



Transcendence, Hybrid and Exploration: an Analysis of the Film *the Scent of Green Papaya*

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Abstract. This paper analyzes Anh Hung Tran's film, *The Scent of Green Papaya*. The film is characterized by its "Oriental" setting. However, this paper aims to challenge this idea by adopting a transcultural perspective. It looks deep into the lens languages and cultural identity, mainly focusing on two aspects of transcendence, namely transcendence of geographical space and women's roles. This film is not only an essential product of a multi-cultural world but also a feasible and meaningful practice in cultural communications and globalization. Tran created new status and forms for the hybrid cultural product by utilizing his transcultural identity and tolerant, positive, and active cultural awareness. He went beyond individual perspectives and his national background, mixing Vietnamese and French cultures through a metaphorical lens and showing cultural conflicts from a relatively subjective position. Tran's films inspire people to face the challenges in transcultural communication and deal with cultural conflicts in a harmonious way.

Keywords: Transcultural · The Scent of Green Papaya · Lens language · Cultural communication · Feminism

1 Introduction

The world under COVID-19 has come with many challenges in cultural, social, political, and economic aspects of life. These challenges have put greater pressure on communications worldwide and films are becoming a widely-used method to spread and express the culture to the world. Internationally, films have been seen as a significant approach to connecting the cultures from different areas. Consequently, analyzing the films which were created by the directors with a transcultural background is a way to better understand transcultural communication and provide a possibility to decrease the cultural conflicts around the world.

This paper looks into the film, *The Scent of Green Papaya*. This film mainly tells a story about a Vietnamese woman named Mai, who falls in love with a man and gets married to him with a happy ending. This paper aims to answer the following questions: to what extent is this film a transcultural product? How did Tran solve the cultural conflicts? Research on Tran's films was generally from the perspective of Orientalism in the field of film studies. Cui in his study showed that Tran's films explore the style and

form of Oriental philosophy through the lenses of post-colonialism and new-historicism, especially his first film, *The Scent of Green Papaya* which represented the ideology of Buddhism and Zen in the “Orient”. Tran gazed at Vietnam from a “western” perspective [1]. Based on their own “Oriental” ethnic identity and worship for poems, Vietnamese directors use the unique poetic film language to show their national character or reflect the “Oriental character” [2].

Another scholar, Jin thought that Tran’s imagination of his mother country is more than reality, and he tried his best to construct highly stylized film narration by capturing the image elements and details in the Vietnamese film tradition and Vietnamese national culture [3]. Moreover, other research was conducted in a feminist view. Deng revealed that Tran’s film did not portray typical masculine roles which broke through the patriarchal system to show females’ agency. She agreed that Tran demonstrated the female characters and narrated the story from the perspective of women [4]. In contrast, Zhen’s study proved that the female myth carefully woven by the film industry is essentially an image expression catering to the central position of male power and this film provides a vivid footnote to the dominant position of male discourse in the gender power system [5].

There are no studies analyzing the film *The Scent of Green Papaya* through transcultural theory and connecting it with Tran’s identity. Many scholars concentrated on the lens language. For example, Zhang analyzed the film through the subjects in the film and how the film expresses emotions through different lenses [6]. This paper also adopts image analysis, focusing on lens language, especially the techniques used to zoom in specific characters and sceneries, and the visual metaphors in the film. Furthermore, to respond to previous studies on orientalism, this paper looks into the film through a transcultural lens. Perspective in transculturalism is that cultures in the world have differences, but there are no barriers in cultures and they are dynamic and able to mix with each other [7]. This paper also used Mulvey’s feminist theory to consider the female and male power relationship in the film. Mulvey’s theory turned voyeurism into fetishism, and make women reliable rather than dangerous by shaping women as Fetish objects [8].

This paper argues that *The Scent of Green Papaya* is a transcultural product which goes beyond the traditional cultural borders. Tran’s transnational identity played a significant role in solving cultural conflicts. He explored and constructed a new discourse system for “the third culture”. Although he idealized the female characters and overlooked the pain in their growing process, he tried to go beyond the gender barrier from the transcultural aspect. In this sense, this film transgresses the boundaries of culture, nation, language, and gender. It is a transcultural product providing a possibility for communication.

