

Cultural Characteristics of Female Hero Images in Intangible Cultural Heritage Films

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Abstract

In Chinese films with intangible cultural heritage themes, female images are an indispensable presence. Particularly, several renowned female hero figures derived from folklore literature, such as Liu Sanjie, Ashima, and Hua Mulan, stand out as symbols of both traditional Chinese heroines and the cultural zeitgeist. This paper utilizes Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze the characteristics of these three representative intangible cultural heritage-themed folk literature films. By employing text analysis methods, it examines the elements of costume, dialogue, setting, and plot in these films. These symbolic elements elucidate the development of female characters and cultural transformations, revealing how traditional culture is represented and transmitted in modern media. The paper also explores the crucial role and value of women in the preservation and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, offering suggestions for better shaping the images of female heroes in intangible cultural heritage-themed films.

Keywords: ICH, Female Heroes, Cultural, Symbolic.

In the context of accelerating globalization and modernization, many traditional cultural forms are at risk of disappearing, making the preservation of cultural diversity and the transmission of traditional culture increasingly important. "Since China joined the United Nations Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004, the protection of intangible cultural heritage in China has evolved into a nationwide movement initiated by the state, supported by scholars, promoted by the media, and driven by local efforts(Xie, 2013).

Consequently, China has seen the emergence of a new wave of intangible cultural heritage preservation. As the most influential media form,

film inevitably becomes part of the intangible cultural heritage protection movement. Films based on intangible cultural heritage themes have become a unique cultural landscape.

In films centered on intangible cultural heritage, female hero figures serve as significant cultural symbols, embodying rich historical and cultural connotations. These female heroes, in any era, are pivotal symbols and carriers for showcasing and cultivating national spirit. They are not only vehicles of cultural transmission but also vital bridges for modern audiences to understand and identify with traditional culture. Their stories, widely disseminated through the powerful medium of film, reinforce the status of traditional culture in contemporary society and

infuse new vitality into the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Firstly, the portrayal of female heroes in films is often overly idealized and romanticized, potentially distancing them from the real-life experiences and challenges faced by women. While this approach enhances the entertainment value for the audience, it can also overlook the complexities and difficulties of real life. Idealized images might obscure the true struggles and nuanced emotions of women facing oppression, and the repeated emphasis on such portrayals may contribute to the creation of stereotypical female hero images within the context of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Most ICH films tend to depict women in traditional roles, neglecting their multifaceted identities and roles in contemporary society.

In the broader context of heritage preservation, "intangible cultural heritage films" are cultural commodities shaped by the involvement of capital, government promotion, and media advocacy. They cannot, like anthropological films or documentaries, provide scientifically accurate and unembellished records of real people and events. Achieving a purely objective and highly authentic visual record of ICH is practically unattainable. The embellished presentations in these films are, at best, partial truths or staged authenticity (McCannell, 1976).

Secondly, in order to adapt to narrative and market demands, films often simplify complex cultural backgrounds and historical details. While this approach may attract a larger audience, it can also lead to misunderstandings of real history and culture. Balancing historical authenticity with entertainment value is a significant challenge for films dealing with intangible cultural heritage.

Lastly, the portrayal of female heroes not only reflects the political and cultural contexts of different periods but also reveals the multifaceted nature of female roles. These characters serve as cultural symbols of their respective eras, challenging traditional gender

roles and promoting awareness of female independence and autonomy. However, these representations are also constrained by the era and cultural context in which they were created, highlighting the complexities and contradictions faced by women throughout history. Intangible cultural heritage films face the dilemma of both promoting cultural heritage and catering to market consumption, often resulting in superficial portrayals of female heroes.

This study aims to analyze the female hero representations in the three intangible cultural heritage (ICH) films, *Liu Sanjie* (1960), *Ashima* (1964), and *Hua Mulan* (1964), using semiotic theory. By examining dialogue, cinematography, angles, and narrative techniques, the research seeks to identify common characteristics among these female heroes and to analyze the stereotypes and lack of diversity in female representations in ICH-themed films. The study also aims to uncover the reasons and significance behind the creation of these female hero images. The study of female character portrayal and their characteristics in intangible cultural heritage-themed films holds substantial contemporary relevance and significance. In recent decades, China has undergone rapid economic development and social changes, bringing new opportunities and challenges for women (Oppliger, 2007).

