

# Symbolic Design Strategies for Film and Television Character Modeling in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of the deep integration of the global film and television industry, character design has long transcended the mere pursuit of aesthetics and has become a key symbolic system that carries cultural information, builds identity recognition, and drives narrative. This article, by integrating semiotic theory and cultural dimension analysis, deeply dissects the core functions and common predicaments (stereotypes, cultural misinterpretation) of formative symbols in cross-cultural communication and systematically proposed four core design strategies: “extraction and translation of cultural symbols,” “visual mapping of cultural dimensions,” “symbolic support of narrative functions,” and “cultural decoding presuppositions for target audiences.” This article holds that successful cross-cultural modeling design should be committed to creative transformation on the basis of respecting the authenticity of culture, constructing a visual symbol system that combines cultural depth and universal appeal, and ultimately serving global narratives and in-depth cultural dialogues.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural communication; Film and television character modeling; Cultural dimension

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## 1. Introduction

As one of the most influential cultural carriers in contemporary times, film and television art has reached an unprecedented depth and breadth in its global dissemination. Costume, hair, and make-up design, as one of the core components of the visual language of film and television, plays far more than just “dressing up” for characters. In Roland Barthes’ semiotic perspective, clothing, hairstyles, makeup, etc. are all “signs” that carry specific meanings. In a cross-cultural context, these visual symbols shoulder the significant responsibility of conveying cultural identity, social class, historical background, psychological state, and even worldview, thus becoming an important bridge connecting audiences from different cultural backgrounds<sup>[1]</sup>.

However, cross-cultural communication is not an easy path. Problems such as symbol misinterpretation caused by cultural differences, reinforcement of stereotypes, and superficial appropriation of cultural elements

keep emerging. For instance, in the early days of Hollywood, the portrayal of Eastern characters often fell into the trap of exotic spectacle, reflecting a deviation in cultural understanding. Therefore, how to, on the premise of respecting cultural diversity, through ingenious symbolic design strategies, enable character designs to not only precisely convey specific cultural connotations but also be effectively perceived and understood by audiences from different cultural backgrounds. It has become a core issue that contemporary film and television creators urgently need to solve. This study will delve deeply into the design strategies and paths for achieving effective symbolic communication of film and television character modeling in a cross-cultural context <sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. Core functions and challenges of modeling symbols in cross-cultural contexts

### 2.1. Core functions

Cultural identity identification is the most direct function. Through specific clothing, hairstyles, makeup, accessories, etc., the nationality, ethnicity, region, religious belief, and other cultural affiliations of the characters are directly indicated. For instance, in *In the Mood for Love*, the female lead wears cheongsams of different occasions and colors, which is a visual symbol of its cultural integration. The costumes of the various tribes in Wakanda in *Black Panther*, which are highly characteristic of African futurism, are symbols of their unique ethnic identities <sup>[3]</sup>.

Visual anchoring of social class and historical background: The details of the shape (fabric, cut, degree of newness and oldness, complexity of decoration) can accurately reflect the social status, economic situation, and historical period of the character. This is particularly important in historical and science fiction dramas, such as the differences in clothing among different classes in *Downton Abbey* and the contrast in the looks of workers and rulers in *Metropolis* <sup>[4]</sup>.

The externalization of a character's inner personality and psychology: The choice of color, lines, and style can reveal a character's personality traits, emotional state, and psychological changes. The transformation of Arthur Fleck's clothing color from dull to bright in *Joker* is a visual metaphor for the wild release of his inner self <sup>[5]</sup>.

Visualization of cultural values and worldviews: The overall modeling can reflect the aesthetic orientation, values, technological development level, and even philosophical thoughts of a fictional or real society. In the movie *Avatar*, the Na'vi's design emphasizes harmonious coexistence with nature. In the film *Blade Runner 2049*, the uniform of the clone K reflects the coldness and order of the future society <sup>[6]</sup>.

