

A Study on the Appropriation of Chinese Culture in Western Narratives in the Context of Global Communication: Taking the “Chinese” Images in Western Film and Television Works as an Example

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Abstract. In the context of globalized communication, the phenomenon of cultural appropriation in Western narratives has increasingly become a focal issue for all sectors of society. In-depth exploration of this phenomenon holds significant value for breaking through Western discursive monopolies, reconstructing China's international image, promoting equal dialogue among diverse cultures, and enhancing national cultural confidence. This study employs research methods such as literature review, case analysis, and questionnaire surveys, taking the portrayal of “Chinese people” in Western film and television works as an entry point to delve into the phenomenon of Chinese cultural appropriation. The research reveals that the images of “Chinese people” in Western cinema and television exhibit complex and diverse configurations across different eras. When appropriating Chinese culture, the West often uses specific narrative strategies to borrow and reconstruct cultural symbols, with these practices implicitly shaped by the dual forces of cultural power games and audience perception. Chinese college students' cognitive understanding of cultural appropriation remains in the initial development stage, with the popularization of academic concepts still needing improvement and significant differentiation in group attitudes. The study argues that Western cultural appropriation reflects cultural power inequality, exerting a profound impact on the international communication of Chinese culture and the shaping of its global image. This research contributes to understanding the laws of cross-cultural communication, provides strategic references for addressing issues arising from cultural appropriation, and holds positive significance for strengthening China's cultural confidence and promoting the equal global dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Global Communication; Appropriation of Chinese Culture; Western Film and Television Works; Chinese Images; Cultural Confidence.

1. The Realistic Background of the West’s Appropriation of Chinese

In contemporary society, as the process of global integration continues to deepen, information dissemination, relying on internet communication media driven by digital technological innovation, demonstrates remarkable borderlessness. While this characteristic breaks through the physical constraints of traditional geographical boundaries and facilitates the instant global flow of information and collaborative production among diverse actors, it has also given rise to complex challenges in communication ecology. Particularly in cross-cultural communication practices, differences in symbolic decoding and cultural contexts between different civilizational systems often lead to systemic misinterpretations between communicators and audiences.[1]

Furthermore, the current global communication landscape exhibits a pronounced asymmetrical power structure. Western countries centered on Europe and the United States, by virtue of their structural advantages in economic capital, digital technology, and the media industry, continuously consolidate their institutional discourse power within the international communication system.[2] This cultural hegemony systematically implants a Western-centric value model through the global circulation of cultural transmission vehicles such as film and television works and online social platforms. Specifically in the practice of international communication of Chinese culture, Western media tend to engage in symbolic construction from an Orientalist perspective, shaping the image of China into a binary-rigidified cultural sample through selective presentation and stylized narration.[3]

Such symbolic manipulation not only distorts the core values of Chinese civilization but also causes structural imbalances in the global cultural and ethical order.

Against this background, the international communication of Chinese culture faces challenges on two levels. From a technical operation perspective, the limitations of communication channels, the loss of cultural translation, and the preset framework of the audience's cognition severely restrict the accurate conveyance of the connotations of Chinese culture. From a geopolitical perspective, the Western society's cognitive paradigm of China is undergoing a qualitative transformation from "cultural curiosity" to "strategic vigilance". Therefore, enhancing international discourse power and cultural confidence is crucial for breaking the Western discourse monopoly and promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture.

"Cultural appropriation" refers to the act of individuals from one cultural background using elements originating from other cultures, and academia has always held diverse perspectives on its definitional nature. While cultural appropriation may trigger misinterpretations and misuses of cultural meanings, it can also leverage the shared characteristics between different cultures to build a discursive system with the core of human common values, thereby promoting positive interactions among international communication actors. In the realistic context of imbalanced global communication power structures, cultural appropriation also possesses the function of breaking through cultural exchange barriers and expanding the reach of information dissemination, using this as a pathway to enhance the international influence of local cultures. Therefore, in the process of advancing international communication capacity building in the new era, it is necessary to examine the dual impacts of cultural appropriation from a dialectical perspective and proactively explore new communication strategies that align with contemporary needs.

