

An Analysis of Cultural Symbolism in *The Bewitching Braid* (1996)

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Abstract

China has enjoyed a long history of communicating with Portugal since ancient times with Macao playing a significant role as a bridge. As one of the earliest platforms where Chinese and Portuguese cultures meet, collide, and communicate, Macao continues demonstrating its rising potential in economic and cultural communication in the new era. When talking about literary and artistic works that reflect cultural collision and communication between China and Portugal, the trailblazing movie *The Bewitching Braid* (1996) exemplifies the highest quality of Macao film production. Approaching from the perspective of Stuart Hall's representation, the present study analyzes the strategies of the film in representing the diversity and harmony of Chinese and Portuguese cultures. It shows the film has organized a series of symbols in Chinese and Portuguese cultures to construct visual aesthetics that arouses interest from both sides. Then it digs up the shared predicaments, attitudes and values of the protagonists to achieve the foundation of cultural harmony. In light of what has been found above and the results of a recent survey questionnaire on Chinese culture dissemination overseas, the paper tries to offer inspiration for the future Macao film production to enhance cultural communication between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Specifically, it includes applying unique cultural codes, creating artworks based on social issues, and exploring familiar cultural patterns.

Keywords: *The Bewitching Braid*, Representation, Symbolism, Sino-Portuguese Communication

1. Introduction

Portugal has been one of the countries that enjoyed the most extended history of contact with China since the Age of Discovery. Relevant historical records provide evidence of more than 400 years of Sino-Portuguese communication since the first Portuguese Jorge Alvares arrived at the Pearl River outlet in the Guangdong region in 1513 of the Ming Dynasty (Huang, 1999). The arrival of Alvares, who was designated to trade Nanyang spices as well as collect national information, has henceforth initiated various degrees of commercial intercourse from handicraft porcelain and tin products to raw materials of raw silk and Chinese traditional medicine (Wang, 2016). By the 16th century, the Portuguese had almost monopolized important trading points with Macao as their base, the only open port for overseas trade in China for 400 years. They mainly took control of the three major shipping routes of Macao-India-Lisbon, Macao-Nagasaki and Macao-Manila-Mexico. To take an overlook at the map, the three shipping routes compose a triangle which is later known as the "The Great Triangle trade". As an international trade club, Macao was arguably not only a market for products from mainland China to the rest of the world, but also a trading hub for world products entering mainland China at ancient times. In the Modern Age, Macao continues to demonstrate its strength as a bridge in Sino-Portuguese communication due to its exceptional location and history. In 2003, the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-Speaking Countries was initiated and hosted by the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, and undertaken by the Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government. Seven Portuguese-speaking countries, including Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, and Timor Leste, actively responded and participated in it. Wu Yi, vice-premier of the State Council of China, pointed out Macao's unique role in further serving as a bridge and link between mainland China and Portuguese-speaking countries due to the resembling cultural foundation (Guo, 2011). Recently on June 26, 2024, an official report on the Belt and Road infrastructure development index has highlighted the advantage of Macao's function as Sino-Portuguese cooperation platform and manifested its outstanding contributions to the initiative (Xu and Zhu, 2024). As a window of communication between the East and the West from ancient times to the present, Macao has shown its indispensable position and enduring potential as the platform that connects China and Portuguese-speaking countries. In the future with the deepening globalization, to communicate with Portuguese-speaking countries in greater scope and depth requires more attention of Macao as an in-between medium, both economically and culturally.

As a category of mass media, cinema features appealing impression and sense of reality. Such unparalleled advantages outweigh the previous single mode of cultural dissemination, making cinema one of the most popular and influential forms of cultural communication today (Chen, 2018). Released in 1995, *The Bewitching Braid* (henceforth the *Braid*) is acclaimed as the quintessence of collision and fusion of Chinese and Portuguese cultures. Co-produced by the Pearl River Film Company

