

Multidimensional Narrative of Traditional Culture: Creative Revelations of the Film Chang'an

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Abstract: As the inaugural installment in Light Chaser Animation Studios' New Culture series, Chang'an crafts a captivating and unparalleled vision of the Tang Dynasty. The film marries meticulous historical research, the romantic spirit of Tang poetry, and the artistry of Chinese animation. It embodies a distinctive narrative approach, rooted in Chinese culture, and enriched with oriental aesthetics, marking a significant exploration in the realm of animated films inspired by traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: Chang'an ; Animated Film; Culture; Narrative

Diverging from the mythological settings of animated films, Chang'an takes the history of the Tang Dynasty as the logical starting point of its narrative. It recreates the dramatic life experiences of the two fabulous poets Li Bai and Gao Shi as the historical facts, and with the mutual friendship as the emotional expression, to paint a vivid picture of the Tang Dynasty, imbued with a sense of epic grandeur.

1. Reenactment and Representation: the Dual Paths of Cultural Narrative Structure

The narrative structure in Chinese storytelling often emphasizes fluidity rather than rigidity, treating structure as a dynamic process that integrates natural laws and human experiences. Chang'an leverages this concept by using familiar historical characters and stories as its narrative backdrop, while skillfully avoiding complex cognitive structures.

1.1 Dichotomy: The Law of Structure Reenacts History

The structural dynamics in the film are influenced by the concept of potential energy, a term borrowed from physics and divided into three types: ontological, positional, and variable potential energy.^[1]

The film's structure, driven by the concept of potential energy, unfolds with Gao Shi facing a dilemma – the threat of the Tibetan army versus the risk to his safety from Chancellor Cheng's inquiries about Li Bai. This dilemma generates positional potential energy, dividing the narrative into two threads: Gao Shi's current challenges and a retrospective of his and Li Bai's journey from youth to old age. These threads, blending concrete and abstract elements, light, and shadow, reflect the Tang Dynasty's glory and the poets' fortunes, forming the core of the film's narrative. This structure offers diverse insights into the lives and minds of the Tang Dynasty poets.

1.2 Two-in-One: the Artistry of Structural Technique in Portraying Emotions

The film employs foreshadowing and echoing to maintain narrative order, a technique termed 'foreshadowed response.'^[2] This method reflects characters' emotional shifts and underscores their decisions and actions, ensuring narrative cohesiveness. For instance, the repeated mention of sumo wrestling symbolizes the emotional and mental states of characters Li and Gao, foreshadowing the trajectory of their lives and serving as a subtle link in the narrative's foreshadowed responses.

Structural laws enhance narrative order, while techniques fortify narrative cohesion, intertwining narrative structure and space with Chinese aesthetic thinking, allowing reflection on characters' journeys, fortunes, friendships, and contemplation of the epochal tragedy mirrored in destinies.

2. Imagery, Ambience, and Implications: the Three Levels of Cultural Narrative

The profundity of a film requires the nourishment of a refined culture, and the concreteness of film narrative interacts with the

abstract nature of culture to create a certain tension. In terms of integrating culture with film narrative, the film has made bold attempts and innovations in the creation of cultural narrative texts, in the modeling of imagery, the construction of ambience, and the generation of implications.

2.1 Live History: the Realistic Construction of Imagery

Imagery is fundamental to presenting ambience and interpreting implications. The construction of images is crucial—too abstract and obscure, and it can complicate subsequent decoding, taxing the viewer’s patience. Sculptures, paintings, and objects as carriers of memory themselves do not remember, “but as special semiotic symbols, they can create an enticing atmosphere of memory, acting as catalysts to activate or stimulate the subject to remember. These symbols become imagery with a priori emotional structures before the act of remembering occurs.”^[3]

The film extensively incorporates Tang Dynasty artifacts and historical research into its character and scene modeling, accurately recreating significant locations such as the Prince Qi’s Mansion and Chang’an City based on historical texts. Character designs reflect Tang aesthetics inspired by historical figures, and numerous details, from horses to musical instruments, serve as cultural references. This fusion of elements establishes a credible cultural narrative, creatively presenting Tang culture within a contemporary framework while enhancing cultural transmission and fostering diverse, vivid cultural memories.