Building cultural wonders and aesthetic appeal: The unique forms of foreign cultures or future imaginations themselves can constitute a powerful visual appeal, satisfying the audience's curiosity and aesthetic needs. This is an important selling point for cross-cultural films and TV series to attract global audiences. Such as the elegant martial arts costumes in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and the religious ritualistic attire of the Fremen in *Dune* <sup>[7]</sup>.

### 2.2. Main challenges

The reinforcement and solidification of stereotypes: In pursuit of rapid recognition and "exotic charm," design may overly simplify or rely on outdated and one-sided cultural symbols, leading to the continuation of stereotypes. All East Asian characters are uniformly designed to wear cheongsams, Hanfu, or kimonos, and have their hair in buns, or forcibly associating African characters with tribal feathers and bone ornaments <sup>[8]</sup>. This kind of design lacks depth and is likely to cause aversion among the audience within the culture.

Cultural misinterpretation and symbol failure: Due to insufficient understanding of the connotations of

symbols in the source culture or deviation in the meaning of symbols in the target culture, elaborately designed shapes are misunderstood. For instance, in Western contexts, certain patterns or colors with specific cultural significance are used <sup>[9]</sup>.

The controversy over cultural appropriation: Creators from a dominant cultural background use symbolic elements from a weaker culture without understanding or respect, especially for commercial profit or entertainment purposes, without giving the source culture the recognition or compensation it deserves, often triggering ethical disputes. For instance, the headwear of people in a specific area can be used as the design inspiration for fashion items at music festivals <sup>[10]</sup>.

The “cultural hodgepodge” and the lack of authenticity: To cater to the global market or create an “international” atmosphere, designs may indiscriminately pile up elements from different cultures, leading to style confusion, a lack of internal logic and cultural roots, and weakening the credibility of the narrative.

The tension between globalization and localization: How to meet the universal aesthetic standards of global audiences (globalization) while maintaining the uniqueness and authenticity of specific cultures (localization) is an eternal balance challenge for designers <sup>[11]</sup>.

### **3. Symbolic design strategies for cross-cultural film and television character modeling**

#### **3.1. In-depth exploration, refinement, and creative translation of cultural symbols**

Go beyond the surface: Avoid remaining confined to well-known and stereotyped cultural symbols (such as dragons, cheongsams, Hanfu, and Tang suits). Conduct in-depth research on the historical evolution, social structure, religious beliefs, philosophical thoughts, craftsmanship, and technology, as well as the details of the daily life of the culture involved. Pay attention to “atypical” but culturally representative symbols. For instance, in *Parasite*, the impoverished Kim family and the wealthy Park family, the details of their clothing, such as material, cut, and neatness, profoundly reflect the social class differentiation and economic disparity. This symbol possesses extremely strong local authenticity and cross-cultural penetration <sup>[12]</sup>.

Symbol extraction and abstraction: Extract the most representative visual elements (such as color preferences, pattern motifs, structural features, and material textures) that can best convey the core cultural spirit from the vast array of cultural materials. Simplify, abstract, or geometrically process it to retain its charm rather than being completely realistic. The costumes and looks designed by Ye Jintian for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* did not completely restore the Qing Dynasty clothing. Instead, they took the flowing and flowing lines and the color artistic conception like ink-wash paintings, added embroidery patterns, and integrated modern aesthetics to create visual symbols with the charm of Eastern philosophy, which were successfully accepted by global audiences <sup>[13]</sup>.

Hybridization: On the basis of respecting the core spirit of culture, boldly carry out cross-cultural integration or future imagination. The key lies in the logic of integration and respect for the source culture. The Na’vi characters in *Avatar* incorporate elements of diverse indigenous cultures, such as Africa, the Indians, and Polynesia, and incorporate sci-fi settings like bioluminescence, creating an alien cultural visual system that is both unfamiliar and feels real. The core of this system is to express reverence for nature. The costume design in *Dune* combines the solemnness, fluidity, outline of armor, and futuristic materials of medieval monastery robes, creating a unique image of the characters that is tough, mysterious, and full of religious sense, perfectly serving the film’s worldview <sup>[14]</sup>.

