

Cross-cultural Mirror: A Comparative Study of Child Images in Chinese and French Children's Films in the 21st Century

Xinyuan Yao

Department of Digital Arts, Xi'an University of Posts and Telecommunications, Xi'an 710121, Shaanxi, China

Abstract: Based on cross-cultural theories, this research focuses on the child images in Chinese and French children's films since the 21st century. Through textual analysis and case studies, it conducts an in-depth comparative study of the types of child images, the ways of shaping them, and the cultural connotations behind them in the children's films of the two countries. By analyzing the differences and commonalities in the portrayal of child images in Chinese and French children's films, this study aims to provide references for the cross-cultural communication and development of children's films between China and France, and to offer new ideas and references for the future creation of children's films in both countries.

Keywords: Cross-cultural; Children's films; Chinese cinema; French cinema; Child images

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, with the acceleration of the globalization process, cross-cultural exchanges have become more and more frequent. Children's films, as an important part of the cinematic art, not only serve the function of entertainment but also play a significant role in the education and cultural heritage of children's growth. Both China and France have a long history and unique cultural traditions in the field of cinema. In recent years, French children's films have taken the lead in major international film festivals and won a series of awards. Therefore, French children's films are selected as the research object to conduct a comparative study with Chinese children's films. Analyzing the child images in Chinese and French children's films from the perspective of cross-cultural mirroring is conducive to a deeper understanding of how cultural differences between the two countries are reflected in the cinematic art. It can also promote the exchange and development of children's films between China and France and provide new ideas and references for the future creation of children's films in both countries.

2. The Concept and Significance of Cross-Culture

The concept of cross-culture was first proposed by the American anthropologist Edward Hall. It refers to the communication and interaction between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds. It emphasizes the perspective of "Cultural Relativism"[1], that is, no culture is superior, and each culture has its unique value and contribution. Against the backdrop of globalization, cross-cultural exchanges are not limited to culture itself, but can also promote innovation in the fields of science and technology, social sciences, politics, and economy. It helps to establish political dialogue between countries, enhance mutual understanding, reduce international conflicts, and promote world peace.

The study will select representative children's films from China and France since the 21st century as samples. Based on the film texts, case analysis will be conducted to extract information related to child images, deeply analyze the characteristics and shaping methods of child images in the two countries, and use comparative analysis to explore from multiple angles such as narrative style, cultural background, and social values. The reasons and impacts behind the differences in child images in the films of the two countries will be revealed, thereby promoting cross-cultural exchanges of children's films between the two countries.

3. Reasons for the Prosperity of French Children's Films in the 21st Century

As one of the birthplaces of European cinema, France boasts a long history and profound film culture. Compared with other countries in Europe and America, French cinema is renowned for its artistry, innovation, and diversity. The Cannes Film Festival is one of the most influential film events in the world. In terms of the inheritance of film culture, France has a strong tradition of film culture. French filmmakers generally adhere to the principle of "art first" and strive to promote the development of small and medium-sized cost films, mainly art films, which provides a good environment for the development of children's films.

The French government has long provided a lot of policy and financial support for the film industry, including chil-

dren's films. For example, the establishment of the French National Center for Cinema (CNC) and the film funding fund has provided policy and financial guarantees for film production. The implementation of the "automatic funding" principle and the "selective funding" principle in France also largely ensures the funding sources for French children's films[2]. In addition, the tax rebate policy (TRIP) implemented by France has added vitality to the creation of animated films, especially its attractiveness to international co-productions. This policy has led to an increasing number of international cooperation projects flowing to France, promoting the cross-cultural exchange and development of the children's film industry.

