

# The Social Impact of Western Animation Works in the Process of Cross-Cultural Communication in China: Taking Zootopia as an Example

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## Abstract:

With the development and deepening of globalization, the cultural dissemination influence of Western animation works has become increasingly prominent. At the same time, they have entered the Chinese market on a large scale and have attracted widespread attention. This article will take the Disney film *Zootopia* as an example to conduct an in-depth study of its multi-level social impact in cross-cultural communication in China. At the same time, it will explore from three dimensions: One aspect is the textual content, which involves analyzing the values and metaphors present in the film; The second aspect is the dissemination effect, which involves examining the dissemination routes and marketing strategies of the film in China; The third aspect is the social response, which focuses on the public discussions, media reactions and social impacts triggered by the film. The research found that the universal themes such as “equality and inclusiveness”, “breaking prejudice” and “self-growth” in the film resonated with the emotions of Chinese viewers; It was also localized in many other aspects beyond the film itself, and was widely disseminated, generating social attention and having potential impacts on the audience. Therefore, the dissemination of Western animated films in China is a complex process of two-way interaction. It is not only the input and dissemination of Western culture in China, but also a process of transformation and re-creation of Chinese cultural values.

**Keywords:** *Zootopia*; cross-cultural; Chinese audience; social impact; value.

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary society where the globalization process is advancing and cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly frequent, Western animated films, with their vivid images, exquisite production and universal narratives, have become an important carrier of cultural dissemination. This study takes *Zootopia* as a case study, focusing on a series of social impacts that Western animated works have exerted during their cross-cultural dissemination in China. This research is of great significance for understanding how Western cultural products interact and communicate with Chinese culture, and for achieving an effective integration of them. At the same time, it also provides valuable references and lessons for the creation of domestic animation works in China and their international dissemination. This research is specifically carried out in three aspects: First, analyze the cultural connotations of the film; Secondly, we will explore its dissemination effect in the Chinese market; Ultimately, it focuses on the impact it has in the Chinese social and cultural context, as well as its potential shaping effect on the audience. During the research process, the literature analysis method was employed to search for and read relevant materials and documents. The advantage of this method lies in its ability to effectively organize and integrate the existing theoretical viewpoints and research status, which is conducive to the progress of the research and thus enables the formation of a three-dimensional and objective research conclusion. The ultimate research objective of this study is to, through the successful case of *Zootopia*, reveal the internal logic and social effects of cross-cultural communication of Western animated films in China.

## 2. Case Analysis

### 2.1 The Plot of Zootopia

*Zootopia* (2016) creates a modern city composed of mammals. Different species coexist here, but the conflict between herbivores and carnivores is simmering beneath the seemingly harmonious Elephant City [1]. The protagonist, Judy Hopps, is a rabbit born in the countryside. From a young age, she harbored the dream of becoming a police officer. Through her own efforts, she broke the stereotype that “rabbits cannot become police officers”, overcame numerous difficulties and graduated from the police academy. However, due to her physical disadvantage, she was assigned to be a traffic police officer by the police station and was also ostracized by her colleagues. She met Fox Nick. To prove herself, she forced Nick, who made a living by fraud, to investigate a case of animal disappear-

ance, but discovered a shocking conspiracy behind the case. At first, they thought it was done by the lion mayor. Later, they discovered that it was actually controlled by the sheep vice mayor. The aim was to intensify the conflict between species, thereby driving away the carnivores. The two worked together to solve the case. During the process, they gradually broke down their preconceived notions about each other and became close friends. They also uncovered the truth - the “aggressive transformation” incident of the carnivorous animals orchestrated by Vice Mayor Yang, restoring peace to the city.

### 2.2 Analysis of the Plot in Zootopia

*Zootopia* is not merely a Disney animated film; it also presents numerous symbolic elements from various aspects and reflects the cultural reality of American society [1].

Firstly, it breaks down biases and stereotypes. Through conflicts and confrontations between different animal species (such as carnivores and herbivores), it conveys the discrimination based on gender, race and social class in the real society. Moreover, the partnership and cooperation between the main characters, the rabbit and the fox, also break this stereotype. In the film, Judy is a fluffy and adorable rabbit. This image inherently carries the label of “weakness”, creating a sharp contrast with the tough characteristics typically associated with the “police profession” [2]. At the beginning of the film, Nick’s “ice cream scam” already demonstrated his cunning and deceitfulness, which was in line with the common stereotype of foxes in people’s minds. The audience would naturally form a preconceived notion about him [3]. However, as the plot progresses, the character of Fox Nick becomes rich and three-dimensional, and this prejudice also collapses. He is not inherently a “villain”, but was forced to hide his true self due to the bullying he suffered in his childhood. The above several examples all reveal the absurdity of stereotypes, and at the same time emphasize that individuals should not be defined by group labels. What should truly be seen and focused on is each “I”, rather than the general “we”. Secondly, it demonstrates the inclusiveness of a diverse society. The Animal City is divided into different ecological zones such as the desert area, the rainforest area, and the polar region, symbolizing the coexistence of cultural diversity; small animals have their own dedicated passages, reflecting the protection of vulnerable groups; various species of animals live in the same city... By constructing a “utopian” animal metropolis, this reflects the ideal of “inclusiveness” that exists in the real society.