In the field of international communication, China's development is facing real-world demands for structural adjustment. Although phased achievements have been made in some areas, overall, prominent issues such as limited vision in communication frameworks and insufficient efficiency in resource integration still exist. General Secretary Xi Jinping's series of important discussions on international communication work during the 17th collective study of the Political Bureau of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China provide fundamental guidance for improving related work. Despite the rapid and promising development of research in China's cross-cultural communication field, significant gaps remain compared to international frontier research levels, such as immature theoretical system construction and insufficient innovation in research methods. Therefore, deepening systematic research in the field of cross-cultural communication holds non-negligible strategic significance for improving China's foreign propaganda work, strengthening the depth and breadth of international cultural exchange, and promoting mutual understanding among different civilizations.

2. Concept Definition and Literature Review

Zhang Jia'ao and Mei Junjie (2023) note that cultural appropriation has two definitional orientations: normative and descriptive. [4]The normative definition views it as erroneous behavior where dominant communities unacknowledged or inappropriately adopt practices, customs, or aesthetics from another community; the descriptive definition is more open—for example, James Young defines it as a cultural "outsider" appropriating elements from an "insider" culture, categorizing it into tangible and intangible appropriation, with content appropriation further including style appropriation and motif appropriation. Richard Rogers also classifies cultural appropriation into four types from the perspective of cultural exchange: cultural exchange, cultural domination, cultural exploitation, and cultural convergence; Feng Wei (2016) elaborates on four manifestations of cultural appropriation in cross-cultural theater: textual appropriation, formal appropriation, motif appropriation, and thematic appropriation[5].

Cultural appropriation carries dual positive and negative impacts. On the positive side, against the backdrop of the "new globalization" era, cultural appropriation drives the reconstruction of discursive

systems, breaks down cultural barriers, and promotes cultural innovation (Mu Hongfei, 2022)[6]. While creating cultural conflicts, it also resolves them, serving as a crucial link in cultural transmission and innovation that facilitates cultural development and dissemination (Xu Guanqun, 2019)[7]. Regarding negative impacts, Mao Sihui and Yang Si (2002), through analysis of the film *Pocahontas*, argue that cultural appropriation under Euro-American ethnocentrism is closely intertwined with racism, historical prejudice, and other issues, calling for reflection on this cultural value orientation[8]. As performative discourse, cultural appropriation has duality and numerous harms (Zhang Jia'ao, Mei Junjie, 2023). For instance, in the new version of *Mulan* and other Western film and television works, the use of visual and linguistic cultural symbols exhibits stereotypes and excessive accumulation of Chinese traditional cultural symbols, leading to normative failures in cultural expression. The patchwork “appropriation” of Western culture into Eastern contexts has caused a “cultural coldness” in global markets (Yu Duoduo, 2021)[9].

In the context of discourse construction and national image under globalized communication, the global communication context exhibits inherent asymmetry, with Western transnational media controlling the global information dissemination system and promoting Western culture and values, while developing countries remain in a disadvantaged position in communication (Guo Jian, 2006)[10]. Therefore, the construction of Chinese discourse must highlight elements of socialism with Chinese characteristics, including its culture, language, and philosophical thoughts, to embody Sinicized representations (Zhang Liwei, Qu Feng, 2024)[11]. By enabling the world to understand China and integrating into the global community, it aims to achieve the goals of common construction, co-governance, and shared benefits, showcasing China's perspective, worldview, and methodology in its discourse.

In the field of cultural appropriation, scholars have clarified its definitional duality and classification systems, revealing the power asymmetry, Orientalist tendencies, and cross-cultural communication controversies behind it. Cross-cultural narrative research has focused on animation, literary film adaptation, and national image construction, exploring the specific manifestations of East-West cultural differences in narrative strategies. However, domestic studies on the portrayal of “Chinese people” in Western film and television works mostly focus on phenomenological descriptions and simplistic critiques, lacking in-depth theoretical analysis. Moreover, research on the appropriation of Chinese culture in Western cross-cultural communication has largely been confined to the fields of communication studies or film studies, with limited interdisciplinary integration. Building on existing research, this study focuses on the specific topic of “images of Chinese people in Western film and television works,” seeking to enhance the specialization and systematization of inquiry. Through questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and the introduction of audience reception dynamics, it examines Chinese audiences' emotional perceptions and cultural interpretations of “Chinese images” in Western films and television, providing academic references.

3. Analysis of the Evolution of "Chinese" Images in Western Film and Television Works

The “Chinese” images in Western film and television works present diverse and complex characteristics, including both positive and negative image representations, and have evolved from being single and stereotypical to diverse and complex over time.