Avoid “labeling” style design: The use of cultural symbols should serve the shaping of characters

and narrative, being a natural expression of the characters' identities, experiences, occupations, ages, and circumstances, rather than rigid external labels. The character's appearance should develop dynamically along with the changes in their experiences, moods, and environments.

### 3.2. Visual mapping of Hofstede's dimensions

Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions provides a framework for understanding cultural differences and can guide how modeling design reflects the socio-psychological characteristics of a specific culture:

**Power distance:** High power distance cultures (such as those in East Asia and Latin America) emphasize hierarchy and order, which are often visually reflected through the volume of the shape, ritualized dress, elaborate decorations, vertical lines, solemn colors (such as deep black and golden yellow), and accessories symbolizing authority. In the film *Hero*, the strict structure of the Qin Palace and the uniform dark court attire of the ministers visually represent the absolute centralization of power. Conversely, the low power distance culture (Nordic) tends to convey ideas through more casual and diverse forms.

**Individualism vs. collectivism:** In collectivist cultures (such as in East Asia), uniforms, school uniforms, and work clothes with uniform colors or similar styles (such as the guests' attire in the wedding scene of *Crazy Rich Asians*) emphasize the harmony and consistency of the group. Individualistic cultures (such as those in the West) encourage the expression of one's uniqueness through highly personalized looks (such as mixing and matching, bright colors, and unique accessories). For instance, the luxurious fashion of the editor-in-chief, Miranda, in *The Queen Who Wears Prada*, is a direct externalization of her personal power and status.

**Masculinity vs. femininity:** Masculinity cultures (such as those in Europe and America) value competition, achievement, and confidence. Their looks may be more rugged, eye-catching, and powerful (such as crisp suits and military style). The feminine temperament culture (such as that of Nordic countries) values cooperation, care, and quality of life. The designs may be softer, more comfortable, practical, and environmentally friendly. In science fiction films, gender characteristics are often emphasized or gender boundaries blurred through modeling to express specific social concepts.

**Uncertainty avoidance:** Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (such as France and Russia) tend to favor rules and order, and their forms may be more traditional, conservative, formal, and pay attention to details and quality. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures (such as New Zealand, Canada, and the United States) are more receptive to ambiguity and adventure, and their designs are more diverse, avant-garde, casual, inclusive of individuality, and even rebellious elements. The dress choices (such as whether to wear formal attire) of characters from different cultural backgrounds when facing the same event can reflect the differences in this dimension <sup>[15]</sup>.

**Long-term vs. short-term orientation:** Long-term orientation cultures (such as East Asia) value frugality, perseverance, and respect for tradition. The designs may be more classic, durable, and contain a sense of history or symbolic meaning (such as family emblems). Short-term oriented cultures (such as beauty and Africa) value the present, respect tradition relatively less, and pursue immediate satisfaction. Their designs may be more fashionable and diverse, novelty pursued, and immediate appeal emphasized. Whether the costumes of characters in historical dramas strictly adhere to ancient customs or incorporate modern elements can partially reflect the creator's orientation or the characters' attitudes.

Designers should study the characteristics of the target culture (or the prototype culture to which the fictional culture is based) in these dimensions, and consciously express them visually through elements such as the style, color, material, decoration, and degree of unity/difference of the form, making it an organic



manifestation of the deep structure of the culture.

### 3.3. Strengthening the narrative function and emotional connection of the shaping symbols

The visual presentation of character arc light: The character's appearance should undergo significant or subtle changes as the character grows and experiences major events, serving as a visual witness to their inner transformation. This change needs to conform to narrative logic and cultural background. In *Black Panther*, the characters evolve from princes to Kings. The visual upgrade of their Black Panther suits not only represents technological power but also symbolizes the transformation of their responsibilities and identities.

