

Re-Encoding Culture in Chinese Animation: A Three-Level Model of Cross-Cultural Narrative Translation

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ABSTRACT

As Chinese animated films increasingly circulate globally, understanding how culturally specific narratives achieve cross-cultural intelligibility remains critical. Existing research often emphasizes either the export of cultural symbols or audience reception, overlooking the narrative mechanisms that mediate cultural translation. This study introduces Narrative Re-encoding as a novel concept in animation cross-cultural storytelling, proposing a three-level analytical framework—Value (cultural dimensions), Narrative (structural transformation), and Expressive (emotional mediation)—as both a theoretical and methodological contribution. Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and employing qualitative textual analysis with a structured coding framework, the study examines Ne Zha (2019) and Ne Zha 2 (2025), high-grossing films with global reach, to investigate how cultural values are re-encoded into universally intelligible story structures. Findings indicate that cross-cultural narrative effectiveness relies less on direct transmission of symbols and more on strategic narrative reconfiguration: balancing individualism and collectivism, reducing traditional power distance through relational design, and managing uncertainty in conflicts to enhance engagement. At the expressive level, culturally specific elements are transformed into emotionally universal experiences, enabling global resonance without prior cultural knowledge. This study contributes to cross-cultural media scholarship by conceptualizing narrative as an active mechanism of cultural translation and offering a practical model for analysing non-Western media globalization. It provides both theoretical insight and actionable guidance for creators seeking to design animated stories that resonate with diverse audiences.

Keywords: Chinese animation; Cross-cultural Narrative; Cultural dimensions; Narrative translation; Ne Zha



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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background and Research Questions

In recent years, alongside the continuous improvement of production quality and market scale within China's animation industry, Chinese animated films have gained increasing visibility in the sphere of international communication. From participation in international film festivals to distribution through global streaming platforms, Chinese animation has gradually moved beyond its previously domestic

oriented circulation pattern (Pan, 2025). However, despite the advancement of distribution channels and technological conditions, Chinese animation continues to face considerable challenges in terms of cross-cultural comprehension and cultural identification. When narratives involve traditional Chinese cultural symbols and value expressions, differences in interpretation among audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds have become a major factor constraining the international communicative effectiveness of Chinese animation (Yang, 2024).

Chinese scholars have widely noted that, in the process of “Going global,” Chinese animation often encounters problems such as high interpretive barriers surrounding cultural symbols and difficulties in conveying culturally embedded values to audiences from different cultural contexts. On the one hand, many animated works rely heavily on local mythology, historical allusions, and collective cultural experiences. While these symbolic systems possess strong cultural consensus within domestic contexts, their meanings often become difficult to fully comprehend in international circulation due to the absence of shared cultural backgrounds, sometimes even resulting in misinterpretation (Geertz, 1973; Gao, 2023). On the other hand, some existing studies remain limited to discussions concerning whether cultural elements have been successfully exported or whether a work sufficiently embodies “Chinese characteristics,” while paying comparatively little attention to the mechanisms through which cultural differences are narratively adapted and transformed (Zhu & Song, 2025; Deng & Jiang, 2025).

Against this backdrop, *Ne Zha* (2019) and *Ne Zha 2* (2025) (hereafter referred to as “The two animated films”), as two of the most influential Chinese animated films in recent years, have attracted widespread attention both domestically and internationally. While preserving core Chinese mythological motifs and cultural symbols, the films demonstrate considerable cross-cultural communicative potential through the modern reconstruction of character relationships, emotional expression, and value conflicts. Existing studies suggest that, at the narrative level, the films weaken the strong fatalistic orientation traditionally associated with Chinese mythology and instead foreground individual choice, emotional identification, and a sense of responsibility. Such value expressions are considered more likely to resonate across diverse cultural contexts (Zhou, 2025; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Compared with conventional mythological animation adaptations, this film series does not simply reproduce pre-existing cultural narrative models; rather, it attempts to reconstruct character identities and modes of value expression within a global cultural context. As such, the films provide highly representative textual cases for examining cross-cultural narrative strategies in Chinese animation.

Based on the above discussion, this study raises the following central research question: within differing cultural value structures, how does Chinese animation achieve the effective translation and comprehension of cultural meanings through the adaptation of narrative strategies? More specifically, while maintaining cultural specificity, how can Chinese animation reduce interpretive barriers for audiences from different cultural backgrounds and enhance narrative accessibility and emotional resonance? To address these questions, this study introduces Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory to analyze the cross-cultural narrative mechanisms employed in the two animated films, with the aim of revealing the underlying pathways through which Chinese animation achieves “cultural intelligibility” via the interaction between cultural values and narrative structures (Hofstede et al., 2010).

1.2 Research Objects

This study takes *Ne Zha* and *Ne Zha 2*, together with their cross-cultural communication contexts, as its primary research objects. Adapted from the traditional Chinese mythological figure Nezha, the two animated films demonstrate substantial modernization in terms of narrative structure, character construction, and value expression. Since their release, both films have attracted significant attention in domestic and international markets. Compared with earlier Chinese animated productions, the two films exhibit more explicit forms of cross-cultural adaptation in both narrative strategy and emotional expression, thereby making them highly representative case studies for scholarly analysis. In this study, the two animated films are analysed primarily as textual cases rather than as fully stabilized reception

phenomena.

The analysis presented in this study does not focus primarily on the films' box-office performance or artistic evaluation. Instead, the films are approached as cultural texts through which the study investigates how cultural meanings are translated and reconstructed via narrative strategies under differing cultural value structures. Furthermore, the term "cross-cultural communication context" in this study does not refer solely to audience responses from specific countries or regions. Rather, it denotes the broader issues of cultural comprehension and differences in value acceptance that emerge when the films enter global systems of cultural circulation.

