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**КРОСС-КУЛЬТУРНАЯ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ КУЛЬТУРНЫХ  
СИМВОЛОВ В КИТАЙСКИХ КИНО- И ТЕЛЕДРАМАХ В  
ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ**

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается кросс-культурная интерпретация культурных символов в китайских кино- и теледрамах в контексте Центральной Азии. Обосновывается, что китайские драмы выступают не только как развлекательный медиапродукт, но и как носитель исторической памяти, этических ценностей, социальных норм и цивилизационных представлений. Опираясь на теорию межкультурной коммуникации, теорию рецепции аудитории и символический анализ медиатекстов, автор выявляет основные категории культурных символов в китайских драмах и анализирует их нарративные и коммуникативные функции. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как аудитория Центральной Азии декодирует данные символы под влиянием местных традиций, религиозного фона, субтитров, цифровых платформ и поколенческих различий. Делается вывод, что восприятие китайских драм в Центральной Азии представляет собой активный процесс символической интерпретации, формируемый как культурной близостью, так и культурной дистанцией, что имеет важное значение для культурного обмена и понимания практических пределов «мягкой силы».

**Ключевые слова:** Китайские Кино- и Теледрамы, Культурные Символы, Кросс-Культурная Интерпретация, Центральная Азия, Рецепция Аудитории, Мягкая Сила

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## **CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN CHINESE FILM AND TELEVISION DRAMAS IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**Abstract.** This article examines the cross-cultural interpretation of cultural symbols in Chinese film and television dramas in the Central Asian context. It argues that Chinese dramas function not only as entertainment products, but also as carriers of historical memory, ethical values, social norms, and civilizational imagination. Drawing on cross-cultural communication theory, audience reception theory, and symbolic analysis of media texts, the study identifies the major categories of cultural symbols in Chinese dramas and analyzes their narrative and communicative functions. Particular attention is paid to how Central Asian audiences decode these symbols under the influence of local traditions, religious background, subtitle mediation, digital platforms, and generational differences. The article concludes that the reception of Chinese dramas in Central Asia is an active process of symbolic negotiation shaped by both cultural proximity and cultural distance, with important implications for cultural exchange and the practical limits of soft power.

**Keywords:** Chinese film and television dramas, cultural symbols, cross-cultural interpretation, Central Asia, audience reception, soft power

### **Introduction**

In recent years, Chinese film and television dramas have become increasingly visible in transnational media circulation, especially across digitally mediated platforms that enable their access to audiences far beyond China. In Central Asia, this process has attracted particular scholarly interest because the region occupies a distinctive cultural and geopolitical position between historical proximity and civilizational difference. Chinese dramas entering Central Asian media space do not function merely as entertainment products; they also serve as carriers of cultural symbols, values, historical imagination, and social norms. As a result, their reception in this region raises an important question: how are Chinese cultural symbols interpreted, recontextualized, or misunderstood by Central Asian audiences?

This issue is theoretically significant because cultural symbols are not transmitted as stable meanings. Their interpretation depends on the interaction between media texts and the cultural, linguistic, and ideological frameworks of the receiving audience. In the case of Central Asia, such interpretation is shaped by a complex combination of shared historical memories, family-oriented ethics, Islamic traditions, post-Soviet cultural experience, and contemporary digital viewing environments. Therefore, the reception of Chinese dramas in this region should be understood not as passive consumption, but as an active process of decoding and symbolic negotiation.

Against this background, the present article examines the cross-cultural interpretation of cultural symbols in Chinese film and television dramas in the Central Asian context. The study focuses on three interrelated tasks: first, to clarify the theoretical basis for understanding cultural symbols in audiovisual discourse; second, to identify the major categories and narrative functions of cultural symbols in Chinese film and television dramas; and third, to analyze how these symbols are interpreted by Central Asian audiences under the influence of local cultural traditions, subtitle mediation, media platforms, and generational differences. The methodological basis of the article combines approaches from cross-cultural communication, audience reception theory, and symbolic analysis of media texts.

The academic novelty of the study lies in shifting attention from the general global dissemination of Chinese dramas to the specific interpretive environment of Central Asia, which remains insufficiently studied in current scholarship. The article argues that the effectiveness of cultural transmission depends not only on the visibility of Chinese media products abroad, but also on the culturally situated ways in which audiences reconstruct symbolic meaning.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

In film and television discourse, cultural symbols refer to meaningful signs embodied in narrative structures, visual imagery, language, costume, ritual, food, architecture, and ethical values. In Chinese film and television dramas, these symbols are not merely decorative elements; they function as compressed expressions of historical memory, social norms, and cultural identity. Their significance does not

exist in isolation but emerges through the interaction between media texts and audiences in specific cultural contexts. Therefore, the interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols in Central Asia should be understood as a process of cross-cultural negotiation, in which meanings are received, adjusted, and recontextualized rather than passively accepted.