Metaphor and symbolism: The ingenious use of formative elements as metaphors or symbols to express abstract themes or character relationships. Color is the most powerful symbolic tool. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* takes the narrative of color to the extreme: red symbolizes passion, bravery, and blood. The blue coat symbolizes calmness and ideals. White symbolizes purity, truth, and transcendence. The same story in different color versions constructs multi-level meaning spaces through forms (mainly colors).

Details carry narrative: A worn-out corner of a dress, an ill-fitting old coat, a carefully preserved family heirloom piece of jewelry, or a sudden change in hairstyle - these details can all carry rich narrative information and emotional power, and often transcend cultural barriers, evoking widespread empathy. The "Upper class" brand shirt label deliberately purchased by the actor when forging documents in *Parasite* is a tiny yet highly ironic and poignant narrative symbol.

Building a "cultural immersion": The overall modeling design should be coordinated with elements such as scenes, props, and lighting to jointly create a credible world with a unique cultural atmosphere. This sense of immersion helps the audience bridge cultural barriers and immerse themselves in the characters and stories. The design of the distillation suit in *Dune* is not only visually unique but also closely linked to its core need for survival in the desert, becoming a concrete symbol of its cultural resilience and enhancing the authenticity of the world view.

### 3.4. Cultural decoding presuppositions and balance for the target audience

The establishment of the "Cultural Consultant" system: Hiring professionals (scholars, artists, handicraft inheritors, etc.) from the source cultural background who are proficient in its history and contemporary context to deeply participate in the design process. They can provide crucial guidance on cultural accuracy, avoid low-level mistakes and sensitive issues, and help dig deeper into cultural symbols. This is the key guarantee for overcoming the limitations of the "other" perspective and achieving respectful expression.

"Cultural tour" design: For cultural symbols that the target audience may be completely unfamiliar with, "tours" can be conducted through the narrative itself, character dialogues, visual contrasts, and other means. For instance, observing and inquiring through the perspective of an outsider character (audience agent), or naturally presenting the purpose and significance of the symbol in the plot (such as wearing a certain type of clothing in a specific ceremony).

Seeking the "greatest common divisor" of culture and emotional resonance points: Focusing on common human emotions (love, hate, fear, hope, sacrifice, family, dignity) and universal values (justice, freedom, survival). Even if cultural symbols are unique, the core emotions and values they carry should be cross-cultural understandable. The modeling design should serve the expression of these universal emotions.

The inevitability of accepting "negotiated decoding": Designers need to recognize that in cross-cultural

communication, it is unrealistic to require all audiences to “fully decode.” Efforts should be made to ensure that the core cultural spirit and emotions can be effectively conveyed, while allowing some symbols to be given new but non-adversarial interpretations in the target cultural context. The key lies in the sincerity, depth, and respect for the source culture of the design, which can effectively reduce confrontational decoding.

## 4. Conclusion

In the globalized era of film and television art that transcends national boundaries and connects people’s hearts, character design, as the core carrier of visual symbols, its cross-cultural expression ability is of vital importance. A successful strategy is by no means simply piling up foreign symbols or blindly catering to global tastes. Instead, it is based on profound cultural research, precise symbol extraction, creative aesthetic translation, a deep understanding of narrative functions, and a thorough consideration of the decoding capabilities of the target audience.

The ultimate goal of cross-cultural modeling design is to build a solid and beautiful visual bridge. It enables audiences from different cultural backgrounds to perceive the warmth and depth of the distant world through the costumes and makeup of the characters on the screen, understand the stories and emotions of others, and find resonance in the differences. This requires designers not only to be creators of aesthetics, but also to be interpreters, translators, and facilitators of dialogue in culture. Only by delving into the texture of culture with a sense of awe and weaving symbols with craftsmanship and ingenuity can we truly fulfill the symbolic mission of form design in a cross-cultural context—eliminating barriers, promoting understanding, and enriching our shared narrative picture of humanity.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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