4. Similarities and Differences of Child Archetypes in Chinese and French Children's Films in the 21st Century

4.1 Unique Types of Child Images in Chinese Children's Films

4.1.1 Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors

In Chinese children's films, many children are depicted as bearing the mission of inheriting traditional culture from a young age. For example, in the film "The Little Peking Opera Star" (2002), the rural teenager Wang Dawei diligently practices martial arts and studies hard, eventually becoming an outstanding young Peking Opera performer. In "The Invincible Young Martial Artist" (2004), Wang Jialiang, though initially reluctant to inherit his family's tradition of martial arts, gradually falls in love with the art under the guidance of an older friend. Another example is in "The Four Roles" (2001), where the half-Chinese boy Jeffrey, whose mother left for a foreign country after becoming a famous performer, grows up loving fried sauce noodles and learning traditional Chinese opera. These child characters, whether actively or passively, ultimately take on the responsibility of carrying forward the cultural heritage.

4.1.2 Children in Rural Hardship Seeking Knowledge

This type of child image is also common in Chinese children's films. For instance, in "Walking to School" (2009), Wa Wa and Na Xiang live by the Nu River in Yunnan and must risk their lives to cross the river on a zip line to attend school. In "Warm Spring" (2003), the orphan Xiao Hua, despite being abandoned multiple times, still longs for education. These child images reflect the Chinese rural children's thirst for education and highlight societal concerns about educational equity.

4.1.3 Obedient, Sensible, and Aspiring Children

This type of child archetype originates from the construction of the "ideal child" image in Chinese families. For example, in the film "Dog Thirteen" (2018), a little girl who loves her dog is ultimately forced by her elders to eat dog meat, resulting in a tragedy. Another example is in "My Sister" (2021), where the elder sister, who had already clearly planned her future, compromises her personal dreams to take care of her younger brother, with whom she has a distant relationship. [3] These child archetypes are often role models for their peers and reflect the emphasis on children's moral education in traditional Chinese culture.

4.2 Unique Child Archetypes in French Children's Films

4.2.1 Resilient Children in War

In some French children's films that reflect war themes, this type of child archetype is relatively common. For example, in "Fanny's Journey" (2016), Fanny, as the Nazis gradually encroach upon France, faces challenges of trust and betrayal while fleeing with her sister, yet she remains resilient, leading her companions forward. In "The New Button War" (2011), which uses children's "war" to reflect World War II, the war is depicted as a group of adorable children running through vast rural fields with wooden sticks. When the Jewish girl's identity is exposed, the two groups of children, who were previously at odds, join hands to fight against the enemy. These child archetypes reflect the resilience and bravery of French children in wartime and highlight the French cultural inheritance of the anti-fascist spirit.

4.2.2 Lonely, Sensitive, and Imaginative Children

In "The Bag of Love" (2006), Betty attempts to commit suicide by cutting her wrist. Instead of scolding her, her father comforts her, acknowledging that she is a sensitive and imaginative child. He also admits that even as a father and an adult, he struggles to adapt to life. This kind of interaction promotes understanding and trust among family members and reflects the emphasis on children's mental health and "Human Rights Education"[4] in French family education.

4.3 Common Child Archetypes in Chinese and French Children's Films

Cross-cultural exchanges allow children's films from different countries to absorb elements from other nations' arts, literature, and diverse cultures, creating richer and more colorful artistic forms. Since the 21st century, the French film and television industry has been committed to international cooperation and cross-cultural exchanges, which are also reflected in children's audiovisual works through the concept of cross-culture. Although China and France have differences in history

and culture, both countries, as anti-fascist nations, share the same pursuit of peace and justice. They also have a common pursuit of the aesthetics of innocence in children's films. Therefore, many consistent child archetypes have been created.

4.3.1 Innocent and Loving Child Images

The archetype of innocent and loving children is a common type in children's films from both China and France, reflecting the universal aesthetic preference for innocence and fun in children worldwide. For example, in the French film "The Little Rascal Nicolas" (2009), Tintin and his friends learn how to cooperate and take responsibility while trying to prevent the arrival of a younger brother, showcasing the pure friendship among children. In China, the children's film "The Secret of the Magic Gourd" (2007), as a fantasy film, uses the magical powers of the gourd to highlight children's imagination, creativity, and spirit of cooperation. These child archetypes reflect the admiration for innocence and love in both Chinese and French cultures and demonstrate society's attention to children's emotional needs.

