Exploring the Success Factors of Cross-cultural Dissemination of the Film "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" in Japan: A Comparative Analysis with the Film "Kikujiro"

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the success factors of the cross-cultural dissemination of the film "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" in Japan. Firstly, it examines the social context of both "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" and "Kikujiro" when they were released in Japan around the year 2000, comparing them with the social realities in China at that time to analyze the objective reasons for their success. The study then conducts a comparative analysis of the two films, investigating the role of thematic setting, the use of cultural symbols, and the reliance on tradition in the context of successful cross-cultural dissemination.

Keywords: Cross-cultural dissemination; film; cultural intertextuality; cultural symbols

1. Cultural Intertextuality - Creating Legends with the Times

In the year 2000, a film that had received little attention in its home country of China achieved remarkable success in Japan. "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" broke the record for single-theater box office revenue, raking in 350 million Japanese yen at the renowned independent art cinema, Iwanami Theater. Around the same time, Takeshi Kitano's film "Kikujiro" also received critical acclaim and performed well at the box office, earning a nomination at the Cannes Film Festival. As these two films were released in Japan at a similar time and shared comparable social backgrounds, they hold value for a comparative analysis.

German philosopher Habermas introduced the concept of "cultural intertextuality," suggesting that culture acquires value through redefining meaning in the interaction with the "Other". Additionally, cultural intertextuality necessitates cultural dialogue, for without the "Other," it would be mere monologue. A successful film in cross-cultural dissemination must engage in dialogue and communication across cultural differences during its exportation and generate unique real-life significance in its recipients. Both films pay great attention to marginalized groups. Meanwhile, China was experiencing rapid societal changes at the turn of the century, with a restless society and burgeoning desires making it difficult for people to slow down and appreciate a slow-paced film. Both in reality and within the films themselves, there was an increasing desire among young individuals to leave the countryside, enter factories, and pursue education, much like the young shepherd boy in "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" yearned to become a journalist. Behind the leisurely pastoral scenery of "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog," one can discern the tremendous changes that had taken place in China since the 1980s and 1990s. The traditional way of communal living, where everyone knows each other and lends mutual support, is no longer suitable for the rapidly urbanizing China. In contrast, Japan, after World War II, established a new constitution and modified its civil code to abolish the autocratic patriarchal rights and the primogeniture system, emphasizing equality between husband and wife in marriage and inheritance matters. This weakening of traditional family values and the emphasis on spousal relationships led to a profound transformation and a renewal of ideas in Japanese society. Consequently, Japan's family structure and family relations entered a new phase [source: Liao Yufei, "The Influence of Changes in the Japanese Family System on Child Education and Its Implications for China - Centered on the Film 'Kikujiro'," in Proceedings of the 2013 Annual Conference of the Fujian Foreign Language Literature Association and Cross-Strait Translation Academic Seminar, pp. 314-326]. Compared to China, Japan had undergone industrialization and urbanization much earlier, which caused it to pay more attention to

the pursuit of authenticity, reconstructing order, and rethinking the roles of society, schools, and neighbors.

Furthermore, both films offer warmth and healing while subtly carrying a sense of critique. The selection of such themes inherently reflects a departure from mainstream norms and indicates dissatisfaction with the current social status quo, seeking higher aspirations. This pursuit of ideals that diverge from the collective imagination and worldly values, focusing on the spiritual well-being and self-discovery of marginalized individuals, is easily overlooked and disregarded in modern society. Therefore, the success of "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" in the Japanese film market can be regarded as an unexpected legend brought forth by the times.

2. Cultural Commonality - Theme Setting and Symbol Usage

(1) The Absent Father

In Asian societies, especially those influenced by Confucian culture, the image of the "father" shares common characteristics - compared to emotionally expressive mothers, fathers are often more reserved. In both small and large families, one parent assumes the role of the dominant figure, carrying the responsibility of support. While there have been slight improvements in the inherent roles of men and women in modern society, the shaping of individuals by economic, cultural, religious, and political systems remains deeply entrenched. In "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog," the family structure of the protagonist exemplifies the widely recognized "father working outside, mother taking care of the home" model, with the father spending years away working as a rural mailman while the mother manages the household.

Within the long-standing norms fostered by patriarchal systems in modern society, fathers play a crucial role in the education and social development of their offspring, especially their sons. Therefore, within the context of relatively unchanged conditions, the absence of paternal love can significantly impact a child's growth, particularly that of a boy. In "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog," the memories of the father and son are interspersed with the main narrative. In the son's memories, the father does bring him gifts and shows care when returning home, but compared to the mother, who remains at home, the father, as a rural mailman, is relatively absent in the son's formative years. The film uses the ancient symbol of a "bridge" to represent the father's role. In a striking montage, one end of the bridge shows the son growing up while the other end features the increasingly stooped figure of the father. This symbolism evokes notions of "separation" (Ba Bridge was located to the east of Chang'an City and was associated with parting sorrows), "connection," and "support," illustrating the personal choices fathers make amid societal expectations and the corresponding responsibilities they bear. The father constantly thinks of his loved ones at home but must repeatedly depart, and the accumulated time spent apart creates seemingly irreconcilable barriers of unspoken longing, subtle neglect, and unexpressed understanding.

