

# *The "Grimm" Rebuild of Disney Animation: Cultural Filtration and Global Image Building*

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**Abstract.** With the development of the world economy, cultural soft power has become an integral part of national strength. Through the analysis of the adaptation strategy of the classic characters in Grimm's Fairy Tales by Disney animated films and the cultural impact brought by this process, this study analyzes how American culture filters and integrates other cultures, and then shapes the global image. Based on the research method of critical discourse analysis, this paper elaborates on the adaptation strategy of Disney animation, the production background and marketing strategy of Disney animation, and the global dissemination and cultural impact of American values from three aspects of text analysis, discourse practice and social practice. Disney's "Grimm Rebuild" process has successfully constructed its own brand image and cultural paradigm, formed a unique cultural appeal and influence, and provided a powerful reference for the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture, but we still need to pay attention to respecting the uniqueness and diversity of national cultures and avoid convergence.

**Keywords:** Disney animation, Grimm's Fairy Tales, cultural filtering, IP image-building, cultural communication

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, with the accelerated evolution of the world political pattern, cultural soft power has gradually become a key area of the game between big powers. Learning from the successful experience of other countries is conducive to helping Chinese film and television works and IP image expand their influence. As one of the most famous entertainment enterprises in the United States, Disney's cultural products have won the world's favor by virtue of its unique marketing strategy and cross-cultural communication. But many of the popular IP images come from the German classic folk literature Grimm's Fairy Tales. It was collected and organized by German linguists Jacob Grimm and William Grimm. Curiously, how does Disney animation transform traditional German folk literature images into classic American screen images? How to give native connotation to European culture, form "Grimm" reconstruction, and then transform it into a global cultural symbol? How does this process of cultural reconstruction reflect the game between American cultural hegemony and native cultural resistance?

According to the theory of "cultural discount" [1] and "cultural proximity" [2], the audiences tend to accept cultures similar to their own, and cultural differences will cause obstacles to the cross-

cultural communication of works, or even be excluded, while Disney animation re-creates the characters of Grimm's Fairy Tales to better integrate American native culture. However, in the process of this strong "cultural filtering", some scholars criticize that Disney Princess movies are too "stereotyped" and lose their original meaning, showing the fierce confrontation and game between local culture and American culture. Disney, relying on the hegemony of American cultural imperialism, invades other national cultures around the world, romanticizes, wonders and stereotypes the "exotic" elements in Grimm's Fairy Tales in order to satisfy American audiences' imagination of "classical Europe" and shape it into a safe, beautiful and consumable "fairy tale world", serving the global entertainment market. Disney is also committed to creating a unified, distinct and highly recognizable global image, which is its main marketing strategy.

An important foundation of this study is an intensive reading of the original German version of Grimm's Fairy Tales, which can more accurately capture the subtle but critical cultural filtering traces in Disney's adaptation process. Through the analysis of Disney animation on the "Grimm's Fairy Tales" characters rebuilding and the German and American culture exchange, integration, conflict, game and other processes, to help China's film and television IP image shaping learn from successful experience, better to the world.

## 2. Literature review

This paper studies how Disney animation realizes the character reconstruction in fairy tales, and uses "Disney animated films" and "Grimm's Fairy Tales" as Chinese keywords to search in CNKI database, and collects 301 related contents. However, most of them involve the changes of female images, commercial marketing strategies and literary research, and the content of screen image adaptation of fairy tale characters is not enough. In 1988, Canadian scholars Colin Hoskins and R. Mirus first put forward the theory of "cultural discount". They believed that "a film and television program will be understood and loved by the audience in an environment where it is rooted in a culture for a long time. However, in other cultural environments, because the audience is difficult to understand or identify with this style, belief, values, or even the meaning of its language, the attraction is naturally weakened [1], resulting in cultural discount. Therefore, Disney needs to use "cultural filtering" (such as deleting violent and dark plots, advocating romanticism and heroism, etc.) To reduce the barriers to understanding or exclusion (that is, "cultural discount") caused by cultural differences in cross-cultural communication, so as to create a "cultural discount". It creates a more "neutral" model that is more acceptable to audiences from different cultural backgrounds around the world, especially children and parents, and improves cultural proximity. In the text analysis, the theory of cultural discount helps us to understand the reasons and ways of Disney adaptation through the comparison of literature and film and television.