2.2 Live Poetry: the Artistic Presentation of Ambiance

The film distinctively employs cross-media storytelling, interweaving poetry with visuals to evoke a poetic ambience. This approach transcends mere narrative, illuminating life’s deeper meanings. Animated films, due to their virtual nature, align well with the ephemeral essence of poetic ambience, making animation an apt medium for portraying literary moods. In the Tang Dynasty poem *Bring in the Wine*, Li Bai’s spiritual realm contrasts with reality, illustrating that the soul’s grandeur remains unbound by life’s hardships, thus merging freedom, sorrow, art, technology, and poetic ambience seamlessly.

Animation’s frame-by-frame precision aids in effectively capturing the nuances of poetic ambience. By leveraging its strengths in visual storytelling, the film innovatively integrates visual artistry and aesthetic enjoyment into its poetic, cross-media narrative.

2.3 Live Characters: Open-Ended Interpretative Significance

The strategic use of negative space in the narrative prompts the audience to grasp the film’s underlying messages, as expressed in the quote, “establish intertextuality through the reader’s subjective associations via explicit references, allusions, adaptations, and applications of intertextual writing techniques.”^[4] Establishing intertextual connections between the narrative’s negative space and the audience’s existing cognitive structures enriches the portrayal of Tang dynasty characters and cultural significance within the film’s limited duration. For instance, portraying Du Fu as youthful and joyful, contrary to the traditional depiction of him as older and disillusioned, invites audiences to complete his story, elevating cultural significance. This approach captures the era’s spirit and resonates with contemporary social consciousness, bridging historical change and personal aspirations. Using negative space cultivates cultural significance by blending culture and imagery, encouraging imaginative engagement, and connecting with everyday cultural life.

3. Empathy, Resonance, and Synergy Resonance: the Triple Realm of Cultural Narratives

3.1 Character Empathy: From Surface to Core

Empathy originates from psychology and refers to the “ability to deeply understand another’s subjective world and their feelings.”^[5] Audience empathy with characters is a key bridge for the conveyance of film culture. To grasp poetry and history, it is necessary for the film’s narrative to first generate empathy between the audience and the characters.

Moreover, empathy is enriched by aligning the audience’s perspective with the characters’ sensory experiences and emotions. For instance, the film’s portrayal of Gao Shi’s repeated visits to Chang’an City exemplifies this, depicting the city’s changing landscape and thus, without explicit narration, allowing audiences to vicariously experience the character’s emotions amidst the nation’s flux. This approach effectively bridges personal destinies with historical contexts, evoking a profound emotional response.

3.2 Self-resonance: A Vision that Spans Thousands of Miles

The film utilizes animation to authentically recreate scenes, engaging audiences in Gao Shi’s perspective and crafting a culturally rich communication space. This approach forms “an integrated world of sensation for the audience, thereby generating similar emotions, evoking a specific perception of the local scenes among the diverse crowd, and thus eliciting resonance.”^[6]

Prioritizing Gao Shi as the central character resonates better with the audience’s everyday experiences, given his relatable

diligence and gradual success compared to Li Bai's exceptional talents. This choice provides a more grounded and immersive perspective. Additionally, character designs reflect Eastern cultural values and traditional virtues like loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, righteousness, and patriotism, further strengthening the film's cultural impact.

3.3 Synergy Resonance: Thoughts Spanning Millennia

Resonance communication is one of the theories of mass communication. Hartmut Rosa defines it as "a mode of relating to the world in which the subject is moved by the people, places, and objects encountered, and consequently takes corresponding actions."^[7] Synergy Resonance is twofold: on the one hand, it refers to individual or collective behaviors that emerge from the narrative text during viewing; On the other hand, it pertains to responsive behaviors that arise after viewing as a result of the film's influence.

In terms of public reception, the film quickly generated extensive online discussions and numerous reviews upon its release, igniting a nationwide conversation about traditional Chinese culture.

From the audience's perspective, synergy resonance signifies a contemporary connection with history. It extends beyond individual alignment with the film's characters, encompassing collective viewer dynamics, shared cultural recognition, and emotional engagement. This immersive experience fosters a cultural emblem that resonates with participants, facilitating the dissemination and preservation of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The exploration of traditional Chinese culture in film and animation is vital for strengthening cultural confidence. Films like *Chang'an* not only demonstrate the importance of culturally grounded storytelling but also pose questions about how Chinese culture can be more effectively showcased to the world. The future of Chinese animation and film lies in continued exploration, creating works that frame national culture and utilize the beauty of Eastern art to tell stories uniquely Chinese.

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