Interpreting the Film *Chang An* from the Perspective of the Theory of Symbolic Intertextuality

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Abstract

This study takes the animated film *Chang An* as a case study, and employs the theory of symbolic intertextuality and the perspective of cultural coding to conduct in-depth analysis of the three major symbol systems: image, language, and music. The study found that these three symbol systems form close intertextual relationships through strategies of simultaneity, linearity, and embedding, expanding the dimensions of symbolic meaning and constructing a multidimensional and dynamic symbolic network, enriching the film's expressive techniques. At the same time, it reveals the rich historical and cultural connotations inherent in these symbol systems' encoding, emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage. Through micro-textual analysis, the study delves into the mechanisms of visual language generation, providing theoretical support and empirical cases for the academic research of classical Chinese animated films.

Keywords: symbolic intertextuality, image symbols, language symbols, music symbols, historical culture

1. Introduction

The animated film *Chang An* adopts the perspective of the poet Gao Shi, using his experiences of witnessing the An Lushan Rebellion and resisting foreign invasions as the thread. It vividly portrays the historical appearance of Chang'an during the prosperous Tang Dynasty, grandly presents the life trajectories of literary figures such as Li Bai and Du Fu, and reflects the historical evolution of the cultural prosperity and decline between the prosperous Tang and middle Tang periods. The film cleverly incorporates 48 Tang poems, perfectly combining the beauty of traditional Chinese poetry with the art of animation, fully demonstrating the splendid heritage of Chinese civilization. Therefore, using the research perspective of the theory of symbolic intertextuality to deeply analyze the historical and cultural connotations contained in this work, the theory of symbolic intertextuality emphasizes the openness of the text and the intertextuality of symbols, revealing the rich cultural connotations implied by symbol encoding. However, there is a lack of systematic and comprehensive application of this theory to analyze the historical and cultural symbols in animated films, and the cultural connotations encoded in the works have not been fully explored. Specifically, the analysis of the symbolic meaning of place space, the cultural significance of language symbols, and the

aesthetic value of music symbols all require further exploration. Therefore, using the theory of symbolic intertextuality to analyze the mutual relationship and integration of elements such as place space, language symbols, and music symbols in *Chang An*, we can further explore the historical and cultural connotations contained in the work, enrich our understanding of the prosperous Tang culture, and delve into the reference provided by ancient Chinese animated films.

1.1 Symbolic Coding of Place Space Reflecting the Cultural Ideal of the Flourishing Tang Dynasty

The film conveys the core symbolic significance of Chang'an City as the political center of the empire through the meticulously constructed imagery of its spatial layout. The seamless integration of panoramic shots and detailed scenes reinforces the visual impact of Chang'an as the "Empire within the Empire," showcasing the bustling historical space of palaces, streets, and residences during its heyday, reflecting the diverse social landscape of the prosperous ancient capital. In stark contrast, the later depiction of the dilapidated and desolate Chang'an symbolizes the decline and fall of the empire. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the spatial symbols of Yangzhou in the film reflects the prosperity of the entire Tang Dynasty. The detailed portrayal of Yangzhou's landscape highlights the unique cultural and aesthetic values of the Jiangnan region, blending commercial civilization with pastoral poetic imagery, showcasing the inclusiveness of the region's culture. The juxtaposition of these two cityscape symbols enriches the film's broad imagination of Chinese urban history.

The recurring depiction of literati reciting poetry at the Yellow Crane Tower cleverly utilizes its unique visual imagery, coding it as a spiritual sanctuary for classical Chinese literati, imbuing it with symbolic significance as a bearer of traditional culture. The Yellow Crane Tower amid the misty mountains and rivers provides a poetic perspective integrated with natural scenery, evoking the cultural atmosphere where literati of all ages expressed their leisurely sentiments. As a cultural symbol, the Yellow Crane Tower carries the historical memory of classical Chinese literary creation. Through the conceptualization of literati reciting poetry, the film carefully explores the cultural connotations of the Yellow Crane Tower space, demonstrating the rich imagination inherent in the transmission of cultural meanings through spatial imagery.

