

# Cultural Representation in Transnational Cinema: A Study of Eastern Cultural Symbols and Identity in Western Films



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**Abstract:** In an era where globalization shapes cross-cultural interactions, transnational cinema serves as a vital platform for promoting international cooperation and cultural exchange. This study delves into the representation of Eastern cultures in transnational films, using *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2004) and other Western films centered around Eastern themes as primary case studies. The research examines the effectiveness of these films in disseminating Eastern cultural values through the analysis of cultural symbols, the casting of transnational actors, and the historical narratives constructed by Western filmmakers. Findings indicate that, despite the intent to foster cultural understanding, transnational cinema often falls short due to recurring misrepresentations and biases. Cultural symbols are frequently oversimplified, reducing their significance and failing to convey the depth of the traditions they represent. Misinterpretations in historical portrayal and the selection of actors — often with ambiguous cultural backgrounds — further complicate the transmission of authentic Eastern cultural perspectives. Additionally, language barriers add another layer of miscommunication, reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them. These challenges underscore the limitations of transnational cinema in accurately representing Eastern cultures, suggesting that without a more nuanced, respectful approach to cultural portrayal, the medium's potential to bridge cultural gaps remains constrained. This research calls for an enhanced commitment to cultural accuracy and sensitivity in global filmmaking to better support genuine intercultural dialogue and understanding.

**Keywords:** Transnational Cinema; Cultural Exchange; Cultural Representation; Eastern Culture; Cultural Symbols; Identity Conflict; Language Distortion; Historical Inaccuracy

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years, globalization has been the major trend in the future of the world, with the emergence of this concept, cultural globalization has also appeared in public sight [1] while the idea of 'transnational' seems to be the practical and intuitive approach of reflecting global cooperation and cultural exchanges. The film industry, as the

target of cultural policies for several countries, aims to attract audiences in the global film market, and transnational and cross-cultural co-productions have become the mainstream of the film and television industry in many countries [2].

In fact, many Asian identities and Eastern elements

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have appeared in Hollywood films since the silent era [3], and these transnational films seem to build a bridge between East and West. However, they often combine multinational cultural perspectives and convey stereotypical or invalid messages. For example, when people mention ‘transnational films’ in China, they often think of Hollywood-style Asian martial arts films like *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2001) rather than realistic kung fu culture in Chinese history [4]. Therefore, some scholars expressed concern about the sacrifice of national culture and historical specificity in transnational exchanges [5], which suggests that, from a cross-cultural perspective, the presence of a specific culture may not be effectively and authentically expressed in transnational cinema due to the notion of ‘transnationality’.

Therefore, this essay will focus on *Memories of a Geisha* (2004) and other similar Eastern themes in transnational films produced in Western countries, discussing the effectiveness of Eastern cultural transmission in transnational cinema. By analyzing the use of Eastern cultural symbols by Western directors, the confusion of transnational actors’ identities and languages, and the diversity of Western perspectives on Eastern history and culture, this essay will illustrate that there are some misunderstandings and prejudices in the presentation of eastern cultures in transnational cinema, the effectiveness and authenticity of its cultural transmissions is limited.

## 2 Stereotypes and Overly Simplistic Use of Eastern Cultural Symbols

Based on the traditional stereotype of Eastern culture, transnational cinemas produced by Western directors, they would tend to simplify some cultural elements into a traditional and symbolic expression, ignoring the diversity and complexity of realistic Eastern culture. *Memories of a Geisha* could as an example, the Japanese historian Dower [6] summarized some views that Western people have for the Japanese stereotype and impression, “replete with fans and paper umbrellas, kimono and lanterns, graceful wooden bridges, and archaic, man-powered boats”, which is almost consistent with the cultural symbols displayed in the film. Jin [7] also stated that the film used various exaggerated symbolic features, such as cherry blossoms, kimonos, and white make-up, which refers to the Japanese culture and the Geisha profession, reminding the audience that the story happened in an oriental context. However, it

fails to ensure the authenticity of the Eastern symbols in the story details. Therefore, it seems that the presence of these cultural symbols cannot deliver the realistic depth of Japanese and Geisha culture, only superficially conveying the Western stereotypes of Japanese women images.

