

# Intercultural Communication of “The Untamed” Overseas

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## ABSTRACT

In the information age, the wide application of Internet promotes the further development of intercultural communication. Among many successful case studies and practices of intercultural products and communication, the largest difference of T.U. is its extensive IP industry chain. Based on statistical analysis, this thesis studies the cultural connotations of the TV series itself and the reasons for its success, audience and effects as well as the cultural industry. This thesis concludes five reasons for the success, including the cultural homogeneity of the Southeast Asian audience, the satisfaction of the audience's martial arts imagination, the fashion boom of fantasy elements in recent years, the common emotional needs of human beings, and the universality of art. This research hopes to help cultural products go abroad and serve to form a better industry chain.

**Keywords:** *The Untamed, the Chinese culture, intercultural communication, audience and communication effects, IP cultural industry.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore how culture and cultural products can be used for wider cross-cultural communication and dissemination through the Internet and social media. Although there are many successful cases of cross-cultural communication at present, *T.U.* is a very representative one, because its influence is extensive and far-reaching, which is reflected in its large number of domestic and foreign audiences and Chinese cultural symbols of deep significance. In addition, its successful transmission path is replicable and can be imitated by other domestic TV dramas with similar content. Therefore, the study of its communication path can provide experience for the formation of high-quality industrial chains and overseas communication of Chinese film and television works in the future.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Before the information age, cultural communication must rely on means like books, sails and political communication. Although they indeed advance cultural communication, they are less efficient. In the context of globalization and networking, with the development of electronic and internet technologies, culture can break

the boundaries of time and geography and spread all over the world, depending on a variety of media forms, including various websites, microblog, BBC, short video and so on. This type of social media enjoys fast communication and wide audience, while traditional paper media is less capable in this respect.

Taking advantage of social media communication, many film and television production companies and cultural works have successfully broken through cultural barriers and achieved cross-cultural communication. Such as Disney's famous animated film *Coco* based on the history and culture of the Mexican Day of the Dead, and the animated version of *Mulan* based on the Chinese folk song "Mulan Poem" from Northern Dynasties. What's more, "Kung Fu Panda" series has come out with 4 films in succession, following the first one in 2008, all of which have achieved good box office results. This series is American action-comedy movie produced by Hollywood with Chinese kung fu as its theme. Its story is set in ancient China with its scenes, sets and costumes full of Chinese elements and tells the story of a clumsy-willed panda who aspires to become a martial arts master. It has won several international film awards, arousing the discussion of intercultural communication. In addition, with the rise of short videos, Li Ziqi serves as an emerging and representative internet blogger. The contents of her videos are drawn

from the traditional Chinese culture in clothing, food, housing and transportation, which embodies the export of the Chinese culture to the whole world. Martial arts novels and fantasy novels at home have been translated at an English website called "World of Martial Arts". Japanese anime has formed a characteristic culture, and Japan is recognized worldwide as a place where anime thrives.

In general, cultural communication should extract local features and borrow other countries' culture to obtain the cultural identity of the recipients. More importantly, it should spread both locally and globally in order to achieve intercultural communication.

In the late half of 2019, the Chinese web series *T.U.* hit the Chinese Internet and Southeast Asian countries. Up to 14th July, 2021, 1.6 million people have rated on Douban( a Chinese media review platform), leading to its rating of 7.7 [1], which enabled it to become the phenomenal ancient immortal drama. Its success has pushed the main actors to the first tier in entertainment and made a huge profit for film and television companies. Even two years later, "the second anniversary of *T.U.*" is still on the Weibo trends. This shows that *T.U.* has an obvious effect on the durability, breadth and depth of influence, which proves that it is successful in terms of cultural products and communication effects.

Intercultural communication refers to the process where various cultural information flows, shares and interacts in time and space. It is not only related to the information dissemination and interpersonal interaction that occurs between members of different cultures, but also involves the diffusion, penetration and migration of many cultural elements in human society.

Therefore, taking *T.U.* as an example, with methods of case study and date analysis, this thesis analyzes its communication influence and effects in terms of three aspects, which are the cultural connotations of the TV series itself and the reasons for its success, audience and effects as well as the cultural industry. By doing so, it aims to provide experience for the Chinese movies and TV series going abroad in the future.

