

I Am What I Am: Construction and Expression of Chinese "Romance" in Animated Movies

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ABSTRACT

From NEZHA: Birth of the Demon Child to Monkey King: Hero is Back, from White Snake to the current hit I Am What I Am, all animated movies are talking about Chinese romance, which is full of Chinese traditional culture and national spirit, filled with Chinese mythological universe and ordinary world. Taking I Am What I Am as the object of study, this paper analyzes the customs and human feelings in traditional culture and personal energy in modern culture from its text symbols, narrative plot and emotional spirit, so as to explore the differences between I Am What I Am and previous animated movies about gods, demons and monsters, and then conclude its more grounded "ordinary and extraordinary" Chinese romance.

Keywords: *I Am What I Am, Text symbols, Narrative plot, Emotional spirit, Chinese roman*

1. INTRODUCTION

Romance has been discussed and described through the ages, and the interpretation of romance varies from country to country. In the entry of Baidu Encyclopedia, the word romance is explained as follows: Romance comes from the romanticism born in Western Europe from the 1820s to the end of the 19th century, which refers to the "individual heroism" feeling of being dissatisfied with the real world, full of expectations and pursuits for the future, with ambitious ideals and unwillingness to degenerate [1]. In China, this "individual heroism" type of romance does not apply, General Secretary Xi Jinping said: "The people are the creators of history, and the real heroes are people." The Chinese romance is never about saving the world, but lies in the emphasis and presentation about the concept of "people". The most ultimate Chinese "romance" is the patriotism that is deeply rooted in heart.

I Am What I Am, which is a big hit recently, has left behind the previous enthusiastic pursuit of the image of gods and demons, and chosen a more grounded image of "little characters". Through the writing of customs and human feelings in traditional culture and personal energy in modern culture, it shows a story full of Chinese local characteristics and deduces a "romantic" plot full of Oriental aesthetic implication for the majority of audiences. In particular, the vivid depiction of each ordinary character in the film and the "realistic romance"

of family affection, friendship, ideal and life can be gotten touched in every word and sentence, all of which seem to make the majority of the audience become a "role" in the film, and integrate this romance into their bodies and hearts. The realistic romance of the "little characters" enhances their emotional resonance and identity of the roles in film.

2. REALISTIC TEXT SYMBOLS: METAPHORICAL ROMANCE SHAPING REALITY

As an important role in image communication, symbols can bring us more three-dimensional and diversified visual and auditory experience. Referring to the classification of TV symbols by scholar Lu Ye in his book Introduction of Contemporary Broadcast Television, this paper also divides the symbols in the film text into linguistic symbols and non-linguistic symbols [2]. It is also because of the continuous interweaving of the two types of symbols that the presentation of real life in the film becomes more realistic and dynamic, and the individual symbols are full of emotions and meanings behind them, shaping the metaphorical romance of reality.

First of all, in terms of language symbols, the film is deeply close to the ordinary life in south of the Five Ridges. In particular, the use of Cantonese language text adds strong local characteristics and creates a more real

environmental atmosphere. For example, when Ah Juan, the male lead, watched the local lion dance activities in the Spring Festival, she shouted "how beautiful!", a Cantonese phrase familiar to the whole country instantly takes the audience to the living environment of the Guangdong region, and the unique tone and flavor of the Cantonese language, emphasizing the realism of the film. Moreover, the language symbols of the film are full of emotion and with strong breath of life. Every line of the protagonists shows their rich inner world to the audience. At the same time, they also tell the trivial but extraordinary "Romance" in real life bluntly. For example, in the film, when two ah Juan are standing on the top of the mountain, the female ah Juan said to the male, "Did you hear that? There is a lion roar in your heart, which seems to say--don't be a sick cat bullied by others! Go and be a male lion!" "Can I?" the male asked in reply. "Absolutely you can! Kapok is also called Hero flower. You are the man hit by hero flower!" She replied.

In the text of their question and answer, the love and reluctance of the female Ah Juan for the lion dance and the self-awakening of the male protagonist are embedded in the text. In this dialogue, it is as if the audience can see their ordinary selves, their desire for undying dreams and love, their dissatisfaction and reflection on the current situation, or their own empathy and self-awakening when standing in a difficult situation. In addition to the ideal discourse of "self-worth realization", there are also many language symbols for family affection and friendship in the film, which are also quietly enhancing the viewer's emotional resonance and identity. For example, when Ah Juan, the male lead, called her parents who were working far away during the Spring Festival, her parents reassured her children, "we are all right! Don't worry. Guangzhou has everything. Today's Chinese New Year, we have got extra food, big fish and fresh meat." The simple words are full of the love of ordinary parents for their children, the love of not wanting their families to get worried, the selfless love of Chinese parents, and the love that can be felt by every wanderer who is far away from home and can't accompany their parents for a long time in life.