1.3 Methodology

This study mainly adopts a research approach that combines close textual analysis with theoretical mapping analysis. Selected audience comments from IMDb were used as supplementary illustrative evidence rather than as primary empirical data. To enhance the analytical rigor of the study, an analytical coding framework was developed to systematically identify narrative elements corresponding to cultural dimensions. Rather than relying solely on interpretive reading, key narrative segments were categorized into three primary coding types:

- (1) Individual choice scenes, referring to moments where characters make autonomous decisions that reflect self-identity or personal agency;
- (2) Authority conflict scenes, involving interactions between characters and institutional, parental, or hierarchical authority structures;
- (3) Uncertainty-driven plot points, including narrative situations characterized by ambiguity, risk, or open-ended outcomes.

These coded elements were then mapped onto Hofstede's cultural dimensions to examine how cultural values are narratively structured and transformed. This framework enables a more systematic linkage between textual analysis and theoretical interpretation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 A Review of Studies on the Cross-cultural Communication of Chinese Animation

With the advancement of China's "Going Global" cultural strategy, the cross-cultural communication of Chinese animation has gradually become an important topic in film studies and communication research. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on the practical pathways of international dissemination, modes of cultural representation, and communication effectiveness of Chinese animation, seeking to explore both its global communicative potential and the practical challenges it encounters within contemporary transnational cultural contexts. Overall, although the existing body of research has grown considerably, notable differences remain in terms of research perspectives and the systematic application of theoretical frameworks.

2.1.1 Cultural Symbol-Centred Research Perspectives

The cultural-symbol perspective represents one of the most common approaches in studies of the cross-cultural communication of Chinese animation. Research within this framework typically examines mythological motifs, traditional imagery, and national aesthetic styles in order to analyze the types of cultural symbols represented in Chinese animated films and their associated cultural connotations. Scholars generally argue that the international communicative advantage of Chinese animation lies in its distinctive cultural resources and symbolic systems, particularly cultural content rooted in mythology, folklore, and traditional values, which constitute important features differentiating Chinese animation from European and American animated productions (Ma, 2023).

However, this research approach also demonstrates certain limitations. Existing analyses tend to focus primarily on issues such as whether cultural symbols are sufficiently represented or whether cultural expressions remain “authentically Chinese,” while paying comparatively limited attention to how such symbols are transformed through narrative mechanisms into meaning systems that can be understood by audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

2.1.2 Research Perspectives Oriented Toward National Image and Cultural Soft Power

Another line of research situates Chinese animation within the broader macro-level context of national image construction and the enhancement of cultural soft power, emphasizing the role of animated films in carrying national narratives within international communication. Studies adopting this perspective commonly draw upon theories of national image communication to examine how Chinese animation constructs positive representations of Chinese culture through narrative content and visual style (Chen, 2017; Qi, 2024; Zheng, 2024). From this perspective, Chinese animation is regarded as an important vehicle for national cultural export, and its cross-cultural communication effectiveness is frequently associated with broader goals of national image dissemination.

Although this approach helps highlight the significance of Chinese animation within cultural strategy and soft power discourse, it also presents certain shortcomings. Some studies place excessive emphasis on macro-level communication objectives while paying insufficient attention to the narrative structures and value expressions embedded within specific animated texts. As a result, animated films are often treated merely as instruments for projecting national image rather than as cultural texts possessing their own narrative logic and mechanisms of cultural adaptation. Consequently, discussions concerning the internal cross-cultural narrative strategies of animated works are, to some extent, weakened.

2.1.3 Audience Reception-oriented Research Perspectives

In recent years, with the increasing application of communication research methodologies, some scholars have begun to examine the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese animation from the perspective of audience reception. Such studies commonly employ questionnaires, interviews, or public emotionally respond to, and evaluate Chinese animated films (Lei & Zhu, 2025). These studies emphasize that cross-cultural communication outcomes are influenced not only by the content itself but also by multiple factors, including cultural background, value systems, and media consumption habits. Nevertheless, existing audience reception studies tend to focus primarily on descriptive accounts of communication outcomes, such as whether audiences “understand” or “appreciate” a film, while paying comparatively little attention to which specific narrative factors shape audience comprehension and acceptance. In other words, a certain degree of disconnection still exists between audience reception studies and textual analysis.

2.1.4 Research Gaps and the Analytical Perspective of This Study

Overall, existing scholarship on the cross-cultural communication of Chinese animation has generated substantial insights from perspectives such as cultural symbols, national image construction, and audience reception. However, these studies collectively share a significant limitation: the absence of a systematic cultural framework capable of interactively analysing cross-cultural narrative mechanisms in animation. Most existing studies either remain at the descriptive level of cultural elements or focus primarily on macro-level evaluations of communication effectiveness, while relatively few attempt to explain how animated narratives negotiate, adapt, and translate meanings across different cultural value structures.

To address this gap, this study introduces Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory to systematically analyse the narrative mechanisms underlying the cross-cultural communication of Chinese animation

from the perspective of cultural value differences. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a more theoretically explanatory framework for understanding how Chinese animation achieves cross-cultural intelligibility.

2.2 Cross-Cultural Narrative and Cultural Difference Research

2.2.1 Theories Related to Cross-Cultural Narrative

Research on “cross-cultural narrative” mainly focuses on the meaning generation and intelligibility of narrative texts in different cultural contexts. Relevant studies generally agree that narrative is not a value-neutral form of expression but is deeply embedded in a specific cultural value system, and its character setting, conflict structure, and emotional logic are constrained by cultural background (Chatman, 1978). Therefore, when narrative texts enter cross-cultural communication contexts, the original narrative rules and value assumptions may no longer be accepted by default, leading to comprehension deviations.