### **3. THE CONTENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE REASONS FOR ITS SUCCESS**

#### ***3.1. the content of communication***

*T.U.* is adapted from the fantasy romance novel "Mo Dao Zhushi (Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation)", which enjoys a large fan base and was ranked first on the overall list of Jinjiang Literature City (a Chinese novel website) and has reached over 1 billion full-text views [2]. The story revolves around the main character Wei Wuxian and his bosom friend, Lan Wangji, and

tells the story of two like-minded paladins who aspire to help the weak and crackdown the wicked. Eventually, they uncover the conspiracy and achieve self-development [3]. The original's standardized martial arts narrative along with its pure and righteous emotions keep readers fail to get enough of reading, while the powerful contrast with reality gives it great artistic appeal and sends emotional shocks to readers.

Both the novel and the TV series include many martial arts elements. In the world of *The Untamed*, they judge strength and weakness by force value. The five great clans all have remarkable kung fu. All the leading and supporting characters wear swords. In addition to martial arts moves, the fight scenes also include artistic sword flight, flying over the wall etc.

The TV series has changed its narrative strategy during its adaptation, inheriting the story framework of "Mo Dao Zushi", the style direction, the complex relationship, image and character of the characters. What's more, the growth experiences of the characters are basically the same as the novel, and even some imperfect and unreasonable plots in the original have been changed and supplemented in the TV series, so that audience who have not read the original can understand the content without any obstacles[4].

In terms of the theme, unlike "Eternal love Ten great III of peach blossom" and "The Journey of Flower" which both focus on the love line, "*T.U.*" focuses on Wei Wuxian's unchanged aspiration after weathering storms, and expresses the theme of youth chivalry and love for family and country throughout the youths' twenty-year passion, during which they have grown from their initial innocence into later development, changes, separation and even death.

#### ***3.2. Chinese cultural symbols***

As TV series is an audio-visual art, producers cannot avoid long-lasting audio-visual attraction if they want to seize the audience. *T.U.* has many communication symbols with classical cultural connotations. As the background of the whole story, five cultivation clans: Qishan Wen, Gusu Lan, Lanling Jin , Yunmeng Jiang and Qinghe Nie have unique family ornaments. The nine-petaled lotus pattern represents Yunmeng Jiang, the scrolling cloud pattern belongs to the Gusu Lan, and the peony pattern is Lanling Jin. These are all real ancient traditional tattoos. In addition, the TV series has introduced colors of Yin-Yang five elements and match the colors according to features of different clans. For instance, Lanling Jin's color is red, gold, orange and yellow, Gusu Lan white and deep dark, Yunmeng Jiang violet blue and light purple, Qishan Wen crimson and dark silver, and Qinghe Nie orange, brown and gold, corresponding to gold, wood, water, fire and earth in the five elements. Wei Wuxian's single element of black

and red contrasts with the five great clans, presenting the core connotation of the Chinese culture through visual methods.

On top of delicate and beautiful costumes, make-up and props with ancient Chinese style, instruments like black flute "Chen Qing" and seven-string Guqin "Wang Ji", together with ancient-styled theme songs and interludes "Unruly", "Xihua", "Drunken Dreams" etc., which are created by Lin Hai, integrate the charm of national style, intangible cultural heritage and traditional skills into the episodes. As a result, the TV series has created an elegant and graceful oriental world [5].

Besides, the whole series enjoys esthetic and graceful visual positioning. In addition to clothing, food, housing and transportation, the etiquette, magic system, art, costume design and musical instruments all correspond to traditional statutes, characters' personalities and their life stages. For example, Wei's ghost flute is made of blackened bamboo after three months in a mass grave, and is named "Chen Qing", which means to express one's feelings and reminisce about the old days. In addition, the Lan's wiping forehead signifies self-restraint, and the design includes the scrolling cloud pattern, which is in line with Cheng-Zhu school's ritual of "restraining oneself and obeying rites". The talks and night hunt of major families are quite Wei-Jin styled [6].

### ***3.3. The reasons for the success of intercultural communication***

Southeast Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Thailand and Malaysia have been deeply influenced by the Chinese culture. Historically, they were either Chinese counties or affiliated states under the emperor's patronage, which belong to the Greater East Asian Cultural Circle. Because of their homogeneity, films and TV works containing traditional Chinese culture have a natural cultural appeal to them.

In the last century, Chinese martial arts stars, represented by Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan, started a worldwide craze to learn Chinese martial arts and were admired by people all over the world. The martial arts elements in "T.U." inherit the martial arts craze and satisfy foreigners' imagination of Chinese martial arts.