Gao Shi's repeated failures in seeking official positions, leading to his eventual return to his tranquil rural hometown of Liangyuan, highlight his determination to adhere to his true self and pursue spiritual aspirations throughout his life journey. The spatial shaping of Liangyuan encodes the literati's ideal of advocating a reclusive life, with its picturesque natural scenery creating a secluded poetic atmosphere that starkly contrasts with the bustling urban life, offering a distinct cultural imagination dimension. This fully embodies the Confucian ideal of advocating a return to simplicity and the pastoral lifestyle, creating a tension in values with the utilitarian-oriented urban political space.

As an important military defense line, the Great Wall transcends its military function in the film narrative to become a symbolic code for interpreting the social realities of the time. It not only represents loyalty to the country but also reflects the real dilemma faced by certain scholar-officials in the prosperous Tang Dynasty who were unable to contribute to the country due to their background or lack of opportunities. Both Li Bai and Gao Shi held political ambitions, but the former, coming from a merchant background, could not participate in the imperial examinations, while the latter, with no hope of passing the exams, chose to enlist. Their failed attempts to seek recommendations in Chang'an and Yangzhou ultimately prevented them from realizing their political aspirations.

The contrasting portrayal of Chang'an, Yangzhou, the Yellow Crane Tower, Liangyuan, and the border fortress elucidates the unwavering pursuit of ancient benevolent scholars to serve their country and fulfill their life values, showcasing the struggles and political ideals of intellectuals during this period.

1.2 Language Text Symbols Bearing the Spirit of Historical Literati

The application of language symbols in the film reflects the theoretical framework of semiotician Peirce regarding the relationship between symbols, objects, and interpreters. Peirce believes that the meaning generation of language symbols depends on the psychological characteristics, values, and cultural identities of language users, "the essence of symbol meaning lies in the bidirectional interaction between

people using symbols" [1] . Symbols must be placed in specific pragmatic contexts and decoded by interpreters to obtain meaning. This theoretical framework provides an important methodological reference for analyzing the cultural connotations of language symbols and offers an inspiring perspective for examining the cultural significance assumed by symbols in new contexts. Specifically in *Chang An*, classical poetry serves as language symbols embedded within visual images, obtaining additional cultural significance relying on the audience's cultural memory of classical poetry. For example, the visual image of Li Bai's *The Yellow River's water comes from heaven* gains a poignant understanding of life's desolation based on the audience's cultural cognition of Li Bai's poetry. Similarly, the linguistic image of Cui Hao's "The Yellow Crane has departed and will never return" conveys the implications of the passage of time based on the audience's synchronous experience of youth slipping away.

According to Peirce's theory of symbolic interaction, the meanings represented by language symbols such as poetry in the film will receive new interpretations from different interpreters, and this decoding process will be a continuous process of obtaining new cultural meanings for the interpreters. For example, the language symbols in Li Bai's *Drinking Alone under the Moon*, such as "The Yellow River's water comes from heaven" and "Morning resembles green silk, evening becomes snow," embody positive optimism and the philosophical view of enjoying life in a timely manner, enriching the cultural connotations of the animation. The lyrical linguistic image of "The Yellow River's water comes from heaven" encapsulates Li Bai's romanticism of advocating nature and cherishing life, while the depiction of "Morning resembles green silk, evening becomes snow" in depicting the changes of things condenses Li Bai's dialectical perspective on changes in phenomena and his positive attitude towards facing the vicissitudes of life. These classic language symbols placed in a new cultural context, the cross-contextual extension of language symbols evoke the audience's cultural identification, providing richer historical and cultural resources for visual language, thereby expanding the expressive space of animation's meaning.