and Cai Brothers (Macao) Film Co., the *Braid* is believed to unveil the program of Macao's independent film production (Xing, 1996) as it was invested, directed and shot by the local and it reflected indigenous issues. Set against the background of the 1930s, it tells a romantic story full of twists and turns between a Portuguese aristocratic young man Adozindo and a poor Chinese water seller A-Leng. The movie is adapted from the novel of Henrique de Senna Fernandes (1923-2010), a Macanese who was devoted to exploring the cultural foundation of the rising group of his own and their social predicament under the transition of the society. Displaying exotic charm and expressing sincere feelings, the film obtains high reputation both domestically and internationally, winning a series of awards including the "Best Co-production Feature Film Award" of the 19th Hundred Flowers Award for Popular Film, and the Special Award at the 25th Figueira da Foz International Film Festival, etc. Reviews of the *Braid* reach agreement on the profundity of themes and aesthetics of various visual images that represent Chinese and Portuguese cultures (Zhang, 2020). Some claim it "points out the way for Macao's future movies by establishing the fundamental motif of cultural conflict and integration between the East and the West through visual imagery (Yao, 2021)." Yet despite the recognition from all sides, few have delved into how the film has reconfigured those visual symbols to represent Chinese and Portugal cultures, and how they function to serve universal themes against the backdrop of the handover of Macao to China. In light of the above, this paper aims to investigate how the visual images are interwoven with the film's themes. Then, it explores how a shared cultural foundation is set and later achieved under a particular historical background. Finally, in light of what has been found, this paper also tries to combine the results of a recent questionnaire to provide advice for better cultural communication between China and Portugal with Macao as a vital intermediary platform.

2. Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation

Representation is one of the keywords in cultural studies and literary theory studies, with its meaning involving almost all fields of humanities and social science. The core of representation lies in the construction of meaning. "It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them -- how we represent them -- that we give them a meaning" (Hall, 2003:3). Cultural critic Stuart Hall clearly stated that representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language (Hall, 2003:17). The meaning process of culture involves two systems of representation--the first amounts to a conceptual system of understanding and interpreting the world. In everyone's brain there is a set of concepts or mental representations, a "conceptual map" referred to by Hall, in which all kinds of objects, people, events, etc, are correlated. It enables one to give meaning to the world by different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations (Hall, 2003:17). To a great extent, the reason that those who can communicate share a similar conceptual map. The second system entails the function of language. The conceptual map is shared by being translated into a common language so that "we can correlate our concepts and ideas with certain written words, spoken sounds or visual images" (Hall, 2003:18). Things like words, sounds, images, etc, are all generally termed as signs. Signs can be organized into language and it is the common language that enables us to translate our thoughts (concepts) into words, sounds or images, and then to use them as a language. It should be noted that language is used in a broader sense here and later in the paper. Through the second system people are able to express and communicate. In conclusion, the relation of "things", signs and concepts lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language (Hall, 2003:19), and the process of how the three elements are linked and intertwined is what we call representation.

3. Representation of Diversity: Displaying Cultural Difference

The *Braid* casts the audience of both sides to the exotic imagination of the concepts of family, love and foreign people by exhibiting diverse or even contradictory cultural symbols of the Chinese and the Portuguese. Through the meticulous arrangement of a series of expressive visual signs, the film aesthetically and meaningfully conveys the message of different conceptions and practices in diverse cultures.

3.1 Concepts of Family: Adozindo's Detached House and A-Leng's Cheok Chai Un

The different concepts of family and community of Portuguese and Chinese are represented by a detached house of Adozindo's family versus a Chinese residential quarter called Cheok Chai Un. According to Hall, any sound, word, image or object can function as a sign and is able to be organized with other signs into a system that is capable of carrying meaning (Hall, 2003:19). From this viewpoint, the concepts of family which consist of a series of embodiment can be deciphered for the significance behind. The male protagonist of the *Braid*, Adozindo comes from a respected and wealthy Portuguese family who runs a shipping service family and they live in a big white house halfway up the mountain. The height of the house location symbolizes the high social class of Adozindo's family as a traditionally respected European one. The clean, bright and the spacious villa enjoyed by the Adozindo family is a typical product of Western supremacy in the colonized Macao. The family's culture is significantly compressed in a sailboat model displayed in the living room which indicates the family business and the pride of the Great Navigation. In fact, the colonial quality the house releases is homogenous to the patriarchy from which Adozindo is inflicted. Adozindo's father has the only final say in the family as he frequently urges, interrogates and even threatens Adozindo when it comes to the already arranged marriage of Adozindo with a wealthy widow Lucrecia.

