

Cultural Mindsets in Sound: A Cross-Cultural Study of Theme Songs of *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and *Empresses in the Palace*

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Cross-cultural interactions between China and the global community have intensified, notably marked by the expanding international reach of Chinese films and television productions. Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of different regions, the task of making adapted TV series resonate with the values of the audiences in the target regions has presented a substantial challenge. As the popular Chinese TV series *The Legend of Zhen Huan* and its American adaptation *Empresses in the Palace* garnered acclaim within their respective domestic markets, they exhibited rating disparities in cross-cultural acceptance, which offers a novel perspective for analyzing intercultural communication. Building on this phenomenon, this study employs Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Values Orientation Theory to conduct a comparative analysis of the theme songs from the two series. By deconstructing the contextual contents embedded in these musical compositions, the research aims to elucidate the underlying cultural and cognitive differences between Chinese and American audiences, which lead to their distinct acceptances of the series.

Keywords: cross-cultural study, theme songs, Individualism-Collectivism Dimension, Man-Nature Orientation

Introduction

The Chinese period drama *The Legend of Zhen Huan* (Legend) and its Netflix adaptation *Empresses in the Palace* (Empresses) highlight cross-cultural adaptation challenges. While achieving an 8.5 IMDb score in the U.S., the adapted version drew Chinese criticism for perceived distortion of the essence of the original series. The phenomenon has prompted scholarship to extensively analyze subtitle translation strategies (Yang, Wang, & Zhang, 2019), culturally-loaded words usage (Quan, 2021), and narrative structural studies (Lai, 2018). However, there remains a gap in analyzing how cultural values are manifested in non-plot elements like the lyrics of theme songs, which are vital for understanding the inner cultural logic of TV dramas. In contrast to scripted dialogues bound by diegetic environments of characters, theme songs serve as condensed cultural expressions in TV dramas, concisely manifesting cultural essence of the series (Shi, 2016), establishing themselves as valuable research materials.

To bridge this gap, this study employs Hofstede's Individualism-Collectivism Dimension and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Man-Nature Orientation Theory—well-established cross-cultural models used in artistic adaptation and cultural translation—to decode lyrical differences. These frameworks help analyze how Legend's collectivist fatalism and Empresses' individualistic mastery over fate reflect deeper cognitive divides, providing insights for culturally adaptive TV strategies.

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The article aims to analyze the cultural reasons behind the differing views towards the two TV series through the exploration of the lyrics of their theme songs, and to provide references for understanding the different cognitive frameworks and cultural cores between people of two nations, thereby informing culturally adaptive strategies for television adaptations that better align with the values of the local audience.

Comparative Analysis of Theme Songs

This paper focuses on the theme songs of the two TV dramas rather than their episodes, as the former serve as iconic musical elements in television scoring. Directly tied to characters, plotlines, and overarching themes (Lv, 2024), theme songs excel at conveying the authors' intentions, enabling them to condense and embody the core elements of the narratives. The lyrics of the theme songs in both series are of significant analytical value, as they epitomize the ideological core of each work, offering a reflection of their cultural values and identities.

In *Legend*, the opening theme song “Hongyan Jie” (红颜劫) and the ending theme song “Fenghuang Yu Fei” (凤凰于飞) poetically embody the entanglement of love and hate between men and women under the constraints of feudal society. The lyrics demonstrate the ideas of collective consciousness and the belief that the will of heaven is irresistible. Conversely, the opening theme song “A New Day Begins” and the ending theme song “Farewell” from *Empresses* deliberately deviate from the belief of collectivism. They express Zhen Huan's individualistic defiance against imperial oppression and her pursuit of freedom, thus constructing the spirit of self-awareness that stands in contrast to the deterministic worldview presented in the former.

Comparative Analysis Under Individualism-Collectivism Dimension

Applying Hofstede's Individualism-Collectivism framework (2001), which distinguishes cultures by their prioritization of independence or mutual reliance, this section examines how choices of lyrics reflect societal values. In individualistic cultures like the U.S., personal agency and self-expression are central, while in China, group harmony and shared destiny take precedence. This theoretical lens helps decode the contrast in the theme songs.

Building directly on this framework, the primary distinction between the theme songs of the two series is embodied in their different tendencies towards individualism or collectivism.

The songs “Hongyan Jie” (红颜劫) and “Fenghuang Yu Fei” (凤凰于飞) from *Legend* exemplify collectivism through their lyrics. Both compositions eschew personal pronouns, such as “I” or “you”, instead employing universal imagery that encompasses all humanity. This stylistic choice manifests in the first line of each piece: “斩断情丝心犹乱，千头万绪仍纠缠” (Severing love yet the heart remains troubled, with countless entanglements persisting) and “旧梦依稀，往事迷离，春花秋月里” (Faded dreams linger, past events blur, indulging in beautiful things). These lyrics create an impersonal narrative space where specific identities dissolve, transforming individual emotional experiences into the perception of all humanity. Moreover, the final line of “Hongyan Jie”—“古今痴男女，谁能过情关？” (Through all ages, which love-stricken souls can escape its trials?)—transcends the current narrative context. While apparently referencing Zhen Huan's personal struggles in the palace, this rhetorical expression elevates her predicament into a collective tragedy, implying that no individual can escape the fate imposed by feudal norms.