In cross-cultural communication research, scholars have gradually realized that explaining communication effects only from the level of cultural elements or symbols can hardly fully reveal the translation mechanism of narrative meaning. In contrast, research on narrative structure and value logic is more helpful to explain how cultural content achieves meaning negotiation between different cultural systems (Hall, 1997). Thus, cross-cultural narrative research has gradually shifted from “what story is told” to “how the story is told”, emphasizing the mediating role of narrative methods in cross-cultural understanding.

2.2.2 Cultural Adaptation Research in Animation and Film

In the field of film and animation research, cross-cultural narrative issues are mostly discussed in the form of “cultural adaptation” or “narrative localization”. Relevant studies point out that successful adjust character relationships, emotional expression, and conflict structures to meet the cognitive and value expectations of target cultures (Iwabuchi, 2002).

As a highly typified and emotional narrative medium, animation research on cross-cultural communication particularly emphasizes the adjustment role of narrative mechanisms. On the one hand, animated works often carry clear cultural symbols and value metaphors; on the other hand, their fictionality and artistic expression provide greater space for cultural adaptation (Napier, 2005). The global success of Japanese animation is largely due to its strategy of retaining cultural characteristics while reducing cross-cultural comprehension thresholds through emotional universality and narrative simplification.

In contrast, research on cross-cultural narratives of Chinese animation still focuses on cultural symbol analysis, with insufficient attention to how narrative structures participate in cultural adaptation. This also makes it difficult for some studies to explain why Chinese animation, with rich cultural resources, has not always achieved influence matching its cultural volume in international communication.

2.2.3 Embodiment of Cultural Value Differences Between China and the West in Film Narratives

An important topic in cross-cultural narrative research is the specific embodiment of cultural value differences between China and the West in film and television texts. Value dimensions such as individualism and collectivism, power distance, and attitudes toward uncertainty have a profound impact on character building and conflict logic in film narratives (Hofstede et al., 2010). For example, the narrative models of “personal growth” and “self-actualization” common in Western films are significantly different from the Eastern narrative tradition emphasizing social relations and collective

responsibility.

In Chinese film and animation research, some scholars have begun to pay attention to how this difference affects cross-cultural acceptance effects. Studies point out that when Chinese films and television work overly rely on collectivist or hierarchical narratives, they may cause emotional distance among cross-cultural audiences (Zhang, 2020). On the contrary, reconstructing traditional values through modern narratives and combining them with individual emotional experiences is more likely to form resonance across cultural backgrounds (Yu, 2014).

However, existing research mostly stays at the descriptive level of value differences, lacking a systematic theoretical model to support how these differences are adjusted, transformed, and re-encoded in specific narrative mechanisms. This is exactly the necessity of introducing cultural dimensions theory to conduct mechanistic analysis of cross-cultural narratives in animation.

2.3 Application of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory in Film Research

Proposed by Geert Hofstede, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is one of the most influential analytical frameworks in cross-cultural research. Initially based on a large-scale survey of IBM employees in multiple countries, the theory summarizes systematic differences in values among different countries and regions, providing an operable quantitative model for cross-cultural comparative research (Hofstede, 1980). With the development of the theory, Hofstede and his collaborators further revised and expanded the cultural dimension system, forming a multi-dimensional framework including individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010).

In the field of film and communication research, cultural dimensions theory is widely used to analyse the implicit value structures in narrative texts and their cross-cultural acceptance differences. Some studies focus on how audiences from different cultural backgrounds are significantly influenced by cultural dimensions such as power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance when interpreting films and television works, thus presenting differences in character relationships, conflict logic, and narrative preferences (Yu et al., 2025). In addition, as an important medium of cross-cultural communication, the meaning of films and television works is not fixed but reconstructed and understood in different cultural contexts (Jackson, 2004). Other studies explore comprehension deviations or meaning reconstruction of films and television works in international circulation due to differences in cultural dimensions from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. However, some scholars have questioned the explanatory power of cultural dimensions theory, arguing that it oversimplifies complex cultural phenomena (McSweeney, 2002). Therefore, the meaning generation of film texts in global communication should be regarded as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation rather than the result of a single cultural variable.

In the Chinese context, some studies have begun to apply Hofstede's theory to national image communication, advertising, and cross-cultural marketing research, verifying the significant characteristics of Chinese culture in terms of power distance and collectivism (Liu, 2014). However, in animated and film textual analysis, cultural dimensions theory mostly stays at the macro interpretive level, lacking detailed dismantling of specific narrative mechanisms, especially empirical research combining cultural dimensions with character growth, plot conflicts, and emotional expression. In summary, although Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory has formed a mature research tradition in cross-cultural communication and film research, systematic cultural dimension narrative analysis targeting Chinese animated texts is still insufficient. Existing research either focuses on static interpretation of cultural symbols or stays at macro value comparison and has not fully revealed how animation narratives adjust and reconstruct between different cultural dimensions. Based on this, this paper takes two animated films as research objects, introduces cultural dimensions theory to conduct specific analysis of their cross-cultural narrative mechanisms, and strives to fill this research gap in theoretical application and Chinese animation research.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND CROSS-CULTURAL NARRATIVE MECHANISMS

3.1 Overview of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory aims to reveal the stable value orientation differences in different cultural systems, providing a relatively operable analytical tool for cross-cultural comparative research. In film and animation research, scholars usually select dimensions highly correlated with narrative structure and character relationships for analysis, rather than using all dimensions homogenously.

Firstly, the individualism vs. collectivism dimension focuses on the relative position of the relationship between individuals and groups in culture. Individualist cultures emphasize individual autonomy, personal achievement, and self-actualization, while collectivist cultures attach more importance to family, group responsibility, and the integrity of social relations (Hofstede, 2001). In narrative texts, this dimension is often reflected in the setting of the protagonist's motivation, the conflict mode between personal choice and group expectation, and whether "self-growth" is placed within the framework of collective ethics.