1.3 Rendering Classical Aesthetic Sentiments Through Music Symbols

In the film *Chang An*, the application of music symbols is crucial for expressing classical aesthetic emotions. These symbols can be divided into two categories: the music performed by historical figures and the background music added later. The qin piece "Yellow Bird" played by Li Bai, with its passionate and mournful qin music, successfully conveys feelings of parting, highlighting the powerful role of music in emotional expression. Meanwhile, the background music in the film, especially pieces played with traditional instruments such as the guqin and erhu, creates a classical atmosphere, with ethereal and melancholic music serving as outstanding tools for emotional expression. The organic integration of these music symbols not only forms the core of the film's music symbol system but also inherits the profound heritage of Chinese traditional music aesthetics, providing audiences with profound emotional experiences.

These music symbols profoundly influence the emotional experience of the audience. As a non-verbal artistic language, music can deeply touch the audience's hearts, evoke resonance, and completely immerse the audience in the emotional world of the film. In *Chang An*, music symbols express emotions such as parting, affection, and nostalgia, providing audiences with profound emotional experiences and deeply involving them in the story. This emotional resonance not only enriches the audience's film experience but also conveys the precious heritage of Chinese traditional music and aesthetic emotions, providing solid support for cultural inheritance.

2. Embedded Intertextuality Expands Connotative Space

"Embedded intertextuality achieves innovative combinations of different symbol system attributes, expanding the connotative dimensions of symbols."[2] Within the context of audio-visual texts, one symbol system can be ingeniously embedded into another symbol system through clever encoding techniques, enabling the fusion and elevation of two symbol systems, resulting in a rich and meaningful space of significance. Taking the animated film *Chang An* as an example, its music composition extensively absorbs and integrates the imagery and emotions of classical Chinese poetry. Among them, the representation of poignant parting in "Parting from the White Emperor, amidst colorful clouds, Returning to Jiangling

after a thousand li, in just one day" is introduced as the theme melody, embedded into the music symbol system. In this process, the verses originally belonging to the language symbol system are highly integrated with the music symbol system, which inherently possesses melodic qualities, through innovative encoding techniques of musical elements. The re-encoded melody not only retains the musical qualities but also fully absorbs the rich cultural connotations conveyed by the poetry, achieving an organic combination of language symbols and music symbols. The two complement each other, forming a new artistic effect.

2.1 Simultaneous Interplay Achieves Multimodal Encoding

Firstly, simultaneous interplay achieves the composite encoding of multiple symbolic systems. From the perspective of semiotics theory, "the organic connection between different symbolic systems is an important strategy for expanding textual meaning." [3] Applying this theoretical perspective to the context of audiovisual texts, language, music, and visual symbols can appear synchronously, thus realizing simultaneous interplay of multiple symbolic systems. Taking the animated film *Chang An* as an example, the production team extensively employed techniques of simultaneous presentation of language symbols (narrative poetry recitation), music symbols (ancient music performance), and visual symbols (historical imagery). For instance, the narration of Su Shi's poetry by Li Bai expresses literary emotions through language symbols, while music symbols create an atmospheric ambiance, and visual symbols construct historical scenes. Different symbol systems intertwine at the same time, complementing each other, and jointly expanding the connotations and extensions of meaning.

Secondly, the implementation of simultaneous interplay also contributes to the innovation of multimodal encoding. In *Chang An*, a single symbol can carry multiple dimensions of meaning, embodying the "multimodality" proposed by semiotician Roland Barthes. For example, the guqin solo *Farewell at Jingmen Pass* played by Li Bai expresses feelings of sadness at the musical level and conveys thoughts of parting at the linguistic level, achieving a clever fusion of multimodal encoding. This multimodal symbolic encoding not only enables the audience to gain a richer experience in emotions

and thoughts but also provides new possibilities for the exploration of audiovisual arts. Simultaneous interplay breaks the traditional linear expression mode, providing an important path for the innovative composite of multiple symbol systems.

