

# An Intercultural Interpretation of *Kung Fu Panda*—From the Perspective of Transculturation

BU Xiao-yan

Ningbo Institute of Technology, Zhejiang University, Ningbo, China

With the tide of globalization, different cultures are clashing, interacting, and merging more frequently. Transculturation expresses an effective way to introduce various cultures to the outside. By analyzing the interaction of cultural globalization and cultural localization in the movie *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), the paper illustrates the transculturating process of two cultures. Furthermore, the paper also points out that transculturation, differing from cultural assimilation and cultural imperialism, can enhance the equal communications of different cultures and improve the cultural comprehension, which is important in intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** transculturation, *Kung Fu Panda*, intercultural communication, globalization, localization

## Introduction

With the new development of technology of information and communication, different nations and different cultures make more frequent contact with one another in this global village. Simultaneously, increasing cultural frictions and misunderstandings never stop impeding those international and intercultural communications, especially between the east and the west. Finding effective ways to introduce various cultures to the outside as well as to smooth the cultural exchanges becomes an urgent need to the whole world. On the way of exploring, more and more phenomena of transculturation occur, generating many widely-accepted cultural products, such as American movie *Mulan* (1998), Japanese anime *Only Yesterday* (1991), and Chinese opera *Turandot* (2009) (LIU, 2001; YANG, 2009). It seems transculturation has been an effective way of intercultural communications and can contribute to diffusing regional cultures globally.

Considering it has high box office and both American and Chinese elements, the animated movie *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) is logically taken as a typical example to study transculturation. It is interesting to see its keywords—Kung Fu and Panda—demonstrate that the movie is deeply rooted in Chinese culture while it is produced by an American animation company—Dreamworks. However, once screened in June, 2008, the film gained great popularity around the world, including with both American and Chinese audience. According to the statistics of Box Office Mojo (2008), the worldwide box office of *Kung Fu Panda* reached \$631,744,560, with the domestic total gross \$215,434,591. In Mainland China, it was also quite well received with the box office of 186,000,000 RMB, becoming the best-sale imported film in 2008 (LIU, 2009). Thus, the study attempts to interpret the transculturating process of *Kung Fu Panda* and to explore the successful way of transculturating a culture to the globe.

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BU Xiao-yan, lecturer, Ningbo Institute of Technology, Zhejiang University.

## The Notion of Transculturation

### The Definitions of Transculturation

The term “transculturation” was put forward by a Cuban anthropologist Fenando Oritiz in the 1940s, which refers to the integration and convergence of different cultures (Oritiz, 1995). Later, several scholars studied this topic and gave more detailed explanations. Taylor (1991) indicated the term describes the transformative process in which a society’s culture is imposed by foreign materials and a new and original cultural production is created due to the fusion of the local and the foreign. Lull (2000) illustrated transculturation as “a process whereby cultural forms literally move through time and space where they interact with other cultural forms and settings, influence each other, produce new forms, and change the cultural settings” (p. 242). To be more specific, Lull (2000) pointed out transculturation results in cultural hybrids and emphasizes the effect of indigenization on the process of transculturation. Chan (2001) generalized transculturation is “the process by which a culture is transformed by another for self-aggrandisement” (p. 106). And Chan (2002) made a supplement in another article that cultural globalization and cultural localization are two dynamic forms of transculturation, in which cultures are not physically mixed but chemically hybridized.

Synthetically, here the author assumes transculturation means the process by which one culture is absorbed, transformed, fused, and renewed by another culture or other cultures, which creates new cultural hybrids. It is an evolving process that involves cultural globalization and cultural localization. They are like the two sides of a coin, interacting with and complementing each other.

