

The Balance Between Cultural Authenticity and Commercialization - Taking "Coco" as an Example

Kaixuan Yao

*Guangdong Experimental High School, Guangzhou, China
ykx15899811173@outlook.com*

Abstract. Looking at the data on hit movies in the film industry in recent years, the success of these blockbusters isn't by chance. Behind every popular movie, there are complex and unique marketing strategies. What's more, it's essential to balance cultural authenticity and commercial value. Taking *Coco* as an example, this paper will focus on how the movie presents Mexican Día de los Muertos culture and its commercial development logic. Combining cultural commodification theories like Bourdieu's "cultural capital" and Baudrillard's "symbolic consumption," it will analyze three aspects: extracting the cultural core, connecting with universal emotions, and controlling the commercial scale. The goal is to figure out how the movie accurately balances the authenticity of Día de los Muertos culture with its commercial development, and how it achieves the modern transformation of traditional cultural IP—through a deep understanding and respect for cultural spirit, rather than just using cultural elements superficially. This paper aims to provide both theoretical and practical references for the development of Chinese traditional cultural IP.

Keywords: Cultural commercialization, Traditional cultural IP, B commercial scale control

1. Introduction

In the tide of globalization, the development of cultural products generally faces a pair of core contradictions: it is necessary to maintain cultural authenticity to avoid connotative consumption, and at the same time, achieve value realization through commercial development to inject motivation into cultural inheritance. This type of tension between "cultural authenticity" and "maximizing commercial value" is the key challenge in the transformation of traditional cultural IP [1]. *Coco*, with the Mexican Day of the Dead culture at its core, has neither fallen into the trap of "symbolic appropriation" nor achieved commercial success, becoming a typical sample for studying the modern transformation of traditional cultural IP. It broke the box office record for non-mainstream Hollywood cultural-themed animations in China back then, and turned into a landmark work in the animation field—one that has both cultural influence and commercial value.

The real reason for *Coco*'s great success lies in the deep balance between "cultural authenticity and commercialization," not just the simple resonance of "art and commerce." This paper will explore the topic from three dimensions—extracting the cultural core, connecting universal emotions, and controlling the commercial scale—and three aspects: theoretical foundation, case analysis, and comparative insights. It will analyze the balance logic of *Coco* in depth, and put

forward specific methods by combining practical cases from China. Meanwhile, it will make clear the core of a successful cultural IP transformation: it comes from a deep understanding and respect for the cultural spirit, rather than just simply using cultural elements.

2. Theoretical foundation: opportunities and risks of cultural commercialization

Cultural commodification refers to the process of turning symbols, rituals and values with cultural meanings into tradable goods or services. Its core theoretical bases are Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural capital" theory and Jean Baudrillard's "symbolic consumption" theory [2]. Bourdieu pointed out that cultural capital can be turned into economic capital to extend its value. Baudrillard, on the other hand, argued that the essence of modern consumption lies in consuming cultural symbols. When cultural elements enter the market, they become consumption carriers that hold emotions and meanings.

Scholars from the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, put forward the concept of "cultural industry" in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [3]. They pointed out that under the capitalist production model, cultural products will follow the production logic of "standardization, large-scale production and commercialization" just like industrial products. As a result, these cultural products lose their original "critical nature, creativity and spiritual value" and become "cultural commodities" controlled by capital.

Cultural commercialization is like a double-edged sword, not only having advantages but also disadvantages. In addition, commercial development can break cultural and geographical limitations and achieve global dissemination through film and television. For example, *Coco* took the Mexican Day of the Dead culture to the world. In addition, commercial profits can provide funds for cultural inheritance, the protection of traditional rituals, and the continuation of cultural skills. For instance, Mexico took advantage of the popularity of *Coco* movies to develop tourism trade during the Day of the Dead and boost the development of related cultural industries [4,5]. In potential risks perspective, culture commercialization may face over-commercialization. The key goal of capital is "make profits maximize". If it is completely oriented towards sales volume, it will lead to culture becoming a "money-making tool" and losing its spiritual value.

The above theories provide a perspective for the subsequent analysis of the balanced logic of "Coco": cultural commercialization can give culture life but it can also make culture lose value. We can only find the balance point between "cultural authenticity" and "commercial value", so we can dream of a win-win situation for culture and business.

3. Preliminary planning and preparation

Market research and positioning: Accurately catching the trends in the film market, the Disney and Pixar teams simultaneously conducted "market research" and "cultural research" in the early stage of project startup.