Overall, the application of simultaneous interplay not only enriches the means of expression in audiovisual arts but also deepens the levels and diversity of symbolic encoding, fully reflecting the important role of semiotics in the field of audiovisual arts. The application of this theoretical perspective provides new insights and methods for the analysis of audiovisual texts, enriches the research field of audiovisual texts, and helps to better understand the role and influence of symbols in cultural transmission.

2.2 Linear Interplay Transmits Meaning

Linear interplay, as a temporal sequence transformation between symbolic systems, is an important strategy for the continuous expansion of meaning in audiovisual texts. In semiotics theory, "linear interplay is seen as a way to organically connect different symbolic systems, helping the audience to smoothly decode dynamically and avoiding ruptures in understanding." In *Chang An*, the production team extensively employs linear combinations of language symbols (lyrical poetry) and visual symbols (historical imagery). Firstly, language symbols appear in the form of recitation, conveying certain emotions and moods, followed closely by visual symbols presented in imagery, visually rendering the previously abstract linguistic moods. In this process, abstract linguistic meanings are successfully transformed into intuitive visual meanings, allowing the audience to smoothly transition from one dimension of meaning to another on a coherent timeline, engaging in fluid dynamic decoding.

Taking the verse "Bidding farewell to the White Emperor amidst colorful clouds, I return to Jiangling a thousand miles away in just one day" as an example, language symbols first appear in recitation, expressing feelings of parting and nostalgia for the hometown. Immediately after, the picturesque scenery of Jiangling is presented in imagery, transforming the earlier abstract linguistic mood into tangible visual meaning, allowing the audience to transform the sorrow of parting into

contemplation and depiction of hometown scenery. In this temporal transformation process, language symbols and visual symbols achieve a smooth and orderly linear interplay, allowing the audience to follow the extension of meaning on a coherent cognitive thread, avoiding interruptions and confusion in understanding. Therefore, the linear interplay between language and visual symbol systems drives the continuous expansion of meaning and is one of the important strategies for achieving coherent artistic expression in *Chang An*. This linear interplay not only helps the audience to understand emotions and contexts more deeply but also provides a richer audiovisual experience.

2.3 Embedded Interplay Expands Connotative Space

"Embedded interplay achieves an innovative combination of different attributes of symbolic systems, expanding the dimensions of symbolic connotations."[4] In the context of audiovisual texts, a symbolic system can be ingeniously embedded into another symbolic system through coding techniques, allowing the fusion and elevation of two symbolic systems to form a rich and meaningful space of significance. Taking the animated film *Chang An* as an example, its music composition extensively absorbs and integrates the imagery and emotions of classical Chinese poetry. For instance, the poignant verse "Bidding farewell to the White Emperor amidst colorful clouds, I return to Jiangling a thousand miles away in just one day" is introduced as the main theme melody, embedded into the music symbolic system. In this process, the poetry originally belonging to the language symbolic system achieves a high degree of fusion with the music symbolic system, which inherently possesses melodic traits, through innovative coding techniques of musical elements. The melody, re-encoded, not only retains the musical qualities of rhythm but also fully absorbs the rich cultural connotations contained in the poetry, achieving an organic integration of language symbols and music symbols. Both complement each other, forming a new artistic effect.

The emotion of parting contained in the musical melody is driven by the cultural connotations imparted by language symbols. From this perspective, the innovative combination of language symbols and music symbols, two different symbolic systems, through embedded

interplay, expands the expression dimensions of each, achieving complementarity and elevation of symbolic attributes, presenting a novel artistic effect. This depth of symbolic interplay not only enhances the emotional expression of audiovisual works but also broadens the audience's aesthetic perspective, allowing them to experience more profoundly the cultural connotations and emotional resonance conveyed by the work.