The popularity of *T.U.* among European and American audiences is due in large part to its subject matter. According to public information, Wuxiaworld was founded in December 2014 by Lai Jingping, an American Of Chinese descent. It is the largest Chinese online literature website in the English world at present, mainly focusing on fantasy, martial arts and fairy chivalry. In November, Wuxiaworld ranked 1,536 in the world's most visited websites, with an average of 3.62 million page views per day. The top five countries

are the United States, the Philippines, Canada, Indonesia and the United Kingdom. North America accounts for about a third of the total number of readers [7], the explosion of the immortal genre has paved the way for *T.U.*'s explosion in Europe and the United States. The immortal (Xianxia) theme breaks the specific ideological constraints of the plot and characters, in which "Xia" refers to brave, righteous and selfless heroes with a high level of martial arts. This is similar to the image of Superman in Marvel series, making it possible for audiences in any country or region to enjoy it without any burden.

With the development of modern society, the pace of life gradually accelerates, material needs no longer depend on low-level social cooperation, which leads to people's lack of time or reluctance to communicate emotionally. As a result, the emotional connection between people gradually weakens and the society tends to become individualized. However, people still have the need to establish warm interpersonal relationships, so turning to virtual space for solace is the natural option. The emotional elements in "T.U." avoid the cultural gap and satisfy humans' pursuit of good feelings. The bonding between soulmates remaining unswerving until death has even become a myth of the ideal country.

Since art boasts commonality, fine art products can transcend cultural differences to give people a sense of beauty. The producers of "T.U." has chosen a highly popular and quality novel and kept most of the original settings in the adaptation to ensure the quality of the story. In adapting it to a TV series, it has showcased strong storytelling ability. In addition, coupled with the excellent audio-visual effects, it has delivered esthetic feelings to the audience and captured their attention.

Thus, to achieve successful intercultural communication, it is necessary to interpret the essence of traditional culture in terms of its content, transcend cultural differences, grasp the common emotional needs of human beings, ensure novel main story line and give full play to the artistic qualities of film and television dramas. In doing so, we can tell Chinese stories with excellent works that are both enjoyable, interesting and immersive.

## **4. AUDIENCE ANALYSIS**

### ***4.1. Audience Portrait***

The audience portrait of *T.U.* shows that the female audience accounts for 81.33%, while male audience for 18.67%. Nearly 72.97% of the audience is between the ages of 18-34, with nearly half aged 25-34[8]. The group between 25 and 34 have considerable purchasing power, thus such a proportion of the audience helps the development of the IP industry chain. Unlike male

audience who are attracted by the martial arts elements and scene production, female audience are attracted by multiple factors, such as voice actors, leading actors, and original novel supporters.

#### **4.2. Audience Classification**

The audience of "*T.U.*" can be roughly divided into four categories: original novel fans, actor fans, web drama fans, and voice actor fans. As an adaptation of the popular IP novel "*Mo Dao Zushi*" by Mo Xiang Tongxiu in Jinjiang Literature City, it has received most original fans' support because of the drama's maximum respect for the original. With it being on air on major network platforms, the strengthening of the publicity, coupled with its own excellent production, web drama fans are attracted as well. Secondly, the characters chosen for "*T.U.*" are those who are not very famous in entertainment, but they have a small fan base. Besides, the value of niche users has not been overlooked, in which two dimensions audience and male viewers have the same potential to become popular. The two male protagonists are voiced by the famous domestic CVs (Character Voice) Lu Zhixing and Bian Jiang, and the show has generated a lot of attention and discussion in the two dimensions circle, and was once on the Weibo trends. Surprisingly, part of the discussion came from males, with the topic related to boys watching "*T.U.*" reaching No. 6 on Weibo trends, generating 260 million reads in one day [2]. It can be concluded that the cultural needs of both males and females are met at the same time.

#### **4.3. Analysis of communication effects**

Firstly, the communication influence of "*T.U.*" is driven by multimedia. According to Tencent.com 2021[9], after *T.U.*'s Douban rating participants exceeded 650,000 in 2019, Tencent Video released *T.U.* on YouTube. Its single episode views exceeded 1.9 million, and *T.U.*-related topics ranked top 1 on Twitter hot search list. Meanwhile, *T.U.* was also the top-rated Chinese drama on MyDramalist (an overseas rating website). According to Weibo TV drama data, "*T.U.*" was listed 173 times on trends, with a cumulative hot search value of 560 million and a total of 85 billion reads on related Weibo topics [2].