While the development of ICH films is a crucial way to protect traditional culture, it is equally important to enhance women's self-awareness and recognition. The choice of female characters in ICH-themed films should be more diverse, avoiding the confinement of women to traditional roles due to cultural heritage preservation, which would otherwise limit their autonomy and diverse development in modern society.

Literature Review

In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (2009) offers a sharp critique of seemingly mundane popular culture phenomena, such as

professional wrestling, actors in Algiers, Romans in films, and writers on vacation. By examining these examples, Barthes uncovers the polysemy, symbolism, and even ambiguity inherent in the implicit connotations of popular cultural spectacles.

Kong Degang (2020), in *The Political Imagery of Roland Barthes in Film*, points out that Roland Barthes is a widely cited scholar in film studies. Since writing *Mythologies* in the 1950s, Barthes' commentary and critique on film have gone through three main periods: leftist ideological criticism, the "obtuse meaning" criticism of still photography, and the affective theory of images. For Barthes, images were the entry point for his application of ideological theory, semiotics, and textual theory to film studies. Political participation and expression were his lifelong motivations for engaging in film research. His study of film perspective is an exploration of political and visual aesthetics within the context of popular culture studies.

Jinjin Liu (2021) critiqued Roland Barthes' semiotics in *The Myth of Weaving Images: The Issue of Images in Roland Barthes' Semiotics*, arguing that Barthes' approach constrains images with language, ignoring their unique characteristics. Liu points out that images and language fundamentally differ in structure and signification, suggesting that a semiotics of images must explore the intrinsic qualities of images to be valid.

Min Rui and Peng Tong (2009), in *The Coding and Stratification of Images: Roland Barthes' Theory of Image Stratification*, analyze Barthes' theory of image stratification and discuss its significance in the field of image semiotics. Barthes breaks down images into three layers: the "linguistic message layer," the "denotative image layer," and the "connotative image layer." This stratification theory reveals the constitutive relationships of image symbols, aiding in the in-depth study of the encoding mechanisms of social culture and ideology within images. However, it does not provide a

detailed analysis of how to apply image analysis in film.

For image creators, the rich cultural connotations and meanings of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) provide abundant creative material. However, during the process of visualizing intangible cultural heritage, it is essential to focus on and maintain the original appearance of intangible cultural heritage as much as possible. This involves reasonably utilizing elements in accordance with basic aesthetic principles. Tao Fuwen (2014) pointed out that when utilizing cultural resources, it is crucial to avoid damaging or distorting the inherent material mechanisms, spiritual connotations, artistic beauty, and historical value of these resources. The extraction of elements should also adhere to their fundamental historical and artistic features.

In the study of issues and reflections on female inheritors of intangible cultural heritage, Wang Xuan(2021) argues that the gender-specific constraints of ICH projects limit the diverse development of women. The research highlights how women are often confined to traditional crafts, with an excessive emphasis on the idea that ICH is predominantly women's work. This confines women to roles within the family and community. Wang stresses the importance of preventing the misuse, distortion, or overuse of intangible cultural heritage under the guise of "protecting and developing national cultural heritage." The study calls for vigilance against male-dominated gender biases and discrimination and points against the risk of reinforcing gender discrimination by overly emphasizing the "integrity" of national culture.

In both Western and Chinese academic literature, researchers have extensively explored the analysis of images in film through semiotics, as well as the significance and cultural transmission of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) films, particularly in the context of general film genres. Although they have applied Barthesian semiotic theory to analyze images within films, there has been a notable neglect of

an in-depth exploration of female protagonist archetypes and their cultural and historical contexts within ICH-themed films.

This paper will employ semiotic theory to analyze the female hero archetypes in ICH-themed films, with a focus on the manifestation of signifiers and signified relationships within these films. By examining the linguistic and visual features of female hero characters in ICH films, this study aims to reveal the underlying social and cultural dynamics. Additionally, Roland Barthes' theory of myth will be used to interpret the composition and significance of female hero images in Chinese ICH films.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily involving textual analysis of film narratives to understand how the heroines in Chinese intangible cultural heritage (ICH) films are portrayed. It is noteworthy that this study also adopts semiotic theory to examine elements of film scenes, including character costumes, set design, space, composition, lighting, color, and camera angles. The introduction of semiotic theory broadens the connection between films and theories in sociology, psychology, and anthropology, imbuing film texts with richer cultural significance.