In conclusion, through strategies of simultaneous interplay, linear interplay, and embedded interplay among multiple symbolic systems, *Chang An* creatively constructs a rich and colorful symbolic network. This network not only facilitates the synergistic cooperation between different symbolic systems but also promotes the innovative integration of language, music, and visual symbolic systems, achieving composite expression through multimodal encoding. Specifically, simultaneous interplay realizes the synchronous appearance of symbolic systems, with language, music, and visual symbols complementing each other, expanding the extensional dimensions of meaning. "Linear interplay facilitates the smooth transformation of symbolic systems in chronological order, bringing about connotative extensions in the transformation from language symbols to visual symbols." "Embedded interplay achieves a creative combination between different symbolic attributes, with language imagery embedded into musical melodies, enriching the cultural connotations of music." These three interplay strategies, working in synergy, not only bring about format innovation, temporal transformation, and attribute fusion of symbolic systems but also offer new possibilities for artistic expression in animated films.

3. Historical and Cultural Connotations in Symbolic Encoding

Exploring the historical and cultural connotations embedded in symbolic encoding, as well as the relationship between symbols and their socio-historical context, represents a new perspective in contemporary semiotic studies, providing insights into the social and cultural dimensions of examining the historical origins and cultural lineages of symbols. Specifically in the context of animated films, their complex multi-symbol encoding systems often internalize and reflect specific historical and cultural implications. Taking *Chang An* as an example, its

audio-visual language vividly reproduces the historical panorama of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, with language, music, imagery, and other symbol systems encoding rich connotations, reflecting a profound historical and cultural heritage. The historical implications presented through composite encoding reveal the intrinsic connection between symbols and traditional Chinese culture.

3.1 Architectural Symbol Encoding Evokes Historical Cultural Memory

The animated film *Chang An* achieves innovative encoding and representation of ancient Chinese architectural civilization through its exquisite depiction of the city walls of Chang'an, palace layouts, and architectural styles. The visual presentation of these architectural symbols not only faithfully reproduces ancient architecture in form but also profoundly showcases the unique role of architectural elements in cultural inheritance. Firstly, the film vividly portrays the urban planning of the "fang" functional zones within Chang'an City through animated form, reflecting the city's construction concept at the time. Audiences can clearly perceive the structure and layout of this ancient city, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of urban development during the prosperous Tang Dynasty. Secondly, the depiction of palaces is also lifelike, especially the application of multi-colored glazed tiles and the combination of carved beams and painted rafters, which re-establishes the stylistic features of classical architectural decorative arts. The exquisite presentation of these details not only allows the audience to experience the beauty of traditional architecture up close but also transports them back in time, enabling them to personally experience the splendor of ancient architecture.

Chinese classical architecture not only represents a form of architectural expression but also internalizes rich historical and cultural connotations, representing the unique achievements of the Chinese nation in the field of architecture. Through the vivid presentation of architectural symbols, the film successfully reproduces the charm of classical architectural aesthetics, evoking the historical memories and cultural identity deep within the audience. This process not only achieves the innovative inheritance of architectural civilization traditions but also fully embodies the cultural perspective embedded in symbolic encoding, providing a new research perspective and thinking path for semiotic studies. This film presentation not only sparks audiences' keen interest in ancient architecture but also injects new vitality into the unique achievements of the Chinese nation in the field of architecture.

3.2 Craft Symbol Encoding Revealing Intangible Cultural Heritage

The film *Chang An* successfully presents the rich and colorful intangible cultural heritage of the Tang Dynasty capital through its meticulous depiction, achieving visual symbol encoding and representation of traditional Chinese cultural life. The animated work portrays various folk activities such as acrobatics, drama, poetry recitation, calligraphy, and painting in the urban streets and markets of the prosperous Tang Dynasty city with extreme precision and attention to detail. These unique non-verbal symbols not only enhance the visual appeal of the scenes but also inject new life into cultural heritage.

Chinese traditional folklore has a long history and draws from the profound cultural essence, representing the collective wisdom of the Chinese nation. In the animated film, these intangible visual symbols are carefully encoded and applied, redefining the contemporary expression of artisanal civilization. This process not only reproduces the beauty of traditional folklore but also evokes memories and recognition of national essence among modern audiences.