The third point is that the film reflects self-identity and

growth. As the first rabbit police officer in Animal City, Judy's career perfectly embodies the core tenets of Western individualist values: how individuals can break free from social constraints through self-actualization. It also profoundly showcases the growth process of individuals in the face of prejudice. At the same time, Western countries emphasize individualism and value individual rights and interests. In the film, Judy the rabbit becomes a police officer through her own efforts, rather than relying on others' help. This is very in line with the values of Western people [4].

### 2.3 The Dissemination Path of the Work

The dissemination and promotion of *Zootopia* in the Chinese market is diverse and covers multiple aspects. Specifically:

First, in terms of online dissemination. Short-video platforms have become an important communication platform. Interesting clips such as "Flashy Sloth" in the films have been widely spread on platforms like Douyin, Kuaishou, and WeChat Video Channel.

Secondly, at the offline event level. Shanghai Disneyland has established a themed area based on *Zootopia*, making it an important venue for IP experiences. The annual visitor count has also reached a new high. It has also collaborated with well-known dining brands such as McDonald's to launch joint packages; has licensed the development of various cultural products; and has launched theme-related accessories, etc.

## 3. Social Impacts and Handling Strategies in Cross-Cultural Communication

### 3.1 The Success of *Zootopia* Reflects

"*Zootopia*" has achieved a huge success at the box office in China. According to the survey, its cumulative box office in the Chinese mainland has reached 1.534 billion yuan, becoming the first animated film in the history of the Chinese mainland to exceed one billion yuan, and contributing 44% of the overseas box office. The reason is that it is not only an interesting animated film, but also some of its entertaining segments have transcended the language barriers between the East and the West. Moreover, Disney's industrial level in animation production has raised the quality of the film to a new level. For instance, the "animal utopia" constructed in the film has been meticulously refined, and its imaginative and wonderful settings can immerse the audience in the story. The most important aspect is that the film employs the narrative technique of "animal personification", presenting real so-

cial issues in the form of animal fables. At the same time, it avoids direct political sensitive topics and, while maintaining entertainment value, conveys profound thoughts to the audience.

### 3.2 The Cross-Cultural Acceptance of the Work

*Zootopia* has achieved an extremely high level of cross-cultural acceptance in China. It has transcended geographical and cultural boundaries and achieved a deep integration of "foreign content" and "local culture". Its wide acceptance is mainly due to the "borderless adaptability" of its core values. The values it conveys, such as "breaking prejudice" and "seeking equality", are universally applicable and can easily resonate with the audience. Regarding the label "bias", Chinese viewers can easily associate it with real-life phenomena such as "gender discrimination" and "career bias", like "girls' thinking in science subjects is not as clear as that of boys", "delivery workers are at the bottom of society"... In the film, Judy shattered the notion that "rabbits cannot become police officers", evolving from "a newcomer" to "irreplaceable"; Nick also broke away from the stereotype that "foxes are inherently cunning", allowing everyone to discover his tender side. This kind of "without considering the conventional standards, proving oneself through one's own actions" growth story precisely hits the emotional pain points of contemporary young people, and deeply touches the hearts of the audience. As for the label of "equality", the core socialist values of China do include this aspect. Moreover, Chinese citizens have been continuously striving on the path of openness and inclusiveness. The principle of "don't judge a person by their appearance" that was instilled in children, and the pursuit of equality in terms of gender, occupation and opportunities in society when one grows up, all share similarities with the values contained in the film.

### 3.3 Adopting a Strategy of Localization

The huge success of *Zootopia* in the Chinese market is largely attributed to its localized approach.

One aspect is language localization. The Chinese dubbed version of *Zootopia* was performed by several well-known and experienced Chinese voice actors, such as Ji Guanlin (for Judy) and Zhang Zhen (for Nick). Subtitles are not merely a simple language conversion. Instead, they take into account the identity, personality and current emotions of the characters, and then transform them into natural and colloquial expressions that are common in daily life [5]. Therefore, the Chinese dubbing also makes the audience feel more involved and connected, eliminating the sense of distance between the audience and the film.

The second aspect is localization of content. In the Chinese version of *Zootopia*, in a news report segment, the original elk reporter was replaced by a panda reporter. The panda is China's national treasure animal, holding special significance for the Chinese people and carrying deep national pride. This minor change, though seemingly insignificant, quickly bridged the gap with Chinese audiences; it was also regarded as a "bonus element" and was widely discussed on social media, boosting the film's popularity.

### 3.4 The Social Impact of the Work

The cross-cultural communication of *Zootopia* in China has had multiple, positive and far-reaching impacts on society.