As Roland Barthes (1957) states in *Mythologies*, "The primary task of semiotics is to reveal the ideologies and cultural meanings hidden beneath the surface of signs." Additionally, Christian Metz (1975) highlights in *Film Language*, "Film semiotics is a method of analyzing film texts, uncovering the meanings of images, sounds, and editing within the film language." HuKe (2005) further emphasizes, "Chinese scholars use the basic features of modern theory to interpret films and understand society, namely by studying Chinese films and society with Western modern film theories as tools."

Thus, through textual analysis and semiotic examination, this study will analyze and explore

the common characteristics and representations of heroines in ICH-themed films, revealing the diverse traditions and historical backgrounds of China.

Theoretical Framework

Semiology has emerged from linguistics so that it include the study of language. In addition, it also use other sign systems knowledge in the field of linguistics, information theory, sociology, and psychoanalysis. The semiotics of film was developed by Roland Barthes (1972) and Christian Metz (1974).

Roland Barthes developed Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory by applying Saussure's linguistic sign system of the signifier/signified = sign, and he expanded this with the concept of a "second-order" language. In this system, the signifier/signified = sign becomes a signifier in a new, second-order system of meaning. Barthes described myths as structures composed of two layers of sign systems: "A myth is a peculiar system, constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system becomes a mere signifier in the second system. Here we must recall that the materials of mythical speech (language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.) however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth" (Barthes, 1999,p173).

Barthes emphasized that signification is a process that combines the signifier and the signified, and the result of this process is the sign. When describing film semiotics, Barthes saw film signs as combinations of signifiers (such as decoration, costumes, scenery, music, gestures) and signifieds (concepts). He outlined three levels of meaning: from the informational level, to the symbolic level, leading to the third level of signification, which is the process of

connotation. This third level opens up an endless range of meanings (Qi, 1992, p31)

Christian Metz further developed film semiotics, stating: "Film semiotics is a method of analyzing film texts that reveals the meanings of film language, including images, sound, and editing." Metz believed that film messages consist of two systems: the first is denotation, which refers to the literal meaning, and the second is connotation, which refers to the secondary meaning formed by cultural, social, and personal associations. In Metz's theoretical propositions, the essential relationships between "metaphor and metonymy" and "condensation and displacement," as well as the categorization of the eight semantic groups of film images, all reflect the influence of Roland Barthes' ideas.

Barthes' semiotic perspective on popular culture and media culture has profoundly influenced subsequent film semiotics research by scholars such as Christian Metz and Umberto Eco. Barthes' metaphorical world and its interpretations have become new pathways and approaches for understanding the image composition and meaning judgment in Eastern cultural films.

Analysis and Findings

i :The Denotative Layer of Meaning

Unlike literature, which uses words as symbols to convey information, film transmits information through images. When characters are depicted on screen, they become image symbols, where the signifier and the signified become one and the same. The character exists within the image, and she herself is the image. The direct impressions these convey to the audience are the denotative layer of meaning. This informational layer, also known as the denotative image layer, represents the literal or direct meaning of the symbol. At this level, the symbols are concrete and explicit, functioning at the communication level, encompassing the setting, costumes, characters, their relationships, and all elements we recognize (Qi, 1999, p. 101).

This paper attempts to analyze the characteristics of the female protagonists' costumes and dialogues in the intangible cultural heritage films Liu Sanjie, Ashima, and Hua Mulan through the lens of image rhetoric and linguistic anchoring. These features not only reflect their cultural backgrounds and identities but also serve as crucial symbols in shaping their images. By examining the surface imagery and linguistic information of the characters and the known narrative, this study aims to depict the concrete representation of female heroes in intangible cultural heritage films.

a. The Expressiveness of Visual Symbols

In "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes (2005) initiates the exploration of the applicability and imagination of rhetoric in the visual field with the question, "How does meaning enter the image, and where does it end?" We understand the two different concepts of "signifier" and "signified," which consist of form and meaning. The signifier is the part that can be perceived by the senses, while the signified is the meaning and concept contained within the sign. For instance, when we see a rose, it exists merely as a type of flower we can perceive, but its hidden meaning symbolizes love. Therefore, the basic template of clothing symbols (signifiers) can be reformulated from "object (referent) · substrate (supporting medium) · variable" to "object · characteristic" (Barthes & AO, 2000).



Figure 1a Figure 1b Figure 1c

Figure 1a. Liu Sanjie's costume. Source: Liu Sanjie (1961) directed by Su Li.

Figure 1b. Ashima's costume. Source: Ashima (1964) directed by Liu Qiong.