This study draws on audience reception theory and cross-cultural communication theory. As audience reception research in the digital era has shown, viewers are active meaning-makers whose interpretations are shaped by cultural background, media environment, and forms of participation across platforms [1]. This perspective is especially important for the study of Chinese dramas abroad, because international audiences do not decode symbols in exactly the same way as domestic Chinese viewers. Instead, they interpret them through local values, religious traditions, linguistic competence, and prior media experience.

From the perspective of symbolic representation, meaning in media texts is constructed through the interaction of image, dialogue, sound, and narrative context. Cultural symbols such as filial piety, hierarchical order, martial ethics, traditional festivals, or Daoist-Buddhist imagery may generate resonance, ambiguity, or misunderstanding when they circulate beyond China. This is particularly evident in transnational digital environments, where subtitle quality, platform affordances, and user interaction influence reception. Recent research on Chinese television dramas streamed overseas shows that international audience responses are strongly affected by translation, genre preference, and platform-specific engagement, especially on YouTube and Rakuten Viki [2]. In addition, studies of globally consumed xianxia dramas suggest that foreign viewers are often attracted not only by exotic aesthetics but also by their ability to project local meanings onto Chinese fantasy narratives [3].

However, current scholarship mainly examines global online audiences in general terms and gives insufficient attention to Central Asia as a distinct interpretive space. This reveals an important research gap, since Central Asian audiences may respond to Chinese cultural symbols through a unique combination of cultural proximity, post-Soviet media experience, and regional identity.

## **Cultural Symbols in Chinese Film and Television Dramas**

Cultural symbols in Chinese film and television dramas can be classified into several interconnected categories. The first concerns traditional values and ethics, such as filial piety, loyalty, righteousness, collective harmony, and moral self-cultivation. These values are deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition and frequently shape the ethical structure of dramatic narratives. Rather than functioning as abstract ideas, they are embodied in character choices, interpersonal obligations, and the resolution of conflict. In many Chinese dramas, moral judgment is not expressed only through explicit dialogue, but also through symbolic actions such as sacrifice for family, obedience to elders, or commitment to social duty.

A second major category is family structure and interpersonal relations. Chinese dramas often present society through relational networks rather than isolated individuals. Parent–child hierarchy, kinship responsibility, sibling solidarity, marriage norms, and friendship obligations all serve as culturally meaningful symbolic frameworks. These relations reveal how identity is constructed through social roles and mutual expectations. Such symbolic patterns are especially prominent in family dramas and historical dramas, where emotional tension often emerges from conflicts between personal desire and collective responsibility.

A third category includes visible cultural forms such as costumes, food, architecture, and rituals. These are among the most recognizable symbols for both domestic and international audiences. Clothing styles, hair ornaments, palace design, ancestral halls, banquet scenes, seasonal festivals, wedding ceremonies, and mourning practices all contribute to the cultural texture of Chinese dramas. Recent research on Chinese film and television costume culture argues that these visual elements are not superficial decoration, but important carriers of historical imagination and cultural communication in the age of digital media [4].

Another important category consists of historical and philosophical references. Chinese dramas frequently draw on dynastic history, Confucian ethics, Daoist cosmology, and Buddhist imagery. Through these references, individual stories are connected to wider civilizational narratives. Studies of Chinese period dramas have

shown that such works often function as symbolic “sites of memory,” where ritual, narrative, and historical imagination are organized to reproduce cultural continuity and collective identity [5].

These cultural symbols also perform crucial narrative functions. They establish historical atmosphere, define moral boundaries, shape character identity, and guide audience evaluation of legitimacy, honor, duty, and belonging. Their transmission depends on the interaction of visual and verbal elements. Visual signs such as color, costume, gesture, space, and ceremonial movement convey meaning immediately, while verbal elements such as honorific language, historical allusion, and idiomatic expression clarify hierarchy and values. Research on the overseas circulation of Chinese dramas via Viki further indicates that platform affordances, subtitling, and multilingual mediation significantly influence how such symbols are communicated to transnational audiences [6].