One of its applications is as an example of "anti-discrimination", which is widely used in school education to help students understand the issues of prejudice in reality. The first half of the film establishes the antagonistic relationship between herbivores and carnivores. However, the plot twist lies in the setting of Night Howler. Any species that accidentally consumes it will become savage. This proves that the characteristic of "barbarism" has no essential connection with carnivorous animals. And the ultimate mastermind turned out to be the seemingly harmless sheep mayor. Moreover, through the portrayal of carnivorous animals such as fox Nick and leopard officer, it once again demonstrated that an individual's nature and inner qualities have nothing to do with their species label [6].

The second is the promotion and call of the "Try Everything" slogan, which extends beyond the screen and gradually evolves into a cultural symbol that encourages courage and perseverance. In the film, the song Try Everything sung by the singer Gazelle is a crucial part that drives the plot forward. The lyrics "I won't give up, no I won't give in" in this song are also the core element of the entire song, emphasizing the importance of effort, perseverance, and not giving up easily [7]. Some schools also use Try Everything as their school song, encouraging students to try everything possible.

The third aspect is the value in terms of business and public welfare. The commercial success of *Zootopia* is not only reflected in the box office, but also in various related industries such as toys, clothing, and theme parks. This also sparked related discussions, facilitating their further dissemination. At the level of public welfare practice, some non-profit organizations based on Judy's transformation and growth story designed the "Dream Classroom" activity for left-behind children, encouraging them to pursue their own dreams. Through the influence of the film, it helps more industries and people. This is the significance and value of the cross-cultural dissemination of the movie

*Zootopia*.

## 4. Discussion

*Zootopia* achieved dual success in terms of box office and critical acclaim during its localization in China, and it also has an extraordinary long-term impact. The specific manifestation is the continuous re-creation on platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili: there are numerous compilations of film characters, the exploration of some hidden details, as well as endless discussions about the plot and film reviews. Meanwhile, on social media platforms such as Weibo, the popularity of the *Zootopia* related terms has continued to rise; on Douyin, the related challenges of *Zootopia* are constantly being updated and innovated, and they have a considerable degree of popularity among young audiences.

The successful dissemination of *Zootopia* in China highlights a series of common characteristics:

Firstly, precise localization marketing. At the language level, the language translation and Chinese dubbing in the film infused local emotions into the characters, enabling the audience to better empathize with them [8]. At the same time, it also collaborates with celebrities. For instance, the theme song is sung by singers with great appeal such as Li Yuchun, which can attract potential fans and further increase the publicity of the film. At the social media level, the way films interact with audiences has shifted from a one-way output to a two-way interaction, significantly enhancing users' engagement and enthusiasm.

Secondly, a wide age range. For instance, the cute animal characters in the film are suitable for children, while the profound social metaphors are targeted at adult viewers. At the same time, people of different age groups will have different understandings after watching this film. Children may pay more attention to the simple plot itself, the vivid pictures and sound effects, as well as the positive ending at the end. While adults will focus on the social issues and educational significance behind the story, as well as some plot designs that can trigger thoughts.

Thirdly, the connection between online and offline. People can not only learn about *Zootopia* through films or short videos online, but also participate in various offline activities. For instance, in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, "Animal City" themed exhibitions are held; collaborating with some national brands to launch joint products can increase exposure and reach out to a wider range of potential customers.

Compared with the markets in Europe and America, the marketing strategies in the Chinese market also have significant differences. For the European and American

markets, the marketing and promotion of the film place more emphasis on individualism, racial conflicts and political satire; for the Chinese market, the marketing strategy focuses more on universal emotional resonance, such as “pursuing dreams” and “living in harmony”, avoiding some sensitive political issues. Meanwhile in China, the localization of the film also takes a deeper approach, aiming to conform to the habits and preferences of Chinese audiences.

## 5. Conclusion

Firstly, the findings of this study are as follows: Through an analysis of the case of “*Zootopia*”, it was discovered that its success in China was not accidental. The film, through a universal narrative, skillfully conveys the core values of prejudice, dreams and equality, transcending cultural barriers; Meanwhile, its subtle social metaphor offers different audiences from various cultural backgrounds a unique space for interpretation. It has also sparked extensive discussions in China, triggering multi-level and multi-dimensional social responses. This further leads to the conclusion of the study: The effectiveness of a work’s cross-cultural dissemination depends on both the “universal themes” and the “local interpretations”, and both are indispensable.

Secondly, this research provides many valuable references for future studies in this field, mainly influencing: Firstly, at the theoretical level, it provides a specific analytical case for the cross-cultural dissemination of the film. Secondly, at the practical level, it provides a reference for the international creation and dissemination of Chinese animation industry.

Finally, future research can focus more on the following directions for in-depth exploration: First, quantitative

research methods such as questionnaire surveys, experiments and interviews were adopted to more accurately measure the impact of specific animation content on Chinese audiences of different age groups. Secondly, multiple cases from different times and different countries can be selected for horizontal and vertical comparisons and analyses, enabling a more comprehensive depiction of the changes and differences in the cross-cultural dissemination of animated films.

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