Julian House, a German translator, first put forward the theory of cultural filtering [3], which refers to the fact that in cross-cultural communication and dialogue, due to the differences in cultural traditions, social environment and aesthetic habits, the recipient intentionally or unintentionally chooses, deforms, transforms, infiltrates and innovates the communication information. As a result, the exchange of information has changed in terms of content and form. That is to say, it is precisely because of the cultural discount that people are more inclined to screen and understand information through cultural filtering, which is subjective and selective. Taking advantage of its cultural hegemony, the United States implanted optimism, romantic love supremacy, personal struggle and other mainstream values in the adaptation of Disney animation, while deliberately downplaying the dark, violent and negative impact on children in the story, packaging it into a more "universal" fairy tale product to promote globally. However, such transformation may also suppress the expression of

local culture. The Brothers Grimm believe that the horror and violence in fairy tales have their educational purposes, including cultivating children's cautious attitude and ability to deal with the world, or disciplining children [4].

Leveraging its formidable economic prowess, media technology, and global communication network, the United States holds a dominant position in cultural exportation, possessing a potent ability to "shape cognition." However, global audiences are not a homogenous group. They can selectively consume, discuss, and even engage in "secondary creation" of Disney texts, incorporating their own cultural understandings and aspirations, thereby forming a kind of "bottom-up" resistance and negotiation. This "dominant exportation" by Disney deeply reflects the hegemony of American cultural imperialism over other ethnic cultures. It represents a new form of colonialism rooted in the cultural sphere after World War II, not only targeting European countries but also, to a greater extent, the Third World and regions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Americanizing their civilizations, thereby promoting cultural homogenization worldwide and continuing to uphold American hegemony.

Schiller first formally proposed the theory of cultural imperialism in his monograph "Communication and Culture Domination" written from 1973 to 1975. He presented this theory as a model of "constructing fundamental relationships of power at both domestic and international levels" and provided the first clear definition of the "cultural imperialism" theory: "The concept of cultural imperialism today is best described as the sum of a series of processes: a society (specifically referring to third world countries) is drawn into the modern world-systems, and its ruling class is attracted, motivated, forced, and sometimes even bribed, to shape and propagate values and structures that conform to the ruling centers within this modern world-system." [5].

In his article "The Impact and Critique of American Cultural Imperialism," Lu Chunxu points out that cultural imperialism is specifically manifested in the way that the culture of certain major powers (such as the United States) continuously becomes the dominant cultural model globally, constantly impacting the inherent forms of identity in people's minds. This makes the people of weaker nation-states feel increasingly less connected to their own traditions and culture, until it eventually fades away [6]. Therefore, Disney's implementation of cultural imperialism policies is an important manifestation of social practice within the framework of critical discourse analysis theory. This approach demonstrates the significant influence of American values on social reality and political culture during Disney's "Grimm's Remake" process.

German culture did not yield to American influence, and its local culture engaged in a contest with American culture. This was not a simple one-way process of "American export - world acceptance", but a dynamic process full of negotiation, compromise, resistance, and reinvention. Disney also adjusted its strategies to some extent based on market feedback, and the Disney version that eventually became popular globally was itself a cultural hybrid that had undergone multiple "filtering" and "reengineering". It retained the basic framework of the source story, but its core, style, and values had been completely transformed into products of American commercial culture, and it attempted to be wrapped in the cloak of "universality". This hybrid is both a manifestation of American cultural hegemony and an inevitable trace of cultural interaction in the process of globalization. This contest is also a competition of national "soft power". Disney animation is an important carrier of American soft power, while the rise and resistance of local cultural industries are a struggle for cultural definition, narrative power, and discourse power in the global cultural landscape.

