

# Analysis of Chinese Cultural Symbols in Western Films—A Case of Kung Fu Panda

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**Abstract:** The American film series *Kung Fu Panda* has achieved great international attention and become a well-known IP. Using the theoretical framework of Semiotics, this paper analyzes Chinese cultural symbols in Western films, using *Kung Fu Panda* as an example. By decoding the visual symbols and plot symbols in this film, making suggestions for the development of Chinese cinema.

**Keywords:** Semiotics; Kung Fu Panda; Chinese Culture

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## 1. Introduction

As a global art medium, film is able to break down national boundaries and build bridges between different cultures through the interweaving of sight and sound. With the expansion of the global film market and the deepening of cultural integration, more and more Western films are exploring and introducing Chinese cultural elements to present diverse plots and capture the attention of audiences. Among them, DreamWorks Animation's production of *Kung Fu Panda*, with its exciting story and unique visual style, has successfully integrated Chinese cultural symbols to Western audiences.

## 2. Chinese Cultural Symbols in Kung Fu Panda

Ferdinand de Saussure believed that the energetic referent of a symbol provides a perceptible form that allows information to be presented in some form, while the referent indicates the particular thing or concept that the symbol represents, laying the foundation of semiotics. Symbols are perceptible objects, characters, scenes, actions and sounds in films and other elements that have a deeper meaning and symbolism. Through the perspective of semiotics, we can better understand and interpret film works.

### 2.1 Visual symbols: Rich in Chinese Cultural Elements

In *Kung Fu Panda*, a film rich in visual symbols, the unique charm of Chinese culture is presented to the audience. The film showcases magnificent Chinese landscapes, including mountains, canyons and bamboo forests, through carefully designed animated images and scenes that match. These landscapes not only symbolize the magnificent natural landscape of China, but also embody the Chinese culture's value of valuing symbiosis with nature. At the same time, the film features ancient traditional Chinese architecture, such as magnificent palaces and temples, as well as temples and traditional courtyards, showing the splendor and majesty of ancient Chinese civilization. The wonderful kung fu movements in this movie are also an important part of the visual symbols, and the characters show a variety of unique moves and movements that reflect the essence of Chinese martial arts culture. These visual symbols not only enhance the visual impact of the film, but also help the audience to feel and understand the unique charm of Chinese culture more deeply. Through these well-designed visual symbols, *Kung Fu Panda* successfully incorporates elements of Chinese culture into the story and characters, presenting the audience with a world rich in Chinese characteristics.

### 2.2 Plot symbols: Conveying Profound Traditional Chinese Values

The plot symbols in *Kung Fu Panda* provide the audience with a deeper experience of Chinese culture. First, the growth of the main character, Po, is one of the keys to the plot symbols. As a lazy and clumsy panda, Po eventually becomes a true kung fu master through perseverance and confidence in himself. This plot symbol conveys the Chinese culture of hard work, self-transcendence and growth, inspiring the audience to pursue their goals and overcome obstacles. Secondly, the master-apprentice relationship plays an important role in the movie. Po learns from his master and establishes a deep master-apprentice relationship with Master Baba. This teacher-apprentice relationship not only reflects the Chinese culture's values of respect for teachers and the dignity of teachers, but also

emphasizes the importance of knowledge transmission and learning in traditional culture. Finally, the film conveys the Chinese cultural values of inner cultivation and peace of mind through the exploration of the character's heart and balance. As a panda, Po is both powerful and in need of control over his emotions and desires. Through his struggle with his inner self and his pursuit of balance, the audience is able to reflect on the harmonious relationship between man and his inner self, and to appreciate the importance of focusing on inner cultivation and balance in traditional Chinese culture.

### **3. The role of Chinese cultural symbols in Kung Fu Panda**

Film is essentially an audio-visual art, and the multiplicity and extension of symbols can enrich the layers and expression of film. *Kung Fu Panda* is a Western film, and then, the panda symbols and kung fu symbols contained in it belong to Chinese cultural symbols, and this unique combination makes the film gain great attention.

#### **3.1 Panda + Kung Fu, Attracting Audiences with High Popularity IP**

As one of the representative symbols of Chinese culture, the panda has a wide popularity and a lovable image, symbolizing peace, friendship and cuteness. Kung Fu is internationally renowned as a unique form of Chinese martial arts. With magnificent movements and techniques, kung fu is full of power and beauty and is loved by audiences. By incorporating kung fu into the growth of the panda protagonist, *Kung Fu Panda* shows exciting battle scenes and action design, fully demonstrating the charm of Chinese kung fu culture and attracting the audience's interest and curiosity in martial arts. *Kung Fu Panda* combines the cute and gentle symbol of panda with kung fu, an element with strong visual impact and dynamics, to form a unique and attractive combination, creating unique comedic effects and action scenes, presenting unique and exciting visual effects for the audience. This combination makes the movie have a strong IP effect in the process of publicity and promotion, attracting the interest of the general audience.