Figure 1c. Hua Mulan's costume. Source: Hua Mulan (1964) directed by Yue Feng.

In films, the costume symbols of heroines (the signifiers) use elements like color, embroidery, and decoration to reflect their personalities and cultural backgrounds, while the signified conveys their identities and inner qualities. For example, the 1961 film *Liu Sanjie* directed by Su Li, China's first color musical landscape story film, emerged during the tenth anniversary celebrations of the founding of the People's Republic of China and is considered a classic of that era. *Liu Sanjie's* attire, predominantly pink, includes traditional Zhuang ethnic clothing and a delicate floral headpiece. The pink floral headpiece and ethnic attire signify *Liu Sanjie's* purity, kindness, and simplicity, symbolizing her humble background and approachability. The phoenix totem on her apron, as a signifier, symbolizes ethnic characteristics, with its signified being an interpretation of freedom and fierceness.

Similarly, the narrative poem *Ashima*, about the Sani people, a branch of the Yi ethnic group in Yunnan's Stone Forest, portrays *Ashima's* girlhood image through white and blue Yi clothing. Her attire features appliqué cloud patterns on the collar, lace decorations on the cuffs, a red hat, and exquisite silver ornaments, showcasing her beauty and ethnic characteristics. Her lively and free attire symbolizes her love for life and romance. In the portrayal of female heroes of intangible cultural heritage, the colors, embroidery, and traditional decorative elements constantly vary and combine, expressing shared traits such as innocence, beauty, bravery, resistance, wisdom, and strength. These qualities are depicted through the diverse ethnic costumes and the purity and goodness of their appearance and spirit. (Ye, 2017)

Additionally, in the film, the characters' costumes express their living conditions and personality traits. In the movie "*Mulan*," *Mulan's* costume symbols show her transformation from a family daughter to a warrior. The costume symbols of *Mulan* illustrate her transformation from a daughter at home to a warrior. Her

traditional Han attire symbolizes her role within the family and her filial piety, while her military uniform conveys her courage and loyalty.

Through these symbols, the film portrays the shifts in the heroine's emotional state and identity across different stages and contexts. *Mulan's* different stages of costume symbols illustrate that the characteristics of film characters can convey different signifieds through their attire. As Roland Barthes (1990) mentioned, "it is enough to compare the different usages of several pieces of clothing, in individual or environmental situations, and a particular way of dressing" . "It suffices to compare the different expressions of several pieces of clothing to establish a fact that they often contain the same elements, i.e., elements that are fluid and variable, adaptable to different meanings" (Barthes, 1990).

The different costume symbols at each stage of female heroes in films convey their personal traits and cultural backgrounds. These symbols are not merely decorative elements but significant carriers of cultural and emotional expression, deeply revealing the characters' inner worlds and social identities. The character's costume in a film is a dynamic process that changes with the development of the plot and the character's internal transformation also. The inner character changes are often reflected in the external costume symbols (Chen, 2022).

Costume symbols are a powerful tool of visual rhetoric. While they go beyond mere decoration to serve as crucial instruments in conveying a character's psychology, cultural identity, and social relationships, this method of visual signification has its limitations. These costume symbols often idealize the portrayal of heroines, frequently neglecting the complexities of real women's experiences. The repeated use of such symbols can confine heroines to a narrow, idealized framework of beauty, purity, and goodness. Although this form of signification is effective, its strong emphasis on traditional virtues and cultural traits fails to accurately reflect the diverse identities and complex

emotions of women in real life. This can lead to a one-dimensional and stereotypical portrayal of heroines, making it difficult for audiences to fully appreciate the diversity and resilience of women.

b. Anchorage of linguistic signs

Barthes proposed the anchoring mechanism, which reveals an important practice of modern image-text intertextuality. In terms of the sign itself, the anchoring practice between image and text depends on the inherent complementarity of two representational signs. The arbitrariness and conventionality of linguistic signs' signifiers and signifieds determine the clarity of their referential structure. The arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified provides language with ample freedom, making precise signification possible.

This mechanism is fully manifested in films, allowing the combination of images and language to effectively convey the characteristics of female heroes. In the film *Liu Sanjie*, folk songs serve as an essential narrative tool throughout the story, showcasing Liu Sanjie's multiple identities and inner world. The content of all the folk songs in the film, such as fish, shrimp, birds, chickens, ducks, pigs, and cows, are derived from the everyday life of rural areas as signifiers, while Liu Sanjie's identity as a poor farmer is the signified that is redefined.