2 Transcendence of Cultural Barriers

2.1 Transcendence of Geographical Space: Overlapping of Multiple Cultures

The film is based on a Vietnamese society, and the things appearing in them have Vietnamese characteristics. However, the film goes beyond the physical boundary of the country, and cannot be simply defined as or distinguished by typical dichotomies between

“Oriental” and “Occidental” in terms of style, scene, and shooting, which neatly separate “us” and “others”.

The Scent of Green Papaya was filmed in France. The producer was French and the scene of “Vietnam” was built in a French studio. It is why some scholars thought that the humid, lively, and muggy “scent” in the film vividly and truly simulates and restores the climate and natural environment of Vietnam [1]. In the film, the slow, long, and ambiguous lens language was used many times to give close-up shots of green papaya as the symbol of Vietnam’s tropics. The close-up shots of green papaya with many seeds and the juice slowly flowing from the green papaya tree show the director’s impression of Vietnam, once the “hometown”. The scene of the host’s house of Mai was mostly depicted through the window of the “Oriental” wooden attic. It is used to perceive and observe the roles. A wooden window is the starting point of viewing, with alienation and estrangement. The director tried to jump out of a fixed and categorical perspective to re-examine and recreate the environment. In a quiet and leisurely social environment, the director placed electric fan, piano, telephone, and other objects which are regarded as the symbols of civilization and industrialization without any contradiction and abruptness. Instead, they were slowly displayed in a soothing and harmonious way. When the traditional “Oriental” wooden structure and courtyard design appear in the same picture as the products of “western” industrial civilization, the director tried to break people’s inherent impression and “stereotype” of the East and the West in a unique and implicit way. Although they are independent of each other, the integrity of the picture has not been broken. The film challenges the inherent cultural and physical boundaries and is characterized as a “hybrid” cultural and artistic work with a peaceful and calm attitude. For example, Buddha statues have appeared many times, as a representative of “Oriental” beliefs. “Oriental” Buddha statues are in line with the mysterious images of the East in western society. Haoren, the hero who has received good western education, has no sense of alienation and disobedience when he touches the Buddha statues, which indicates that civilization and belief can span the boundaries of nations and countries. In this sense, there is no estrangement between civilizations. A transnational cultural work does not necessarily belong to any kind of culture. Instead, it can be a transcultural performance which was created from multiple perspectives.

2.2 Transcendence of Women’s Roles: “Three-Dimensional” and Alive Female Characters

The Scent of Green Papaya demonstrates the fates of three generations of Vietnamese women. Deeply influenced by their own times, they are all multi-dimensional and alive. The shaping of female images in Anh Hung Tran’s film goes beyond regional culture. He paid attention to the characters themselves and the essence of people. A single perspective like “Orientalism” or “post-colonialism” fails to unearth the characterization of artistic work. Firstly, for the creation of the protagonist Mai, the words like “mysterious oriental beauty”, “forbearance” and “implication” are used to describe this distinctive “Oriental” woman. She serves the host’s family in silence and honestly. ‘Her love and desire for the hero were expressed through the hidden lens language, such as using lipstick, polishing shoes for the hero, and trying them on. The obscure way of expression should not be regarded as the stereotype that the director treated the East from an “Orientalist”

perspective and believed that the East is in an uncivilized stage of expressing “love”. The director showed Mai’s complex but pure inner world through a restrained and objective lens. As a girl in love, it is inevitable to have shy subjective reasons and the objective facts of Vietnam’s specific social background should also be considered. The obscure lens language may shape an alive and vivid female image of Mai. However, Mai is different from the “Oriental” women under the traditional western discourse system. She dares to face her deep love for others, expresses herself, and creates opportunities for herself sincerely and bravely, instead of being an “Aphasia” and “passive” woman. Tran completed the transcendence of the gender boundary in shaping women’s images. He revealed women’s inner world from a female perspective.

Secondly, he shaped the female roles from the perspective of the previous generation, such as the hostess in the film, a tolerant, hardworking, unpretentious, kind wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother. In her relationship with her husband, she is in a passive position, waiting to “be selected”; as a daughter-in-law, she must obey all her mother-in-law’s words and has no right to resist; as a mother, she supports the broken home without complaint and regret in order to provide a seemingly “complete” family for children. All the choices seem to be full of sadness, but in fact, they also demonstrate women’s agencies in different positions. The tenacious, selfless and family-dedicated characters of Vietnamese women are what the director wanted to convey through the seemingly helpless reality. It also reflects the director’s spiritual strength offered by his “hometown of mind”. What really makes the works deeply rooted in the hearts of the people is not complex skills, but the empathy of the underlying culture and the understanding beyond physical and regional boundaries. The vague boundary between cultures makes the exchange of human social civilization possible.

