

Cultural Identity and Self-Identity in “Turning Red”

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Abstract: Hollywood animated films are highly proficient in integrating cultural values into films and achieving cross-cultural communication subtly through films. This paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the animated film “Turning Red” and examines the presentation and relationship between cultural identity and self-identity in this film. Through the analysis of Chinese and Western cultural elements and characters’ self-identity in this movie, it explores its positive significance and limitations, providing a new perspective for understanding animated films in terms of cultural expression and the presentation of psychological themes, and also puts forward prospects for relevant research and creation.

Keywords: “Turning Red”; Cultural Identity; Self-Identity; Animated Film; Family Education

1. Introduction

In the realm of contemporary animated films, “Turning Red” (2022) has drawn widespread attention due to its unique themes and expressive techniques. This work directed by Domee Shi, a Chinese-American female director under Pixar Animation Studios, is not merely a simple animated film on the theme of adolescent growth, but also a vivid illustration of the two profound themes of cultural identity and self-identity. This paper aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of “Turning Red” to answer questions such as how cultural identity is specifically manifested in the film, how self-identity is reflected in the development of characters, and how the two influence each other.

2. Analysis on the Presentation of Cultural Identity in “Turning Red”

2.1 Application of Cultural Elements

“Turning Red” is replete with rich cultural elements. From the perspective of Chinese culture, the film presents typical Chinese family values, such as the authority of the elders, the close bonds among family members, and the inheritance of traditional virtues. Scenes like Meimei offering tea to the elders and performing ancestral sacrifices, which embody traditional filial piety, as well as the dominant role of the elders’ opinions in family decisions, all profoundly reflect the influence of traditional Chinese family culture.^[1] In terms of customs, elements such as the ancestral hall sacrifice ceremony and traditional dragon and lion dances that appear in the film immerse the audience in a thick Chinese cultural atmosphere.

Robin Cohen, when discussing global diaspora, once summarized the behavioral characteristics of diaspora populations who tend to maintain collective memories and cherish the cultural history of their homeland, and emphasized that this kind of homesickness is often embodied in certain spatial imaginings.^[2] Although contemporary China itself has moved beyond the era of ancestral halls, the Li Family Ancestral Hall still exists in Canada, forming a miniature cultural “heterotopia”.

2.2 Integration and Conflict of Multiculturalism

In the context of cross-culturalism, the creation of film works involves a re-understanding and re-narration of other cultures, aiming to achieve the ideal effect of cultural transcendence through the method of cultural hybridization.^[3] The scenes of cultural integration in the film vividly demonstrate the protagonist’s life experiences in two cultural environments. Meimei actively participates in school activities at school while also following the traditional Chinese lifestyle at home. She endeavors to find a balance between the two cultures. For example, she shares the modern knowledge and concepts she has learned at school with her family, and at the same time, she experiences the inheritance of culture in traditional family activities such as ancestor worship and cleaning the ancestral hall. American scholar David Powell believes that as a powerful cross-cultural medium, film not only needs to express its own national

culture but also absorb a broader range of human civilizations and share the achievements of other cultures.^[4]

However, cultural conflicts are inevitable. There are differences in values between Meimei and her parents. Her parents' expectations for her are more influenced by traditional Chinese concepts. They hope that she will remain well-behaved, obedient, and focus on her studies and family honor. While growing up in the Canadian environment, Meimei begins to have her own ideas and pursuits, such as her love for idols and her longing for freedom. This conflict is metaphorically reflected in the plot where Meimei turns into a panda. American psychologist and screenwriter William Indick believes that films often use archetypal metaphors and cultural symbols to shape the main characters and convey creative concepts.^[5] The panda symbolizes the repressed self deep within Meimei, and this repression partly stems from the confusion about identity under cultural conflict.

3. An Analysis of the Demonstration of Self-Identity in “Turning Red”

3.1 The Self-Identity Journey of the Protagonist

British social theorist Anthony Giddens pointed out that self-identity is the self formed by an individual based on personal experiences and is the self in the sense of reflexive understanding. Self-identity is not simply given, that is, as a result of the continuity of an individual's action system, but rather something that must be routinely created and maintained in an individual's reflexive activities.^[6]

In the film, the protagonist Meimei experiences a journey of self-identity. At first, when she discovers that she has turned into a panda, she feels extremely confused and frightened. This change is not only physical but also has an impact on her psychological self-perception. At this stage, she begins to doubt her own identity and doesn't know who she really is.

As the plot unfolds, Meimei gradually discovers, in her interactions with friends, that the panda form also has its own cuteness and uniqueness. She starts to accept this side of herself and uses the panda form to fulfill her wishes, such as earning tickets for the concert. This process is an important turning point in her self-identity. She begins to explore a more diverse and authentic self and gradually grows into a confident and independent girl who is finally able to show her true self, including her panda form, in front of everyone.

