere. In the context of globalization, although Hollywood animation currently dominates the market, the cultural resonance evoked by Miyazaki's works in East Asia is particularly profound. Based on Joseph Straubach's theory of "cultural proximity," this paper employs textual and comparative analysis to interpret how Miyazaki's animations mitigate "cultural discount" through geographical and cultural similarities, examining three dimensions: values (Confucian ethics and Shinto naturalism), aesthetic style (mono no aware and negative space), and narrative logic (non-binary opposition). This study finds that the collectivist ideology and the ecological view of harmony between humanity and nature embedded in Miyazaki's works not only awaken the collective cultural memory of East Asian audiences but also offer implications for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese animation in exploring universally recognized local values.

Keywords—Hayao Miyazaki, animated films, cultural proximity, East Asian cultural sphere

I. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of Hollywood's cultural industry dominating the global market, Western animation, represented by Disney and Pixar, has captured the global market with its universal narrative of "heroic journeys." However, in Japan and neighboring East Asian countries, the works of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli have demonstrated strong resilience and a long-tail effect. This phenomenon cannot be explained solely by production techniques, but rather by the accumulation of cultural genes. Straubach's theory of "cultural proximity" posits that audiences tend to choose media products that are closer to themselves in terms of language, culture, and values. This paper aims to explore whether geographical and cultural proximity constitutes a core barrier to the dissemination of Miyazaki's animation in East Asia. If so, how can this proximity be achieved through specific textual strategies? Theoretically, this paper attempts to extend the theory of cultural proximity from television program research to the field of animated films; practically, by analyzing the East Asian cultural elements contained in Hayao Miyazaki's works, this paper provides a practical reference for Chinese animation to utilize the commonalities of East Asian culture in its "going global" efforts. The research methods used in this paper include: textual analysis, comparative analysis, and case study.

II. THE PRESENTATION OF EAST ASIAN CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS IN HAYAO MIYAZAKI'S ANIMATIONS

The cross-cultural communication advantage of Hayao Miyazaki's animations is rooted in the deep cultural genes shared with the East Asian cultural sphere within its texts. It is not simply an export of Japanese culture, but a creative integration and sublimation of pan-East Asian cultural resources, constructing a "cultural intimacy space" that is both familiar and imaginative for East Asian audiences.

Unlike the individualistic growth history emphasized in the West, Miyazaki's works focus more on "social return." Taking *Spirited Away* as an example, Chihiro does not achieve growth by overthrowing authority, but gains recognition through hard work, integration into the collective, and taking responsibility. This profoundly echoes the deep psychological structure of Confucianism, which emphasizes the realization of individual value in the collective.

From an ecological perspective, his works completely abandon the binary oppositional narrative of Western anthropocentrism [1]. The complex entanglement of interests between humans, nature, and the Kirin in *Princess Mononoke* embodies the essence of East Asian Taoism's "unity of heaven and man" and Japanese Shintoism's "animism" [2, 3], conveying the dialectical relationship of interdependence among all things. Furthermore, the delicate portrayal of family ethics in the works (such as the loyalty in **Ponyo** [4, 5] and the kinship in **My Neighbor Totoro**) reflects "filial piety" and "responsibility," giving the films a natural emotional resonance among East Asian audiences who value the foundation of family.

Miyazaki Hayao's visual language is full of the unique charm of Eastern aesthetics. He is adept at capturing the fleeting beauty and loneliness of nature, which is both a visualization of the Japanese spirit of "mono no aware" and similar to the "lament for spring and autumn" in classical Chinese literature. Meanwhile, the sacred realms inhabited by spirits in his films create a profound, understated yūgen aesthetic, inviting the audience to engage in philosophical reflection.

III. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGIES OF MIYAZAKI HAYAO'S ANIMATIONS AND MAINSTREAM WESTERN ANIMATION

To reveal the East Asian cultural characteristics of Hayao Miyazaki's animations, this section systematically compares them with mainstream Western animation represented by Disney and Pixar. As the dominant force in the global

animation market, mainstream Western animation often relies on the highly mature Hollywood industrial system, and its narrative core focuses on universal individualistic values and heroic growth paths. This comparison not only highlights divergences in artistic style but also profoundly uncovers the fundamental disparities in underlying cultural logics.

A. Value Expression: Collectivism vs. Individual Heroism

In terms of expressing core values, the differences between the two are clear. Western animation, such as *The Lion King*, perfectly interprets the classic “hero’s journey” model. The protagonist Simba is born with royal blood, and his growth path is a typical “leaving home - test - return - restoration”. Its core conflict is structured around binary opposition, and he ultimately realizes his personal value and heroism by defeating evil and reclaiming the throne. This narrative emphasizes that individual will can and should overcome the environment and realize its own mission.