Secondly, for the non-verbal symbols, there are many typical symbols in the film that conceal the metaphorical romance of reality and touch the inner world of the film viewers, among which the typical non-verbal symbols are mainly composed of environmental symbols, object symbols and music symbols. First of all, the film depicts a large number of scenes of small towns and modern metropolises in Guangdong. The highly restored scenes of village houses, farmhouses, small town shops, ancestral halls and other scenes in Guangdong represent the optimistic, happy and blissful hometown time of Ah Juan, who is still struggling for her ideal; The depiction of Guangzhou construction site, clothing wholesale market, Xi Guan old street in Li Wan District, the top floor of urban village and other scenes is to highlight the helplessness, struggle and lonely wandering years of the

hero a Juan when she left her hometown, which is a foreign land that cannot be truly integrated [3]. In addition, the film reveals the philosophy of life and spiritual thoughts contained in the text through a large number of symbols that restore reality. The skinny kitten that appears at the beginning of the film and the mighty lion that soars at the end of the film allude to the personal image and growth of the main character, Ah Juan, who is initially a skinny "sick cat" that is always bullied, but grows into a resolute and brave "lion" with the lion dance and the trials and tribulations of life. These two metaphorical images stir the heart of every ordinary person who is struggling to grow up, and they find their own shadows in. At the same time, the fiery red kapok in the film represents the "hero flower", as an important "metaphorical role" from the beginning to the end of the film, and eventually transformed into the resolute spirit of Ah Juan "Never submit to fate", which has been passed down from generation to generation in China, showing the romantic sentiment of the Chinese people's perseverance and courage. Another metaphorical character "red lion head" throughout is the embodiment of Guan Gong in traditional culture, a beautiful image of ah Juan's "loyalty, filial piety and righteousness", and a symbol for every Chinese. In addition, the Buddha statue is also a typical representative symbol. It is the hope and spiritual sustenance of the protagonist and the guide to get up again in the face of difficulties. Worshipping the Buddha also represents the customs in Chinese traditional culture and the faith and beautiful yearning of the Chinese people. Last but not least, the music symbols in the film also constantly show the local Chinese culture. When the people of Jiu Lian shout: "how to go up the mountain, how to go down the mountain", the scene of the Cantonese boys trying to pursue their dreams comes to mind. When the people of Wu Tiao sang "Why are you wearing your ragged slippers, why don't you go cut your hair", the unique dialect sang out not only the original countryside of China, but also the image of many wanderers who left the town like the main character.

The scholar Saussure proposed that "signifier" and "signified" involve two different meanings of symbols, and the textual symbols involved in the film are not only the "objects" themselves, but also imply a deeper cultural connotation and spiritual symbolism. From the rich variety of communication symbols, we see the local landscape of Chinese cities and towns, the growth of youngsters left behind, the warmth of family and friendship, and the image of every ordinary person struggling to make a living, which is closer to the reality of metaphorical romance that touches everyone's heart.

3.THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF NARRATIVE PLOT: CREATING AN IDEAL ROMANCE OF THE ORDINARY

American scholar Arthur Asa Berger explained the

"definition of narration" in his book *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media and Daily Life*. He believed that "narration is a story, which includes a series of events in chronological order, which can be short or long with a beginning, middle and ending." [4] As a storytelling animated film, the narrative structure of the film *I Am What I Am* follows the narrative definition of Berger. It not only contains many small stories to form a big narrative, but also forms a dramatic plot according to a certain logic. The sequential development of the whole story is carried out according to the growth of the protagonist Ah Juan. It is a story interpretation from Id to Ego and then to Superego. Freud put forward in his book "Ego and ID": there are three 'I' in our personality, ID, ego and superego. In his view, ID is an instinctive desire dominated by the principle of pleasure, expressing "I want"; Self is self-restraint and change under the guidance of the principle of reality, which expresses "I change"; Superego is a moral self-dominated by the principle of perfection, which refers to "I surpass" [5]. Ah Juan got through the process of these states of mind, and it fully shows the twists and turns of the character's growth. Every time, we can also receive another kind of ideal romance of the ordinary people.