Regarding positive images, Po in *Kung Fu Panda* and *Mulan* in *Mulan* are representatives. Po combines the characteristics of Chinese heroes with Western cultural elements. Its image design is full of Chinese elements while following the growth pattern of Western heroes. In the Disney animated film *Mulan*, *Mulan* not only retains traditional qualities of Chinese heroines such as bravery, determination, wisdom, and filial piety, reflecting traditional Confucian and Taoist thoughts, but also, to a certain extent, breaks through the shackles of traditional female images and incorporates the independent characteristics from a Western cultural perspective.

Negative images manifest in multiple forms. At the dimension of cultural representation, the portrayal of Chinese people in Western film and television works involves subversive use of cultural symbols. [12] The *Mulan* series, while retaining superficial Chinese elements like martial arts and costumes, replaces the ethics of loyalty and filial piety with individual heroism through character recharacterization. [13] The *Kung Fu Panda* series implants American-style growth narratives within an Eastern cultural shell, achieving covert displacement of cultural genes. *The Last Emperor* constructs historical re-narration by depicting Pu Yi as a victim of political eras, accomplishing the de-criminalization of colonial history through so-called “humanized” storytelling—a practice that essentially constitutes discursive practices of neocolonialism. Films like *M. Butterfly* and *The Painted Veil* also reinforce otherized imaginaries from a Western perspective through piling up of symbols such as “Chinese doll” and “mysterious Orient.” At the level of spatial production, whether it is *The Spy Next Door* positioning Chinese American males at the visual margins through cinematic language, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* fragmenting Chinese American family narratives via surreal editing, or *The Chinese Box* exoticizing Hong Kong's urban landscape and *Empire of the Sun* articulating war trauma as an otherized experience, all reveal the cultural commodification logic in postcolonial contexts, embodying the metaphorical projection of ideological constructs in Western narratives.

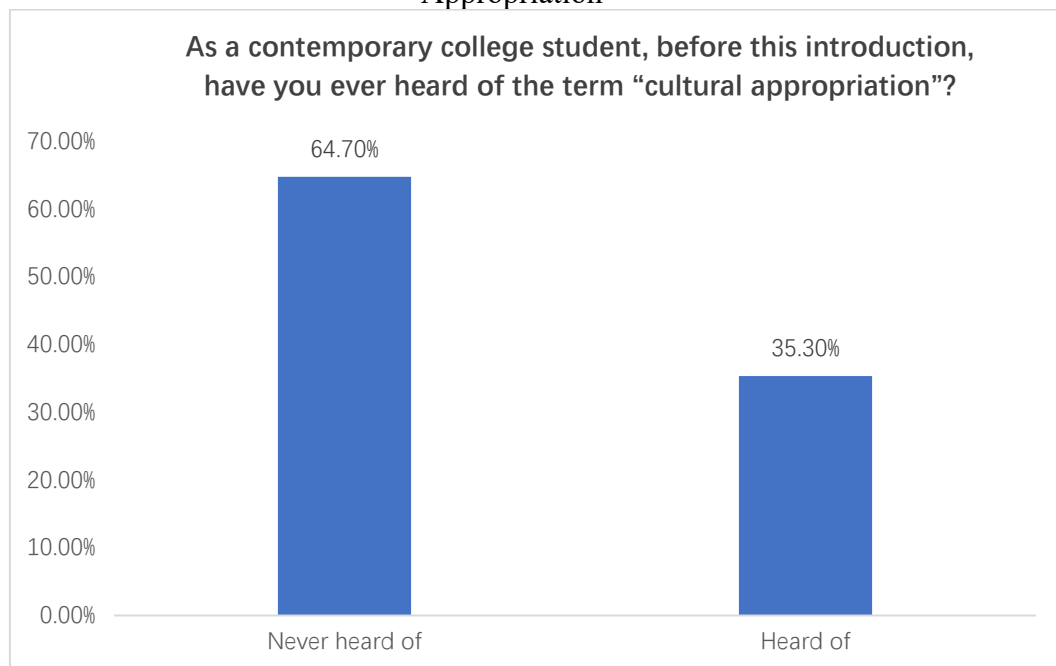
Examined from a temporal dimension, the evolution of Chinese images in Western films and television shows paradoxical characteristics. On the time axis, through the demonized prototype of Fu Manchu, the domesticated improvement of Charlie Chan,^[14] to the portrayal of Asian-American elites in the 21st century, the representational forms indeed show a trend of diversification and complexity. However, at the cognitive paradigm level, it has never been able to break away from the Orientalist framework criticized by Said. Even in the context of globalization, its narrative core is still trapped in the cognitive stereotype of Western centrism. This structural contradiction in diachronic evolution reflects that film and television texts, as the arena of cultural power struggles, always reflect the power games in the international political and economic pattern.