The mother and sister in all lenses are silenced both technically and allegorically. A traditional Western family of that time is represented at heart: decent and free outwardly yet haunted by patriarchy inside.

A-Leng lives in a small room in the poor Chinese quarter of Cheok Chai Un. In the colonial period of Macao, the Chinese community struggles as the socially disadvantaged group and occupies less living materials than the Portuguese. Though faced with such an unfavorable environment, the members live their lives in solidarity and mutual assistance with a buoyant life attitude. A-Leng's adopted mother is the chief of the community, who has the power to decide the punishment and exile of the members. The Chinese community that is represented as a matriarchal society, seems to echo those of Adozindo's, but such an arrangement indeed has its cultural background. Record has that the local fisherfolk have a long history of worshipping Maze, the Chinese goddess of the sea (Chen, 1999). The A-Ma Temple, which has a direct influence on the naming of Macao by the Portuguese, is frequented by the local Chinese in all the important festivals. From the perspective of the historical process, the Chinese community is in close relation to the female goddess and thus tinged with the matriarchal aura. Besides, others see that as the retrospect for a particular indigenous group of Dan Family which is the matriarchal symbol of the birth of the Macanese (Su, 2004). Like Adozindo, A-Leng cannot have her free will in deciding her marriage. The Chinese family is portrayed as united and helpful, but in its personal affairs like marriage will be interfered to a great extent.

3.2 Practices of Love: Trestle Bridge and Water Well

One of the vital themes of the *Braid*, the love between the protagonists of distinct cultural background is symbolized by using typical symbols from the two cultures. For Adozindo, he likes to date A-Leng in a Macao-style bridge as the rendezvous, a trestle bridge. The bridge appears three times in the film, with each time A-Leng gradually accepting his courtship. In the West, the image of bridge is rich in symbolism and one of it is about love and romance. To look at the history of Western film industry, the Hollywood landmark *Waterloo Bridge* (1840) exemplifies the image of bridge as the symbol of ardent love where Myra sacrifices her life out of her love for Roy. Besides, another prominent movie *The Bridge of Madison County* (1995) relates the symbol of a bridge to love on full-fledged level by depicting an audacious extramarital affair yet affectionate love. All of the above indicates that the image of bridge in the West is related to the passionate and open attitude of love. Adozindo just features such an enthusiastic way of expressing his feelings. He falls in love with A-Leng at first sight, straightforwardly articulates his affection and rushes to kiss her shortly after they begin dating. Western concept and practice of love that Adozindo holds are thus represented spatially by the trestle bridge.

The traditional Chinese concept of love is represented spatially by the water well area where A-Leng is accustomed to chilling with her friends. In China, especially in the less civilized regions, a well does not merely provide the daily water supply, but it works as a social communication platform. Apart from fetching water daily, the neighbors would like to gather and chat more or less, achieving emotional and intellectual exchange (Hu, 2006). In this sense, a well area equals to an epitome of traditional Chinese community. In this environment, personal affairs could be exposed to the public. When Adozindo first comes to the well area, trying to be friendly to A-Leng in front of the crowd, she bears the stares from around and feels annoyed, hurrying to leave the scene. Later when Adozindo visits again, she even feels so ashamed that she beats Adozindo with the pole when he says he likes her long black braid. The quite a few close-ups of the neighbors staring, gossiping and sneering create the same predicament that A-Leng is facing for audience. By this the concept of love in Chinese culture is better expressed: conservative, inward and implicit. Besides, the well also implies the Chinese quality of loyalty in love, as a well is unmovable and settled forever. Thus Chinese practice of love is conveyed in spatial form through the symbol of the well where A-Leng is attached to.