"I want lion dancing". As a native of Guangdong, Ah Juan feels the baptism of the traditional culture of "Southern lion" from urination, and his love for it is self-evident. In the film, whether it is the memory of watching the lion dancing performance with his parents since childhood or the initiative to watch the lion dancing in the Spring Festival when he grows up, it represents the protagonist Ah Juan's love for the lion dance culture. Therefore, the first reason why Ah Juan wants to dance the lion is because of his love. With the development of the film, Ah Juan was promoted by the words of the female Ah Juan. He has never been a loser; he deeply moved for a second time in her heart, "I want to dance a lion, to get rid of a life muddling along". When the protagonist Ah Juan sits in front of the Buddha statue, holding a group photo with his parents and muttering to himself, "this year's wish has not come true, but it doesn't matter. I don't blame you. Since my parents have never come back, let me make a new wish. I'm going to Guangzhou to surprise them. I'm coming for the lion dance competition!", which touches his heart for the third time. He wants to participate in the lion dance competition to get together with his parents. The protagonist at the beginning of the film is just an ignorant teenager who has just planted the seed of "desire to dance a lion". The desire is his most instinctive pursuit--his love, his resistance to be laughed at, and his love for his parents.

"I get to change". When Ah Juan stood under the tree and shouted to his friend Ah Mao, "Ah Mao, I want to dance a lion!", they took the first step to change themselves and decided to participate in the competition as a team to prove that they could do it; When Ah Juan,

Ah Mao and Ah Gou were insulted by the Chen Jia Village lion team, they stood on the middle of the village, heard the big drum of the training lion team, recalled all kinds of ridicule, and shouted: "I want to be a male lion like them!". The growth and change of they three will really start from that on; the three people traveled past mountains and over rivers to ask Ah Quang as their master and tried to persuade Ah Quang accepting them. This desperate determination began to change the audience's initial impression of the three nothing-to-do teenagers; when the friendship match between the newcomers of the Ah Quang's team was over, the three people deeply knew the disadvantages they had from Chen Jia Village lion team and began the ultimate change. They kept training every day to enhance their strength and fell on the piles countless times to learn their spirit. Finally, in the preliminary competition of the lion dance, the three teenagers defeated their new opponents and themselves. The second plot turn of the film narrative comes from the change of the protagonist from the heart. It is a change to solve problems based on reality, and a change of self-realization derived from instinctive desire.

"I surpass myself". They successfully got the semi-finals ticket and successfully completed the transformation, but the accident of life came. Due to the serious illness of his father, Ah Juan had to stay away from his hometown and go far to earn money to support his family. This is his first self-transcendence. He is no longer live for his own desires, but to assume the responsibility of his family. After the honing of life, he gradually lost his innocence and happiness she had before in a busy metropolis. When Ah Juan, who hated fate, got away the hero flower on his body, we all thought that he also abandoned spirit of never-give-up, but at the last moment, Ah Juan returned to the lion dance competition in Lychee Bay, Guangzhou, not only for herself, but also for her partners who fought with her, for Ah Quang, the master who taught them skills selflessly. The final sublimation of the film is the sublimation of the protagonist's high morality and high ideal, the transformation of surpassing his own selfish desire, the transcendence for his family, partners and mentor, and the transcendence of the perfect embodiment sublimated after changing the current situation.

The protagonist Ah Juan's growth is developing along from "Id" to "Ego" and then to "Superego". We have witnessed Ah Juan's gradual transformation from an ignorant teenager who initially did nothing to a determined teenager who firmly pursued his dream. In this tortuous narrative, we can see the ideal romance of ordinary characters, the ideal romance in Stephen Chow's film that if a man doesn't have a dream, what the difference is from a salted fish. It is an ideal romance that can be self-defined and strives to pursue. It is a romance that every Chinese tries to find under the oppression of real life, which is not unreachable or ethereal, but shines in everyone's heart with ordinary meaning and will never die.

4. FULL EMOTIONAL SPIRIT: SPREADING CHINESE ROMANCE OF IMPERFECTION

In many literary works and even artistic works, imperfection is regarded as a kind of beauty, an imperfect perfection. The beauty of imperfection can leave more space for people to think and imagine. As early as in the *Book of Changes*, there is a good sentence, "full moon can be lost same as to the overflows of the water", which conveys the idea that perfection cannot be imposed. Therefore, the pursuit of imperfection has also become a unique way for people to get another kind of beauty. As a frequently searched work of art, the film reveals imperfection beauty in both characterization and plot. There is filled with emotional spirit when talking the imperfection beauty. The imperfection has also become truly perfect to inspire the audience.

