Cross-Culture Communication of Japanese Animated Films in China Within the New Media Context

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Abstract: Compared to traditional media, new media is characterized by openness, personalization, segmentation, and cost-effective global communication. It provides a wider platform for films and enables individuals to explore cultural identity within a vast digital community. This paper focuses on cross-cultural communication of Japanese animated films in China, specifically analyzing *Sezume* directed by Makoto Shinkai. By examining distribution channels, promotional strategies, and narrative elements, the study first illustrates how new media offers opportunities and challenges for cross-cultural film communication. Furthermore, it explores how *Sezume* skillfully utilizes cultural context to reduce cultural misunderstanding, then apply linguistic symbols and non-linguistic symbols to integrate the 'world series' narrative framework with universal thematic expression. Finally, the paper presents recommendations for the cross-cultural communication of animated films: adopt all-age positioning and harmonize global appeal with Japanese tradition and feature; value fans and make long-term commitments with them; collaborate with local agencies in target audience countries; maintain distinctive artistic style and convey universal themes.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, new media, Makoto Shinkai, *Sezume,* world series

1. Introduction

Sezume represents the final installment of Japanese director Makoto Shinkai's 'Disaster Trilogy', narrating the adventure of a 17-year-old girl, Suzume, who encounters the enigmatic 'Souta' and embarks on a quest to prevent disaster. As of April 17th, the film has been released in China for 25 days, accumulating a box office revenue exceeding ¥752 million, surpassing its domestic performance in Japan, and accounting for nearly 40% of the film's global box office [1]. This achievement positions *Sezume* as the highest-grossing Japanese animated film in Chinese cinematic history. Its ratings on Chinese film review platform Douban reached 7.3 (formerly peaking at 7.9), and IMDb rates it at 7.8, reflecting its successful reception and communication in China [2,3].

In contrast to traditional media, new media is characterized by openness, personalization, segmentation, and cost-effective global communication, which have brought about significant changes in cross-cultural communication from traditional perspectives. As a unique form of aesthetic expression, films not only replicate and transform people's contemporary lifestyles and perceptions but also serve as a crucial cultural factor accelerating the globalization process. *Sezume*

portrays landscapes, customs, and traditions ranging from rural to urban settings, encompassing elements of both traditional Japanese aesthetics and modern commercial cityscape. This convergence of diverse cultural elements, contexts, temporalities, and character representations renders it a successful case of cross-cultural communication between culturally proximate nations. Its textual creation and promotional efforts hold valuable lessons for other endeavors in cross-cultural communication.

This paper employs a case study approach, along with textual analysis, drawing upon cross-cultural communication theories such as high-context and low-context communication and semiotics. Through this approach, the research achieves a deeper analysis of film context, exploring the underlying drivers of cross-cultural communication in animated films. Additionally, it allows for a multifaceted examination of cross-cultural communication strategies, enhancing both the theoretical value and practical implications of the research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Cross-Cultural Communication Theories

The study of cross-cultural communication first emerged in the late 1950s in the United States, with the term 'Cross-cultural Communication' coined by Edward T. Hall. In his work *The Silent Language*, Hall introduced the concepts of 'high-context' and 'low-context' cultures, as well as the 'three levels of culture' theory [4]. In his later book, *Beyond Culture*, Hall further elucidated the notions of 'high-context culture' and 'low-context culture'. Hall emphasized the importance of understanding and exploring the interaction and integration among different contextual cultures, both within and between cultures, in order to genuinely transcend the boundaries of one's own culture [5].

In the 1970s, the field of cross-cultural communication gradually expanded and integrated knowledge from psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and other disciplines. Geert Hofstede proposed the initial cultural value dimensions theory, continuously refining it, and providing a reference basis for understanding cultural phenomena and conducting cross-cultural comparisons [6]. In 1991, American scholar Straubhaar, J. introduced the concept of 'cultural proximity' [7]. As the process of globalization accelerated, cultural exchanges and transmissions between nations became more frequent, deeper, and broader, leading scholars to pay greater attention to the importance of interpreting and understanding the significance of different cultural interactions.