### Cultural Globalization and Cultural Localization

In the context of transculturation, according to LIU (2001), cultural globalization implies the process in which a regional culture is accepted by the globe after being processed and transformed. And cultural localization indicates the process in which the content or form of a foreign culture is learned, renewed, and transformed by the regional culture (LIU, 2001). To be more specific, the author attempts to illustrate the flow by the following diagram (see Figure 1):

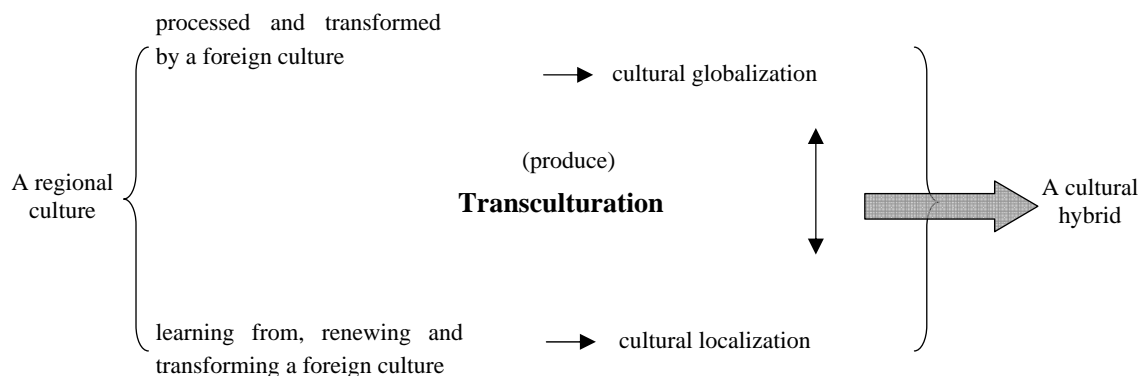


Figure 1. The flow of transculturation.

Hence, cultural globalization and cultural localization are cooperating to produce a new cultural hybrid. Neither side overwhelms the other. More importantly, both the dominant culture and the subordinate culture can play the main role in the two processes (Chan, 2002).

### Intercultural Interpretation of *Kung Fu Panda*

Movie, as one of the popular forms of mass culture, serves as an effective channel to publicize one culture or several cultures to the world (Giannetti, 1993). As a product of cultural hybridization, *Kung Fu Panda* miraculously draws large audience over the world. The movie tells a story of a fat, untidy panda named Po in ancient China, who is accidentally chosen to be the Dragon Warrior to save the threatened hometown—the Valley of Peace. Through his efforts, ultimately, he builds up his confidence, fulfills the task, and becomes a Kung Fu master. The movie, through transculturation, on the one hand shows the vigor in the globalization of a foreign culture, and on the other hand plays the role as a carrier of the local culture, reflecting both Chinese and American cultural features.

#### The Cultural Globalization in the Movie

Just as Fung (2008) asserted that a globalizing nation also obtains the global power to utilize and export other cultures. Apparently, this time Dreamworks opted for Chinese culture as their creating source. The moment the Chinese national treasure panda bears the protagonist, *Kung Fu Panda* is deeply branded with the mark of China. Whether for the commercial profits or for the cultural diversity, the movie embraces plenty of Chinese cultural icons, which vividly presents a series of typical Chinese pictures to the global audience and promotes the globalization of Chinese culture.

**Chinese words.** Word, as the essential element of a language, is the direct vehicle for transforming cultural information. In the movie, the screenwriter employs many words derived from Chinese Pinyin. The word “kung fu” is a good example. In fact, “martial arts” is more popular to be used to mention fighting styles. However, “martial arts” refers to various kinds of fighting sports or styles, including judo, karate, and so on (Hornby, 1997), while “kung fu” is a special name for Chinese fighting styles and regarded as the quintessence of the Chinese culture, implying profound Chinese cultural connotations. Next, the senior master of the Jade Palace is called Master Oogway instead of Master Tortoise. “Oogway” in China symbolizes longevity and wisdom. It is more suitable for this character. Yet the word tortoise does not imply such an extra meaning. Meanwhile, the word “shifu” in Chinese also has a special meaning. As an old Chinese saying goes: “One day as a shifu (teacher), a father for life”. “Shifu” is a respectful address to a teacher. So it is more in line with Chinese culture to call Po’s teacher Master Shifu.

