

Semiotic Study on Strategies to Promote Sanxingdui Culture Through Animations

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the role of semiotics in creating and promoting animated works inspired by Sanxingdui culture, a cornerstone of China's ancient civilization. It explores strategies for encoding Sanxingdui cultural symbols into animation and analyzes how creators, audiences, and interpretants collaboratively shape meaning through these symbolic elements. By reviewing successful animated works, the essay demonstrates how cultural symbols can be thoughtfully reimagined to resonate with global audiences while preserving their unique cultural identity. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of incorporating universal themes—such as love, friendship, and familial bonds—and leveraging online platforms and social media to foster Sanxingdui-themed communities. These strategies enhance cross-cultural engagement and broaden the global reach of Sanxingdui culture, ensuring its rich heritage is appreciated worldwide.

KEYWORDS

Semiotics; Sanxingdui; Animation; International Communication

1 Introduction

The Sanxingdui civilization, an essential cultural landmark in Chinese history, has captured worldwide attention for its enigmatic artifacts and profound historical legacy. Recognized as one of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, Sanxingdui's unique relics—including its iconic bronze masks, towering sacred trees, and intricate standing human figures—have fascinated historians, archaeologists, and art enthusiasts alike. These artifacts not only provide a vivid glimpse into the spiritual beliefs and material life of the ancient Shu people but also offer immense potential for cultural transmission in the modern era. Their extraordinary craftsmanship and rich symbolism make them ideal subjects for reinterpretation through contemporary media. Among these, animated works stand out as a particularly promising medium.

This essay adopts a semiotic framework to explore how animated works can effectively depict Sanxingdui cultural symbols, construct meaningful narratives around them, and facilitate their cross-cultural transmission. By examining examples of domestic and international animations, it seeks to provide new insights into leveraging this ancient cultural treasure for global engagement and mutual understanding.

2 International Communication, Semiotics, and Animation

Semiotics, the study of "the expression, transmission, reception, and understanding of meaning ^[1]," offers invaluable theoretical insights for enhancing international communication. Within this framework, symbols are not merely vehicles for conveying information; they are also imbued with cultural significance and social value. In the context of cross-cultural exchanges, semiotics helps elucidate how audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret symbols and how these symbols can be employed to enhance both clarity and communicative effectiveness.

Animation, as a dynamic and versatile medium, holds exceptional potential for storytelling and for promoting the international communication of Sanxingdui culture. First, animation transcends the physical limitations of reality, offering vast imaginative spaces to visualize and reinterpret Sanxingdui cultural symbols. This includes creative designs, modern reconstructions of ancient civilizations, surreal narrative journeys, and the depiction of abstract concepts ^[2]. These possibilities enable a rich and engaging presentation of Sanxingdui's cultural imagery, making it accessible to global audiences. Second, as a globalized art form, animation possesses a strong cross-cultural appeal. The international popularity of animation-related cultural products and short multimedia videos fosters interactivity and emotional resonance with viewers, significantly enhancing audience engagement. By leveraging the visual, narrative, and emotional strengths of animation, creators can bridge cultural divides and introduce the profound heritage of Sanxingdui to a worldwide audience.

However, creators of Sanxingdui-themed animations must address two critical questions: (1) How should Sanxingdui cultural symbols be encoded in animated works? (2) How can cultural barriers resulting from differing coding systems be overcome to ensure effective communication? In this regard, semiotic theory offers valuable insights, helping creators understand the processes by which symbols are encoded, interpreted, and transmitted.

3 Strategies to Encode Sanxingdui Cultural Symbols in Animation

The rich and distinctive symbols of Sanxingdui provide an abundant source of inspiration for animation. Creators can integrate these symbols into animated works through two primary approaches: visual design and narrative structure. By leveraging these strategies, animators can preserve the cultural essence of Sanxingdui while making it accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.

3.1 Visual Design

The artifacts of Sanxingdui, renowned for their unique aesthetic and strong visual impact, offer unparalleled opportunities for innovative design. When incorporating these symbols into animation, creators must strike a balance between recognizability and creativity. The primary objective of Sanxingdui-themed animations is to introduce and popularize this cultural heritage on a global scale. Consequently, character and prop designs must be both highly distinctive and memorable, ensuring the audience forms a lasting association with Sanxingdui culture.

The animated film *Sanxingdui: Glory Awakens* exemplifies this approach. In the film, numerous Sanxingdui cultural symbols are seamlessly woven into both the visual and narrative elements. The protagonist, Gaiqi, is modeled after the iconic bronze standing figure of Sanxingdui.