3.3 Views of Foreign People: Adozindo's White Suit and A-Leng's Black Braid

In terms of shaping characters that represent the Chinese and Portuguese, the film has arranged typical features that arouse exotic interest. For Adozindo's part, Western culture is personified by his frequently-worn complete set of white suit. Clean, fitted and of high quality, the white suit reveals the wealthiness and good manner of Adozindo. Later in the film when Adozindo is kicked out of his family, he barely wears his suit and it is when he struggles with poverty and starts to blame A-Leng sometimes. The white suit also visually leaks out the information of the civilized nature of the West. In fact, the colonial career that brings fortune to many Portuguese like the Adozindo's family can never be regarded as polite and civilized for its brutal nature. In this sense the white suit only serves as a disguise of colonists' so-called civilization. Nevertheless Adozindo at the end proves his genuine understanding and considerate personality from heart, not needing any special outfit for illustration. Thus, the significance of the white suit is involved with multiple levels as the combination of typical personality as well as Western culture.

The characteristics of a traditional Chinese woman fulfill its symbolism in A-Leng's long and black braid. Adozindo's falling for the braid at first sight is less a burst of desire than his obsession with the Chinese culture behind it. Well cared and preserved for a longtime, the braid symbolizes the caring disposition and enduring emotion of a Chinese wife. Besides, containing the trait of belonging, the braid alludes to the affiliation of a wife to the husband as A-Leng claims to cut it if

Aodzindo no longer loves her. Though some believes that the “big braids” and long red cloth wrapping the chest in the film are portrayed as oriental spectacles carrying sexual symbols, with a strong postcolonial connotation (Yao, 2021), it succeeds in presenting Chinese cultural aesthetics and evincing the merits of Chinese people through visual representation.

4. Representation of Harmony: Establishing Common Humanity

For Hall, a shared language (here an extensive and inclusive term) functions as the dominant force during the process of exchanging meanings and concepts. The functioning of the second system, relies on constructing a series of relations between one’s conceptual map and others signs organized into languages. It is through the common language that one can express meanings and communicate thoughts to others (Hall, 2003:18). In the *Braid*, despite all kinds of cultural differences and even confrontations, Adozindo and A-Leng are able to express their ideas, communicate in harmony and finally understand each other through the representation of common language.

4.1 Similar Predicament: Family Interference in Marriage

Though Adozindo differentiates A-Leng concerning the attitude and practice of love, they unite in the suffering of family’s obstruction in their marriage. When talking about the meaning, Hall points out that it is constructed and fixed by the code, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system (Hall, 2003:18). As what has been discussed above, the two protagonists come from distinct organizations of family that are typical of Portuguese and Chinese. In order to set them in the same dilemma of enjoying no right to free love, the film actually has made the different settings in concordance with different social realities of both sides. Adozindo’s right to get his true love has to be sacrificed for the family business, while A-Leng is subjected to her clan’s taboo of exogamy out of a traumatized memory. The prohibition of exogamy results from a previous incident when a Chinese girl was exploited and deserted by a Portuguese. Consequently, they both incurred isolation and exile. The common plight is constructed through different traditional cultural codes from the Portuguese and Chinese conceptual systems. In this way the audience shares the same sympathy for the protagonists and achieves an emotional connection. The common ground of the structure of feelings lays the base for later broader cultural communication and integration. Furthermore, the families of both sides connote to the two countries they represent in historical context at the time when the movie was filmed. The reconciliation of the two families at the end signifies the agreement of the Chinese and Portuguese governments on the issue of Macao’s handover.

4.2 Shared Emotion: Sincere Love for Each Other

Although differing in conceiving and practicing love, Adozindo and A-Leng share the exact value of love that unites them against cultural conflicts. As discussed previously, Adozindo features Western ways of expressing love in a straightforward, ardent, and passionate way. The case of Adozindo would be more significant in that he undergoes the transition from a typical Portuguese dandy from upper class in Macao of the day, to a Macaunese who respects and cherishes the love of his life. In the very beginning, Adozindo sees A-Leng as a challenge in his numerous pursuits for women, an oriental beauty that he can philander and then abandon. However, he takes a fateful turn and takes her seriously as he realizes A-Leng is nothing but a human being just like him. The transformation of Adozindo amounts to a man of a particular race and social class to one with general humanity. For A-Leng, her early xenophobia, as the result of collective trauma, shuns her from facing up to her inner affection for Adozindo. She has also undergone a transformation into a brave, independent, and strong-minded woman after her sensitization to Adozindo’s love and resolve to respond to him. In this sense, the figure of A-Leng has been elevated from a commoner with a narrow worldview to one embracing values that are universally recognized. Moreover, the transition of the characters bears more profound significance in the social milieu of that time. Premiered before the incoming of the handover of Macao to China, the *Braid* on the one hand expresses the spirit of the residents with the shared humanity in the land of hybrid cultures. On the other, it signifies the subject of the new citizens that China, Portugal, and the new Macao would like to interpellate to construct a promising future for the new land.

