

# Analysis on the Culture Concepts in the Movie Spirited Away

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, Japanese animation movies have become popular in the world. Because of all of those classic and amazing animations, Japan has become one of the major countries that has a strong cultural industry. After decades of development, Japanese animation industry has gradually formed its own unique style. Japan gradually opens the foreign market by its animation movies. Hayao Miyazaki is a famous Japanese animation director, and his projects cannot be replaced in the global animation industry. Since the establishment of studio Ghibli in 1985, it has collaborated with Hayao Miyazaki and made many excellent animation movies, especially *Spirited Away*. This movie is one of the most popular animations in the world that received many positive reviews and sold well. Also, this movie became the peak in the history of Japanese animation. *Spirited Away* contains rich Japanese elements and a unique social background, so it not only attracts Japanese audience, but also other countries' audience who are interested in Japanese culture. The detail and elements make audience get a spiritual resonance in an acceptable way. This paper makes a detailed analysis about the relationship between culture and metaphors in this movie.

**Keywords:** Story Plot, semiotics, ideology critique, psychological analysis, feminism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Spirited Away* is a fantasy animation movie that is directed by Japanese famous animation director Miyazaki Hayao. In the mind of many audience, Miyazaki Hayao's hand-painted animations present the top animation in the world, especially *Spirited Away*. Every vivid scene of *Spirited Away* is full of Miyazaki's imagination that looks like Alice in the wonderland. Also, each frame is so picturesquely situated in the movie that it can be seen as a fine art. According to Peter Bradshaw's analysis: "It is a beautifully drawn and wonderfully composed work of art - really, no other description will do - which takes us on a rocket-fuelled flight of fancy, with tenderly and shrewdly conceived characters on board" [1]. This animation brought many achievements for Miyazaki Hayao. It sets a record of 23.5 million views and 30.8 billion yen in Japan. The box office of *Spirited Away* surpasses the box office of Titanic in Japan. It became the highest grossing movie in Japan.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The movie is about an adventure of a family. When Chihiro's family drives to their new home, they accidentally go into a mysterious tunnel in a suburb. In that tunnel, there is a strange medieval theme park full of food. After Chihiro's parents eat

those foods in this weird theme park, they become pigs. Also, by this time, many strange and translucent monsters come here. However, In order to save her parents, Chihiro has to find a job and live in that town. She meets her lover and many friends there as well. Although this is a simple story, there are many interesting backgrounds behind this great movie. Before Miyazaki created *Spirited Away*, he planned to create another movie. However, the producer of Studio Ghibli did not like it because the plot was about a young girl who falls in love with an old bath house owner. The cross age love stories might not be popular, so the producer suggested to Miyazaki that he should create a movie for young people. Therefore, Miyazaki gave up his original idea. During a summer break, Miyazaki met his friend's daughter and got inspiration from her. This time, he wanted to create a movie which is suitable for 10-year-old girls because most animations are published on the qualification of tacky love story. He was convinced that tacky love stories are not a ten-year-old girl desired. So, he started to create *Spirited Away*. Miyazaki states in an interview : "Every time I wrote or drew something concerning the character of Chihiro and her actions, I asked myself the question whether my friend's daughter or her friends would be capable of doing it" [3]. He hoped that every young girl could find their shadow in this movie. This movie helped him to convey the positive belief for young girls that only persistence, effort and diligence can save us. Based on many metaphors in this movie, this paper will analyse *Spirited Away*

by narrative structure, semiotics, ideology critique, psychological analysis, and feminism.

### 3. STORY PLOT

First, for narrative animated feature movies, the key to success is story and narrative structure. Moreover, the core of the story is the creation of characters. In the narrative structure of *Spirited Away*, main characters are successfully created for completing the plot point setting. So, the movie finally can achieve a good story effect. The great narrative structure becomes one of the necessary reasons for the success of *Spirited Away*. This movie is using linear narrative to show the adventure trip.

The story of *Spirited Away* is about a girl named Chihiro. She experiences a fantasy trip on a summer day. At the beginning of the movie, Chihiro gets lost with her parents when they are in the car. Then, they walk into an abandoned theme park. This is the first plot point of the film. Generally at the beginning of the story, the first appearance of the main character is more important, so characters of Chihiro are almost complete in this part. Then, the plot turns to a worse situation, and the seemingly beautiful theme park becomes dangerous because Chihiro's parents cannot resist the delicious food and are turned to pigs by magic. The beginning of the story ends when Chihiro's parents become pigs.

One of the themes in this movie is about Chihiro's growing up. Chihiro is a weak and timid girl. When she walks in the tunnel with her parents, she holds her mother's hand very tight. She is afraid to stay in a new environment. Moreover, she only cry after she sees her parents turns to pigs instead of solving the problems.



Figure 1. Chihiro and Haku.

In Chihiro's process of growing, she is lucky to meet some assistant characters who can be her spiritual mentor to guide her. By watching the story progress, the beginning of the

rising action is Chihiro meets Haku. it is clear to see that Haku is Chihiro's spiritual mentor in the movie. He brings Chihiro into the bathhouse and tells her the rules of the magic world. Moreover, because of Haku, Chihiro can meet Yubaba. Yubaba changes her name and let her work in the bathhouse. The beginning and the rising action of the story are over after Chihiro lost her real name. Although Haku gives Chihiro many supports and guide for living in the spirited world, Chihiro needs to solve problems by herself. Then, the movie starts its climax. In these three climax, Chihiro helps river god to take a bath when river god turns too dirty, saves Haku when he gets injured by Yubaba's magic, and leads No Face to find a new home.