Designed as a robot, Gaiqi incorporates signature features of the Sanxingdui masks, including extendable vertical eyes, a wide mouth, and exaggerated ears. These elements are further enhanced with fantastical abilities: Gaiqi's eyes can see for miles, and his ears can detect distant sounds. By transforming the ancient bronze figure into a dynamic and engaging animated character capable of walking, talking, and performing magic, Gaiqi captivates the audience, leaving an indelible impression. This innovative design not only facilitates the cultural dissemination of Sanxingdui but also lays the groundwork for the development of related cultural products.

While maintaining the authenticity of Sanxingdui symbols, creators must also adapt their visual presentation to align with the tastes and aesthetics of contemporary audiences. Beyond mere resemblance, attention should be given to the symbolic and metaphorical connotations of these artifacts.

A prime example of such a nuanced approach can be observed in the animated film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*. The creators reimagine the traditional Chinese mythological figure Ne Zha with a bold, modern reinterpretation. Rather than adhering to the archetype of a heroic figure, the film portrays Ne Zha as a rebellious youth born from a demon orb and ostracized by society. This version of Ne Zha is defiant, independent, and misunderstood, yet he yearns for familial love and genuine connection.

The character design reflects this reinterpretation. Ne Zha is depicted with dark circles under his eyes, prominent buck teeth, and untamed bangs, presenting him as a melancholic yet endearing figure. This modernized design not only adds depth to the character but also resonates strongly with contemporary audiences, who see in Ne Zha a reflection of their struggles and desires.

3.2 Narrative

The cultural symbols of Sanxingdui can be integrated into animation not only through visual design but also by embedding them into compelling storytelling. Through skillful narrative techniques, these symbols can convey cultural meanings while enriching the emotional and intellectual depth of the story.

One effective approach is the direct incorporation of Sanxingdui cultural symbols into the plot. For instance, in *Sanxingdui: Awakening Glory*, the seven enigmatic symbols found on artifacts from the Sanxingdui archaeological site are creatively woven into the film's storyline. These symbols serve as pivotal elements of the narrative, gradually revealing the mysteries of Sanxingdui culture to the audience.

As the plot unfolds, the protagonists embark on a journey to decode these symbols, unveiling their meanings one by one. Each revelation adds a new layer of depth to Sanxingdui's cultural heritage, while the discovery of each new symbol introduces fresh challenges for the characters to overcome. This progressive unraveling of symbols not only propels the story forward but also invites the audience to immerse themselves in the historical and cultural significance of Sanxingdui.

Beyond direct integration, animation creators can also explore the denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings of Sanxingdui symbols to craft narratives that resonate on multiple levels. By thoughtfully incorporating these layers of meaning, animators can create stories that appeal to both the intellect and the heart, fostering a deeper connection with the audience.

3.2.1 Metaphor

One powerful narrative strategy that creators can employ is metaphor. Charles S. Peirce defines a metaphor as a

subtype of icon, wherein one object conveys the characteristics of another through relational correspondence ^[3]. In animation, metaphors serve as a vital tool for conveying deeper cultural meanings, enhancing storylines, and fostering both emotional resonance and cultural identity among audiences.

A notable example of this technique can be seen in *Zootopia*, where the creators skillfully integrate "cultural metaphors" and "visual metaphors" into character design and scene settings to explore pressing social issues. The character Judy Hopps, a rabbit, symbolizes ambition and tireless effort, while Nick Wilde, a fox, embodies societal biases and discrimination. By aligning animal traits with human social dynamics, the filmmakers leverage cultural stereotypes and existing impressions, allowing the audience to grasp the underlying messages on multiple cognitive levels ^[4].

In a similar vein, animation can combine imagery, language, and sound effects to transform abstract concepts into concrete audiovisual elements and narrative expressions. This multimodal approach constructs layered meanings that resonate deeply with viewers.

For instance, in *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the filmmakers use a rich combination of visual, linguistic, and auditory metaphors to craft a complex web of relationships and narratives. While rooted in ancient mythology, the film mirrors contemporary challenges faced by adolescents, such as struggles with identity and the quest for self-acceptance.

Metaphors also offer creators an effective means of tapping into the symbolic depth of Sanxingdui culture. The intricate designs of Sanxingdui bronze artifacts—such as masks with exaggerated eyes or the towering bronze tree—can be reimagined as metaphors for themes like vision and foresight, or the interconnectedness of life and the cosmos. In this way, metaphors enable cultural symbols to transcend their historical and geographical context, allowing them to gain relevance for modern audiences while preserving their cultural essence.