On the contrary, Miyazaki Hayao’s works reflect the harmonious philosophy of East Asian collectivism. Taking *Spirited Away* as an example, Chihiro is not the “chosen one”, but an ordinary and timid girl. Her goal after entering the spirit world is not to conquer or overthrow Yubaba’s rule, but to integrate into the “bathhouse” micro-society by abiding by the rules, working hard [6], and treating people kindly [7], and save her parents and herself by repairing the unbalanced relationships in it. Her victory is not to overthrow the system, but to achieve “reconciliation” within the established social framework. This emphasis on “relationship repair” and “social harmony” stands in stark contrast to Western advocacy of “individual triumph”.

B. Narrative Mode: Prose-like Allegory and Dramatic Conflict

In terms of narrative structure, Hollywood animation typically adheres strictly to a three-act dramatic structure: the first act establishes conflict, the second intensifies the conflict and confrontation, and the third culminates in a climactic showdown and resolution. Its pacing is tight, conflicts are prominent, and the strong external drama drives the audience’s emotional engagement.

Miyazaki Hayao’s narrative, however, is closer to a prose-like allegory. His plot progression is often leisurely, even possessing characteristics of prose and stream of consciousness. It doesn’t rely on a tightly interlocking logical chain, but focuses on creating atmosphere, expressing emotions, and conveying philosophical thoughts. Even in his more narratively driven *My Neighbor Totoro*, the main storyline revolves around the daily lives of Mei and Satsuki in the countryside and their longing for their mother. The magical encounter with Totoro serves to highlight the innocence of childhood and the warmth of imagination. This “loose in form but cohesive in spirit” model aligns more closely with the East Asian literary and artistic tradition of “introduction, development, climax, and conclusion,” emphasizing the creation of atmosphere and inner experience. It seeks a lingering aftertaste and reflection after watching the film, rather than immediate gratification.

C. Character Development: The Virtues of Ordinary People and the Mission of the Chosen One

Western animated protagonists are often endowed with

extraordinary bloodlines or destinies, and their abilities and missions are innate. Queen Elsa in *Frozen* has a magical ability that is a royal curse, and her entire story revolves around how to control and accept this “talent.” Bloodline and magic are the core capital that drives the plot.

Miyazaki Hayao, on the other hand, is keen to create ordinary or even weak protagonists. Chihiro in *Spirited Away* is just an ordinary, crying elementary school student at the beginning, without any superpowers; Sophie in *Howl’s Moving Castle* is also an ordinary hat maker, and even becomes an old woman due to a curse [8, 9]. Their source of power is not divine power or bloodline, but the daily virtues advocated by Confucian culture. Their growth trajectory is the process of an ordinary person influencing others and repairing the world by practicing good virtues. This kind of character creation greatly enhances the sense of identification of East Asian audiences. It conveys the idea that heroes are not unattainable, and that virtue and strength reside in the everyday words and deeds of ordinary people.

D. Aesthetic Pursuit: Subtlety and Exaggeration

In terms of character performance, Western animation follows the principle of “compression and stretching,” with characters displaying rich and exaggerated expressions, large body movements, and outward and direct emotions.

Miyazaki Hayao’s animation, on the other hand, pursues subtle and restrained emotional expression, which is consistent with the expression habits of East Asians. It focuses on subtle micro-expressions and deep eye movements to convey complex inner activities [10]. For example, in *Porco Rosso*, the emotional bond between Porco Rosso and Fio is rarely conveyed through direct dialogue or exaggerated gestures, but through exchanged glances and hesitant silences against the picturesque Adriatic scenery [11].

In terms of visual style, Western animation features high color saturation and strong contrast to pursue striking visual impact; East Asian animation, by contrast, uses soft tones and delicate lighting, striving to reproduce natural light and shadow and the negative space of Eastern painting. This difference in aesthetics, one outward and one inward, reflects the fundamental difference in expression between low-context and high-context cultures [12].

E. Attitudes towards nature and technology: reverence and criticism, conquest and utilization

The attitudes of different parties toward nature and technology constitute the core difference in their worldviews. Western science fiction animation often exhibits technological optimism. For example, in *Big Hero 6*, high-tech armor is not only a weapon but also a tool for saving the city and achieving justice. Technology is essentially portrayed as an extension of human capacity and a means of resolving problems.