2.3 Transcendence of Film Language: Reconstruction and Artistic Cutting

Film language consists of visual language and auditory language. In a broad sense, language is a cultural symbol and also conveys and carries the culture. In terms of auditory language, the film was completely funded by France and shot in France and won the Oscar for best foreign-language film. Taking Saigon, Vietnam as the social background of the film, the whole film adopts the Vietnamese language. Although all scenes were not created in Vietnam, the environment and atmosphere presented in the whole film can still give the audience a real experience of being in the scene. Therefore, culture can coexist, blend and overlap in various forms, across geographical space, time and different physical individuals. A new way of cultural interaction can be formed by cutting and reconstructing different cultures. German linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt believed that “every language contains a unique world outlook” [9]. Some studies have shown that language can shape personal cultural identity. As a “wanderer” far away from his hometown, Tran’s thoughts and feelings for his “hometown” have the “blood” and national feelings of Vietnam because of the language. Although there are hardly any dialogue and narrative in the whole film, and the characters and their inner world were often displayed with silent lenses and pictures. Each sentence contains complex emotions and profound cultural meanings. The auditory language of the film is very fine and delicate. In the background, sounds like cicadas, running water, crickets, the wind blowing through the leaves, and stepping on the wooden floor, are full of nostalgia for the

beautiful things in Vietnam. At the same time, the roar of airplanes, the sound of curfews and the hum of electric fans, as well as the tense sound of modern industry, constantly remind the audience that Vietnam is in a state of war and colonization. As a cultural broker between Vietnam and France, Tran's lens language did not completely solidify the impression of Vietnam in the narrow imagination of the West about the "Oriental" world. Under the influence of "national emotion" and "national identity", he also revealed the pain of Vietnamese society. The historical facts of the colonial war and the harmonious, quiet, and beautiful environment overlap in the film at the same time. The director placed them together with artistic techniques, but they are not contradictory. In terms of cultural meaning, the director artistically reconstructed his hometown of "soul" from different cultural perspectives. He once said: "when I make a film, it is not for a specific country, but for the country in my heart". Therefore, the "Vietnamese world" in his film and television works does not belong to any cultural form. It is a work floating between a variety of cultures and ideologies. It is an audio-visual monologue of Tran's cultural interpretation.

3 An Exploration in Transculture

3.1 The Metaphorical Lens: Construction of Emotional Identity in the Transcultural Context

Tran used many metaphorical techniques in the film, to express emotions and create artistic conceptions. Metaphor is not only the main means of expressing emotion and attitude but also one of the most commonly used artistic methods in film art. The images in the film frame are all metaphors, substitutes for certain ideas, and have their internal metaphorical value, rather than the general picture [2]. The main intention of the film is the green papaya. The director showed the detailed entire process of the growth and maturity of green papaya. The green papaya, which represents Vietnamese women, is consistent with Mai's change from a young and astringent girl to a mature woman with independent ideas and pursuits. There are many seeds inside the mature green papaya, which are consistent with the gentle and tenacious impression that the women in the film gradually have a rich inner world and many good qualities after growing up. There is a plot where Mai at a young age accidentally breaks one of a pair of precious vases when cleaning the owner's house, and she is not blamed but is gently comforted by the hostess. The vase here symbolizes the class system in traditional Vietnamese society. Breaking the vase indicates Mai's fate is changed finally. She is transformed from a maid to a lady after marrying the male protagonist with good western education. There is no doubt that she crosses the class and achieves the transformation of life. Metaphorical things in the film have distinctive "regional" characteristics, which result in a high degree of recognition and make it easier for the recipients to capture the director's emotion. In the process of transcultural communication, works of art need to break the differences to finally realize semantic sharing and achieve the common emotional identity of mankind all over the world. These works break the class imprisonment, pursue a free, satisfactory, and harmonious ending and look forward to a better future.