3.2.2 Regularity and Surprise

Yuri Lotman categorizes films into two broad categories: artistic and non-artistic texts. In non-artistic texts, the information density typically decreases over time as predictability (or redundancy) increases. By contrast, artistic texts preserve an element of surprise throughout, maintaining audience engagement. Lotman suggests that artistic appeal lies in the interplay of regularity and irregularity; when disparate systems—whether opposing or complementary—are juxtaposed within a unified framework, they generate conflict. This tension, when resolved through a higher-order synthesis, creates dynamic and compelling artistic expressions ^[5].

Zootopia provides an illustrative example of achieving a balance between regularity and surprise. The central mystery—an investigation into the disappearance of animals—unfolds with a series of unexpected twists. The mastermind shifts from Mr. Big to the wolf guards to Mayor Lionheart, ultimately revealing Assistant Mayor Bellwether, whose ostensibly benign demeanor conceals her true intentions.

These narrative reversals sustain suspense and captivate the audience. Character design reinforces this balance between the anticipated and the unexpected: Judy Hopps, a petite, herbivorous rabbit, defies stereotypes by aspiring to be a police officer, a role traditionally associated with strength and size. Meanwhile, Nick Wilde, a cunning fox, undergoes an unanticipated transformation, inspired by Judy's sincerity and perseverance. He ultimately evolves into her ally, adding further depth to the story.

Despite its numerous plot twists, the thematic and structural foundations of *Zootopia* remain consistent. The anthropomorphic animal characters function as metaphors for real-world societal issues, including racial prejudice, bureaucratic corruption, hypocrisy, and internal strife. These allegorical elements enrich the film by blending entertainment with incisive social commentary, ensuring its appeal to both casual viewers and critical audiences.

Similarly, *Sanxingdui: Glory Awakens* achieves a dynamic balance of regularity and surprise by intertwining the enigmatic elements of Sanxingdui civilization with futuristic technology. This fusion of ancient cultural motifs and modern innovation not only heightens the film's visual allure but also invites deeper reflection on the interplay between history and contemporary reality, as well as tradition and modernity. The film's non-linear narrative structure, which spans multiple timelines, further enhances its complexity and unpredictability, delivering a storytelling experience rich in surprises.

4 The Construction and Dissemination of Meaning

Communication relies on symbols, which undergo an interpretative process—referred to as the "interpretant"—before being perceived as meaning by the audience ^[6]. In cross-cultural dissemination, this process becomes significantly more intricate. Creators and audiences often operate within distinct cultural frameworks, leading to potential variations in how the same symbol is understood. The construction and decoding of meaning in animation involve three critical components: the creators, the audience, and the interpretant.

4.1 The Creators

Animation creators are inherently shaped by the cultural contexts in which they are raised. Their interpretations of symbols reflect personal experiences, as well as the dominant ideologies and values of their societies. For instance, Marvel animated films often emphasize themes of American individualism, while Japanese anime frequently embody *mono no aware* (the pathos of things) and the Bushido spirit.

The film *Sanxingdui: Glory Awakens* provides a compelling example. Co-directed by Chinese director Liu Xinsong and American writer Derek Iverson, the animation reflects the confluence of their distinct cultural backgrounds, resulting in a unique style and ideological framework. The film integrates numerous elements of traditional Chinese culture, including aspects of the Sanxingdui civilization, Chinese festivals, local customs, and folkloric tales. These traditional motifs are interwoven with modern aesthetic elements such as suspense, science fiction, action, adventure, and comedy. Audiences may recognize echoes of *Detective Conan*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Spider-Man*, and *The Avengers* in the narrative style and pacing.

This synthesis underscores two key points about symbolic codes. First, codes are shaped by the social environments in which creators operate. In today's globalized world, animated films are widely disseminated, and the symbols that directors and screenwriters encounter in their daily lives inevitably influence their subconscious and later emerge in their creative processes. Second, codes are not fixed; they can be constructed and negotiated. Although interpretations of the same symbol may differ based on individual experiences and the context in which the symbol is encountered, such differences can be reconciled through dialogue and adaptation. This dynamic process fosters the creation of a new, higher-order cultural identity.

4.2 The Audience

When engaging with animated works, audiences are not passive recipients of symbols. Instead, they act as active "readers" whose interpretations are profoundly influenced by their cultural backgrounds, customs, and personal experiences. Moreover, audiences' attitudes and emotional responses to a film play a crucial role in constructing its meaning. Christian Metz referred to film symbols as "imaginary signifiers," underscoring that audiences' interpretations are shaped not only by the material meaning of symbols but also by their functions within the imaginary and symbolic realms^[7].