Tanaka [8] identified that Arthur Golden, the original author of *Memories of a Geisha*, did not understand the deep meaning of the Geisha as the carrier of Eastern culture, but merely found a series of ostensible symbols hybridized based on Western stereotypes of Japanese culture, constructing a story of a young girl who has a crush on an adult man. This statement could be reflected in the process that Sayuri (Ziyi Zhang) practices to become a qualified Geisha. In the plot, she shows some symbols of traditional Japanese arts, such as dance, tea ceremony, and etiquette. Although it shows several classical Japanese props and symbols, the dialogue between Sayuri and Mameha (Ziqiong Yang) proves that the criteria for a Geisha to be judged as whether or not to be qualified Geisha has always been “whether or not could attract men’s attention”, which fits the stereotype of Japanese Geisha in Western society. It seems that their images are always submissive, powerless, and erotic [9]. However, in Japanese history, Geisha was proficient in traditional dance, song, shamisen and other genres of Japanese art [10], their multi-disciplinary artists images, technical and historical identification, and the profound role they played for the military and politics during the war [11], are not maximally portrayed in the film, instead being characterized with labels of oriental and female.

One of the reasons for this usage of simple symbols is the purpose to achieve de-culturalization, however, it is not as effective as its expectation. Wang and Yeh [1] mention that when cross-cultural films are produced, these culturally specific elements, such as racial, historical, and religious elements, which may create barriers to cultural acceptance, are downplayed to ensure that transnational audiences could understand the narrative. Wang [12] explained this phenomenon in terms of the Eastern elements in *Kill Bill* (2003). The bride (Uma Thurman) wears a costume that symbolizes Chinese Kung Fu and Bruce Lee, it could to some extent represent the cultural elements of Chinese martial arts, but its overall narrative and expression of values are different from traditional Chinese culture, as a distorted and superficial expression. Similarly, *Mulan* (2020) has also been criticized for simply using Chinese cultural symbols as an approach to visually ensure an alien representation [1]. It leads to these East-

ern-themed stories being less culturally specific, while only portrayed as something general that could happen at any place or period in human history.

Based on the above examples, this simple approach of de-culturalization not only exacerbates and spreads stereotypes of Eastern cultures among Western audiences but also ignores the depth and breadth of Eastern cultural heritage. Thus, it would contribute to a kind of fantasy of Eastern constructed by Western perception [7]. However, Berry and Farquhar [13] hold a different viewpoint, they believe that these symbols with racial markers, such as language, food, and clothing, could significantly promote the distribution and dissemination of transnational films. As these symbols can support to create of a stronger sense of difference between various races, the differentiation could assign a pronounced value to commercialization, which is considered a valuable means of appealing to more target audiences for global films. Nevertheless, even if the simple use of such symbols could achieve some commercial success and help expand the audience base, it is still a concerned barrier when it comes to delivering the realistic Eastern culture.

### 3 Identity Recognition Conflict and Language Distortions

Both actors and characters described in transnational cinema generally have multiple identities, which, to some extent, creates confusion in the audience's cognition of the characters' identities. In fact, in the early Hollywood classic cinema, the means of 'cultural whitewashing' was mentioned, showing that Asian characters were usually not played by Asian people themselves, instead of white actors [3]. For example, several Japanese protagonists in the Japanese animation film *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) were all played by white actors. For this phenomenon, Shamdasani [14] comments in the *New York Times* that it largely ignored the Asian atmosphere and Eastern philosophy of the original Japanese animation. In addition, the main character of the film *Great Wall* (2000) apparently should be supposed to be a Chinese ethnic identity as this story was described in the Northern Song Dynasty in ancient China. However, the director Yimou Zhang defended the casting of the main character, Matt Damon, claiming that his original intention was not to create a Chinese protagonist [15], such contradictory statements reinforce the issue of racial intersections in transnational films.