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, films are not only an art form but also a unique means of conveying values and cultures. The theoretical research on cross-cultural communication has developed a relatively comprehensive framework; however, there remains a lack of research focusing on the effects from a public perspective.

2.2. Research on Makoto Shinkai's Works

In recent years, research on Makoto Shinkai's works has mainly focused on the analysis of his animation aesthetics and the expression of emotions and environmental awareness within his films, interpreting them within a broader cultural and social context. Regarding cross-cultural communication, emphasis has been placed on the universal values conveyed in his works and the amalgamation of traditional and modern perspectives.

Japanese animated films possess advantages in cross-cultural communication with China due to cultural proximity and similar cultural contexts. Additionally, the propagation of universal values in Shinkai's works can foster cultural identification [8]. Traditional ethnic and cultural symbols hold a significant position in the cross-cultural communication of Makoto Shinkai's animated films [9].

The success of Makoto Shinkai's animated films in China's cross-cultural communication in recent years can be attributed to a complex interplay of factors. It results not only from individual psychological needs and societal cultural influences but also reflects the pivotal roles played by online fandom and digital influence in the era of new media in cross-cultural communication.

3. Cross-Cultural Communication Channels Analysis

3.1. New Media Era: From Niche to Mainstream

In the early stages of Makoto Shinkai's works, they were considered representative of niche culture, and fan communities played a significant role in their communication through various online platforms, including anime forums, video websites, cloud storage services, Weibo, and WeChat. This period established a strong audience base. However, with the development of new media and the involvement of commercial capital, the official promotion and distribution of Shinkai's works underwent a transformation. The integration of online and offline channels facilitated more extensive and effective communication.

Currently, Makoto Shinkai's films are distributed by Toho, Japan's largest film company, which holds a strong influence over both domestic and international film screening systems. Starting with *Your Name.*, Shinkai's animated films have been translated and distributed through local agencies in various countries, adopting more localized marketing strategies. In China, *Sezume* was imported translated and distributed by China Film Co., Ltd.. Before its official release, *Sezume* released different versions of trailers on new media platforms like Bilibili and ticketing apps like Maoyan, some of which were linked to Shinkai's previous works, such as the 'Your Door' version trailer. The film also premieres in China. Makoto Shinkai attended and unveiled an exclusive Chinese poster at Peking University, followed by a live performance of the Chinese theme song by singer Zhou Shen.

3.2. Communication Within Similar Cultural Context, Reducing Cultural Misunderstanding

Regarding cultural values, China and Japan both belong to the East Asian cultural sphere, sharing a high degree of homogeneity in geographical, historical, and traditional aspects, and possessing a considerable amount of shared life experiences. The two countries have similar cultural atmospheres, with worldviews, value systems, and outlooks on life rooted in Confucianism, influenced by a fusion of Buddhist and Taoist schools of thought. They emphasize the concept of 'enlightenment' rather than direct and explicit expressions. Both countries exhibit strong high-context cultural characteristics. Cultural works from both countries often share similar aesthetic orientations. For instance, Chinese audiences resonate with Japan's concept of 'animism' and the aesthetic of 'mono no aware' (the pathos of things), discerning their fundamental meanings of expression.

Nevertheless, in today's globalized world, cultural systems are no longer isolated and closed. With the advancement of economic integration, cross-national and cross-regional interactions have become more frequent, leading to a convergence of cultural values embedded in commodities, bridging vast differences and diversities in regional cultures. Furthermore, with the progress of modernization, societal disparities have widened, weakening the shared context that previously held societies together. Consequently, people are compelled to utilize clearer and more direct language contexts for communication. In this context, the blending of high-context and low-context communication becomes more prevalent, with a gradual shift from high-context to low-context communication.

From the perspective of Makoto Shinkai's team as the disseminator, the transformation of Makoto Shinkai, from an independent director to a commercial animation film team, is currently

represented by CoMix Wave Films, a Japanese animation studio that emphasizes individualized creative routes. The team's production possesses a unique visual appeal and animation style, emphasizing the application of digital technology, and continuously experimenting and adapting for both domestic and international markets. In the documentary of *Sezume*, Shinkai stresses the film's target audience: being all-age and global.