For instance, using fish and birds as metaphors to illustrate that Aniu does not understand Liu Sanjie's feelings, or using moving clouds and stationary skies, and vines entwining trees to depict the natural scenery of the Zhuang ethnic group, these metaphors celebrate friendship and love. Most prominently, Liu Sanjie angrily scolds the landlord Mo and his lackeys, comparing them to tigers, wolves, snakes, soft-shelled turtles, and dogs. Here, tigers and wolves symbolize their ferocity and predatory nature, snakes and soft-shelled turtles imply their cunning and insidiousness, and dogs represent their baseness and servility.

These lyrics, through metaphors and symbols, reveal class conflicts and social

injustice, highlighting Liu Sanjie's rebellious spirit, her clear distinction between love and hate, her sympathy and care for the oppressed, and her hatred and denunciation of the evil landlords. This creates a well-rounded heroic image. As Roland Barthes (1977) pointed out in *Rhetoric of the Image*, "the polysemy of image signs determines the anchoring effect of linguistic information on the image's signified."

In the film *Ashima*, empty shots occupy a significant portion of the film, showcasing the beautiful landscapes and villages. This imagery not only conveys the unique regional features but also enhances the film's visual aesthetics. However, the film does not explicitly identify *Ashima*'s specific identity; viewers can only infer who she is through visual clues. When an empty shot transitions to a panoramic view and a beautiful woman appears, it is difficult for the audience to determine that this woman is *Ashima* without the accompanying lyrics. The ambiguous link between the image and the signified object or attitude can be confusing. When the lyrics appear, the context becomes clear. For example, the lyrics "Long Lake Water, tell me where *Ashima* is?" and "There is a beautiful girl... her beautiful name is *Ashima*" provide a definitive reference to the character, giving the audience a clear concept of *Ashima*'s image. Furthermore, Ah Hei compares *Ashima* to a flower, and they compare each other to stars, fish, and water, while comparing *Rebubala*'s family to wolves.

The content of the lyrics conveys the natural scenery and cultural characteristics of the Yi ethnic group to the audience, forming a vivid image of *Ashima*'s beauty and wisdom. These symbols, through the anchoring mechanism, allow the audience to clearly understand and feel the deeper meaning conveyed by the film. Thus, various technical means are developed in films to fix the floating chain of signifieds, countering the confusion brought by the uncertainty of symbols, and it is through linguistic information that clarity is achieved.

In both films, the role of folk songs is not merely a method of emotional expression but also a symbolic representation of class protest. As Zhang Wei(2020) stated in *Symbols, Tropes, and Contexts*, "the ability and limits of pure image symbols to independently convey meaning in the context of modern society." While image symbols can independently convey meaning, integrating symbols such as language and sound into a comprehensive image narrative has become mainstream. This intertextuality of symbols has become a paradigmatic style of modern visual rhetoric.

In the film "Mulan," the dialogue incorporates the artistic form of traditional Chinese opera, which is characterized by highly condensed and artistic language. Through the lyrics, the audience not only understands the plot but also experiences the characters' inner world and emotional fluctuations. This approach preserves the essence of traditional Chinese culture while enhancing the story's artistic appeal. For example, the line "The enemy breaks the border city, smoke and fire alarm everywhere. Who should not serve the country? Who should not join the army? But father is old and has asthma, how can he go to the army with illness? Mulan has no brothers, only the little daughter will join the army instead of father" helps the audience understand Mulan's decision to join the army and feel the tension and crisis of the social environment at the time. This line lays the foundation for the subsequent plot development, showcasing her love and filial piety towards her father, as well as her patriotism, which drives the narrative forward.

On the battlefield, Mulan's motivational speech to the soldiers demonstrates her leadership skills and determination. She says, "We must use our courage and wisdom to protect our country. No matter how dangerous the front is, we must persevere to the end." These lines convey her bravery and wisdom, symbolizing her loyalty to the country and deep affection for her comrades. Mulan's songs, through concise and powerful linguistic symbols, portray her as a

heroine embodying both loyalty and filial piety. This helps in easily and purely identifying various elements within the scenes and the scenes themselves. This is an extensional description of the image (often a partial description), or as Hjelmslev puts it, an operational procedure (as opposed to connotation). Corresponding to the naming function, it anchors all possible meanings of the objects involved (i.e., the extensional meaning) through a directory of names (Wu & Du, 2005).