Secondly, the power distance dimension measures the degree to which members of a society accept the unequal distribution of authority. In high-power-distance cultures, hierarchical order and obedience to authority are often regarded as reasonable norms; in low-power-distance cultures, authority is more likely to be questioned, and equal relationships are valued higher (Hofstede et al., 2010). In film narratives, this dimension is usually presented through the shaping of parent-child relationships, master of the legitimacy of character behaviours.

Thirdly, the uncertainty avoidance dimension focuses on the tolerance of different cultures for ambiguity, risk, and unpredictable situations. High-uncertainty-avoidance cultures tend to reduce anxiety through rules, order, and clear norms, while low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures are more tolerant of open conflicts and uncertain endings (Hofstede, 2001). At the narrative level, this dimension is often closely related to conflict design, fate themes, and ending handling.

In addition, the long-term orientation dimension emphasizes a culture's emphasis on the future, perseverance, and delayed rewards. Although this dimension is not a mandatory analytical item in all film studies, it still has certain explanatory power in texts involving growth narratives, intergenerational relationships, and value inheritance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Therefore, this paper will selectively use this dimension according to specific narrative situations.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is not intended to judge specific cultures or texts, and its analytical results should not be interpreted as essentialized definitions of cultural differences. As some scholars have pointed out, the theory is more suitable as an "analytical coordinate system" to reveal the implicit value orientations in narrative texts and their cross-cultural adjustment methods, rather than a complete explanation of cultural complexity (McSweeney, 2002). Based on this understanding, this paper treats cultural dimensions as an analytical tool for understanding the cross-cultural narrative mechanisms of *Ne Zha: Devil's Sea Adventure*, rather than a decisive explanatory framework.

3.2 Construction of an Analytical Framework for Cross-Cultural Narrative Mechanisms

In cross-cultural communication research, cultural differences are not directly perceived by audiences as abstract values but are gradually "translated" into understandable story content through specific narrative structures and emotional experiences. Therefore, merely staying at the level of value

comparison of cultural dimensions can hardly explain the actual communication effects of film texts in cross-cultural contexts. Based on this understanding, this paper attempts to introduce mediating analysis at the narrative and emotional levels on the basis of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and construct a three-level analytical framework consisting of Value Level, Narrative Level, and Expressive Level to reveal the internal operating logic of cross-cultural narrative mechanisms of Chinese animation.

3.2.1 Value Level: Cultural Dimensions as Implicit Value Structures

In this framework, the Value Level corresponds to the deep cultural orientations revealed by Hofstede's cultural dimensions, such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. This level is not directly presented on the visual surface of animation but acts as an "implicit value structure" that influences the judgment of the rationality of character behaviours, the source of conflict legitimacy, and the value orientation conveyed by the ending in the narrative.

This paper does not treat cultural dimensions as fixed labels of Chinese culture or other cultures but understands them as analytical coordinates to identify the relative positions of different value orientations in the text. In other words, cultural dimensions play more of an explanatory tool than a causal determinant in this paper, and their role is to reveal the potential roots of comprehension differences that animation narratives may produce in cross-cultural communication.

3.2.2 Narrative Level: Structured Transformation of Cultural Values

The Narrative Level is a key mediator connecting abstract cultural values and audience comprehension. In animated texts, cultural values do not appear in the form of direct statements, but are concretized through character building, plot setting, and conflict structures. This paper argues that it is at this level that cultural dimensions are transformed into narrative logic recognizable to audiences.

As one scholar described: Philosophical concepts become the generative essence of artistic practice through a dynamic exchange with creative situations, medium characteristics, and the spirit of the present era (Xu and Mohamad ,2026). Specifically, individualist or collectivist orientations are often reflected through the protagonist's motivation and growth path; power distance is often embedded in parent-child relationships, master apprentice relationships, or institutional authority images; and uncertainty avoidance is reflected in the narrative's handling of risk, fate, and order. These narrative elements do not exist in isolation but together form a relatively stable meaning generation mechanism that gradually manifests cultural values in the process of story development.

Audiences from different cultural backgrounds do not necessarily share the same cultural values, but they can understand the emotional logic of character behaviours through familiar narrative structures. This is an important prerequisite for the establishment of cross-cultural narratives.

3.2.3 Expressive Level: Emotional and Resonance Cross-Cultural Adjustment

Compared with the Value Level and Narrative Level, the Expressive Level acts more directly on the audience's perceptual experience, including emotional mobilization, humour styles, and the construction of emotional resonance. This level is particularly critical in cross-cultural communication, because emotional responses often precede cultural understanding.

In animation creation, expressive means such as humour, exaggeration, and emotional tension can to a certain extent weaken comprehension barriers caused by cultural differences. When cultural values are structured through the Narrative Level, the Expressive Level further enables the audience to establish emotional connections with characters without fully understanding the cultural background through emotional encoding. This "emotion-first" mechanism helps improve the acceptability of texts in cross-cultural contexts.