4.3.2 Rebellious and Growing Child Images

In French children's films, the archetype of rebellious and growing children is often depicted. For example, in "The Chorus" (2004), there are those children who are considered "problem students"[5]. Another example is in "Annette" (2021), where Annette, who has a May-December romance with the conductor, reveals the truth of her father's murder at her farewell concert. Her father, Henri, is then brought to justice. These child archetypes reflect the French cultural pursuit of individual freedom and self-expression.

Similarly, in Chinese children's films such as "A Good Place in the Tree" (2019) and "The Art Teacher's Flock" (2023), there are also portrayals of mischievous and rebellious children like Ba Wangchaoguo. However, in Chinese children's films, these types of characters are often disciplined by the school and society. The successful portrayal of such characters also indirectly reflects the increasing attention and humanistic care for the "underachiever" group in Chinese society in recent years.

4.3.3 Fairy Tale, Mythology, and Animated Child Images

In recent years, both China and France have adapted some animated films based on the cultural history and excellent literary works of the two countries. However, there are slight differences in character portrayal. In Chinese animations, child archetypes focus more on collective consciousness and are on a mission to "save the world," such as Chun in "The Big Fish and Begonia" (2016). In contrast, French animations emphasize individual growth and redemption, like the fox's guidance for the Little Prince in "The Little Prince" (2015). These subtle differences in animated archetypes also indirectly reflect the disparities in social culture and values between the two countries.

5. Reasons for Differences in Child Archetypes in Chinese and French Children's Films

5.1 Differences in the Construction and Shaping of Child Archetypes

5.1.1 The Choice of Narrative Perspective

Chinese children's films often employ an adult perspective or alternate between adult and child perspectives. The adult perspective can better depict social backgrounds and historical events while also guiding and interpreting children's behavior and psychology. For example, in some children's films with revolutionary themes, the adult perspective helps the audience better understand the brutality of war and the significance of revolution. Alternating between adult and child perspectives allows the film to present the child's world while also incorporating the viewpoints and attitudes of the adult world, adding depth and breadth to the film.

French children's films, on the other hand, tend to adopt a child's perspective for storytelling. For instance, in "The Holiday of Little Nicolas" (2014), the entire story unfolds through the eyes of a child. Through the child's eyes, the contradictions in the adult world are presented in a highly romantic manner. The use of a child's perspective enables the audience to get closer to the child's inner world, experience their joys and sorrows, and enhance the film's emotional impact and resonance.

5.1.2 Audiovisual Language and Artistic Techniques

Chinese children's films tend to emphasize the use of a realistic style, striving to authentically reflect social life and children's growth environments. For example, in some children's films with rural themes, the visuals focus on depicting the poverty of rural areas and the lack of educational resources, evoking the audience's sympathy and resonance. In contrast, French children's films often place greater emphasis on artistic quality and romantic hues in their visual presentation. For instance, in "A Summer in Provence" (2014), unique color combinations and shot compositions are employed, and through delicate emotional expression and the use of music, a warm, touching, and mysterious atmosphere is created.

5.1.3 Character Dialogue and Personality Shaping

In Chinese children's films, character dialogues typically have distinct characteristics of the times and regional features, aligning with the expression styles and thinking patterns of Chinese children. In terms of personality shaping, the characters' behaviors, language, and mental activities are used to highlight their personality traits. For example, children of the suffering and resistance archetype usually have strong, brave, and optimistic personalities, while those of the lively and sensible archetype are cheerful, kind, and understanding.

In French children's films, character dialogues place greater emphasis on "humor and personalized expression"[6], reflecting the characteristics of French culture. In terms of personality shaping, French children's films focus more on revealing the inner world and emotional changes of children, using delicate descriptions to create three-dimensional and authentic child archetypes. For example, children of the rebellious growth archetype typically have sensitive, independent, and freedom-seeking personalities.