4.3 Common Attitude: Mutual Understanding for Cultural Distinction

Both at first holding prejudiced beliefs towards people from other racial backgrounds, Adozindo and A-Leng reach mutual understanding through communicating within the same discourse sphere. For Hall, to exchange meanings effectively between people, they must “share the same way of interpreting the signs of a language” (Hall, 2003:19). Though Adozindo and A-Leng love each other, they are still beset by their cultural variation from time to time. For example, A-Leng takes a long time to accept Adozindo out of her stereotype of Western males: arrogant, lecherous, and irresponsible womanizers. At that time Adozindo works as a silent and passive code misinterpreted by A-Leng. Later when the Chinese maidservant of the Adozindo family told A-Leng that he was a polite, well-mannered, and grateful man unlike others of his ethnic group, she began to involve him in what Hall calls her “conceptual system,” and understood him in the right way. A similar situation also comes when A-Leng once belches when they dined together. Adozindo felt irked for he criticized her as “uncivilized” because, in the West, it is considered impolite to make any noise when eating on a table. A-Leng refuted “How is it uncivilized when

I am so satisfied with the food that I get full?" Many Chinese hold that belching means that one eats well as a physical compliment for the food. Hall sees a cultural code as "the result of a set of social conventions" (Hall, 2003:22). Bearing different meanings in different cultures, a belch can be undisputed through effective communication within one discourse sphere. Besides, they also differ in A-Leng's custom of bearing foot. Adozindo feels ashamed while A-Leng practices it to preserve her only shoes. After A-Leng heartbreakingly pours out her ideas of baring foot and her love for Adozindo, their prejudice clears up and they understand each other. At the end of the film Adozindo even takes off his leather shoes after the wedding, showing an act of really integrating into A-Leng's culture.

5. Inspirations for Producing Favorable Cultural Products for Communication

Macao has proved its pivotal role as a platform in Sino-Portuguese cultural communication. As a work of art acclaimed by both sides, the *Braid* offers a series of inspirations for producing more popular cultural creations to enhance cultural communication between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Recently, a research team from the Institute of Hermeneutics, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, has done a service about the validity and reliability of Chinese culture in overseas communication in Portuguese-speaking countries. Forty-six questionnaire results have been collected before the paper is written. The respondents are mainly from Portugal, Cape Verde, and Macao, with various occupations and age groups from 18 to 60. This part of the paper will try to combine the strategies the *Braid* uses for cultural representation and the results of the service to provide suggestions for cultural production that will realize communication between China and Portuguese-speaking countries.

5.1 Application of Abundant Cultural Codes

The profound histories and traditional cultures of China and Portuguese-speaking countries provide inexhaustible resources for cultural production, from which special cultural codes can be organized to stimulate interest. To elaborate, tangible cultural practices like festivals, costumes, architecture, and so on are inspiring choices to be organized into creating a film or a novel. On the question "Which aspect of Chinese culture interests you the most," 29 out of 46 chose "history and culture" and 9 chose "folk custom." Such preference for history, culture, and custom demonstrates the primary inclination of the foreign interest that artistic producers cannot neglect. Macao has developed a diverse and coexisting lifestyle and customs influenced by the Eastern and Western cultures. For example, the Lantern Festival and the Portuguese Carnival occur on the same day in the *Braid*. The hybrid and tolerant cultural environment serves as the platform for communication with mutual respect. It is described as "a buffer zone" between the Eastern and the Western cultures (Xu, 2021). As the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area was issued in 2019, Macao has the rising potential to be constructed as an exchange and cooperation stage with Chinese culture as the mainstream and diverse cultures coexist.