4. The Current Cognitive Situation of Chinese College Students

Based on the Cross-Cultural Cognitive Theory, following an empirical study conducted on 1,276 college students, the data indicate a significant disjuncture between cognitive and behavioral dimensions in Chinese university students' attitudes toward cultural appropriation. This contradictoriness in cognitive structures not only reflects the complexity of cultural collisions in the era of globalization but also exposes the structural deficiency in cultivating cultural awareness within higher education.

In the cognitive dimension, the college student group has a weak understanding of basic concepts. According to Table 1, the survey shows that only 35.3% of college students had previously heard of the term “cultural appropriation,” and more than 60% of the students were unfamiliar with it. There are significant differences among students of different majors and academic levels. The proportion of students in humanities and social sciences who have heard of it is slightly higher, while students in science and engineering, art, and other majors have a lower awareness rate. In terms of academic levels, the proportion of doctoral students who have never heard of it is the largest, which paradoxically contrasts with the in-depth trend of their professional research, revealing the systematic absence of cultural criticism theory in academic training.

Table 1. Statistics on Whether Chinese College Students Have Heard of the Term “Cultural Appropriation”



In terms of attitudinal tendencies, there is a multi-level differentiation in value judgments: according to Table 2, 44.17% of Chinese college students hold a cultural protectionism stance, 28.51% identify with cultural integration values, and 27.32% maintain value neutrality, reflecting college students’ diverse perspectives on cultural sovereignty and national cultural protection. This cognitive fragmentation manifests as concrete characteristics in film-viewing choices: as shown in Table 3, 51.3% of respondents have never noticed cultural appropriation in daily life, creating a contradiction between macro-level terminological concerns and micro-level cognitive oversights.

Table 2. Statistical Chart of Chinese College students' Attitudes towards “cultural appropriation”

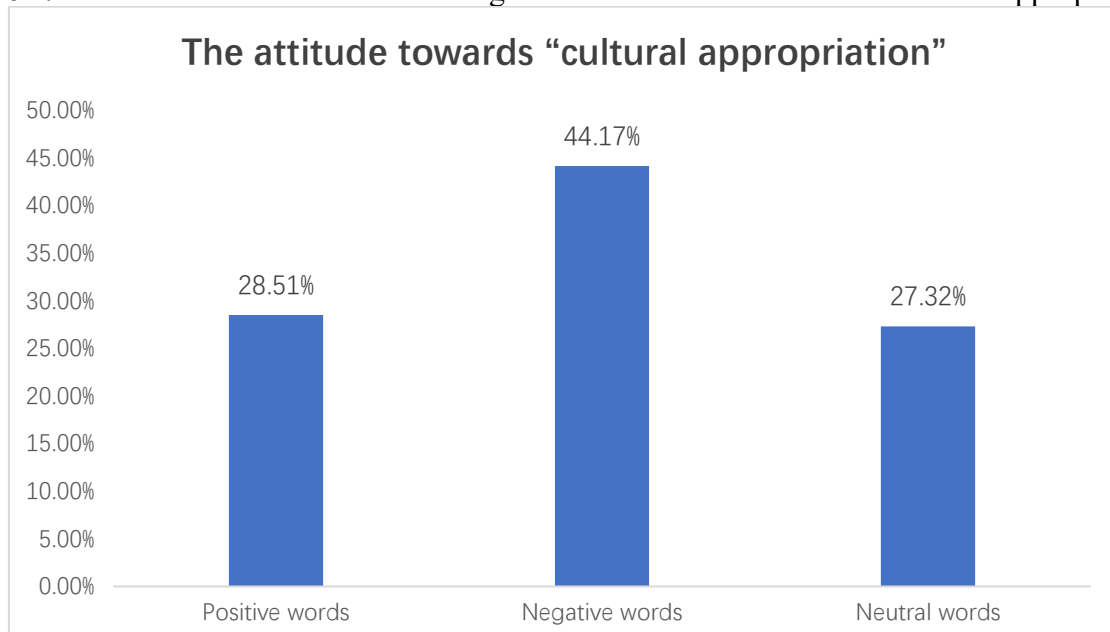
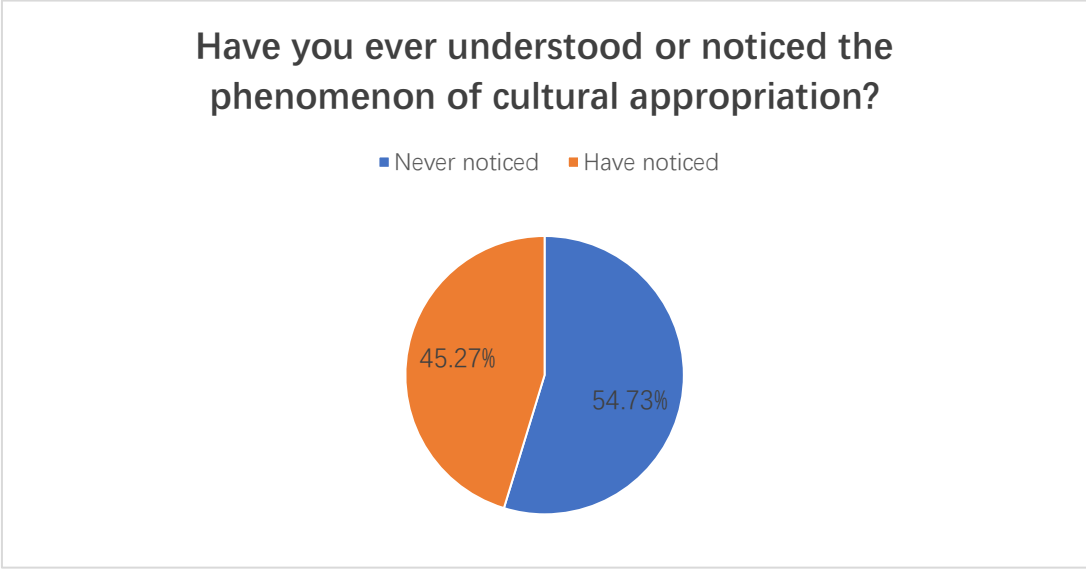