Taking the film *Kung Fu Panda* as an example, the interplay of Eastern and Western cultural symbols evokes diverse interpretations depending on viewers' cultural contexts. For instance, Master Oogway's succinct, metaphorical, and philosophical manner of speaking resonates naturally with audiences from high-context cultures, such as those in the East, where communication often relies on subtlety and implication. However, for viewers from low-context cultures, predominantly in the West, such indirect expression may seem ambiguous and challenging to interpret. By contrast, the direct and straightforward communication style of other characters aligns with Western low-context cultural norms. While Eastern audiences might find this style overly blunt or impolite, Western viewers often regard it as clear and effective, reflecting their preference for explicit communication.

The film also juxtaposes two distinct cultural value systems: collectivism and individualism. The martial arts warriors embody collectivist values, demonstrating unity and self-sacrifice to protect the residents of the Valley of Peace. In contrast, Po's personal journey of overcoming self-doubt, building confidence, and ultimately saving the valley reflects the quintessential American ideal of individual heroism.

These contrasting paradigms coexist harmoniously in *Kung Fu Panda*, offering audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds familiar elements while introducing them to new perspectives. The film's universal themes—pursuing dreams and the triumph of justice over evil—bridge cultural divides, resonating with both Eastern and Western audiences. By intertwining these cultural narratives with universal ideals, the film expands its audience base, underpinning its global success.

Sanxingdui culture faces similar challenges in cross-cultural transmission due to symbolic differences. For instance, the bronze sacred tree, a spiritual medium in ancient Shu culture, symbolizes a connection between heaven and earth. Its intricate design—branches adorned with divine birds and a coiling dragon—carries profound cultural meaning in China, where dragons are auspicious symbols of pride and vitality. However, in Western contexts, dragons are often perceived as destructive or malevolent, risking misinterpretation of the tree's symbolism. To bridge this gap, creators must reimagine these symbols to make their cultural significance accessible to global audiences.

4.3 The Interpretants

According to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, the interpretant refers to the understanding or mental effect a sign produces in an individual, shaped by their prior knowledge and context. Peirce emphasizes that the meaning of a symbol is not static but evolves dynamically through the interpretant. Each interpretant can, in turn, become a new sign,

generating a continuous chain of meaning. For animated works, the significance of symbols is not solely determined by the creator's intent, the textual content, or the audience's interpretation. Instead, meaning emerges through the interaction and negotiation among all three parties. This concept holds profound implications for the cross-cultural transmission of Sanxingdui culture.

First, when producing Sanxingdui-themed animations, creators must account for the cultural backgrounds of their target audiences to ensure that intended meanings are effectively communicated. Given the immense cultural and historical significance of Sanxingdui, creators should strive to evoke emotional resonance and foster cultural identification across diverse cultural contexts. This can be achieved by focusing on universally appealing themes such as friendship, love, and familial bonds, or by emphasizing values like justice, courage, diligence, and kindness—qualities that transcend cultural boundaries and are readily embraced by global audiences. Creators should also provide supplementary materials, including trailers, behind-the-scenes content, and explanatory videos that delve into the cultural elements featured in their animations. Sharing these materials through online platforms, television, and social media can enhance viewers' understanding and appreciation of Sanxingdui culture.

Second, audiences do not interpret symbols in isolation but within the context of their communities, whose perspectives are shaped by specific socio-historical environments. In cross-cultural communication, creators and audiences often inhabit distinct semiotic contexts, which can lead to the formation of clear boundaries between interpretive communities. However, these boundaries are not fixed; they shift and adapt through communication. With the increasing globalization of economies and cultures, these boundaries are becoming more fluid, paving the way for the emergence of culturally inclusive communities.

Thus, fostering Sanxingdui-themed communities is essential for expanding the reach and influence of Sanxingdui culture. Through dialogue and negotiation, creators can increase the number of shared interpretants among diverse audiences, enhancing the effectiveness of cultural transmission. Regularly sharing Sanxingdui-related content—including videos, articles, and interactive posts—on social media platforms can spark widespread engagement and encourage discussions about the culture.

5 Conclusion

Sanxingdui culture, a treasure of Chinese civilization, offers immense potential for inspiring animated works. By harnessing its distinctive symbols, creators can design visually iconic elements and craft compelling narratives using strategies like metaphor and audience engagement. Semiotics provides a valuable framework for understanding how meanings are constructed, shared, and interpreted, offering critical insights into effectively representing Sanxingdui's cultural heritage in animation. Creators can employ universal themes—such as love, friendship, and familial bonds—to broaden shared interpretants and foster emotional resonance. Additionally, establishing Sanxingdui-themed communities can enhance the accessibility and appreciation of its cultural significance, ensuring this rich legacy reaches and resonates with global audiences.

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