Tran was aware of the respective characteristics and differences between cultures, but he did not avoid them. Instead, he skilfully used people's stereotypical impressions

of other cultures as the carrier of common emotions of all mankind. Finally, in the transcultural context, he used metaphorical techniques and exquisite lens language to build emotional identity, narrowed the gap in cross-cultural communication, and created more comprehensive cross-cultural works.

3.2 Cultural Conflicts and Integration

In the film, Tran did not deliberately hide or avoid the cultural differences between the Eastern and the Western. He showed the cultural differences and conflicts calmly and restrainedly. Vietnam was set as the cultural background. Combined with the cultural background of the director himself and the French film producer, the director showed his critical attitude towards the feudal culture and patriarchy, which are regarded as the typical cultures in “Oriental” society. Women must still adhere to “benevolence, morality and faithfulness” after the death of their husbands. In the film, the director contrasted Mai’s attitude towards love with that of the former generation of women. When Tran treated the so-called “Oriental” culture he does not agree with, he did not avoid or beautify the culture of the “hometown of the soul” but showed it with a gentle and developmental vision. He saw the development of the times, faced and examined those problems left over by history. In addition, he saw the possibility of a nation’s development and progress. It is under the influence of the social environment and cultures that a grandfather in the film deeply loves the old lady, even though he is rejected after expressing his true love in mind. From then on, the ending of the silent grandfather is different from the ending of the hero. With the deep influence of western education, he expresses his love for the girl directly and takes the initiative to choose, and he obtains a happy and wonderful love. It shows the director’s distinctive cultural attitude towards the differences between the Eastern and Western views of love and social values. Another cultural stereotype is about perfect female characters. They are virtuous, pure, and gentle. Tran shaped the idealized female characters, which satisfies the demands of male audiences. According to Laura Mulvey, “The male unconscious has two ways to escape this castration anxiety: concentrate on imitating the original trauma (examine the woman and demystify her mystery), balance it by devaluing, punishing or saving the guilty object; or another way to completely deny castration, that is, replace it with a fetish object, or turn the reproduced character itself into a fetish, so as to make it safe rather than dangerous (therefore, there is excessive evaluation and obvious worship of women)” [8]. This film uses the second method to shape the perfect and objectifying women. There is still a conflict between gender in the film.

3.3 Exploration and Challenge: The Creativity of Immigrants’ Cultural Identity

The diversity of Tran’s cultural identity brings a transcultural perspective to his films, providing a paradigm for the communication mode in the context of globalization.

As a director of immigration, he does not choose to regard himself as a “stranger” or “marginal person” of the culture of the immigration country. He does not have a conflict with or resist integration into the cultural environment of the immigration country. Instead, he makes full use of the diversity and richness of various cultural backgrounds, recognizes and constructs his identity as a “multicultural person”, and maintains his

different cultural brand and cultural integrity with an open, inclusive and positive attitude. He also examines culture from an objective perspective, creates the possibility of blending different cultures on the basis of differences in a free and flexible way, and creates a unique third cultural perspective. In the era of globalization, it can promote the continuous reconciliation and exchange of cultures, maintain distinctive characteristics, and find the resonance and identity of common emotions. However, the director's cultural perspective and identity also have problems and difficulties, such as weakening the difference between works, creating vague cultural boundaries, and diversifying decoding. However, in the sense of cultural communication, it is an intermediary bridge between different cultures. It is also an indispensable form of development in the process of cultural exchanges.

In this film, Tran neither blindly blurred the cultural differences between different areas nor treated the cultural differences with a negative attitude. Instead, he recognized the differences with an active and inclusive attitude, respected the objective differences, and looked at the culture from the perspective of development. He showed the possibility in the development of "the third world culture", which has been neglected, solidified, and gazed at by the mainstream.

4 Conclusion

The analysis indicates that *The Scent of Green Papaya* is a transcultural product. It transgresses the borders of cultures, gender, and geography, mainly due to the director's attitudes towards different cultures and his cultural identity as both a Vietnamese and French. The director did not avoid cultural conflicts. Instead, he tried to show different cultures and took active and positive measures to create harmony and acceptable feelings for audiences. Furthermore, through the theory of feminism, this paper proposes some perspectives of the director's attitudes and cultural identity, especially focusing on the dynamic development in different cultures and those mixed and hybrid cultural products. They are parts of transcultural communication and globalization. Transculturalism could be a useful theoretical framework of film studies and cultural communications.

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