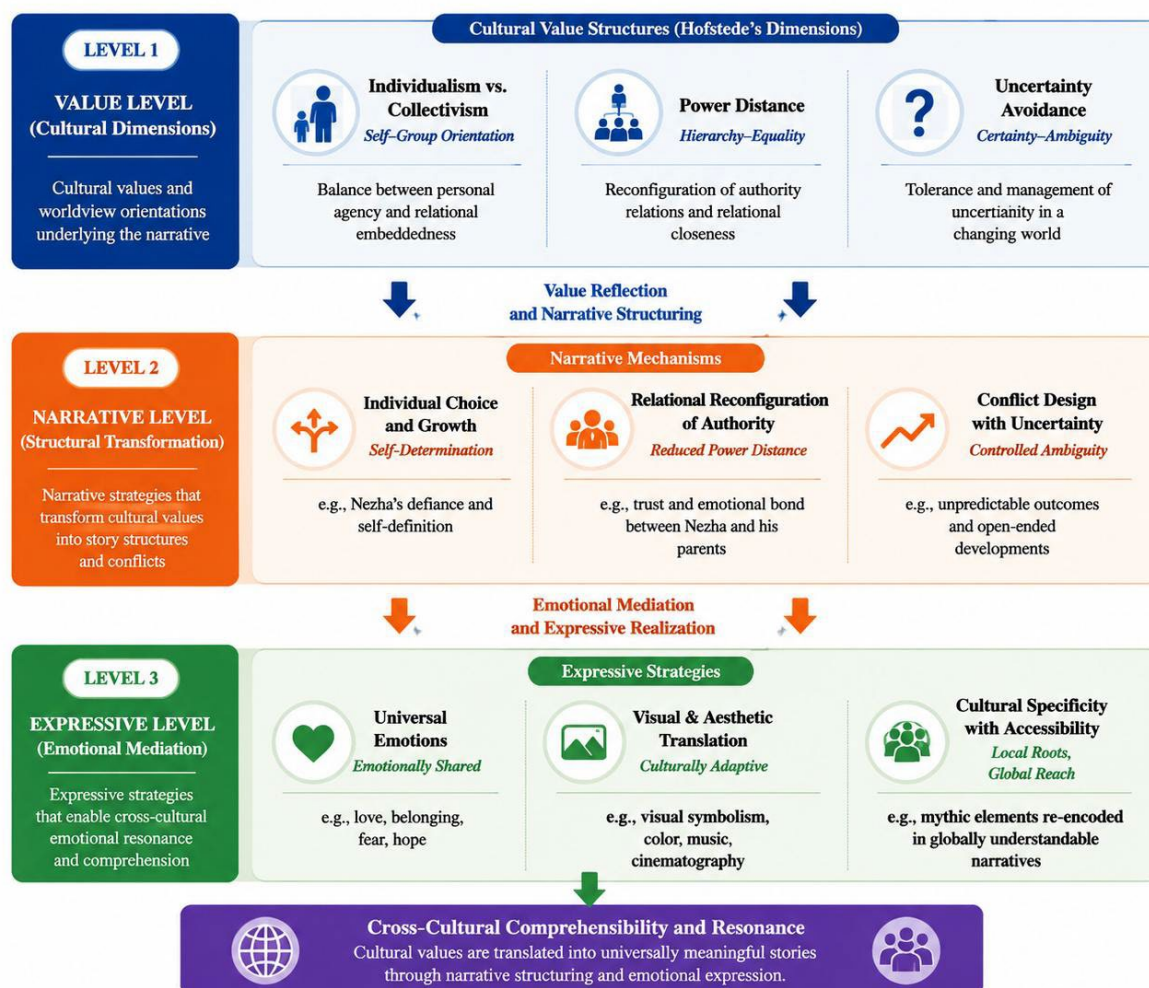


Figure 3 A Three-Level Narrative Re-encoding Model of Cross-cultural Translation (in Chinese Animation Films).

Source: Developed by author based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and analysis of Ne Zha films.

As illustrated in Figure 3, narrative re-encoding operates through a three-level transformation process linking cultural value structures, narrative mechanisms, and emotional accessibility, ultimately enabling global narrative intelligibility. However, this adjustment does not mean the elimination of cultural differences. On the contrary, the role of the Expressive Level is more to provide a perceptible and experiential entry point for cultural differences, allowing the audience to gradually approach the cultural meaning carried by the text through emotional participation.

3.2.4 Summary of The Translation Path from Cultural Values to Intelligible Narratives

The three-level analytical framework proposed in this paper aims to illustrate that cultural dimensions do not directly determine cross-cultural communication effects but are translated into story forms understandable to audiences through narrative structures and emotional expression. The Value Level provides potential cultural coordinates, the Narrative Level completes the structured transformation of values, and the Expressive Level promotes cross-cultural resonance through emotional adjustment. Based on this framework, this paper will take the two animation films as an example in the following chapters to specifically analyse how Chinese animation constructs narrative mechanisms with cross-cultural intelligibility between different cultural value structures.

4 ANALYSES OF CROSS-CULTURAL NARRATIVE MECHANISMS IN THE TWO ANIMATED FILMS

4.1 Narrative Balance between Individualism and Collectivism

In Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, individualism and collectivism are regarded as important indicators distinguishing different cultural value structures. Individualist cultures emphasize individual autonomy, personal choice, and self-actualization, while collectivist cultures attach more importance to group responsibility, social roles, and relational obligations (Hofstede, 2001). In cross-cultural communication contexts, establishing a narrative balance between the two value orientations often directly affects the international intelligibility of works. The two animated films present a typical "dual individual-collective encoding" narrative strategy in character building and plot advancement.

First, at the character level, Ne Zha's core narrative motivation still revolves around the establishment of "self-identity". Different from the relatively functional hero image in traditional myths, the two films continue and strengthen Ne Zha's continuous questioning of self-identity. His behavioural motivation does not simply stem from external missions, but more from internal thinking about "who am I" and "what kind of person I will become". This growth narrative centred on individual will and personal choice is somewhat similar to the individualist hero model common in Western cultures, enabling audiences from different cultural backgrounds to quickly enter the character's emotional logic. This can be categorized as an individual choice scene, where Ne Zha's self-identity is articulated through autonomous decision-making.