Hayao Miyazaki, on the other hand, has held a profound reflective and critical attitude toward industrial civilization and technological rationality since the beginning of his creative work [13]. *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* depicts a desolate post-apocalyptic scene after the destruction of technological civilization, while *Princess Mononoke* directly depicts the irreconcilable tragic conflict between human development (Iron Town) and the gods of nature (Girls and Mountain Dogs). His works reveal a nostalgia for

pre-modern pastoral life and a deep concern for the destruction of ecological balance by industrial expansion. This critical spirit resonated deeply with East Asian societies also grappling with environmental pressures and anxieties of social transformation stemming from rapid economic development [14, 15].

IV. CASE ANALYSIS AND VERIFICATION OF COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

A. Core Case Study: An Interpretation of the East Asian Cultural Core of "Spirited Away"

Spirited Away is not only Miyazaki Hayao's artistic pinnacle, but also a perfect example of interpreting East Asian "cultural proximity". The film cleverly blends the anxieties of modern society with the redemption of Eastern tradition. The setting of "forgetting one's true name means losing oneself" accurately metaphorically represents the identity loss and alienation crisis faced by East Asian individuals in the process of rapid modernization. In the "Bathhouse", a micro-society full of hierarchy, Chihiro did not choose the Western tradition of resistance and subversion, but instead integrated into the collective and repaired the imbalance through labor and rules. In the end, Chihiro relies on diligence, friendship, and the reawakening of her true name and memories of home to achieve a spiritual return beyond material pursuits, embodying profound Eastern wisdom and offering East Asian audiences trapped in modernity a cultural mirror for self-reflection [16, 17].

B. Market Performance

Market data is the most direct and objective reflection of a dissemination advantage. The long-term box office appeal and outstanding reputation of Miyazaki Hayao's films in East Asia powerfully demonstrate the competitive advantage brought about by cultural proximity.

Compared to Hollywood animations of the same period or type, this advantage based on cultural affinity is even more pronounced. For example, in the Chinese market, many well-made Hollywood animations, such as *Frozen 2*, while achieving short-term commercial success, often see their cultural popularity fade after their theatrical run. Miyazaki Hayao's films, however, exhibit a strong long-tail effect, consistently achieving high viewership on streaming platforms and continuously sparking social discussion. While attaining global recognition, Hayao Miyazaki's films have cultivated deeper and more enduring emotional resonance within the culturally proximate East Asian region.

V. CONCLUSION

This study, through systematic argumentation, reveals that geographical and cultural similarity is the core driving force behind Miyazaki Hayao's animation achieving cross-cultural communication advantages in East Asia. His works deeply resonate with the collectivist values and Confucian ethics of East Asian society, skillfully integrate Eastern aesthetics, and adopt a prose-style allegorical narrative system that differs from Hollywood's. By invoking the shared historical memories and aesthetic tastes of East Asian audiences, Miyazaki Hayao successfully constructed a pan-East Asian "imagined community" and "cultural intimacy space". This

not only greatly weakens the "cultural discount" effect in cross-cultural communication but also deepens Straubach's theory of cultural proximity at the practical level, powerfully demonstrating that "local" knowledge deeply rooted in regional soil is precisely a powerful force for breaking through the barriers of global cultural homogenization. Miyazaki Hayao's successful practice provides a valuable real-world reference for Chinese animation. In the process of Chinese animation going global, we should abandon the simple accumulation of superficial cultural symbols and instead delve into the spirit of traditional philosophy and aesthetics, integrate it with the common issues of modern society, and realize the modernization and universalization of local culture. In terms of specific dissemination strategies, we can take the East Asian cultural circle as the breakthrough point, make full use of the shared cultural resources formed in history to trigger regional resonance, and then gradually radiate to the global market. Although this study has obtained certain regularities, there are still some limitations. On the one hand, the case analysis focuses on the most influential core representative works such as Spirited Away and Princess Mononoke, and pays insufficient attention to the early or relatively unpopular works of Studio Ghibli. Future research can further test the universality of the relevant conclusions by expanding the scope of text analysis. On the other hand, due to objective constraints, the analysis of the audience's acceptance mechanism in this study mainly relies on publicly available secondary data (e.g., film reviews and ratings) but has not conducted large-scale first-hand questionnaire surveys or in-depth interviews. If empirical research methods can be introduced in the future to directly collect the real reception data of audiences in different regions of East Asia, it will be possible to more accurately and three-dimensionally measure the actual effect and deep mechanism of cultural proximity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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