Later, the domestic largest media "People's Daily" commented on "*T.U.*": delivering the beauty of national style and conveying cultural confidence[10]. A year later, it reviewed outstanding web dramas on its official Weibo account, "online literature should boast both high quality and positive energy." Among the positive cases is "*T.U.*" [11], "*T.U.*" won the "Korean Updates Awards Asian Drama of the Year" and was nominated to the "Top 50 Global Hot Drama List". According to "TV Landmark"[12].

In terms of cultural export and integration, many overseas audience's comments can be seen under the videos related to "*T.U.*" on YouTube and Twitter-related tweets, where they believe that the expression of Chinese culture is very diverse, including scenes, costumes, language, hairstyles, etc. All of them are subtle and elegant. Therefore, the craze for national style has been created. Thai and Korean fans have turned into drama-lovers and the drama has repeatedly topped the Twitter global trending list during its broadcast. The influence of "*T.U.*" in intercultural export and cross-cultural communication is evident.

The following are excerpts of comments on some foreign multimedia platforms, from which it can be proved that "*T.U.*" has been widely followed overseas. Because of the large attention, many viewers have become interested in the Chinese culture and its expression forms, such as headwear, shoulder ornaments, language, etc., which has promoted cultural export.

### **5. THE MULTICULTURAL INDUSTRY OF *T.U.***

Derivative works of the original novel include anime, manga and radio drama. According to the author's statistics, the adapted radio drama has three seasons and 139 episodes, with a total of 515 million views. The adapted anime receives Douban rating of 9 and involves 15 episodes, each lasting for about 20 minutes. The anime adaptation delivers a significant market profit with total hits of 1.95 billion [13].

As for its broadcast, on the night of August 7, 2019, with the release of the final episode, Tencent put forward advance on-demand watch, and more than 1.3 million people purchased the privilege that night, spending 30 yuan to unlock the last five episodes. This brought about 156 million revenues to the drama[14]. As of September 7, 2021, it has received a rating of 9.1 and 9.79 billion views[9].

In terms of spin-offs, as a web-series, "*T.U.*" also shows diversified methods. During its going on air, the drama released a single digital album of national music for 20 RMB in QQ Music, Kuwo Music and KuGou Music. According to the author's statistics, 2,605,784 copies have been sold by August 13, 2021, with total sales of 52,115,680 RMB. "*T.U.*" then launched an official Taobao store, and the highest sales of derivative products have reached more than 30,000 copies per month [2]. Besides, costumes and accessories launched in association with several brands were also best sellers, all of which served as a testament to the superb purchasing power of fans. It has also derived two extra movies: "The Untamed: Chaotic Soul" in November 2019 and "The Untamed: Living Soul" in March 2020. In addition, the producer also held offline cast meetings

and concerts in Tianjin in July and in Nanjing in September 2019. Also, two national-styled concerts were held in Thailand in November with a large number of enthusiastic fans. Even, "T.U." made the news in Thailand because its tickets were madly sold out. A year later, in July 2021, props from the cast were exhibited at the Beijing National Style Art Exhibition, restoring the impressive scenes and generating another little craze, which showed the endurance of its influence.

The producer has built "T.U.", a popular IP adaptation of "Mo Dao Zushi", into a complete industrial chain, making use of the TV series for cultural innovation and dissemination. On the basis of that, it has produced a variety of derivative products, setting up an IP industrial chain and promoting economic development, which in turn benefits the production. As far as the production of this business model is concerned, "T.U." is a model of success.

## 6. CONCLUSION

By analyzing the content, audience, communication effects and IP industry of the intercultural communication of T.U., this thesis draws the following conclusions. In order to form an excellent cross-cultural communication product, in addition to focusing on traditional cultural symbols in the work, the unconventional theme, and trendy cultures such as martial arts and immortality, we should also cater to the common cultural demand of people all over the world. Besides, culture and economy interact with each other. Therefore, based on cultural works in cross-cultural communication, a complete IP industry chain should be formed. In doing so, we can not only further expand influence, but also obtain more funding sources for the continuous development of IP products, which would in turn feed and further reshape the excellent culture as well as promote cultural communication to the world.

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