In "Kikujiro," the young boy Masao's father dies in a traffic accident, leaving him to rely solely on his grandmother. Growing up in a fragmented family, Masao rarely shows his emotions. During the journey with the unreliable Kikujiro in search of his mother, Kikujiro inadvertently takes on a fatherly role, hinted at several points throughout the film. When standing at the address left by his mother, Kikujiro jokes with Masao, "Your mother is very pretty. If our relationship improves and we end up together, I might become your father." Though seemingly a whimsical remark, it reflects Kikujiro's self-awareness of his role in Masao's life.

Psychologist Carl Jung believed that a person's personality is shaped in childhood and that all adult behaviors have reasons, with childhood experiences often being the source. While the film doesn't directly depict Kikujiro's childhood, his immature, rude, and violent behavior, as well as the scenes of visiting his mother, who abandoned him multiple times after remarrying, suggest a similarity in his experiences to those of Masao. In Japan, much of the social responsibility falls on women in families, and thus, families without men often struggle to maintain stability. If the mother of either Masao or Kikujiro chose to stay and take care of them, they might receive more love. However, the

tremendous pressure of life would soon make it impossible for these women to cope, resulting in remarriage or seeking other paths. The two "children," one large and one small, appear to be on a journey to find their mothers, but in reality, it is their mutual companionship along the way that helps them find solace and project their identities as fathers and sons. Not only paternal love but also the absence of social care compels these two equally fragmented souls to continuously seek healing in their interactions. Through Kikujiro, Masao sees the potential for change, while Kikujiro finds a sense of responsibility in Masao's presence.

This theme and exploration of the eternal topic of "father" bring these two films together and contribute to their favor among Japanese audiences. "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" resonates with the Japanese middle-aged and elderly viewers, reminding them of their own hardships as a hardworking generation, often misunderstood by their children, leading to deep generation gaps. For young Japanese viewers, they can see the challenges faced by their parents' generation. Many Japanese audiences can relate to both films, finding shadows of their own intergenerational relationships between themselves and their parents.

(2) The Journey of Reconciliation

"The road" is a timeless and captivating theme in movies. Broadly speaking, road movies should include all films centered around traveling on the road. For academic research, road movies have a relatively comprehensive definition: they are "films with the basic spatial background of a road...usually themed around escape, wandering, or searching, reflecting the protagonist's doubts about life or yearning for freedom, thereby demonstrating the complex relationship between individuals and geography, and the inner world." Road movies break away from presenting the same location and lifestyle, integrating different spaces to showcase the ever-changing modern society. These movies imagine and construct a lifestyle different from the norm, providing marginalized characters with enough time and space for self-discovery – whether it's the father who spends his life traveling the mountains as a rural postman, or the jobless wanderer like Kikujiro in Japan, or even the "bike gang" who selflessly accompanies and heals young boys after being "robbed" by Kikujiro... In that era, they were all relatively insignificant or marginalized figures. Both films focus on these marginalized characters, discovering the touching aspects in them, reaching the peak of mutual healing and warmth between people.

The conclusion of their journeys often leads them to return home in a better state. In these few days on the road, the protagonists experience personal growth. The son sets off again at the end, and Kikujiro promises another summer with Masao – which also embodies the cycle and succession of the symbolic "road." In "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog," the son will eventually follow in his father's footsteps and continue to roam through the mountains. This is an imitation of his father's life. In the process of the father's final postal route, continuous flashbacks of his memories are juxtaposed with the present, signifying that the son is not only his father's successor in his work but also the continuation and reincarnation of his father's life. This journey itself is also a reenactment and summary, a formal farewell. Kikujiro and Masao's journey is a correction of their childhood. While Kikujiro appears to heal the lack of Masao's childhood, he is actually guarding his own childlike innocence, making efforts to end Masao's loneliness here, so that he won't repeat his own mistakes. The "reconciliation" here is actually the reconciliation between the protagonist and his own experiences.

This is a journey that evokes true emotions, and "reconciliation" is also a reconciliation between generations. Those touching details buried deep in time are chewed back and forth by the father and son during their monotonous walking, finally polished and shining. Therefore, it is not just a journey where the father accompanies his son on the postal route, but more of a journey of reconciliation between father and son. While walking together, the father realizes that his son has grown up during his time away, so when introducing his son to the villagers along the way, he does so with a proud tone. The son's emotions towards his father shift from resentment and confusion at the beginning to understanding and concern, gradually shouldering more responsibilities. This film touches upon the

themes of heritage and generation gap between two generations, which was a topic of great concern in Japan at that time.