5.2 Differences in the Cultural Connotations Behind Child Archetypes in China and France

Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, patriotism, and social responsibility, which are fully reflected in the shaping of child archetypes in Chinese children's films. The archetype of children in suffering and resistance reflects love and loyalty to the country and nation, as well as the spirit of fighting against social injustice. The archetype of rural children seeking knowledge reflects Chinese society's pursuit of educational equity and the importance placed on knowledge. The archetype of sensible and ambitious children reflects the emphasis on children's moral education in traditional Chinese culture.

French culture focuses on individual freedom, romanticism, and the spirit of innovation, which are particularly evident in the shaping of child archetypes in French children's films. The archetype of rebellious and growing children reflects the pursuit of individual freedom and self-expression. The archetype of imaginative and whimsical children reflects the French cultural admiration for romance and innocence. The archetype of resilient children in war and adversity reflects French cultural values of strength and bravery, as well as the inheritance of national spirit.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Through cross-cultural comparative studies of child archetypes in Chinese and French children's films in the 21st century, it can be found that there are obvious differences between the two countries in terms of the types of child archetypes, the ways of shaping them, and the cultural connotations behind them, but there are also many commonalities. The types of child archetypes in Chinese children's films are more diverse, reflecting the social values and cultural characteristics of different historical periods in the development of New China; French children's films focus more on showing the inner world and emotional changes of children and have a unique artistic style and cultural charm. In terms of shaping methods, the two countries have their own characteristics in narrative perspective, audiovisual and artistic presentation, character dialogue and personality shaping, and the differences in cultural connotations behind the archetypes reflect the different values and historical traditions of the two countries.

In the process of cross-cultural comparison, it can be seen that Chinese children's films should further strengthen the "child-centered" consciousness in future creation, focus on children's lives and psychological needs, and create more authentic and three-dimensional child archetypes. At the same time, Chinese children's films can also learn from the innovative experience of French children's films in narrative perspective and visual presentation to enrich the artistic expression of Chinese children's films. In addition, it is necessary to further explore the excellent elements of traditional Chinese culture, integrate them into the creation of children's films, and enhance the cultural heritage and international competitiveness of Chinese children's films.

In cross-cultural exchanges, China and France should strengthen communication and cooperation in the field of children's films. By holding film festivals, seminars and other activities, the learning and communication between Chinese and French children's film creators can be promoted. In addition, China and France can also carry out Sino-French co-production children's film projects in many ways, give full play to the cultural advantages and creative resources of the two countries, and create excellent children's film works with international influence.

References

- [1] Eirini Mavritsaki et al. Cross-cultural differences in attention: An investigation through computational modelling[J]. *Brain Organoid and Systems Neuroscience Journal*, 2025, 3: 1-7.
- [2] Parc Jimmyn and Messerlin Patrick. Screen monopoly and diversity: a comparative study between the Korean and

French film industries[J]. *Cultural Trends*, 2023, 32(5): 532-551.

- [3] Bi Yanhua, Li Jie. “My Sister”: Emotional Encoding and Realistic Significance of Female-Themed Films [J]. *Film Review*, 2022, (05): 48-51. DOI: 10.16583/j.cnki.52-1014/j.2022.05.018.
- [4] Zoe Moody and Lotem Perry Hazan and Frédéric Darbellay. Children’s human rights education: conceptual foundations of school students’ learning processes[J]. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 2024, 54(6): 681-699.
- [5] Sezen TOFUR. Hersey–Blanchard Situational Leadership Model in Cinematographic Narration: *Les Choristes* Movie[J]. *Kuramsal Eğitimilim Dergisi*, 2018: 822-837.
- [6] Del Ré Alessandra et al. Children’s development of humour in everyday interactions: two case-studies in French and Brazilian Portuguese[J]. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, 2020, 8(4): 112-131.