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard believed that commodities possess not only use value and exchange value, but also symbolic value, which he regarded as the fundamental premise of

commodity consumption. Symbolic value has become the ultimate value in a consumer society, overshadowing use value and exchange value. The Disney brand IP image places great emphasis on symbolic construction, transforming the brand IP image through image symbols, music symbols, etc., thereby stimulating consumer enthusiasm and reinforcing brand value recognition [7]. In addition, Disney has established theme parks worldwide, developed peripheral products, and collaborated with other well-known brands to expand its global influence.

### 3. Research methods

This article employs critical discourse analysis as its theoretical framework, starting from Fairclough's three-dimensional model (text analysis, discourse practice analysis, social practice analysis), and conducts research through methods such as text mining and analysis, typical case analysis, and comparative studies between films and original texts. Within this framework, Disney works are not only entertainment texts but also discourse fields that carry power relations and cultural values. In this model, text analysis refers to the comparative analysis of the German original text of "Grimm's Fairy Tales" and the plot of Disney movies, while discourse practice revolves around the production background and marketing strategies of Disney animation, studying how it is produced, disseminated, and consumed. Social practice refers to the impact of this cultural model, transformed by American values, on social reality and culture. This analytical approach will reveal how Disney establishes cultural authority through discourse strategies, naturalizing and invisibilizing American values and consumerist ideology in global dissemination, ultimately leading to cultural homogenization. At the same time, it can also help us understand the resistance strategies and negotiation practices of local cultures in the process of globalization.

Based on the Disney Princess series of movies, this article selects the protagonists from four classic stories in "Grimm's Fairy Tales": "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," and "Sleeping Beauty" as samples for analysis. "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," adapted from the Grimm fairy tale "Snow White" (Schneewittchen), is Disney's first animated feature film, laying the foundation for Disney's fairy tale adaptation model and marking the pioneering work of cultural filtering. It successfully shaped the initial image of Disney's fairy tale kingdom globally. "Cinderella," released in 1950, is adapted from the Grimm fairy tale "Aschenputtel." It is a key work in Disney's post-war revival and an important founder of the "Disney Princess" image. It significantly "purifies" and romanticizes the original plot, character motivations, and endings, with far-reaching influence. "Sleeping Beauty," adapted from the Grimm fairy tale "Dornröschen," represents Disney's pursuit of artistic excellence in visual style and music. It further emphasizes the central role of the prince in the rescue, downplaying other elements from the original story. Its "true love's kiss" setting has become a global fairy tale template. "Rapunzel," adapted from the Grimm fairy tale "Rapunzel," is Disney's reinterpretation of a classic fairy tale in the era of computer animation. It embodies the new characteristics of cultural filtering in the new era and demonstrates the continuation and renewal of global image shaping.

### 4. Text analysis

#### 4.1. The removal and embellishment of violent, dark, and terrifying elements

In the original "Grimm's Fairy Tales" [8], the plot where the queen orders the hunter to hunt down Snow White and bring back her "lungs and liver" to be cooked and eaten is replaced in the animation by the scene where the heart is placed in a jewelry box, mitigating the visual impact.

e.g. "Du sollst es töten und mir Lunge und Leber zum Wahrzeichen mitbringen." [9]  
 (The queen said to the hunter) "Kill her, but bring me her lungs and liver as evidence." [8]

In the original story, the queen is invited to attend the wedding of Snow White and the prince, but is forced to dance to her death in red-hot iron shoes.

e.g. "Aber es waren schon eiserne Pantoffeln über Kohlenfeuer gestellt und wurden mit Zangen hereingetragen und vor sie hingestellt. Da mußte sie in die rotglühenden Schuhe treten und so lange tanzen, bis sie tot zu Erde fiel." [9]

There were already iron shoes placed on the coal fire, which were picked up with pliers and placed in front of her. She had to wear the fiery red shoes and dance until she collapsed and died [8].