Table 3. A statistical chart of Chinese college students' understanding of the phenomenon of cultural appropriation



In terms of viewing influence, Table 4 shows that nearly 30% of college students develop interest in foreign films due to Chinese elements, while only 30% report their viewing choices being significantly influenced by “cultural appropriation.” Western films engaging in cultural appropriation generally have poor dissemination effects except for those with well-known IPs or produced by major studios. Regarding official attention, Table 5 reflects a dilemma in the awakening of power consciousness at the behavioral identification level among college students: although 65.27% pay attention to government statements on the issue, 47.25% believe current propaganda needs to increase its focus, and the 33.27% who advocate maintaining the status quo further highlight a lack of critical thinking.

Table 4. A statistical chart showing whether foreign films with Chinese culture as the main thread or involving Chinese cultural elements will affect the willingness of Chinese college students to choose to watch them

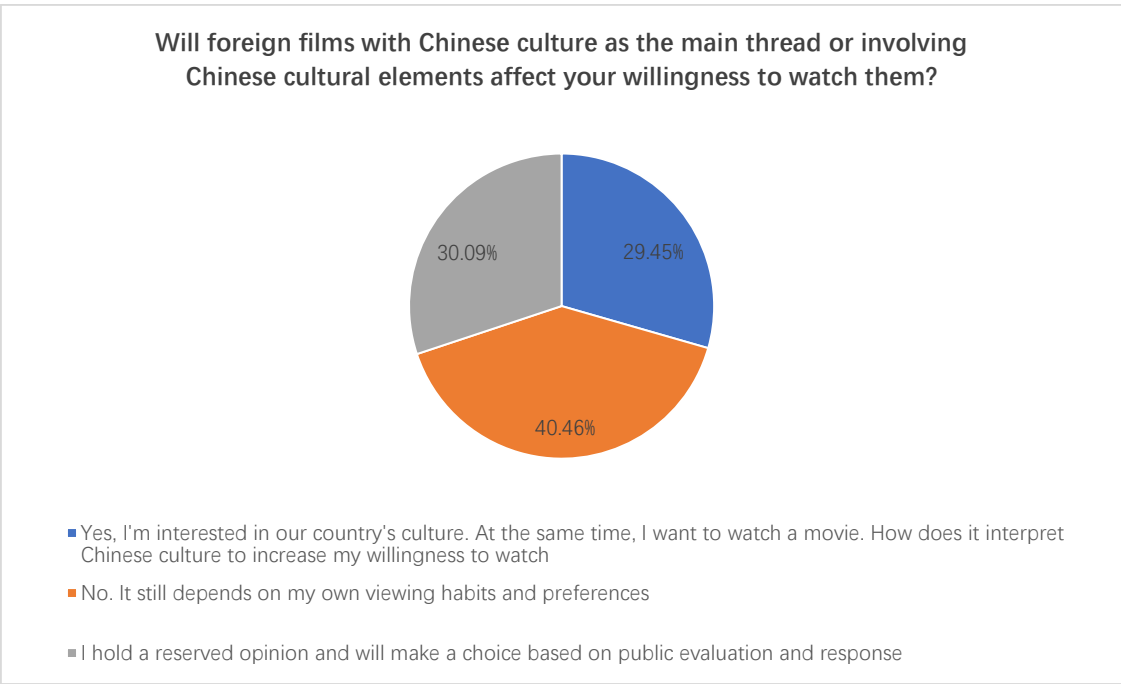
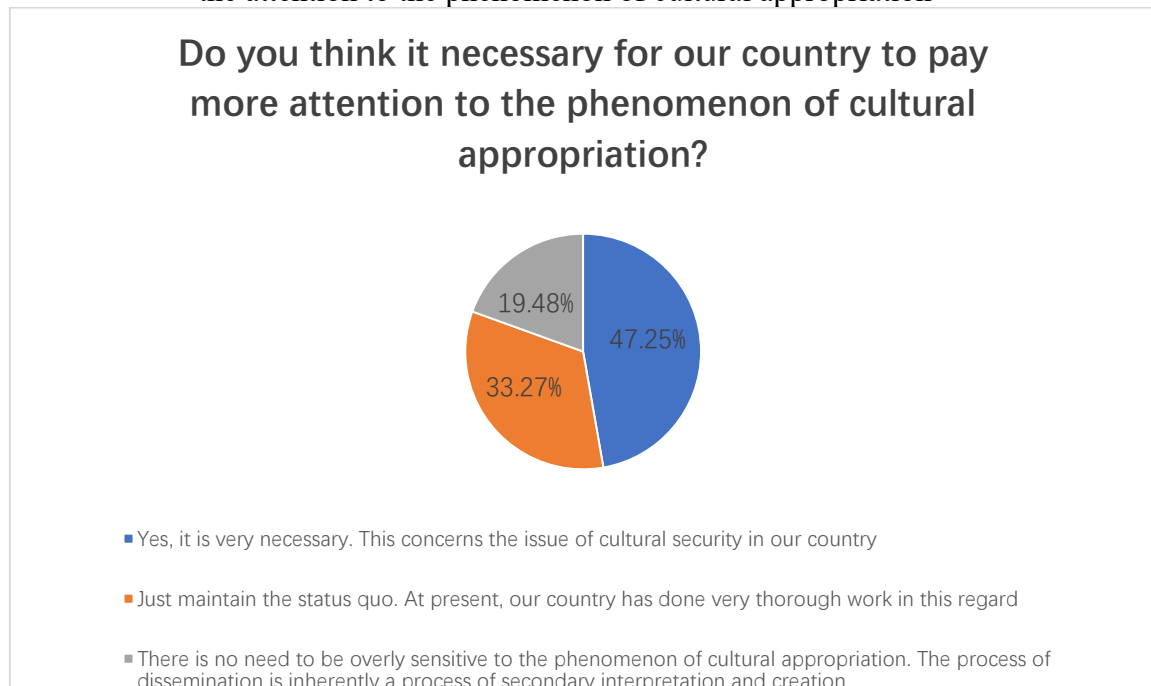
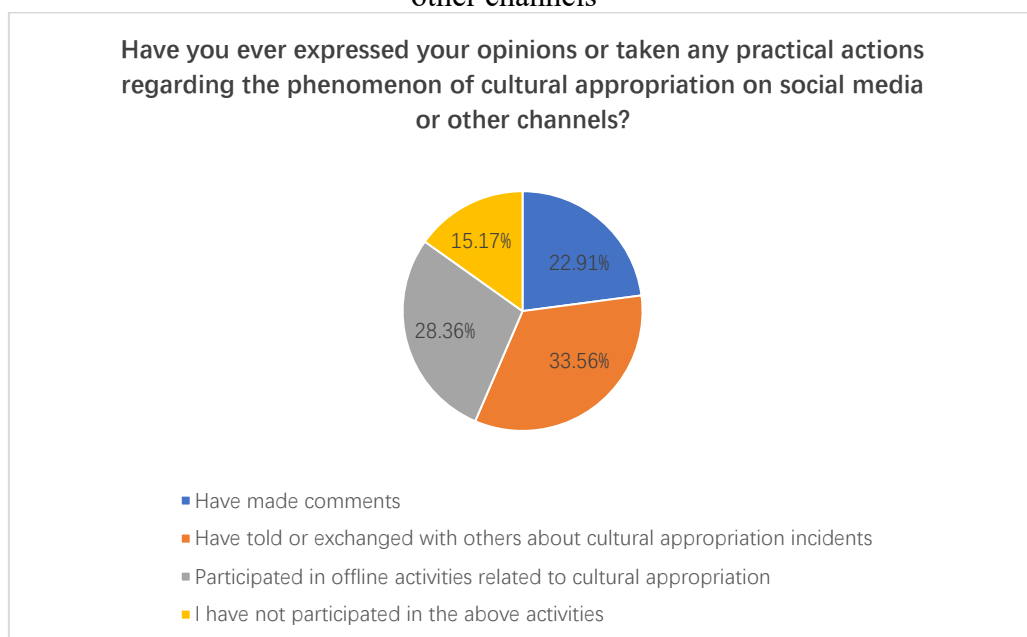