Therefore, for Liu Sanjie, Ashima, and Hua Mulan, their dialogues serve as an effective means of engaging in social movements and a unique form of social life. These characters, shaped under the political discourse of their special times and loaded with strong ideological content, manage to transcend the typical "female hero" image of the revolutionary struggle of their era. Instead, they are portrayed as full-bodied, emotionally rich individuals with distinct characteristics, reflecting the Zhuang people's esteem for intelligence and skillfulness. Through their dialogues, these female heroes not only express their personal demands and inner worlds but also directly participate in social and political movements, becoming voices for social change.

ii : Symbolic Layer

In films, when dialogues cannot be repeated to reinforce the characters' images and historical-cultural context, props and other symbols take on a symbolic role. These symbols convey direct meanings and deeper cultural and emotional connotations. Through the dual structure of signifier and signified, these symbols immerse the audience in a more complex and rich world of meaning. According to Roland Barthes' theory of secondary semiotics, this involves a "semiotic triangle" with the signifier as the first component, the signified as the second, and the connotation as the third, forming a triangular relationship. Film is a representation of reality, containing numerous elements that often carry interpretative, cultural, and traditional qualities or symbolic meanings. These elements can form a second layer of meaning system beyond

linguistics. We can refer to these elements as 'rhetorical elements' or 'connotative signifiers,' which can become objects of semiotic exploration (Barthes, 2015).

In the film *Liu Sanjie*, the embroidered ball appears multiple times, symbolizing love and hope. Liu Sanjie makes the embroidered ball in her boudoir, and close-up shots highlight its vibrant colors and intricate patterns, which act as signifiers, suggesting her love for Aniu. When Liu Sanjie is kidnapped, the embroidered ball is left behind and picked up by Aniu, symbolizing the unbreakable emotional bond between them. On the connotative level, this symbol reflects the persistence and faith in love amidst difficult circumstances. The differences in ethnic customs allow other ethnic groups to appreciate the deeper meanings of these symbols, and in a certain sense, these ethnic elements constitute part of the cultural context for interpreting the images. Barthes claimed that the various connotative layers of the signifier are closely intertwined with culture, history, and other factors. It is through the world of symbols that the external environment becomes embedded into the linguistic system.

The camellia flower serves as an important narrative symbol in the film *Ashima*, appearing repeatedly at key moments. The signifier is the physical form of the symbol, the part directly perceived by the audience. In *Ashima*, the camellia flower acts as the signifier, with close-up shots showcasing its vibrant color and delicate petals. The signified is the concept and meaning behind the signifier. When *Ashima* picks camellias in the mountains and sings, the flower not only adorns her but also represents her pursuit of love and freedom.

The connotation involves the deeper cultural and emotional layers of the symbol. The camellia's connotation in the film is particularly prominent, conveying *Ashima*'s resilience and indomitable spirit in the face of adversity. For instance, when *Ashima* is imprisoned, the camellias in the forest gradually disappear, symbolizing the danger and despair she faces;

when she is rescued, the camellias bloom again, symbolizing her regained freedom and spiritual liberation. The use of the camellia as a symbol emphasizes its regional significance to the Yi people of Yunnan Province.

In the complex system of visual communication in film, meaning is expressed through the collaboration of images, sound, and action. This rhetorical use of images is richer than simple words or photographs, resulting in more full and vibrant symbolic meanings. As Roland Barthes stated, "Images are not just intuitive perceptions but also products of culture and society, whose connotative meanings are built upon their denotative meanings."

In *Mulan*, the red-tasseled spear symbolizes courage and strength. When *Mulan* decides to join the army in place of her father, the family heirloom red-tasseled spear given to her by her father acts as the signifier, symbolizing her determination to break gender constraints and pursue equality and independence, which is the signified. On the battlefield, it is not only her weapon but also symbolizes her wisdom and bravery. Each swing of the spear demonstrates her steadfast faith and indomitable spirit. The connotative level of this symbol conveys her loyalty to her country and her resolute defiance against the enemy. As Barthes (1967) stated in *The Fashion System*, "The meaning of a symbol lies in its ability to simultaneously convey direct visual information and deeper cultural connotations."