The use of visual symbol encoding provides a new perspective for broadening the exploration of historical and cultural life. Through the encoding of intangible cultural heritage symbols, the film *Chang An* successfully achieves the contemporary representation of artisanal civilization, innovatively inheriting intangible cultural heritage, profoundly demonstrating the cultural perspective embedded in symbol encoding, and enriching the exploration of traditional culture.

3.3 Object Symbol Encoding Evoking Historical Imagination

The film *Chang An* vividly presents lifelike historical artifacts that are characteristic of the era, successfully achieving innovative encoding and representation of life in the prosperous Tang Dynasty. These object symbols not only provide audiences with a visual experience but also, through implicit cultural information, outline a rich historical background, evoking the

historical imagination of the audience. Firstly, the finely depicted ancient coins in the animation not only reproduce the historical scenes of the prosperous Tang Dynasty economy but also showcase the cultural evolution of currency. These ancient coins serve not only as mediums of economic exchange but also carry multiple layers of information such as casting dates and government policies. Through these details, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the social and cultural background of the time. Secondly, the appearance of silk and other textiles is also meticulously presented. This not only reproduces the splendor of the Silk Road but also conveys the frequent interaction and integration of Eastern and Western civilizations in the silk industry. Audiences can perceive the prosperity of ancient trade and the extensive cultural exchange through these object symbols. The presentation of silk's texture, color, and production techniques provides audiences with a window into understanding the Tang Dynasty era.

Additionally, the appearance of elephants is also significant. Elephants appear twice in the film, with elephants and baby elephants as toys for aristocrats to watch acrobatic performances, becoming part of the life objects. This detail not only showcases the social hierarchy and cultural entertainment of the time but also outlines the living scenes of the prosperous Tang Dynasty. The film ends with the depiction of the decline of the Tang Dynasty, with the emperor fleeing and elephants running amok in Chang'an City, conveying the decline and chaos of the empire, presenting a dramatic turning point in history to the audience.

In conclusion, these object symbols play a unique role in the film, carrying rich historical contexts and stimulating the audience's historical imagination. Through meticulous presentation and the transmission of cultural information, they add more layers and depth to the cultural context of the film, fully demonstrating the unique value of symbol encoding in conveying cultural information.

4. Conclusion

As an emerging form of visual text, animated films contain rich audiovisual languages and symbolic expressions, warranting scholarly attention to their unique artistic language features and the cultural significance they carry.

Taking *Chang An* as a case study, this research applies the theory of symbolic intertextuality and a cultural encoding perspective to analyze its textual symbols, decoding the imagery, language, and music, the three major symbolic systems within the text. The study finds that there is frequent intertextuality among different symbolic systems, manifested in the application of three strategies: simultaneous intertextuality, linear intertextuality, and embedded intertextuality. These three intertextual strategies work together to expand the dimensions of meaning within the text, constructing a three-dimensional dynamic network of meaning and enriching the film's expressive methods and artistic appeal. Specifically, simultaneous intertextuality achieves composite encoding; linear intertextuality guides dynamic symbol transitions; embedded intertextuality realizes innovative integration between symbolic systems.

The research also finds that composite symbolic encoding contains rich historical and cultural implications. Non-verbal symbols such as architecture, craftsmanship, and objects showcase historical memories and contemporary insights, demonstrating unique cultural heritage effects. Architectural symbols evoke cultural identity, craftsmanship symbols exhibit the charm of intangible cultural heritage, and object symbols construct historical imagination.

In summary, this study employs the perspective of symbolic intertextuality theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the animated film *Chang An*, examining the intertextual strategies among different symbolic systems and dissecting the historical and cultural significance carried by non-verbal symbols. Through micro-analysis of the text, it enriches and deepens the academic discussion of classical-themed animated films, allowing the cultural connotations of their symbolic systems to be fully explored.

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