Before the project kickoff, The Disney and Pixar teams conducted in-depth market research, deeply observing the box office consumption trends. In the global box office ranking of film history in 2011, it can be seen that audiences' preferences for film type have gradually changed, and adventure, science fiction and other themes have gradually become popular. Animated films are showing a growth trend. Among the top 50 highest-grossing films in global film history, 11 were animated films before 2016, occupying more than 20%. From the perspective of audience analysis, the audience groups of "Zootopia" and "Frozen" are extremely broad, covering all age groups. Lies in the high compatibility and adaptability of themes, material selection and content. Meanwhile,

audiences who need more and more emotional needs let Pixar team realize the importance of emotional resonance. Such as the profound expressions of individual belonging and ecological protection in "Avatar", and the emotions about "companionship" and friendship that are like family in "Toy Story", and so on.

From the perspective of cultural research, the Pixar team visited the Mexico local area to deeply understand the core spirit of the Day of the Dead culture - "Death is a part of life, a joyous commemoration." The film's presentation of the Mexican Day of the Dead culture does not remain at the surface symbols such as "skull patterns" and "marigold petals". For example, the building of the "world of the Dead", every detail is closely related to the cultural connotation: The access to the world of the undead is paved with marigold petals, which derived from the Mexican cultural tradition that "marigolds symbolize the fragrance of life, and their aroma can guide the undead to cross the boundary between life and death and return to the present world [6,7]." It dig deeply into the core connotation that "death is the continuation of life, and commemoration is the inheritance of love.

4. Competitive benchmarking: filling the market vacancy of "animation art + culture" in the film market

There are rare films that combine "animation art and culture", and those involving the sub-theme of "life and death" almost do not exist. Project planning and topic selection are also precisely locating this market gap. During the script development process, the script focuses on the plot of family affection, cultural exploration and death education. He combines art and culture, presenting a colorful world of the dead through three-dimensional images, taking the Mexican "Day of the Dead" as the cultural anchor point. Taking the Mexican Day of the Dead culture as the narrative background, it enables the audience to appreciate the aesthetics of animation and understand the true meaning of life that "death is not the end of life; forgetting is the end." It provokes thoughts on life and death, stands out in the animated film market with a unique theme of life and death culture, and respects the Mexican undead culture's core .

4.1. Before release: preheat in stages, taking into account both culture and popularity

The promotion adopts a phased preheating strategy, and cultural elements are integrated into each stage.

In the first stage, taking advantage of the popularity of Disney and Pixar in the animation field, Release the film information centered on the Mexican Day of the Dead culture, emphasizing the attribute of "distinctive cultural animation" rather than merely promoting "joint production", breaking away from the conventional promotion of "Disney + Pixar collaboration".

The second stage shifts from "abstract cultural concepts" to "concrete animation details". The poster takes marigold petals and skull images (in line with the connotation of "skull symbolizing the continuation of life" in the culture of the Day of the Dead) as its core elements. The protagonist Miguel is dressed in the traditional Mexican costume "Guayabella shirt", and the background is a simplified building of the world of the dead. The animation details reveal scenes such as the "World of the Dead" and the "family altar". At the same time provide a brief introduction to the cultural background of the Day of the Dead, allowing the audience to perceive the cultural core in advance [8].

In the third phase, cultural elements are woven into the plot to deepen emotional resonance. When releasing trailers and unfolding plot details, the narrative foregrounds Miguel's journey—his

passage through the Land of the Dead in pursuit of his musical aspiration, and his quest driven by family bonds—while emphasizing the theme of "family affection as the carrier of cultural inheritance." This approach prioritizes the integration of cultural connotations with emotional beats, rather than focusing solely on revealing plot conflicts to grab attention.

4.2. Release stage: the selection of release dates line with cultural themes and emotional needs, achieving "business serving culture"

It premiered at the Morelia International Film Festival in Mexico on October 20, 2017, and was released in major Mexican theaters a week later (a week before the Day of the Dead), with the release date echoing the theme of the film. During Mexican undead day, social media have a high level of discussion. It not only attracts audiences to watch movies due to the "festive atmosphere", but also enables them to have a deeper understanding of the culture of the Day of the Dead through the films, achieving a mutual empowerment of "festivals and movies".

4.3. Long-tail operation stage

Secondary sales of Copyrights: Expanding from the film field to business, art, culture and entertainment fields, closely fit the cultural connotation.

In the business field, in 2017, Southwest Airlines collaborated with Pixar to create a "Coco" themed airplane and simultaneously played a "Day of the Dead Cultural Science Popularization Short film" on the airplane's electronic screen, transforming business cooperation into a cultural dissemination carrier.

The Mexican government used this film to promote tourism, highlighting the cultural connotation of the Day of the Dead, such as "in memory of relatives" and "inheriting memories", and indirectly increasing the local tourism revenue of the Day of the Dead (the number of tourists in Oaxaca increased by 27% year-on-year in 2023) [9].

In the field of art and business, Cordoba Guitar Company has collaborated with Disney to create the Coco X Cordoba co-branded classical guitar. The body of the instrument is based on white, decorated with mother-of-pearl and black skull patterns, implying the Mexican Day of the Dead cultural features of Coco: music is the core that connects family and memory, passing the cultural connotation that "music carries family emotions", and avoiding derivatives from becoming pure image consumption [10].