The second type of image message is the coded iconic message, which in semiotic terms can be referred to as connotation and connoted image. This is "symbolic" information where each visual symbol carries a certain symbolic meaning with its specific signifier and signified (Zhang, 2013). Christian Metz, when explaining the relationship between the important elements of semiotic theory, the signifier and the signified, stated: "The signified is the aspect that we must actively reconstruct or seek out, participating in the hidden aspect."

iii : The Third Layer of Cultural Meaning

Film provides an artistic reflection of real life within specific historical contexts. All aspects of film language, character development, scene construction, and plot progression reflect the ideologies shaped by the political, cultural, moral, and religious factors of a particular era. In the context of intangible cultural heritage films with folk literature themes, the female hero images in Liu Sanjie, Ashima, and Mulan inherently embody historical and cultural characteristics. As Barthes' analysis of myth semiotics points out, certain historical class socio-cultural phenomena are obscured through the rhetorical techniques of secondary signification systems.

These techniques transform the ideology of dominant discourse producers into natural causal relationships that are disseminated to the public. The film medium plays a significant role in propagating ideology, bypassing the 'natural backdoor' and hiding the true intent of myths, making it a naturalized process that extends beyond functional limits and meaning itself. The third layer of meaning, which Barthes calls "obtuse meaning" (*sens obtus*), is an additive, plural, and ambiguous signification process. Obtuse meaning supplements the narrative and opens up an infinite field of meaning that extends beyond culture, knowledge, and information, revealing the boundless potential of speech activities.

a. Class Binary Opposition

Film serves as an "imaginary signifier," simultaneously creating the illusion of social reconciliation and revealing the reality of social division. In intangible cultural heritage films, the female hero images function as indicative symbols, highlighting class stratification and inescapable fate. In the context of the 1950s and 1960s, where literature and art were subordinated to politics, "political standards first, artistic standards second" became the primary criteria for creating literary works. Against this backdrop, the narratives of both the written and film versions of Ashima, Liu Sanjie, and Hua

Mulan had to align with the mainstream discourse of class struggle.

Therefore, in films, the labor of female heroes is particularly emphasized, highlighting their cultural heritage and their skills and wisdom in daily life. The films delineate work and life, reason and emotion through spatial symbols, providing direct signification and serving as the primary field for storytelling and emotional expression (Kong, 2017).



Figure2. The Transition of Shots Between Liu Sanjie and the Landlord. Source: Liu Sanjie (1961) directed by Su Li.

For instance, in the labor scenes of Liu Sanjie, she is shown picking tea, weaving fishing nets, and embroidering, while Ashima is depicted stepping on hemp cloth, weaving, and embroidering, showcasing their diligence and wisdom as laborers. The directors use these scenes to express the third layer of meaning.

In the classic scene (figure2) where Liu Sanjie and her sisters pick tea on the mountain, the director uses a low-angle shot and diagonal composition, with tea trees scattered across the hills and beautiful girls picking tea interspersed among them. The panning shots of women singing while picking tea symbolize the unity of the peasant class. The camera then slowly zooms in on Liu Sanjie, signifying her role as a leader of the peasants. In contrast, a high-angle shot shows the landlord arriving in a grand sedan chair to ban the songs, cutting to a wide shot of the landlord lounging in luxury, symbolizing exploitation and oppression. Whether it is Liu Sanjie singing against the three scholars or rallying people against the landlord, the scenes metaphorically represent the flesh-and-blood bond between "revolutionary cadres" and

"revolutionary masses" in their common struggle against the enemy.

This national myth, aligned with the discourse of ethnicity and state, constructs a set of visual symbols through cinematic language that reflect the narrative themes and illustrate the shared spiritual home of all ethnic groups in the "Republic." Barthes posits that the third meaning in film can only be achieved through the movement of cinema: "Cinematic quality (the future cinematic quality) exists in an unspeakable third meaning rather than in movement. Photography and painting cannot bear this third meaning because they lack a plotline" (Barthes, 2009).



Figure 3. The Confrontation Between Ashima and the Landlord. Source: Ashima(1964) directed by Liu Qiong.