#### **3.2 Shaping the Role of the Characters, Helping the Ups and Downs of the Plot**

First, Chinese cultural symbols play a key role in shaping the characters' roles. Take the main character, Po the panda, for example, he has a blend of the Chinese cultural symbols of panda and kung fu. The panda symbolizes a cute and lazy image, while kung fu represents strength, skill and courage. This combination gives Po a unique personality. The use of Chinese cultural symbols makes the characters more fleshed out and distinct, and through the interaction with their traits, presents the audience with a touching and inspiring story.

Secondly, Chinese cultural symbols play an important role in helping the plot to fall. This movie is filled with many classic kung fu scenes and combat challenges, and these plot elements are closely tied to the spirit and philosophy of martial arts in Chinese cultural symbols. Through the duel between Po and the evil dragon Tyrone and other battle scenes, the audience is brought into the tense and exciting plot development. The use of Chinese cultural symbols provides rich elements and momentum to the development of the plot, making the story more engaging, compact and interesting.

### **4. The inspiration of Kung Fu Panda to the development of Chinese movies**

Film works can often break through cultural barriers and reach a wider audience, which is an effective way to enhance national influence. At present, Chinese films are facing difficulties such as fierce market competition, creative originality challenges, and lack of international influence. These problems need to be solved by innovative content and groundbreaking creations.

#### **4.1 Excavating Localized Symbols and Gathering Emotional Resonance**

China has a long and rich traditional culture. Films can dig deeper into these traditional cultural elements and integrate them into the storyline, character setting and scene construction. By presenting traditional Chinese values, moral concepts and aesthetic concepts, and portraying characters and emotional conflicts, audiences can feel the commonality with their own life experiences and develop emotional resonance. In addition, China is rich in folklore and folk culture, such as mythology, folklore and traditional festivals. The movie can choose representative story elements and integrate them into the film's storyline. Through the references to folklore and folk culture, the movie can trigger the cultural memory and emotional resonance of the audience. Finally, focus on regional characteristics and ethnic culture. China has a vast territory with unique regional characteristics and ethnic culture. By accurately expressing regional characteristics and ethnic culture, the film can better arouse the audience's empathy for regional identity and cultural belonging. By

tapping into localized symbols, Chinese films can not only enhance audiences' movie-going experience, but also boost the reputation and influence of Chinese films in the international arena.

## 4.2 Exploring Cross-cultural Integration to Satisfy Audience Needs

Chinese films can meet the needs of audiences and enhance their international reach by exploring cross-cultural integration. First, collaborating with international production teams is an effective way to do so. Such collaboration can blend the creative concepts and visual styles of different cultures to create unique and appealing works. At the same time, exploring multicultural characters and story lines is also an important direction. By showcasing the characteristics and exchanges of different cultures, Chinese cinema can provide audiences with a rich and colorful experience. Moreover, it is also necessary to introduce international film elements and technologies. We should actively learn from the innovative thinking and advanced technologies of international films, and at the same time combine Chinese cultural elements with international influence to create Chinese film works with unique international influence. Finally, it actively participates in international markets and exchange platforms, such as international film festivals, to establish connections and cooperation with international audiences, producers and film practitioners, and to convey the uniqueness of Chinese culture to global audiences. Through these ways of exploring cross-cultural integration, Chinese films can meet the needs of audiences and create excellent works with both local characteristics and international connections, further promoting Chinese films on the international stage and enhancing their own influence.

## 4.3 Creating Sustainable IP, Forming Brand Identity

In contemporary times, IP traits have long-term vitality and commercial value for cross-media content management. IP communication has symbolic and inheritable characteristics and has a powerful influence. To create sustainable IP, Chinese films can create serialized content, extend story lines and character development based on the success of the film, and launch sequels, spin-offs, TV series, and animations. Serialized content builds a lasting IP universe that allows viewers to look forward to new stories and characters, adding to the brand's ongoing appeal. In addition, by launching derivative products related to the film IP, it can further expand the influence of the film and raise the audience's emotional involvement to a deeper level, forming a brand identity. A diverse selection of derivative products can meet the needs of different audiences. In addition to traditional peripheral products, such as toys, clothing and stationery, digital derivatives, such as video games and virtual reality experiences, can also be considered. Different types of derivatives are used to attract a wider audience base.

## 5. Conclusion

The Chinese cultural symbols presented in the movie *Kung Fu Panda* not only enchant the audience, but also provide valuable insights for the development of China's film industry. The global market is now increasingly competitive, and the Chinese film industry is facing unprecedented difficulties under the heavy challenges of new technologies and new media environments. For example, the withdrawal of a considerable number of film and television organizations, the loss of movie audiences, and the large slippage in the film market, especially the scarcity of head-top stream outstanding film works, have brought many uncertainties and instabilities to the future development of Chinese films. How we can restore the vitality of Chinese cinema and promote its better development is a question we urgently need to explore. In this context, Chinese films need to pay more attention to innovation, continue to explore the depth of localized symbols, expand the derivatives market, and actively embrace cross-cultural integration in order to meet the needs and expectations of audiences. It is believed that with continuous efforts and innovation, Chinese films will emerge on the international stage and make greater contributions to enhancing the power and influence of Chinese cultural communication.

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