However, the film does not construct Ne Zha's self-identity as absolute individualism detached from social relations. On the contrary, the formation of his "self" is always nested in the network of relationships involving family, peers, and broader communities. Whether it is the emotional connection with parents or the mutual influence with the fate of others, Ne Zha's personal choices are constantly directed toward a more socially oriented dimension of responsibility. This treatment ensures that the character's individual growth does not dissolve collectivist values, but instead continuously interacts with them in the narrative progression.

Second, in terms of plot structure, the two films show a narrative shift from "resisting fate" to "actively taking responsibility". Early conflicts mostly revolve around Ne Zha's rejection of predetermined fate labels, which strengthens the dramatic tension of individual resistance to external discipline and meets the expectation of "self-struggle" narratives in individualist cultures. However, as the plot develops, the film gradually shifts the focus of conflict from "what I am not" to "what I choose to be". At this point, responsibility is no longer shaped as an externally imposed moral requirement but transformed into an active choice made by the character based on self-identity.

This narrative shift is of great significance at the cross-cultural level. On the one hand, it retains the emphasis on free choice and self-determination in individualist cultures; on the other hand, it responds to the value expectation of social obligations and group order in collectivist cultures through the "internalization of responsibility". In other words, the film does not require the audience to make a value choice between the individual and the collective but integrates the two into the same growth logic through narrative design.

From the perspective of cross-cultural narrative mechanisms, the success of the two films does not lie in simple "Chinese-Western compromise", but in the progressive presentation of individualism and collectivism at different narrative stages through narrative structure. In the emotional entry stage, individual resistance and internal struggle are more likely to trigger universal resonance; in the value sublimation stage, active responsibility provides a more stable meaning outlet for the story. This phased, non-oppositional value presentation helps audiences from different cultural backgrounds establish connections with the text at their familiar value nodes.

Therefore, the narrative balance between individualism and collectivism in the two films is not the result of value blurring, but a carefully designed cross-cultural translation strategy. It is through the structural integration of individual growth narratives and collective responsibility logic that the films maintain the inherent value orientation of Chinese culture while improving their intelligibility and emotional accessibility in the international context.

4.2 Weakening of Power Distance and Emotional Reconstruction

In Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, power distance measures the degree to which members of a society accept the unequal distribution of authority. High-power-distance cultures often emphasize hierarchical order and obedience to authority, while low-power-distance cultures tend to emphasize equal dialogue and the questionability of authority (Hofstede, 2001). In film narratives, this dimension is concretized through patriarchal structures, master-apprentice relationships, and institutional authority images. While continuing the traditional Chinese mythological framework, the two films have carried out obvious narrative reconstruction of power relations, thus lowering the threshold for authority comprehension in cross-cultural contexts.

First, in the presentation of patriarchal and master-apprentice relationships, the film weakens the narrative mode of "absolute authority-passive obedience" in traditional myths. The relationship between Ne Zha and his father, teachers is not simply shaped as a one-way disciplinary structure but placed in a process of continuous negotiation and emotional interaction. Authority roles no longer only function as order maintainers; their decisions and judgments are also subject to emotional constraints and value reflection. This treatment weakens the immutability of hierarchical relations at the narrative level, making authority relations closer to an understandable social interaction mode.

Second, the two films have carried out a significant "desacralization" of traditional authority images. Whether it is supernatural forces symbolizing destiny or authoritative beings representing institutional order, the film avoids shaping them as correct or unquestionable ultimate arbiters. On the contrary, these authorities often expose their limitations in the narrative and even become important sources of conflict generation. Through this strategy, the film pulls authority from a "trans-narrative existence" back into the story itself, making it an object that can be discussed and reevaluated. This desacralization is not a negation of traditional culture, but more like a re-encoding at the narrative level. Authority no longer exists with a priori legitimacy but needs to continuously gain recognition through emotional relations and moral practices. This treatment to a certain extent meets the expectation of authority rationality and transparency in low-power-distance cultures and provides a more familiar comprehension path for audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

Third, in the expression of parent-child relationships, the two films show obvious modern emotional characteristics. The parent-child interaction in the film does not completely rely on the logic of command and obedience, but promotes relationship development through emotional expression, communication, and mutual understanding. Parental roles are no longer just symbols of authority, but endowed with more complex emotional dimensions, and their vulnerability and hesitation are clearly presented in the narrative. This emotional writing shifts family relationships from a hierarchical structure to an emotional community, providing an emotional basis for the weakening of power distance.

This interaction represents a typical authority conflict scene, in which hierarchical structures are re-negotiated through emotional engagement. From the perspective of cross-cultural narrative mechanisms, the weakening of power distance does not mean the disappearance of authority, but the transfer of the source of authority legitimacy.

Through emotional narratives, the film shifts authority from a priori position endowed by institutions and blood ties to a posteriori identity obtained through understanding, responsibility, and emotional connection. This translation process makes authority relations that may have comprehension barriers

due to cultural differences more acceptable in cross-cultural contexts.

Therefore, through re-narrating patriarchy, master-apprentice relationships, and parent-child emotions, the two films effectively adjust the value presentation under the power distance dimension while maintaining the traditional cultural narrative framework. This narrative strategy of reconstructing authority relations through emotion not only reduces cross-cultural comprehension costs but also provides a valuable expression path for Chinese animation in global communication.

4.3 Uncertainty Avoidance and Conflict Narrative Design

In Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, uncertainty avoidance describes the psychological orientation of different cultures when facing unknown situations, risks, and ambiguity. High uncertainty-avoidance cultures tend to reduce anxiety through clear rules and stable order, while low uncertainty-avoidance cultures are more tolerant of open endings and value ambiguity (Hofstede, 2001). In cross-cultural narratives, establishing a balance between a sense of order and uncertainty directly affects the audience's emotional engagement. By redesigning fate settings and conflict structures, the two films have achieved narrative adjustment of the uncertainty avoidance dimension to a certain extent.