Although the practice of cultural whitewashing in film and television images has been criticized by a large number of scholars [16], even if this kind of ethnic identity confusion occurs within the ethnic group of the same skin color, it will also create some confusion. For example, *Memories of a Geisha*, the first Hollywood film to feature an exclusively Asian cast, was heavily criticized for using the wrong Asian images [17]. In the film casting, the roles of traditional Japanese Geisha were played by Chinese actresses Ziyi Zhang and Li Gong. Although the director Marshall explained that the choice of Chinese actors is because of their reputations as "the best actresses in Asia" [7], this setting still provoked nationalist resentment in Japan and China. Based on the history of Japanese occupation in China, the Chinese media generally consider the acting of Japanese as an insult to the identity of Chinese actors [7], criticizing these actresses for being unpatriotic [18]. Whereas, from the perspective of the Japanese audience, they believe that *Geisha* should not be played by foreigners, which leads to inaccuracy of the Japanese culture, a kind of 'misinformation and prejudice' [8]. Sakai Kanichi, a Japanese expert on *Geisha*, mentioned in an interview that "This is just wrong. When you look at the actress, you know that is fake." [7]. Thus, for Asian audiences, this not only adds to the sense of historical inaccuracy but also dismantles the uniqueness of the image of different Asian groups.

Linguistic confusion is another problem. Some transnational films based on Eastern historical themes, such as *Memories of a Geisha* and *The Last Emperor* (1987), have dialogue and language settings in English, further creating cognitive confusion for the audiences. Marchetti [19] points out that the audience subconsciously assumes these Chinese-faced actors speak Chinese. They are prone to translation and communication problems when they speak English with an accent. Regarding Zhang's performance in *Memories of a Geisha*, some online comments called her "slow and rough English" became the worst part of this film. In addition, another female actress, Ziqiong Yang, who has an excellent ability to speak English, was also criticized by the American audience because she has a solid British accent [20]. For Western film production teams, using English lines may be intended to attract a wider Western audience, but it alienates them. Therefore, it seems that the globalization of English usage is unsuitable for films from all cultural backgrounds; it may result in more significant misunderstanding and discomfort in the audience's understanding.

Some scholars suggest that this phenomenon may be linked to Hollywood's global hegemony [20]. The setting of globalization of the English language appears to be a typical means in Hollywood films, which often impose unthinking domination of the English language to maximize global profits while igniting political tensions by ignoring ethnic differences [5]. However, some scholars suggest that there are still some values of English language model in terms of film marketing and reputation expanding, as Joo [21] argues that these transnational and co-production films have potential economic benefits to Asian actors, it could seem like a way for Asian faces to fight against Hollywood's power. It has even contributed to a 'repatriation' phenomenon for these transnational actors. Many Chinese stars and actors appear in English-speaking Hollywood through Western-produced global films, shaping the terms of Chinese participation in the world's entertainment industry, then returning to the Chinese-language film industry after building a strong international fan base at international film festivals [20]. As the case of Ziyi Zhang, film *Memories of a Geisha* strengthened her fame in international cultural exchange platform, after expanding the influence of her roles around the world [20], she starred back in several Mandarin-language Chinese films.

To sum up, the confusion of Asian identities and the hegemony of English in transnational cinema to some extent restricted the communication of Eastern cultures in the West, while leading to a cognitive dissonance between Eastern and Western audiences. However, it cannot deny its commercial incentive, as Lim [18] concludes that English-speaking Chinese actresses playing Japanese Geisha represent a transnational 'market penetration'.

## 4 Cognitive Differences and Historical Inaccuracy Towards Eastern Cultures

Authenticity is considered an essential consideration for cross-cultural expressions. However, *Memories of a Geisha* as a Hollywood film, its authenticity has been widely questioned by media and professionals in the film industry around the world. In terms of authenticity of characterization, Jin [7] claims that the white face makeup of the Geisha in the film is not exaggerated to the extent that it should be for a real Geisha, while their hairstyle is not

typical of the usual hairstyles of the Geisha. Similarly, another film, *The Last Emperor* (1987), which was directed by Italian director Bertolucci, also shows some historical mistakes, such as the inaccurate usage of costumes from the Ming rather than the Qing dynasty [22]. Also, a scene in the film shows that the emperor sleeps with two women, which would not have happened in the real history of the palace [23]. All of this triggered dissatisfaction among Chinese audiences with the differences in cultural perspectives and historically inaccurate depictions.