(3) Ever-Present Scenery

In road movies, scenery is not only a key element in constructing the narrative setting but also a core element closely related to the content presentation. From the title of "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog," one can understand that the narrative protagonist includes both the landscape and the people and objects within it. In landscape storytelling, it often reflects the region's care for culture, local sentiments, and national identity, presenting abstract concepts in tangible forms. In traditional Chinese literature, various landscapes can be abstracted as "images" containing emotions, allowing people to connect emotionally with the scenery. Compared to this, Japanese literature has the concept of "mono aware," which is a feeling of empathy and sorrow towards things; there is a certain similarity between the two. Therefore, Japanese audiences should be able to better grasp the emotions conveyed by the scenery and appreciate the "backward" yet beautiful rural atmosphere it constructs. When traditional pastoral poetry meets the fresh Japanese style, an unexpected similarity in tone is displayed. Both "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog" and "Kikujiro's Summer" fully showcase the beauty of nature, with lush countryside, mountains standing in the distance, mist-filled forests, and healing oceans – encompassing everything. The scenery is indeed beautiful, but it also carries a sense of sadness at the edge of the world, tempting modern people with this utopian paradise and reflecting a departure from modern society.

Scholar Duan Yifu believes, "Scenery is an image, a construction of the mind and emotions." In this sense, "scenery" refers not only to natural landscapes but should also include the ever-present cultural scenery. During the journey of the son and the father, the son complains to his father that his arrival has not gained the attention of the villagers. However, the warmth and trust of the villagers, their unconditional trust and reliance, and the touching eyes of the women in western Hunan completely dispel the son's doubts and dissatisfaction. During Kikujiro and Masao's journey, countless strangers, also with their eccentricities, lend them a helping hand. Such plots provide a spiritual comfort for people increasingly alienated in modern urban life, evoking a simple and genuine warmth. As Mr. Mao Dun said, people are the most beautiful scenery.

Directors Huo Jianqi and Takeshi Kitano skillfully blend the characters with the environment. When they first set off, the father and son walk in a single file on the narrow paths of the countryside, allowing only enough space for two people, and the distance in their hearts keeps them separated. However, as the journey progresses, the father and son exchange more heartfelt words, and their care for each other becomes more natural. Their figures blend deeply into the scenery, and the distance between them seems to no longer be distant. "Kikujiro's Summer" similarly highlights the movie in a place where streams are clear and lush greenery abounds. In such an environment, the adults accompanying Masao do not deliberately act childish to please the child, but naturally return to their childlike innocence in a complete setting.

3. Conclusion: A Deep Look Back at Tradition and Novel Construction

The essence of cultural infiltration is the creation of a shared cultural space, the realization of cultural resource sharing after ethical filtering, and the promotion of cultural commonality. Although sometimes this shared cultural space may be unintentionally established, it can still provide valuable experiences. The film "The Man from Nowhere" carries a profound attachment to traditional culture, with misty mountain forests and rice paddies in the Xiangxi region exuding an authentic Eastern charm. However, the film's filming location in China's Hunan province shares a similar monsoon climate with Japan, being moist and rainy, which also evokes feelings of nostalgia and yearning among Japanese audiences, thus weakening cultural barriers. It not only broadens the film's cultural connotations and narrative space but also aligns well with the multi-cultural context for audience acceptance. This approach proves beneficial in reducing cultural discounting while reverting to tradition.

Nevertheless, unlike the father's postal route, the son's journey walks both the old and new paths, which involves post-tracing construction. As the son travels, he carries a radio and listens to English songs. Amidst the unchanging aspects, more changes begin to surface. The unaltered human emotions and sincere relationships evoke admiration while also sparking reflections on modernity. In "Kikujiro," this is evident in the beautiful imagination of interpersonal relationships between the old and the new during a period of social transition. Kikujiro's wife cannot ignore the plight of Masao and not only arranges for Kikujiro to accompany him but also provides him with travel expenses and takes care of all related matters. These actions force people to contemplate the significance of "neighbors" in modern society. Can children growing up in relatively deprived environments rely on society's power to fill the void in their hearts? At the same time, it provokes self-reflection among the audience: does urban alienation make us today exhibit more detachment and indifference? Such reflections are often not readily accepted during the early stages of urbanization, but only when the drawbacks of rapid modernization are exposed does this voice gradually become a genuine inquiry and call, becoming the mainstream of societal values.

4. Conclusion

Although the success of "The Man from the Distant Past" in its cross-cultural communication with Japan can be considered accidental, its success factors still offer us many positive insights. In academic discussions on cultural exports, the focus is often on how to excavate and translate one's own excellent traditional culture, but the attention to the receivers is rarely given. If we want to make breakthroughs in cross-cultural communication, we should pay full attention to the needs and motivations of the audience. For film creation, whether fully utilizing native culture or borrowing elements from other cultures, it is necessary to explore reasonable paths in the key stages of "encoding," "decoding," and "interpretation." In other words, in cross-cultural communication, the target audience of media products may need to be appropriately narrowed down. As China is a high-context cultural country, it does not naturally possess an advantage in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, starting with audiences with similar cultural backgrounds and setting themes and cultural symbols with common meanings can make the communication more targeted.

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