### **Cross-Cultural Interpretation in the Central Asian Context**

The cross-cultural interpretation of Chinese film and television dramas in Central Asia is shaped by both cultural proximity and cultural distance. On the one hand, China and Central Asia share a long history of contact through the Silk Road, overlapping experiences of empire, borderland exchange, and certain collectivist orientations in social life. These historical linkages can create a degree of symbolic familiarity, especially in relation to family obligation, respect for elders, community ethics, and the prestige of historical civilization. On the other hand, important differences remain. Central Asian societies are marked by Turkic, Persian, Islamic, and post-Soviet cultural layers, which may produce distinct expectations regarding gender relations, religious symbolism, political authority, and public morality. Recent research on Chinese soft power in Central Asia shows that regional responses to Chinese cultural influence are mixed and strongly conditioned by geographical proximity, historical memory, and local attitudes toward China rather than by exposure alone [7].

Against this background, Central Asian audiences do not simply absorb Chinese cultural symbols as fixed meanings. They decode them selectively through local

experience, linguistic familiarity, and region-specific value frameworks. Some symbols—such as kinship loyalty, ritual respect, and collective endurance—may generate emotional resonance because they can be connected to local traditions. Others may be reinterpreted through Islamic ethics, Soviet-modern legacies, or contemporary national identity, while still others may be misunderstood when they rely heavily on specifically Chinese historical or philosophical knowledge. In digital viewing environments, this decoding process is further shaped by platform architecture. Recent work on the transnational circulation of C-dramas argues that overseas viewers engage in “platformized audiencing,” in which subtitle quality, accessibility, technical design, and user communities influence cultural interpretation and meaning-making across platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, Viki, iQIYI, and WeTV.

Several factors therefore influence interpretation in the Central Asian context: local cultural traditions and religious background, language translation and subtitle strategies, media platforms and viewing environments, as well as generational and educational differences among viewers. Younger and more digitally literate audiences may be more open to hybrid interpretation and genre experimentation, while older audiences may rely more on familiar moral codes and historical analogy. Subtitle mediation is especially important because many culture-loaded expressions, honorifics, and historical allusions lose precision in translation. A recent reception study using the Chinese period drama *Nirvana in Fire* shows that subtitle form directly affects involvement, comprehension, and viewer willingness to continue watching, even when audiences cannot fully identify translation problems [8]. Therefore, cases of resonance, reinterpretation, and misunderstanding in Central Asia have broader implications: they reveal that the overseas influence of Chinese dramas depends not only on cultural export, but also on how audiences actively reconstruct meaning. In this sense, audience interpretation becomes a crucial link between audiovisual circulation, cultural exchange, and the practical limits of soft power.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the cross-cultural interpretation of Chinese film

and television dramas in Central Asia is not a simple process of cultural transmission, but a dynamic process of symbolic reconstruction shaped by audience reception. Chinese dramas convey cultural meanings through a broad range of symbolic forms, including traditional ethics, family relations, ritual practices, costume, food, architecture, and historical-philosophical references. These symbols perform important narrative, aesthetic, and ideological functions within the text, yet their meanings do not remain fixed once they enter a different cultural environment. In the Central Asian context, audience interpretation is influenced simultaneously by cultural proximity and cultural distance: shared values related to family, respect, and collective identity may foster resonance, while differences in religion, historical memory, language, and post-Soviet social experience may generate reinterpretation or misunderstanding. Therefore, the reception of Chinese dramas in this region should be understood as an active process of decoding in which local audiences selectively negotiate the meanings embedded in Chinese cultural symbols.

At the same time, the study shows that the effectiveness of this symbolic transmission depends on multiple mediating factors, especially subtitle strategies, platform environments, and differences in age, education, and media literacy among audiences. For this reason, the international influence of Chinese film and television dramas cannot be evaluated only in terms of export scale or overseas popularity; it must also be assessed in relation to interpretive accessibility and cultural intelligibility. The article thus contributes to ongoing discussions of cross-cultural communication, audience reception, and the transnational circulation of audiovisual media by highlighting Central Asia as a distinct and underexplored interpretive space. Its practical implication is that cultural exchange and soft power development require not only wider circulation of Chinese media products, but also more careful attention to translation quality, regional cultural contexts, and audience-specific modes of understanding. Future research may build on this foundation through empirical audience studies in individual Central Asian countries in order to examine more precisely how local social and cultural conditions shape the reception of Chinese cultural symbols.

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