5. Conclusion and prospect

The success of "Coco" confirms that the core logic of hit films is a result of the balance between cultural authenticity and commercial value: In culture, the "Day of the Dead Life Culture" strikes a chord with social emotion and gives the IP depth. In business, "Commercial activities serving culture" (pre-cultural research, distribution close to cultural day, and derivative products conveying cultural connotations) realizes the commercial closed loop from traffic to monetization.

Its inspirations for the film industry and the development of traditional Chinese cultural IP are as follows:

Deeply cultivate the fertile soil of culture, Avoid shallow appropriation. China is a traditional country that involves a large number of traditional cultural resources, like the Dragon Boat Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, as well as cultural carriers like myths, legends and historical stories. IP development should deeply dig the core spirit of culture. For instance, the Dragon Boat Festival

refers to "honoring Qu Yuan and patriotism ", while the Mid-Autumn Festival carries the feelings of "family reunion and nostalgia". Avoid only extract surface symbols such as "zongzi" and "mooncake", and fall into the trap of "symbolization". In the innovation of traditional cultural IPs, while *White Snake: The Origin* managed to make a core breakthrough by rebuilding the story as a "prequel to the White Snake," it revealed some typical shortcomings when it came to digging into cultural elements [8]. Firstly, the creative process slipped into the trap of "prioritizing formal aesthetics over the spiritual core" — the film overly fixated on the visual aestheticism of the "snake demon" image. Whether it was the dynamic vitality of character designs or the poeticized styling of scenes, the work leaned heavily toward satisfying audiences' aesthetic expectations. Yet, it diluted the "ethical struggles between humans and demons as beings of different realms" and the "tripartite interplay of divinity, demon hood, and humanity" embedded in traditional texts (e.g., *Stories to Warn the World: The White Snake Immortal Forever Guards Leifeng Pagoda*). This led to the fading of the cultural core under the overshadowing of superficial aesthetics, ultimately resulting in a scenario where "cultural connotations are lost due to symbolic appropriation.", So Chinese traditional cultural IP films like *The White Snake: The Origin* can learn from the cultural creation approach of the *Coco* team to avoid the risk of symbolization. On one hand, They should conduct "systematic historical research" — not only sorting out the formal standards for visual elements such as costumes and architecture, but also digging deep into the values and life logic of the era. On the other hand, it's necessary to set up a "scholar collaborative creation mechanism," inviting historians and folk culture experts to join in script polishing and detailed textual research. This way, elements like costumes and architecture will not only meet formal standards, but also carry the cultural meanings of the era — for example, having characters' actions align with the era's context. In the end, this achieves a deep integration between cultural symbols, historical context, and plot development, thus preventing these elements from becoming superficial decorations without real substance.

Secondly, the portrayal of the late Tang Dynasty's social context was limited to the stacking of visual symbols — it merely signaled the era through surface-level elements such as character costumes and set designs (e.g., the architectural style of Jiangnan water towns), without delving into the era's social ecology. Details like the dissemination logic of witchcraft beliefs among ordinary people and the living conditions of market artisans were left unexamined, reducing cultural elements to mere "ancient costume backdrops." The failure to forge deep integration between these elements and the plot ultimately left the work with rather flimsy cultural backing .

Control the commercial scale and achieve mutual empowerment. As the commercial value of traditional cultural IPs keeps growing, the "culture + tourism" model has become a common way to develop them. But this model also faces a risk: too much commercial influence can make culture lose its true meaning.

For example, in some places, to attract more tourists, serious traditional ceremonies have been turned into popular online check-in activities. Take the Dai Water-Splashing Festival scenic spot in Yunnan Province. To get more tourists involved, the traditional "water-splashing for blessings" ceremony was changed into a "water gun fight." This even caused many fights, and the Water-Splashing Festival lost its cultural meaning of "purity and blessings."

However, the tourism development around Mexico's Day of the Dead—made famous by *Coco*—sets a good example. The Mexican government didn't turn the Day of the Dead into just an "entertainment activity." Instead, it strictly controls tourism activities: it bans performances that are too commercial, and requires parade teams to follow traditional routes and wear traditional clothes. This ensures that tourists won't disturb the seriousness of the traditional ceremony, and in this way, Mexico's Day of the Dead culture is well protected .

In fact, commercial development should focus on "passing on culture." Whether it's making derivatives, working with tourism industries, or running IPs, we must stick closely to the cultural meaning. At the same time, we should use the money from commercial activities to support cultural protection. For the development of Chinese traditional cultural IP, it is essential to follow the principle that "Culture as the foundation and business as the source of value." This will ultimately realize "the integration of cultural and economic benefits" and drive Chinese traditional cultural IPs to gain global recognition. Finally, achieve the unity of cultural benefits and economic benefits, and promote the global spread of traditional Chinese cultural IP.

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