Although the third climax is not very obvious as the first and second parts, it reaches a higher theme. In the falling action, the story becomes more pace and slow. The audience can enjoy the beauty view when the train drives on the sea. In order to save her parents, Chihiro uses her brave and clever mind to answer Yubaba's question. She successfully saves her parents in the denouement. Everyone cheers for her. Chihiro is not the little girl who only know to rely on others by experiencing all the challenge in this fantasy world. She grows a lot and becomes an independent and strong girl.

### 4. SEMIOTICS

Second, semiotics are a necessary part in *Spirited Away*. Those semiotics are emitted in every detail of Miyazaki's movies. Whether semiotics are on purpose or a natural output of Miyazaki's values, it is hard to hide semiotics in his movies, especially *Spirited Away*. According to Jose Vega's critics, the author demonstrates that *Spirited Away*, which Japanese movie is directed by Miyazaki, is remarkable and contains many symbolism [4].

At the beginning of *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's family takes their Audi and drives to their new home in 2001. The year 2001 is the first year after the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This scene seems like their family drives from the old era to the new year.

After Chihiro decides to save her parents by working in the bathhouse, the audience can see the structure of the bathhouse. Although the entire structure of the bathhouse is a traditional wooden building, the top of this traditional Japanese building is decorated by western style including carpet, fireplace, and sofa. Besides, Yubaba's office is full of jewelry. She always dresses like witches of the west. This actually implies that the spiritual core of whole Japan has been completely westernized and dominated by western thoughts. By watching *Spirited Away*, the audience can always feel a sense of thinking and alert for society and history. This movie connects with society tightly.



Figure 2. The bathhouse.



Figure 3. Yubaba and her office.

## 5. CRITIQUE ON IDEOLOGY

Next, *Spirited Away* sends out some aspects of ideology critique. This movie is not only a strange fantasy journey for a young girl, but also represents a warning for Japanese young generation. In this movie, one of the ideologies is that never forget why you started, and your mission can be accomplished. Chihiro represents all the young people who are ready to enter society. Most of those kinds of young people face many issues. Those young generations like Chihiro easily get confused and do not know how to develop themselves in a new environment. Also, those young people have to face many temptations such as right and money. Moreover, in the bathhouse, Yubaba will take everyone's name and control them. When men make contracts with the rules of society, they often lose themselves like the worker in the bathhouse. In the whole movie, Haku reminds Chihiro never forget her real name. The background of this animation is set after the Japanese economic bubble. During the Japanese economic bubble, many people lost themselves. Miyazaki uses this movie to remind the younger generation to never forget their original aspiration and copy the history.

## 6. PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Moreover, for psychological analysis in *Spirited Away*, not all movies can become classics. The movies can become classic because they always reveal the most real psychology of humans, such as *Spirited Away*. Ten-year-old Chihiro is a slightly timid little girl who thinks friendships are very valuable to her. The audience can see that she cares about the bouquets which her friends give to her. Although Chihiro's parents love her so much, they often ignore her feelings. When they walk into the tunnel, Chihiro keeps saying that she wants to go back to their car, but her parents just ignore Chihiro's fear and keeps walking into the spirited world. Moreover, after they enter the strange place, her parents just focus on what they want such as food. They do not even know where Chihiro is. However, Haku, as an important character in this film, plays a decisive role in the growing process of Chihiro. From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, Haku can be the professional psychological consultant for Chihiro. Although Chihiro fears Haku when they meet at the first time because she refuses Haku's food, the second time they meet, helpless and confused Chihiro really needs a therapist from the person who can understand her because Haku.

## 7. FEMINISM

Finally, feminism is another important part in *Spirited Away*. According to the article "'Spirited Away' and the Intersection Of Feminism And Marxism", Zoe Crombie states: "This signals Miyazaki's subversive approach, and that the film may actively acknowledge feminist issues" [2]. In most Miyazaki's movie, the girl always has a hero's heart, independent ability and the clear goal of life. They no longer need to be protected by men such as Lin in *Spirited Away*. Lin is a very kind girl. When a monster comes into the elevator in the bathhouse, she uses her body to block Chihiro and tries her best to cover Chihiro's smell because Chihiro is human. Although her talking ways are impolite, she is really brave and cares for her friends. When she stands in front of No-Face, she keeps Chihiro behind her again and threatens No-Face that if it dares to touch Chihiro, she will take revenge for Chihiro. In Miyazaki's movie, girls are not the objects to satisfy male's desire. Their morality and ability are the example for men. Those girls deserve respect from the men in Miyazaki's movie.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Spirited Away* won many awards in the world including the Golden Bear Award at the 52nd Berlin Film Festival and Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2002. Many reporters and critics give positive reviews for this movie. Unlike animations of Disney and Dreamworks,

*Spirited Away* is a delightful adventure story for all ages the audience. Although the protagonist of the movie is a ten-year-old girl, the movie does not only stay in the pure “children’s film” level. Miyazaki uses many plots to touch the deep minds and hearts of adults. Moreover, this movie keeps the style of traditional Japanese animations and is full of Oriental metaphors. There are so many metaphors to discover in this movie. Every time when you watch this movie, you always can find new things in it.

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