Other English borrowings from Chinese like “tofu”, “majiang”, and “bingbang” also appear in the movie. All these borrowings not only remain the original pronunciation of Chinese words but also spread the traditional Chinese specialties, symbols, values, and so forth, filling the movie with thick Chinese flavor.

**Chinese scenes.** Different from the language of the movie, the scenes of *Kung Fu Panda* are totally Chinese. At the beginning, the audience are immediately placed among Chinese ink paintings. Piles of peaks rise straight into the sky and the antique oriental buildings lie on the far mountains. The producer once revealed they had chosen the landscapes of Lijiang and Guilin as the prototype of the Village of Peace (QIU, 2009). When the lens shifts to the street where Po is living, a small noisy market appears. Noodles, dumplings, chopsticks, porcelain bowls, lanterns, small carts, etc., come into sight one by one, which composes a scene of life in ancient China. Likewise, the scene of Dragon-Warrior Draft borrows the elements of Chinese temple fair. People are setting off firecrackers, beating drums and gongs, walking on

stilts, and performing dragon's and lion's dances. What a lively atmosphere! Other Chinese traditional elements like sedan chairs, scroll, the eight diagrams, and acupuncture are all impressively presented in the movie.

Chinese classical music is another Chinese factor in the movie. In scenes of Po's kung fu dream, the Dragon-Warrior Draft and the passing of Master Oogway, the background music is performed mostly on Chinese musical instruments, such as flute, suo-na (Chinese oboe), gong, drum, erhu, Chinese zither, etc.

All these scenes lead the audience into the mysterious ancient China and dedicate them an audio-visual feast.

**Chinese martial arts.** From Bruce Lee to Jacky Chen, Chinese martial arts—kung fu seems to be a great selling point of movies to attract western audience. The kung fu movies, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008), to name but a few, all performed well in box office (WU & Chan, 2007; LIU, 2009). This genre of movies has already been the window of outputting Chinese culture.

The characters of “The Furious Five” in *Kong Fu Panda* show five well-known kung fu—tiger boxing, monkey boxing, snake boxing, mantis boxing, and crane boxing. In addition, the role setting of “The Furious Five” imitates the *Wuqinxi* (Exercise of the Five Animals), which is an ancient physical exercise evolved from the movements of the tiger, monkey, crane, deer, and bear (LU, 2008). Apart from action, the meaning of kung fu is also explained by the spoken language. Beside the Pool of Sacred Tears, Master Shifu said to Po: “This is where Oogway unraveled the mysteries of harmony and focus. This is the birth place of Kung Fu”.

Here “the mysteries of harmony and focus” coincide with the kernel of Tai Chi (QIU, 2009). These boxings and Tai Chi are essence of Chinese martial arts. They are the pride of Chinese culture. Nowadays, kung fu, as one of the most representative elements of Chinese culture, is so charming in Western world that more and more Western audience are acquainted with it. This movie succeeds in displaying Chinese kung fu again and bringing great entertainment to the audience as well.

**Chinese philosophies.** In light of thought, the audience can find Taoism and Confucianism now and then. Taoism advocates “Govern by doing nothing” (GAO, 2010). In the movie, Master Oogway's wisecracks, like “One often meets his destiny on the road he takes to avoid it”, “There is no accident”, and “There's just news. No good or bad” shade such a philosophy which is so familiar to Chinese audience. When Master Shifu is worried about the return of Tailung, Master Oogway says: “Your mind is like the water, my friend. When it is agitated, it becomes difficult to see. But if you allow it to settle, the answer becomes clear”. These words spread another thought in Taoism—emptying oneself of everything and letting the mind be at peace. So when things are growing, one can observe their regeneration (GAO, 2010).