3.2 The Role of Supporting Characters in Self-Identity

The supporting characters play an important role in Meimei's process of self-identity. Meimei's friends show surprise at her panda form, but more importantly, they display acceptance and affection. Their attitudes give Meimei the courage to realize that being different doesn't necessarily mean something bad. During the development of the plot, her parents, who initially held a negative attitude, also start to understand Meimei in the end. This transformation plays a crucial role in Meimei's complete self-identity. On the basis of gaining family recognition, she accepts all aspects of herself more firmly.

4. The Interactive Relationship between Cultural Identity and Self-Identity in “Turning Red”

4.1 The Influence of Cultural Identity on Self-Identity

As a Chinese-Canadian, the protagonist Meimei's cultural identity is a blend of Chinese and Western cultures. The family values and traditional virtues of Chinese culture have enabled her to develop qualities such as kindness and filial piety, yet they have also restricted her exploration of herself to some extent. Meanwhile, the spirit of freedom and inclusiveness in Canadian culture has inspired her to pursue individuality. The conflicts and integration of cultural identity have promoted the development of her self-identity.

4.2 The Shaping of Cultural Identity by Self-Identity

“The red panda and this film actually represent all the chaos in the process of growing up, just like all the chaotic emotions during our growth. As we grow older, we start to change. However, society or our families always tell us to suppress and control these chaos to meet the needs of society.”

During the process of self-identity, Meimei's understanding of her own cultural identity is constantly changing. When she starts to accept her panda form and the personality associated with it, her choice of cultural identity also changes. She is no longer passively accepting the Chinese cultural concepts represented by her parents but integrating the positive elements of both Chinese and Western cultures into her own cultural identity. While identifying with her own uniqueness, she also reinterprets the meaning of her identity as a Chinese-Canadian.

5. Critical Thinking on the Presentation of Cultural Identity and Self-Identity in “Turning Red”

5.1 Positive Significance

“Turning Red” has numerous innovative aspects in presenting cultural identity and self-identity. Firstly, through the unique metaphorical symbol of the red panda, the film concretizes the abstract issues of cultural identity and self-identity. In this movie, the panda, as an iconic symbol of Chinese culture, is endowed with new meanings. It not only represents traditional Chinese culture but also symbolizes the self deep within Meimei. The application of this metaphor makes it easier for the audience to understand complex themes.

Secondly, the film is extremely delicate in its emotional portrayal, enabling the audience to deeply feel the protagonist’s confusion, struggle, and joy during the process of cultural conflict and self-identity. This emotional resonance endows the film with strong appeal. Whether they are Chinese-American audiences or audiences from other cultural backgrounds, they can all find parts similar to their own growth experiences in it, thus triggering reflections on their own cultural identities and self-identities.

5.2 Limitations

However, there are also some issues in the presentation of cultural identity in the film. On the one hand, there might be a simplification of certain aspects of Chinese culture. “Stereotypes lead people to observe and understand another culture subjectively within their own cultural background, and then lose the correct understanding of the original culture. Stereotypes are part of people’s mental activities as well as part of cultural activities.” The Chinese family values in the film are somewhat stereotyped to a certain extent. It overly emphasizes the authority of the elders and the constraints of traditional customs while ignoring the more diversified and open aspects of modern Chinese family culture. Such a simplified presentation may cause misunderstandings among audiences who are not familiar with Chinese culture.

On the other hand, there may be an idealized tendency in the development of the self-identity plot in the film. Although Meimei encountered some difficulties in the process of accepting herself, on the whole, her self-identity process was relatively smooth. Especially with the support of her family and friends, she reached a reconciliation quickly. In real life, an individual’s self-identity is often a much longer, more complicated, and full of setbacks process. This way of handling in the film may lead the audience to underestimate the difficulty of self-identity.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of “Turning Red”, we can see that the film has unique features in the expression of cultural identity and self-identity. Cultural identity is demonstrated through rich cultural elements and plots of cultural conflicts and integrations, while self-identity is vividly presented in the development of the protagonist and supporting characters. The two influence and interact with each other. With its innovative metaphors and delicate emotional portrayals, the film provides a new perspective for us to understand the growth of individuals in a cross-cultural environment. However, there are also some limitations in cultural presentation and plot development.

For future animated films in dealing with the issues of cultural identity and self-identity, I put forward the following suggestions. Firstly, creators should dig deeper into cultural connotations, avoid the simplification and stereotyping of cultural elements, and display the diversity and complexity of cultures. Secondly, when depicting the process of self-identity, they should be closer to reality and truly reflect the difficulties and challenges that individuals face in this process, so that the audience can obtain more valuable insights from it. This study also has certain deficiencies. For example, the analysis of the feedback from the film’s audience is not in-depth enough. Future research can further start from the perspective of the audience and comprehensively evaluate the effects of animated films in terms of cultural dissemination and psychological influence.

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