From the aspect of delivering a spirit of values, it also causes some bias. Back to the *Memories of a Geisha*, due to its historical background was set in Japan during the World War II period, which is seen as a significant historical turning point for Japanese society. Thus, the film to some extent highlights the American perception of Japan during this particular period, rather than whether the traditional image of Geisha has been positively and correctly embodied or not [9], this starting point is probably based on the emphasis of Western directors on historical thinking. Jin [7] also supports that the authenticity of *Memories of a Geisha* is more reflected in the power relations favored by American culture, such as how Geisha are snatched up amongst men, rather than only those depictions and interpretations of mysterious Geisha or local Japanese culture. Hence, it contributes to the bias of the narrative concept, turning it into a simple representation of Eastern culture interpreted from the Western perspective. Another recent Disney film could also illustrate this argument, the story and portrayal of the film *Mulan* has changed dramatically compared to the traditional Chinese version. The original Chinese fable attempts to convey the traditional Chinese spirit of filial piety through Mulan's replacement of her father in the army [5]. However, as a commercial product of Disney, the film *Mulan* expresses more about American Hollywood-style individualism, which contradicts the ideology of the Chinese original [1], revealing more Western than Chinese values.

Professor Robert Burgoyne mentioned in an interview that 'transnational' implies a contrasting perspective with the old form, even perhaps in opposition [24], which explains why films with Eastern themes produced by Western directors can cause these potential misunderstandings. Higbee and Lim [5] further explain the purpose of contrasting perspectives. In the cross-cultural process, films often attempt to change the local cultural perspective to conform to the cultural values of the global market or



producers, which can be seen as a kind of distorted localization. As the example of *Mulan* mentioned above shows that Disney's concern is not how to maintain loyalty to the original culture, but how to effectively balance the exotic with the cultural tastes of Western audiences [12]. However, other scholars believe that diversified perspectives can make the film industry more innovative. Because globalization could provide production teams the opportunity to tell stories more creatively and attract a wider audience by redefining multiple elements such as time and space, socio-political, economic, and cultural values [1]. Therefore, globalization has indeed led to the loss of some cultural uniqueness and originality, however, through the loss of the original, we could find something brand-new [1], such as understanding how Eastern culture is viewed from an external perspective, and the extent to which Eastern culture could be most appealing to Western audiences.

In addition, this cross-cultural perspective also builds a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures. For example, Gerard [25] believes that the success of *The Last Emperor* an important symbol of Eastern and Western relations in the mid-1980s. Because *The Last Emperor* was the first multinational film which allowed to be shot in the Forbidden City, the filmmaker Thomas mentioned in an interview that, he thought *The Last Emperor* could be seen as an advertisement for the Forbidden City [26], which significantly enhance the cultural cognition and travel willingness for Western audiences. Similarly, *Memoirs of a Geisha* also prompted a tourism boom in Japan, including an increasing number of tourists to Japan and increased consumption of film-themed cultural and creative products [7].

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay claims that transnational films as a popular trend in the current film industry, although it has helped Eastern culture open the international market and enhanced the cognitive status of Asian images in the world, their effectiveness is limited in conveying the realistic Eastern culture and history. If setting all political art and ideological trivia aside, Hollywood does have the significant advantage of producing marketable products in the film market [16]. However, due to its oversimplified use of cultural symbols, incorrect selection of actors, and misunderstanding of Eastern culture by Western directors, the spread of Eastern culture has been hindered in trans-

national films.

There are some limitations in the discussion of this essay. Due to the wide range of film eras involved, there would be some differences in the understanding of transnational cinema in the context of different eras. However, its research significance can still strengthen the cultural exchanges between East and West transnational films in the future, and also provide new thinking and application for transnational literature, media, communication, and some other fields. Therefore, when we discuss transnational film, we need to hold a critical perspective on it [5], then it can become a significant area in the topic of cross-cultural and transnational cinema.

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