5.2 Creation Based on Social Issues

To create literary and artistic works of high quality, the contents must be carefully chosen and reconfigured to reflect the social reality and meet the requirements of the times. In the case of the *Braid*, the disparity between different classes and nations is overshadowed by the theme of interracial marriage because it is one of the significant social issues in Macao at the time when the film was shot. In fact, it restores more or less the origin of an important indigenous group, Macanese, a mixed community of the Chinese and the Portuguese. It is through the representation of the local community of Macanese that lots of local films showcase the fusion and harmonious coexistence of the Eastern and Western cultures. Though the *Braid* may be criticized for its fairy-tale and unrealistic plots, the happy ending indeed works as a comfort for all sides due to the true mirror of people's wishes. On the question of "to what extent do the contents of Chinese culture resonate with you," over half of the answers go to "generally" and "less," showing a passive inclination of resonance. It indicates the urgency in artwork production of seeking common issues that both Chinese people and those from Portuguese-speaking countries can relate to.

5.3 Exploration of Familiar Cultural Patterns

Literary and artistic creation with profundity should never eschew exploring narrative patterns that are familiar to both sides, contemplating common human predicaments, and searching for shared solutions. As mentioned above, the *Braid* is adapted from the Portuguese novel by Henrique de Senna Fernandes. As a Macanese intellectual, he has profound knowledge of both Chinese and Portuguese literary traditions and is able to weave them into his novels that express and explore the Macanese predicament in times of change. The English translator of the novel, David Brookshaw, points out the echoes of the *Braid* of the Portuguese romantics, in which "A-Leng hovers between the slave heroine of Bernardo Guimarães's nineteenth-century Brazilian novel, *A Escrava Isaura* (The slave girl Isaura), and Jorge Amado's later Brazilian barefoot beauty, Gabriela, in the novel *Gabriela Cravo e Canela* (Gabriela clove and cinammon)" (Brookshaw, 2004). Likewise, Fernandes' storytelling pattern resembles Chinese traditional literary narrative, especially in the delighted ending. The butterfly-like kites in the last scene recall the Chinese classic masterpiece *The Romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. Consequently, writers and artists

should be acquainted with the literary traditions and look for the similarity of storytelling in the cultures of China and Portuguese-speaking countries to create works with universal recognition.

6. Conclusion

In the service on “among the contemporary cultural forms, which one do you find most attractive to you,” “movies and TV dramas” ranks the most with 33 out of 46. The choices, not surprisingly, prove the overwhelming dominance of mass media in cultural dissemination in today’s Media Era. Cultural products like films, TV dramas and short videos and the messages they carry unconsciously permeate people’s everyday life and mentality. The *Braid*, considered as the first Macao movie, has gained a worldwide reputation since its release, exemplifying a classic cross-cultural love film with universal significance. The present study, probing from the perspective of representation, tries to account for the movie’s underlying cultural significance. In representing the different ideas of family, love and foreign people, the *Braid* has organized a series of symbols unique in Chinese and Portuguese cultures to construct visual aesthetics which arouse interest from both sides. Then despite all the cultural divergences, the *Braid* digs out the common predicament faced by Adozindo and A-Leng, transforming them into ones that respect, understand and appreciate each other’s cultures through their partnership. Through these strategies of harmony in diversity, the *Braid* succeeds in achieving great fame from both sides and promoting cultural dissemination and communication with Macao playing as the platform. To draw suggestions from Macao’s story, literary and artistic production can fully apply cultural codes to their works from the profound Chinese cultural resources. Besides, common problems should be explored and the shared solutions should be sought in artworks to arouse resonance. Plus, creators should apprehend and learn about the literary and cultural tradition of the other’s to produce works that can be appreciated by all sides. Although it has been almost 30 years since the *Braid* was released, the inspiration on how to produce universally acclaimed movies it brings still proves effectiveness and dynamics for the people who aspire to promote cultural communication.

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