In Ashima, scenes such as matchmaking and bride kidnapping reinforce the opposition and conflict between the exploiting and exploited classes. When Ashima is kidnapped into Rebubala's village, the director uses a circling shot to first introduce the landlord enjoying a performance, symbolizing the power and authority of the landlord class. The medium close-up shot captures Ashima's resolute eyes and decisive actions as she rejects the gold, silver, and luxurious clothes, highlighting her spirit of resistance. She is then imprisoned, with a subjective shot circling the dark surroundings depicting her oppressive plight, transitioning to a low-angle shot with a single beam of light entering through a stone window, symbolizing her resistance and hope. This metaphorically represents the class oppression that prevents lovers from being together due to the ruling class's intervention and the resulting class

struggle between the exploiting and exploited classes (figure 3).

b. Dual Oppositions of Gender and Power

As Barthes stated, "The arbitrariness and conventionality of signs establish the structure of their signification." These labor scenes, through the combination of visual symbols and cultural context, allow the audience to understand and feel the manifestation of ethnic culture. Through these labor scenes, the film not only showcases the intangible cultural heritage of the Zhuang people but also conveys their attitudes towards life and cultural spirit. The connotative codes (the sequence of signifiers in the second system) are not equal, as dominant cultural groups control the discourse structure. These groups, possessing the most power and influence in social structures, dictate the images people see, often creating stereotypical images of other groups to maintain their own interests and dominance (Paul & Lester, 2003).

For example, Mulan uses gender transformation and power structure conflicts to depict class opposition. Mulan's transition from a family daughter to a battlefield warrior demonstrates the challenges and opposition of gendered class roles. Her desexualization symbolizes the need for female labor and the transformation of women into symbols. Mulan's image on the battlefield further reinforces the theme of gender opposition. The director uses eye level-angle shots and close-ups to showcase her determination and wisdom in battle, contrasting with the high-angle shots of the emperor and generals, symbolizing the existence of traditional power structures (figure 4).

Culturally, this aligns with the mythical hero images on the screen from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the Cultural Revolution, where individual fate and identity anxiety are downplayed, and their heroic deeds in response to the collective sacred mission are highlighted. These female heroes share hardships with men, reflecting mythic idealism and noble spirit.

Their images are a perfect blend of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism (Hu, 2008). The image of female heroes symbolizes revolutionary discourse. In this highly politically symbolic revolutionary narrative, the prominent figures are the "new" women—those who have been liberated and transformed into female warriors/heroes (Dai, 1994). Wu (2011) points out that during this period, ethnic films served as important tools for cultivating national identity and constructing national consciousness in a specific historical context. The scenes and shots in the film convey a third layer of meaning, which is not merely about the transformation of the heroine's identity. Whether in terms of gender or the challenge to power, the symbolized image of the heroine serves as an ideological carrier of political metatexts, representing an abstract expression of national politics.



Figure 4. The Contrast Between Mulan on the Battlefield and High Officials. Source: *Hua mulan* (1964) directed by Yue Feng.

Discussion and Conclusion

Analyzing female hero images in intangible cultural heritage films through Roland Barthes' semiotics, we can identify certain universal symbolic characteristics: physical beauty, inner kindness, and resilient character traits. These images not only denote specific class hierarchies, illustrating the opposition between the working class and the exploiting class, ethnic minorities and oppressive classes, and women and gender constraints, but also connote the cultural and historical context of the Cultural Revolution era. The symbols formed by these female hero images, through visual and narrative techniques,

vividly portray social classes and cultural transformations across different historical periods, reflecting the social changes and development in China.

Symbolized female hero images primarily serve as ideological carriers of political metatexts, representing an abstract expression of national politics. They use folk songs and labor as tools to convey political ideologies, leading the masses in relentless struggles against landlords and government officials. These heroic symbols represent political imagination and collective dreams of that era, satisfying the people's spiritual and aesthetic desires. However, they are objectified in romantic narrative rhetoric, placed in positions of devotion, passivity, and subordination. Consequently, these female hero images have become impoverished and conceptualized, losing their richness and ambiguity within a specific culture.

These symbolic images vividly depict social classes and cultural transformations across different historical periods through visual and narrative techniques, reflecting the social changes and developments in Chinese society. Semiotic theory only reveals one aspect of the creation and portrayal of female heroes in films. The core reality is that the predicament of women's situations and characteristics shaped such cinematic female images, turning them into symbols reflecting national consciousness, social realities, the spirit of the times, and gender power, created and disseminated through film.

With the ongoing surge of interest in intangible cultural heritage in China, these films not only highlight commercial motives but also carry political intentions, embodying both cultural enterprises and cultural industries. The current selection of singular female hero themes in "intangible cultural heritage films" raises important questions about how to shape female hero images without compromising heritage elements. The artistic creation of female hero images in future intangible cultural heritage films will continue to hold significant research value and profound implications.

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