Table 5. Statistical chart of Chinese college students' cognitive Attitudes towards strengthening the attention to the phenomenon of cultural appropriation



In terms of perception of the phenomenon, college students believe that Chinese culture in foreign films is mostly reflected in actors' costumes, makeup, and props, Chinese-style soundtracks and languages, and character image construction. Cultural appropriation is frequently observed in the fields of fashion, cuisine, film and television, and literature. As shown in Table 6, approximately 85% of college students have participated in related discussions or activities, with internet dissemination emerging as the primary channel for cultural appropriation.

Table 6. A statistical chart showing whether Chinese college students have expressed opinions or taken practical actions regarding the phenomenon of cultural appropriation on social media or other channels



Overall, Chinese college students' understanding of cultural appropriation is still in its infancy and requires the joint efforts of colleges and society to improve their cognitive level.

5. The Cross-Cultural Communication Logic under Film and Television Symbols

When Western film and television works appropriate Chinese culture, they often use specific narrative strategies to borrow and transform cultural symbols. Essentially, this is a visual practice of cultural power relations. Taking *Mulan* and *Kung Fu Panda* as examples, they draw on Chinese culture, retain part of the Eastern-element framework, but integrate Western narrative logic and values into the plot core and character shaping. *Mulan* emphasizes the realization of personal value, deviating from the collectivism of traditional Chinese culture; the growth process of Po in *Kung Fu Panda* follows Western philosophical thinking logic, abandoning the gradual cultivation concept of Chinese martial arts.

This appropriation model is underpinned by the combined influences of cultural power, economic development, and ideology. First, the asymmetrical accumulation of cultural capital between East and West enables the West—by virtue of the global communication advantages established during the Industrial Revolution—to construct a globally dominant cultural power structure. To maintain its hegemony in cultural discourse, the West employs narrative styles familiar to local audiences in other countries to lower acceptance thresholds, leveraging cultural power dynamics and audience psychology to instill Western values globally. Second, driven by market expansion and commercial interests, the rich thematic materials and symbols of Chinese culture attract global audiences, generating substantial commercial profits. Finally, due to cultural misinterpretation and stereotypes, Western creators selectively appropriate cultural elements based on Orientalist imaginaries, only adapting those that cater to Western audiences' curiosity mentality, which further exacerbates the one-sided perception of Chinese culture among global audiences.

Audience reception exhibits characteristics of colonialized cognitive reproduction. Western audiences habitually interpret works through their own value systems, with their curiosity mentality sparking interest in works that appropriate Chinese cultural elements—films such as *M. Butterfly* and *The Painted Veil* satisfy their exoticized imaginings of Eastern culture. In contrast, Eastern audiences face a dilemma of “negotiated decoding” when encountering “distorted” cultural elements under Western cultural power suppression. Cultural power dynamics shape the cognitive habits and psychological demands of Western audiences, whose positive feedback in turn incentivizes creators to perpetuate cultural appropriation, continuously reinforcing the West's cultural power advantage.