Moreover, Taoists also appreciate the concept of nonbeing, because for them being is sought from nonbeing. It is well illustrated in their sayings—an immense image seems shapeless; the glorified Tao seems indefinable (GAO, 2010). The producers of *Kung Fu Panda* seem to apply this philosophy to the movie. In the story, there are two puzzles. One is the limitless power of the Dragon Scroll, and the other is the secret ingredient of the noodle soup. Unexpectedly, the audience finally find the Dragon Scroll is in blank and non-secret ingredient is the best secret ingredient. Then Po understands that “No strike wins the trick” is the highest state of kung fu.

Besides, the selective criteria of the Dragon Warrior mirrors another great thought—Confucianism. Confucianism values morality and is based on “humaneness” and “ritual”, including the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, and loving others, etc. (ZHOU, 2010, p. 71). Simply speaking, moral criteria are humaneness-centered and moral evaluation is prior to ability evaluation. In fact, Tailung is highly skilled and has great potential to be the Dragon Warrior. But Master Oogway sees his cruelty and selfishness that are opposite to humaneness. Finally Tailung is out. Rather, the loyal, honest, upright Po, although fat and clumsy, is chosen and becomes a real kung fu master.

Through the meaningful sayings and the plot design, the movie successfully advertises Chinese ancient philosophies.

### **The Cultural Localization in the Movie**

When the domestic culture of a nation joins the process of transculturation, its cultural genetic base will remain in the new cultural hybrid (Chan, 2002). So while the transculturator utilizes, transforms, or globalizes another culture, the target culture will inevitably be blended with the local culture of the transculturator, resulting in the integration of cultural globalization and localization. Though the story of *Kung Fu Panda* is full of oriental flavor, Po is still an American-born Chinese panda, conveying American spirits and values by the release of the movie.

**American individualism.** Hofstede (1980) ascertained US, among 40 countries and regions, values individualism most greatly. Individualism is regarded as the core value of the States. Personal interests and goals take the priority. American individualism manifests itself in individual freedom, individual equality, individual independence, and individual achievement (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 2000). All are fully presented in the story of *Kung Fu Panda*. The whole story is about Po’s self-realization. Through his efforts, he insists on his dream and finally obtains great individual achievement as a kung fu master. At first, Po is bound to his father’s expectation to be a noodle cook. But later he follows his own thought and pursues his individual dream. So he rejects the noodle cart and begins his way to the Dragon Warrior. It is the victory of free choice. Of course, Po meets with huge difficulties and once hesitates about his dream, but he overcomes them and challenges himself, for he cherishes his dream paramountly. When he understands the secret of the scroll and the noodle, he gains self-confidence and beats Tailung in the final fight all by himself. It proves everyone, even as ordinary as Po, has equal chance to succeed. Thus, despite the oriental settings and contents, the movie again demonstrates American mainstream value—individualism.

**American humor.** American movie is famous for its witty dialogues and exaggerated actions (CHEN, 2009), and *Kung Fu Panda* is not exclusive. Teasing is considered as one of the main features of native American humor (Dean, 2003). Landes (1937) noted Americans use teasing to improve interaction with others. In *Webster’s Dictionary of American English* (Dalgish, 2006), teasing is defined as “to irritate, bother, or anger (someone or an animal) with jokes, playful words or actions, or other annoyances” (p. 2000). In the movie, teasing is a main means to make audience laugh. In order to make Po quit, Master Shifu and The Furious Five tease Po in the training ground. The funny Po makes a show of himself. Later, Shifu teases Po with a bowl of dumplings to train him. Watching Po’s anxiety, the audience cannot help laughing.

Another style of American humor used in *Kung Fu Panda* is self-mockery (ZHANG, 2008). Po possesses

such an American personality. When Tigress says to Po that he does not belong there and shuts the door heavily, Po still smiles and replies: “*Big Fan*”. It is so amusing.

The application of American humor not only makes the movie relaxing and funny, but also impresses the audience with part of American spirits—activeness and optimism.