At the beginning, what made the film go viral is the controversy of Internet users over the character image in the film. Some netizens believe that the squint of the protagonists is an insult and vilification of Chinese. However, as a work of art that pays attention to ordinary people in Chinese society, this artistic exaggerated expression is just to show a great beauty of imperfection and vividly depicts the external image of ordinary people. Although they are not the perfect image engraved in Disney animation or the lovely thick eyebrows and big eyes in Japanese animation; it just expresses the sense of reality and imperfection beauty in the eyes of many writers and scholars. It is an ordinary young feature with the personality of old-fashioned and smart in small towns that challenges the unified aesthetics of the audience and breaks the morbid pursuit of perfect nowadays. More attention would be attracted to Chinese real world and the ordinary people living in.

In addition to the imperfection beauty of the characters, the imperfection beauty of the film plot is also moving and aftertaste. The first regret comes from the love topic in the film between Ah Zhen and Ah Quang. When Ah Zhen shouted to Ah Quang, "I didn't allow you to dance lions and did those dangerous actions ever. Like everyone else, I advised you not to neglect your business, earned money and lived a good life, sold the salted fish, and had made you stay in vain for more than ten years!". When Ah Zhen got on the motorcycle and cried out in tears, "I regret it!", these words and sentences all show the imperfection of the reality to the audience. She regrets and even feels guilty that she can't let her husband pursue his dream. In her opinion, it is she who got Ah Quang become a mediocre in life. This kind of imperfection is so moving. So as to the people who give up their dreams because of life. In China's traditional humanities, giving up ethereal dreams for family and partners is another greatness. We may have regret, but we feel deserved. Life is not only to become the winner pursuing dreams, but more pragmatic care for small families, which can bring

peace of society and the country. That will be identified as another kind of realistic romance. The second regret comes from the "last jump" of the protagonist Ah Juan. The unattainable Optimus Prime shines in front of Ah Juan. The last step up is half success and failure. Ah Juan falls into the water, but the lion's head hangs high. The design of the ending shows not the success of pursuing dreams, but the regret that little people cannot become big winners in life. It is precisely this imperfection that makes us see the second possibility of animation works of art. When the Monkey King beat the demons and completed his self-redemption; When NEZHA risked everyone's condemnation and completed his self-change, what we see from the films is the happy ending of the protagonists. The idealization shows the perfection of the mythical universe and lacks the ordinary part of life. The ending design of the film *I Am What I Am* shows the imperfection of ordinary people's life incisively and vividly. We can't have divine power like mythical characters. Even if we make all efforts out, there will be chance that we can't achieve our ideals. At the end of the film, surprisingly Ah Juan still got busy with the working in modern cities. The cruel pressure of life also reminded the audience: "Up and down the mountain, everyone has his own way to go." In addition, the love that male Ah Juan failed to start and the lion dance that female Ah Juan had to give up in the film also reflect the imperfection of every ordinary person's life.

When European and American blockbusters try to tell the romance of "personal heroism" saving the world, what we see in this film is the realistic romance without excessive "idealism", the ordinary and extraordinary romance focusing on ordinary characters, and the emphasis and description of the characters. The characters and plots in the film tell us the inconspicuous but hardworking of the Chinese people, because of which that Ah Quang gave up lion dance and returned to the real life, and Ah Juan failed in her last leap and got back to work. However, the full spirit behind the imperfection still awakens the pursue of romance in the hearts of the Chinese people, which encourages thousands of ordinary people in China to live a "perfect and imperfect" life in a conspicuous way.

5. CONCLUSION

With the rapid development of Chinese animation industry, the film *I Am What I Am* stands out, as a dark horse, presenting an animation story full of Chinese unique aesthetics and romance to the majority of audiences. From the perspective of Chinese film research, we can find that it shows the unique Oriental characteristics of Chinese films in a unique way. While most of the film works are still excavating the mythical heroes in Chinese traditional culture, the film pays more attention to the role of ordinary people in real life. It closely combines Chinese traditional customs and human

feelings with the reality and humanities, and transmits a wonderful story of teenagers showing themselves, challenging themselves, trying to pursue their dreams, but finally returning to reality. In this inspirational story, various realistic text symbols are constantly intertwined, shaping the realistic metaphorical romance; the narrative plots of various twists and turns are constantly presented, creating an ordinary ideal romance; all kinds of full emotional spirit continue to gush, spreading Chinese imperfection romance. Admittedly, the plot of the film is old-fashioned and not perfect. It seems that you can guess the ending when watching the beginning, but the ink animation at the beginning of the film, Ah Juan's betting his bottom dollar on the last leap, being busy with several jobs for life, the teenagers who dance lions on the rooftop until dawn, and the spirit of never-give-up and fearlessness, all of which constitute the most romantic realism of Chinese people, and have become the most genuine emotional resonance and identity of every ordinary Chinese.

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