6. Strategies for Responding to Diverse Cultural Appropriations with Cultural Confidence

Enhance Cultural Confidence and Self-Expression Ability School education plays a crucial role in enhancing cultural confidence. Integrating excellent traditional Chinese culture comprehensively and systematically into all educational stages can help students firmly establish a cultural foundation at the cognitive level, enabling them to deeply understand and identify with the value of local culture, thereby enhancing cultural confidence. As key forces in cultural communication, creators' innovation and expression abilities directly affect the way and effect of Chinese culture's dissemination to the world. Therefore, encouraging creators to innovate in their expressions can present Chinese culture to a global audience in novel and attractive forms.

Build International Cooperation and Exchange Platforms to Achieve “Reciprocal Understanding” International film and television festivals and exhibitions gather top-notch global film and television resources and have high international attention and industry influence.[15] Actively participating in these events can enhance the international visibility of Chinese film and television works and gain more discourse power on the international stage. Transnational cultural exchange institutions build a bridge for regular communication among Chinese and foreign cultural creators, scholars, and audiences, promoting in-depth cultural dialogue and understanding, enhancing the international

community's comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture, and reversing the negative impact caused by cultural appropriation.

Promote the Innovation and Development of the Cultural Industry Cultural industry innovation should focus on exploring the diverse values of Chinese culture and presenting its charm in innovative forms. Although China's cultural and creative industries have developed to some extent, there are problems such as a lack of creativity and serious homogenization. Therefore, it is necessary to draw on foreign experience, strengthen the cultivation of cultural innovation talents, establish an incentive mechanism, encourage enterprises to increase research and development investment, and promote the in-depth integration of culture and technology. For example, VR and AR technologies can be used to innovate cultural experience forms. To optimize the industrial structure, it is necessary to get rid of excessive reliance on traditional models, explore new themes, and avoid theme homogenization. To enhance market competitiveness, it is necessary to cultivate professional talents who are proficient in international market rules and have cross-cultural marketing experience, expand overseas distribution channels, and strengthen publicity and promotion efforts to enable excellent cultural works to stand out in the international market.

Innovate the Content and Forms of Cultural Communication It is necessary to deeply explore the essence of Chinese culture, combine traditional cultural elements with modern social issues, and use technologies such as VR and AR to provide audiences with immersive experiences, thereby enhancing the interactivity and interest of culture. Developing the cultural and creative industry is of great significance. It is necessary to cultivate cultural enterprises with innovation capabilities and international competitiveness to promote Chinese culture to the world market in diverse and personalized ways and promote the globalization of Chinese culture.

7. Conclusion

This study takes the portrayal of “Chinese people” in Western film and television works as an entry point to systematically analyze the appropriation of Chinese culture in the globalized context. The research finds that the construction of Chinese images in Western cinema and television exhibits characteristics of diachronic evolution and synchronic differences, with Eastern character images undergoing a trajectory from single-dimensional demonization to pluralistic heterogeneity. Through narrative strategies such as symbolic collage, contextual displacement, and archetypal reconstruction, Western creators not only superficially borrow Eastern elements to satisfy exotic imaginations but also maintain cultural hegemony through discursive encoding at a deeper level.

The study conducts an empirical investigation among Chinese college students. Analysis of questionnaire data reveals that audiences exhibit characteristics of vague conceptual understanding, contradictory attitudes, and conservative behaviors toward cultural appropriation, with over half of the respondents adopting a critical stance toward Chinese images in Western films and television. This cognitive dilemma reflects the identity anxiety of cultural subjects in postcolonial contexts—while desiring breaking free from Western discursive constraints, they also face deficiencies in constructing indigenous discourse. Therefore, to address cultural appropriation, strategies may include enhancing cultural confidence and self-expression capabilities, building international cooperation and exchange platforms, promoting innovative development of cultural industries, and innovating the content and forms of cultural communication. These measures aim to help the country showcase the charm of Chinese culture, enhance cultural soft power, reverse the adverse impacts of cultural appropriation, and facilitate equal global cultural exchange.

While contributing to understanding Chinese cultural appropriation in Western narratives, this research identifies three areas for further exploration. Methodologically, future studies should integrate interdisciplinary approaches and big data analytics to uncover broader patterns of cultural appropriation, enhancing research rigor. Theoretically, deeper analysis is needed regarding the operational mechanisms of cultural power in Western narratives, particularly the impact of social media algorithms and emerging technologies on appropriation dynamics. Additionally, audience

reception theories across diverse cultural contexts require systematic investigation to discern differential attitudes toward appropriation among varied demographics. Practically, translating theoretical insights into actionable guidelines for cultural industries demands closer collaboration with practitioners to address

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