**American heroism.** Heroism is a permanent topic in Hollywood and heroes are cherished and worshiped by American people. However, American heroism reflected on screen has its unique traits. Numerous American heroes in movies, such as *Forrest Gump* and *Spider Man*, are civilian heroes. Their making of heroes encourages the ordinary people to believe heroes are among them. Raised by a noodle family and achieving the goal through his own efforts, Po is surely one of such heroes. When Po discovers the Dragon Scroll is in blank, at first he retreats. It is not appreciated by Chinese people but easily accepted by American audience, because in American culture hero is a human rather than a god (HUANG, 2010). What is more, the birth of an American hero is extremely rapid. The Hollywood-made heroes either have innate power like Superman, or obtain the power overnight like *Fantastic Four*. Similarly, without any kung fu foundation, Po amazingly becomes a kung fu master in a couple of days. Consequently, Po is undoubtedly labeled with American heroism.

In summary, through the cultural globalization and localization in the context of transculturation, the movie becomes a good east-west hybrid of the two cultures. And it is this perfect cultural integration that attracts different types of the audience all over the world.

### Discussion

Despite the fact that *Kung Fu Panda* is popular in the globe, some people argue it is a case of “cultural assimilation” or even “cultural imperialism” and should be resisted (HUANG, 2010; CHEN, 2009). Cultural assimilation means “the disintegration of an ethnic group’s system of shared values and norms resulting from cross-cultural contact” (Roberts & Clifton, 1982, p. 89). And cultural imperialism is a process of cultural domination whereby one culture is exported to the nation of another culture, resulting in the undermining of the local culture and spreading of the dominant culture (WU & Chan, 2007). It is worth noting that either cultural assimilation or cultural imperialism is a one-way process, implying the compromise, damage of the cultures of receiving countries.

However, transculturation is not merely the acquisition of one culture. It is a multiple and boundary-crossing process. From the above analysis, *Kung Fu Panda* is not a unity but a culture hybrid. People still can identify the two cultures in the movie and detect the hidden cultural meanings and purposes. In order to realize the equal exchange of the two cultures, the creating of the movie has experienced the three procedures of transculturating—“decontextualised, essentialised and recontextualised” (Chan, 2002). Firstly, it deletes the particular situations, such as gratitude and resentment in Chinese kung fu movies which is hard for children to understand. Secondly, it focuses the essential topic on humaneness-centered and self-realization. Last, new elements are put into the cultural context. For instance, the story happened in ancient China and Master Oogway is endowed with oriental wisdom, while the Chinese panda is portrayed as an American hero. As a result, both Chinese and American cultural elements co-exist, merge, and are embodied in the whole movie.

In this sense, *Kung Fu Panda* is neither cultural assimilation nor cultural imperialism. It learns from the both cultures and advocates a healthy and positive theme. In the multi-cultural era, the development of a traditional culture is closely connected with the impulse and promotion from other cultures. Choosing a proper way to communicate is the most important.

### Conclusions

Due to the corresponding economic status, cultures are divided into dominant and subordinate (Rogers, 2006), but the process of transculturation is not the one that only globalizes the dominant cultures or protects the weak ones. Instead, through the interaction of cultural globalization and cultural localization, it bridges the gaps between different cultures, sparkplugs equal communications and dialogues, so as to promote the cultural diversity and comprehension. This is a win-win situation, benefiting the cultures involved. Therefore, transculturation is not the only solution, but at least can be one of the solutions to improve intercultural communication.

*Kung Fu Panda* is not totally Chinese, nor is it completely American. It is a transcultural version, a combination of east and west, which represents a unique way in which the world's cultures are being hybridized to form what can be called a global culture. The global popularity of *Kung Fu Panda* has demonstrated the feasibility of successfully transculturating and melting different cultures through the mass media—movie. In turn, it seems a good way to spread traditional cultures and enhance effective exchanges with other cultures to reach a far better international cooperation and communication.

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