In terms of communication content, animated films possess the ability to visualize both the real world and the virtual world from the production process. Compared to non-animated films, animated films with unconventional story settings, freely changing colors, and exaggerated forms are more easily accepted by the audience [10].

From the perspective of the audience, the audience of Makoto Shinkai's films consists mainly of white-collar workers and students, primarily from first-tier cities and provincial capitals. They belong to the 'internet-native generation' born before and after the widespread application of internet technology. They possess strong cultural consumption capabilities and are active on the internet [11]. Due to the better development of cultural facilities in cities, urban residents have a higher acceptance of foreign and new cultures.

3.3. Application of Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Symbols

3.3.1. Linguistic Symbols

In contrast to Shinkai's previous films, which emphasized poetic and introspective emotional expressions, *Sezume* features more diverse characters, including those who speak directly and straightforwardly, like the single mother running a pub. Descriptions of scenes or relationships are also presented using concise language. In terms of social relationships, the film portrays flexible in-group and out-group relationships, showing different strangers' assistance to Suzume in a road movie format while retaining characteristics of high commitment. Suzume's search for 'daijin' is also based on more objective information sources, such as social media platforms and news broadcasts, rather than directly asking passersby for directions.

In high-context cultures, cultural values are more often expressed through implicit symbols, metaphors, and non-verbal means. Therefore, when translating, it is essential to preserve contextual implications and meanings, better conveying the cultural values of the source language and allowing the audience to experience similar contexts and emotional resonances in the target language.

For example, the Chinese title translation of *Sezume* The original Japanese title of *Sezume* is すずめの戸締まり, where '戸締' means 'to lock a door' or 'to close a door' The official Chinese translations considered several versions, such as '铃芽的门锁'('Suzume's Door Lock'), '铃芽来锁门'('Suzume Comes to Lock the Door'), and '铃芽小姐来锁门' ('Miss Suzume Comes to Lock the Door'), finally settling on 铃芽之旅('Suzume's Journey').

In the film, the protagonist's names 'Suzume' and '前进' (pronounced 'zimou' in Japanese) have the same pronunciation in Japanese and imply Suzume's story of embarking on a new chapter of life after experiencing an adventure and overcoming a disaster. The term 'journey' carries an antique connotation, implying that the film belongs to the road movie genre, which is more subtle and likely to pique the interest of Chinese audiences. The four characters in the film's title, *Sezume*, *Your Name.*, and *Weathering with You*, harmoniously form the 'Disaster Trilogy' when placed together.

The translation of the 'gate' incantation in the film continues the characteristics of Japanese culture (piety and formality) and is filled with reverence and gratitude towards nature, suggesting that it aligns with the cultural values of both Chinese and Japanese audiences.

思而复思祈唤日不见之神
祈唤祖祖代代之土地神
此山此河承恩甚久 不胜感激
诚惶诚恐诚惶诚恐
谨遵神旨予以奉还
（English translation:
O divine gods who dwell beneath this land
You have long protected us for generations
Your mountains and rivers
That we have long called our own
Now!
I return them to you!）

3.3.2. Non-Linguistic Symbols

Sezume incorporates rich traditional Japanese cultural symbols and motifs, such as traditional architecture, classical imagery, and customs. These elements resonate with and are understood by Chinese audiences to a certain extent.

Through visuals, music, animation style, and other means, emotions and stories are conveyed, sparking the audience's imagination and empathy. The film cleverly utilizes classic City Pop tracks with a large following in both China and Japan, enhancing the sense of immersion.

Animated films often use exaggerated expressions and tones beyond real-life experiences to express characters' emotions. These exaggerated expressions and tones are already understood by a majority of young Chinese audiences due to familiar Japanese anime symbols, such as sweating or black lines, which facilitate communication in a low-context culture.