First, at the level of fate setting, the film does not shape "destiny" as a linear and irreversible decisive force but transforms it into a narrative device that continuously generates conflicts. Fate is no longer just a causal starting point for explaining character endings, but an existence that is constantly questioned and challenged to promote plot development. This treatment retains the traditional mythological worldview while introducing uncertainty, keeping the character's future in an open state. For the audience, the story direction is not preset but gradually emerges in the advancement of conflicts.

Second, in the design of conflict structures, the two films deliberately weaken the absolute opposition of good and evil dichotomy. The conflicts in the film do not simply revolve around "justice against evil", but more present the tension between different positions and choices. Some characters have ambiguous behavioural motivations, and their action outcomes do not always point to clear moral judgments. This ambiguous treatment makes narrative conflicts themselves an open process rather than a reconfirmation of established value orders. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this blurring of the boundary between good and evil has dual significance. On the one hand, it reduces comprehension barriers caused by differences in cultural backgrounds, allowing the audience to participate in story judgment without relying on specific cultural contexts; on the other hand, it provides space for audiences from different cultural backgrounds to project their own value judgments, thus enhancing the inclusiveness of the narrative.

Third, the role of uncertainty at the emotional level is particularly significant. Compared with narrative models with clear endings and stable values, the two films strengthen the audience's emotional engagement by continuously creating unresolved conflict states. The audience does not passively accept value conclusions during viewing, but experiences choices, hesitations, and emotional fluctuations together with the characters in uncertain situations. This emotional experience does not depend on full understanding of cultural rules, but more stems from empathy for the character's situation. These narrative segments function as uncertainty-driven plot points, where ambiguity and unpredictability sustain audience engagement.

However, the film's use of uncertainty does not completely abandon a sense of order. At key nodes, the narrative still provides certain psychological stability for the audience through emotional feedback and relationship repair. This "limitedly open" uncertainty design enables the film to avoid comprehension anxiety caused by excessive ambiguity while retaining sufficient narrative tension, creating a relatively friendly emotional environment for cross-cultural acceptance.

In summary, the narrative strategy of the two films on the uncertainty avoidance dimension does not

simply cater to the aesthetic preferences of low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures but establishes a dynamic balance between traditional fate narratives and modern conflict design. By transforming fate settings into conflict generation mechanisms, weakening the boundary between good and evil, and strengthening open conflicts, the film effectively improves the audience's emotional engagement and also provides a referable narrative path for Chinese animation to handle uncertainty in cross-cultural contexts.

4.4 Emotional Universality and Re-encoding of Cultural Symbols

In cross-cultural communication contexts, animated texts that overly rely on specific cultural knowledge backgrounds often raise comprehension thresholds and limit their international acceptance. The two films do not avoid traditional Chinese cultural symbols at the narrative level but re-encode these symbols into narrative resources with high emotional universality through restructuring emotional structures and adjusting narrative strategies, thus achieving cross-cultural readability while retaining cultural characteristics.

4.4.1 Cross-Cultural Commonality of Emotions (Family Affection, Friendship, Sacrifice)

From the perspective of emotional structure, the two films continue and strengthen emotional narratives centred on family affection, friendship, and self-sacrifice. These emotional types are understandable without relying on specific cultural contexts and have high cross-cultural commensurability. The emotional tension between Ne Zha and his parents in the film is no longer only cantered on the traditional ethical category of “filial piety” but reshaped into a more universal parent-child relationship issue—the desire for understanding, support, and emotional identity in the process of individual growth.

Meanwhile, through the shaping of peer relationships, the film presents friendship as an important emotional fulcrum. Whether it is the plot design of fighting side by side or mutual support at critical decision-making moments, this narrative mode conforms to the common emotional structure in global mainstream animations, enabling the audience to quickly establish identity at the emotional level.

Self-sacrifice, as the core motivation in the narrative climax, is also treated as an emotional choice rather than moral preaching. Its meaning is no longer limited to “sacrificing one's life for justice” in traditional hero narratives but emphasizes the individual's active commitment to others and groups, which is more acceptable to audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

4.4.2 De-Thresholding of Chinese Cultural Symbols

At the level of cultural symbols, the two films do not weaken the existence of Chinese cultural elements but lower their comprehension difficulty through “de-thresholding”. The mythological prototypes, character identities, and worldview settings in the film do not require the audience to have systematic cognition of the traditional Chinese mythological system but serve plot advancement and character building through functional presentation in the narrative.

For example, the traditional cultural symbol of Ne Zha no longer relies on its established meaning in Chinese cultural history but is re-encoded into a character image with universal growth dilemmas. His mythological identity is more reflected as a narrative background rather than a prerequisite for understanding character behaviours. This treatment transforms cultural symbols from “knowledge-based symbols” to “emotional symbols”, allowing the audience to understand character motivations and emotional changes through narrative logic without mastering their cultural sources.

This strategy is of great significance in cross-cultural communication. By reducing cultural interpretation costs, the film avoids the alienation caused by cultural othering. As scholars have analysed, Lin Ruoxi's boneless painting style reveals that while it has its roots in traditional Chinese

painting, it is inclusive, pioneering, and innovative, bringing his creations more in line with the demands of contemporary aesthetics. The great eclecticism and modernism in the artistic philosophy are evident (Duan et al., 2024). Only in this way can Chinese cultural symbols be accepted and understood in a more flexible way in the global context.

4.4.3 Global Expression of Humour, Action, and Aesthetic Style

At the expressive level, the two films further strengthen the universality of emotional resonance through the global expression of humour, action design, and visual aesthetics. The humorous elements in the film are mostly based on situational comedy and character personality contrasts, rather than relying on language puns or cultural allusions, thus reducing losses in cross-language communication. This “low cultural dependence” humour form helps audiences from different cultural backgrounds obtain immediate emotional feedback during viewing.