In contrast, the theme songs “A New Day Begins” and “Farewell” from *Empresses* embody a distinctly individualistic value. By manual counting, the lyrics of these two songs collectively contain 13 instances of “I”, two of “my”, and one of “me”, which intentionally express a powerful sense of individual agency and

resistance within the protagonist. Lyrics, such as “I see where to go”, “the flame in my heart, grows brighter with each day”, and “all the darkness I went through” exemplify of the expression. Through such lines, Zhen Huan’s characteristics—her defiance of oppressive power structures, her uniqueness, and her unyielding spirit—emerge vividly. These characteristics accord with core American individualistic values, which prioritize self over collective conformity, emphasizing personal autonomy and self-expression as central to cultural identity.

Comparative Analysis Under Man-Nature Orientation

The other salient distinction between the two series’ theme songs lies in their divergent attitudes towards nature and the will of Heaven, or more precisely, towards fate. In Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s framework, attitudes toward fate are inherently tied to views on humanity’s relationship with nature, whether seen as subjugated by it, in harmony with it, or mastering it. This section employs the man-nature orientation of the theory to analyze how Legend and Empresses demonstrate contrasting cultural beliefs about fate. Empirical studies show that the U.S. tends toward mastery over nature, while China traditionally favors harmony with nature. However, Legend—as a Chinese ancient tragedy—exemplifies subjugation to fate, a fatalistic view that resonates with Chinese cultural acceptance of destiny. This section thus comparatively analyzes the “subjugation-to-fate” and “mastery-over-fate” orientations.

The songs “Hongyan Jie” (红颜劫) and “Fenghuang Yu Fei” (凤凰于飞) from Legend epitomize the subordination of humanity to the mandate of heaven. This paradigm, deeply rooted in classical Chinese philosophy, posits fate as an omnipotent force that governs mortal existence, thereby presenting individuals as passive receivers of predestined outcomes. The lyrics “期盼明月，期盼朝阳，期盼春风浴。可逆风不解，挟雨带雪，催梅折枝去” (Longing for the bright moon, the morning sun, and spring breezes/Yet biting winds bring storms and snow, mercilessly breaking plum branches) embody the tragedy of humanity’s powerlessness in the face of fate. Characters’ aspirations for happiness are thwarted by the mandate of heaven, symbolizing the irreconcilable conflict between human desire and immutable destiny. As a period drama that encapsulates the essence of ancient Chinese culture, Legend further reinforces the fatalism through lyrics, such as “祸福轮流转，是劫还是缘” (Fortune and calamity rotate in turns; is this calamity or luck?) and “得非所愿，愿非所得，看命运嘲弄，造化游戏” (Gaining what is undesired, desiring what is unattainable—witnessing Fate’s mockery and tease). These lyrics underscore the idea that humans can do little more than acquiesce in their fate, as life is perceived to be beyond individual control.

However, the songs “A New Day Begins” and “Farewell” from Empresses convey an entirely different set of values. The songs construct Zhen Huan as a representative of defiance against fate. Lines, such as “the wind carries me, like a bird flying high”, “I will follow my destiny”, and “the sun lights the sky, I fly” construct a theme of personal triumph over the will of heaven, which resonates deeply with the American cultural belief of mastering one’s destiny. Additionally, the lyricists employ rhetorical devices to emphasize that human is the master of nature. For example, when the wind is symbolically presented as an empowering force (“the wind carries me”), it suggests that nature succumbs to human will—when Zhen Huan desires to soar, the wind becomes her ally, not her oppressor. This stands in direct contrast to the “branch-breaking” wind in “Fenghuang Yu Fei”, where external force is portrayed as a devastating blow rather than an obedient force or a helper. Through the vivid figures of speech, the songs of Empresses express a worldview where individuals can, and should, subjugate external circumstances through their willpower.

Conclusions

This paper conducts a cross-cultural comparative analysis of the theme songs of the Chinese TV drama *Legend* and its American adaptation *Empresses*. Through in-depth contextual examinations and exploration of the interplay between social values and integrated art work, the research delves into the cultural disparities and reveals why narratives thrive in a specific sociocultural context but fail to resonate beyond it. Such analysis highlights the depth to which social values and beliefs are embedded within integrated art works, while also emphasizing the role of cultural frameworks in defining thematic priorities—whether collective harmony or individual agency.

Additionally, this analysis not only sheds light on the cultural roots of narrative reception, but also offers practical implications for artistic adaptation. By decoding the cultural preferences of diverse audiences, creators can adapt artworks to align with the target audience's mindset. Thus, the study intends not to determine the better version but to illustrate why each adaptation thrives in its cultural context. By dissecting how societal values affect integrated art works like television, insights are gained into the profound ways culture shapes storytelling—demonstrating how deeply societal values are rooted in integrated art works. This localization process reduces interpretative barriers, thereby promoting smoother intercultural communication. This enables audiences to transcend cultural boundaries, fostering broader appreciation for global artistic expressions while preserving the integrity of domestic culture and beliefs.

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