4. Narrative Framework and Universal Theme Expression

The characteristic of 'world series' works lies in the direct connection between the 'small-scale romance' of the male and female protagonists and the significant issue of 'world's fate', bypassing various social intermediaries [12]. The concept of 'world series' works was first introduced by EVA, but Makoto Shinkai is the only author who explicitly applies 'world series' as a narrative framework. The Voice of a Distant Star (2002), directed by Shinkai, can be seen as his first animated short film utilizing the 'world series' narrative framework. In The Place Promised in Our Early Days (2004), Shinkai began to break the framework of the 'world series' from within, symbolizing the destruction of the 'giant tower' representing the promise. The male protagonist expresses his sentiment that the female protagonist is already doing well when she wakes up and forgets their past affection. In Your Name. (2016), Shinkai began to combine the 'world series' framework with public issues Weathering with You (2019) presents the police and violent gang as the antagonists, presenting a new model of social versus individual conflicts.

Overall, pure and innocent love, the concept of the 'world' and the protagonists' personal choices are the essential elements of Makoto Shinkai's 'world series' framework. The relationship between the male and female protagonists can be seen as destined, bonded by shared secrets and space.

As an authorial narrative framework, the 'world series' possesses a branding effect, aligning the aesthetic direction within the audience group. Through internal fermentation within the audience, it stimulates the desire to watch the films in the market. In the continuous application and innovation process, Shinkai infuses new elements and his artistic style into the 'world series' framework.

Similarly, the framework also limits the characters in the story and influences imagery, metaphors, and plot developments, holding significant importance in the narrative process and theme expression.

In *Sezume* the 'bond' is no longer confined to the male and female protagonists but extends to the background of the '3.11 Great East Japan Earthquake' Through Suzume and Kusakage closing the 'gates' (only visible to the main protagonists) that once experienced great earthquakes in Kyushu, Shikoku, Kansai, and Tokyo, the film presents a space where the 'worm' (symbolizing earthquakes) resides, and the deceased are resurrected. The 'ever-after' is also where Suzume finds her childhood self, remembers forgotten memories, and resolves inner conflicts. The film expresses that, when dealing with trauma, the best solution is not to forget but to rely on the bonds between people. This bond is no longer limited to the personal experiences between young men and women; Suzume and Kusakage perform a prayer ceremony when closing the 'gates' requiring them to feel the traces of the vibrant human presence in the ruins, listen to the sounds of people's daily lives, and connect through memories with the land and the memories it once bore. During the road movie narrative, Suzume encounters various strangers who help her, showcasing another type of bond. The protagonist of the 'world series' begins to establish social connections with the world, searching for their place in it.

In *Sezume* through the perspective of the young male and female protagonists, it retells the collective trauma memory of the nation, expanding the focus to all age groups worldwide. The film narrates the pain brought to Japanese society by earthquakes, which extends to various accidents and disasters worldwide, hoping to offer solace to everyone about past pain and encouraging positive living.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Harmonizing Globalization and Localization

Sezume adopts an all-age and global audience positioning, starting with traditional Japanese customs and featuring a large number of Japanese-style buildings, using elements from Japanese mythology, traditional clothing, and more to create differentiated communication. In emotional expression, *Sezume* conveys humanistic sentiments of warmth and healing regarding the harm caused to individuals, families, and society by the '3.11 Great East Japan Earthquake'. While the story can only be told in Japan due to the recurring nature of Japanese earthquakes, emotions faced with accidents and disasters are universal themes, thus better bridging the gap between different cultural contexts.

5.2. Valuing Fan Communities and Utilizing Local Agency

Makoto Shinkai's team values existing fan communities and agrees on a 'three-year promise' with fans. The director himself actively cooperates with online and offline promotions. Local agencies in the target audience countries better understand the local culture and can provide more audience-friendly marketing strategies.

5.3. Authorial Theme Expression

In *Sezume*, Makoto Shinkai combines his unique 'world series' narrative framework with the film's expression of universal themes, maintaining his distinct artistic style. Through the branding effect, the films attract the audience, driving the market. At the same time, the films possess a societal aspect, balancing collectivism and individualism, effectively conveying different cultural values.

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