The design of action scenes also follows the aesthetic logic of global mainstream animations, emphasizing rhythm, visual impact, and emotional promotion functions, rather than simply displaying mythological spectacles. By closely combining action and emotion, the film transforms narrative conflicts into intuitively perceptible emotional experiences.

In terms of overall aesthetic style, while retaining Chinese visual elements, the film adopts animation image language familiar to international audiences, realizing modern translation of traditional cultural symbols at the formal level. This aesthetic strategy not only enhances the watchability of the film but also further consolidates its cross-cultural communication foundation.

4.5 Cross-cultural Reception Evidence

To further support the analytical findings, selected audience responses from international platforms such as IMDb and social media reviews were examined. Although not intended as a full-scale reception study, these responses provide indicative evidence of how narrative strategies are perceived across cultural contexts.

Selected audience responses on IMDb suggest that international viewers perceived the film’s emotional themes as universally relatable. For example, some viewers described the film as “a perfect balance between humour and heartfelt moments, making it easy for anyone to connect with the story.” “Everyone can find something to be moved by, making it a must-watch for animation enthusiasts and a testament to the global rise of Chinese filmmaking.” “laughed and cried and laughed and cried. one of the best movies I’ve ever seen. loved it” “This movie is a huge success because every viewer can find a character that relates to themselves.” “you don’t need to understand the mythology to grasp the concept of this movie and be wrapped into the extremely in-depth storyline.”

Additionally, some viewers emphasized the film’s treatment of authority and family relationships as “more emotionally nuanced than expected,” suggesting a reduced perception of rigid hierarchy. Comments also frequently mentioned the unpredictability of the plot, indicating that uncertainty-driven storytelling contributed to sustained engagement.

These responses, while limited in scope, align with the analytical framework proposed in this study and reinforce the argument that narrative re-encoding facilitates cross-cultural comprehensibility. This is not intended as a comprehensive audience study, but as illustrative evidence.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how culturally specific narratives in Chinese animation achieve cross-cultural intelligibility. By applying Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory to Ne Zha (2019) and Ne Zha 2 (2025), and by developing a three-level analytical framework, the findings move beyond descriptive

accounts of cultural representation to explain the mechanisms through which cultural meanings are translated across contexts. Rather than treating cultural symbols as the primary carriers of meaning, the analysis demonstrates that cross-cultural accessibility is achieved through Narrative Re-encoding. Cultural values—such as individualism versus collectivism, hierarchical authority, and attitudes toward uncertainty—are not directly transmitted but are systematically transformed into narrative structures and emotional experiences. This process enables audiences from different cultural backgrounds to engage with the story at the level of narrative logic and affect, even in the absence of shared cultural knowledge. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to cross-cultural media and communication research in three important ways.

First, it reconceptualizes Narrative as a Mechanism of Cultural Translation, shifting the focus from symbolic representation to the structural processes of storytelling. While previous research has emphasized either the export of cultural symbols or audience reception, this study highlights the mediating role of narrative in bridging cultural differences.

Second, the proposed Three-Level Narrative Translation Model linking value structures, narrative design, and emotional mediation—offers a systematic framework for analysing how cultural meanings are transformed into globally intelligible forms. This model advances existing applications of Hofstede's theory by moving from static cultural comparison to dynamic narrative transformation.

Third, the study introduces the concept of Narrative Re-encoding, emphasizing that cultural globalization involves not merely the circulation of cultural content, but its reconfiguration within narrative systems. This perspective aligns with broader debates in global media studies that view cultural exchange as a process of negotiation and hybridization, rather than one-directional dissemination.

Methodologically, this research demonstrates the potential of integrating qualitative textual analysis with a structured analytical coding framework. By categorizing narrative elements into individual choice scenes, authority conflict scenes, and uncertainty-driven plot points, the study enhances the transparency and analytical rigor of interpretive research.

In addition, the incorporation of selected audience responses provides supplementary evidence that bridges textual analysis and reception, suggesting a feasible mixed qualitative approach for future studies of cross-cultural media texts. Beyond its theoretical and methodological contributions, this study also carries practical implications for the global circulation of Chinese animation. The findings suggest that cultural specificity does not inherently limit international accessibility; rather, it is the mode of narrative organization that determines whether cultural meanings can be understood across contexts. For creators, this underscores the importance of embedding culturally specific values within universally recognizable narrative structures, such as identity formation, relational conflict, and moral choice. For industry stakeholders and policymakers, the study highlights the need to prioritize narrative adaptability and emotional resonance in strategies of cultural export, moving beyond an exclusive focus on symbolic representation.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on a limited number of case studies and relies primarily on qualitative analysis, which may constrain the generalizability of its findings. Future research could extend the proposed framework to a broader corpus of animated films, incorporate large-scale audience data, or conduct comparative analyses between different national animation industries to further examine how narrative strategies operate across diverse cultural systems.

In conclusion, this study argues that the cross-cultural success of Chinese animation lies not in the visibility of its cultural symbols, but in the effectiveness of its narrative translation mechanisms. By foregrounding the role of narrative re-encoding, it provides a theoretically grounded and methodologically adaptable framework for understanding how culturally embedded media can achieve global resonance in an increasingly interconnected media landscape. This allows Chinese cultural

symbols to shine more brightly on the global cultural stage, contributing significantly to promoting the prosperity and development of Chinese culture and enriching the diversity of world culture (Wang, 2025).

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Duan Xiaoyun and Wang Yingli contributed to this research in a variety of ways, including data acquisition, analysis and writing, Nadzri Mohd Sharif and Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh gave instructions to conduct this investigation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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