However, the film adapted it into a scene where the queen is chased to a cliff, and when she wants to throw a boulder at the dwarves, the cliff breaks, and the queen falls, with two vultures circling in the air, avoiding as much as possible the bloody scenes. In the original story, Cinderella's stepsisters cut off their toes or heels to fit into the crystal shoe, and at the end, the dove pecks out their eyes as punishment. Disney animation removed the bloody self-mutilation and cruel punishment plots. The stepsisters just clumsily try to squeeze into the shoe, and the ultimate punishment is merely embarrassment and failure.

e.g. "Da reichte ihr die Mutter ein Messer und sprach 'hau die Zehe ab: wann du Königin bist, so brauchst du nicht mehr zu Fuß zu gehen. " [9]

So her mother gave her a knife and said, "Cut off your toe. When you become queen, you won't have to walk anymore." [8]

This plot change completely removes extreme violence elements and softens the moral punishment, aligning with Disney's "family-friendly" positioning. In the original story of "Sleeping Beauty", during the princess's hundred-year sleep, thorns grew around the palace, and many princes who tried to enter the palace were entangled in the thorns and died. Disney animation adapted it to show the prince arriving shortly after the princess fell asleep, blurring the sense of time and reducing horror and discomfort.

Horror, as an aesthetic experience of pain, reflects people's cultural anxiety and traumatic experiences, embodying a nation's collective unconsciousness, and thus possesses certain relatively fixed imagery and scenarios [10]. "Grimm's Fairy Tales" were originally not created for children; they are metaphors of the adult world, intended to warn and educate. Disney's vision is to create "family entertainment." From the very beginning, he targeted the entire family, especially children. To appeal to this vast market, he had to remove adult and horror content that might give children nightmares and upset parents. By altering visuals and plots to reduce the sense of horror, it becomes more suitable for children and a broader family audience, reflecting the "purifying" function of cultural filtering.

#### 4.2. Simplification of character motivation and moral dualism

In addition, Disney films reflect the Western binary thinking structure. Western philosophy is full of binary opposition thinking, dividing things into two mutually opposing, mutually exclusive, yet mutually dependent aspects, such as appearance and essence, truth and fallacy, rationality and sensibility, femininity and masculinity, and so on [11]. In the original works, all the villainous characters may have more complex motivations for their actions (such as jealousy, maintaining status, contracts, etc.), sometimes exhibiting human weaknesses. Snow White's stepmother is jealous of her beauty, Cinderella's stepmother wants to maintain her and her two daughters' status in the family, and even wants her daughter to become queen. In "Sleeping Beauty", the witch retaliates against the king for not inviting the thirteenth fairy to the feast, and Rapunzel's father steals the

witch's lettuce, so the witch takes his child away as punishment. Disney animation simplifies the villains' motivations to pure evil, vanity, or jealousy. Such as the queen's monologue in the magic mirror in "Snow White", the stepmother's harsh scolding in "Cinderella", the witch's curse declaration in "Sleeping Beauty", and the witch imprisoning Rapunzel in the tower in "Rapunzel". These changes make the characters more flat, with clear good and evil, easy for global audiences to understand, strengthening dramatic conflicts. Ultimately, these villainous characters receive their due punishment, shaping a clear universal value image of "good will prevail over evil".

This simple moral structure can be quickly recognized and understood in almost any culture, lowering the cognitive threshold. Although this simplification strategy makes the story more accessible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds around the world, it also diminishes the depth of traditional fairy tales as cultural rituals and moral education tools.

### 4.3. The reinforcement of romantic love lines and the happy reunion in the ending

The most notable feature of Disney's adaptation process is the systematic implantation of mainstream American values. The story must have a clear and happy ending, with the protagonist's pursuit often being personal happiness and love. The gorgeous dresses, castles, and singing and dancing scenes create a dreamy and commercializable aesthetic. This is an important manifestation of American values such as optimism, individualism and self-actualization, consumerism, and romanticism, and is a form of cultural imperialism.

In the film, the prince awakens the princess with a "true love's kiss", while in the original story, it is the seven dwarfs who are carrying the coffin that are tripped by a tree branch, causing the princess to cough up the poisoned apple. The film transforms the accidental event into a romantic and magical "true love" ritual, becoming the core symbol and global selling point of Disney's fairy tales. The same goes for "Cinderella". The romantic climax of the prince and Cinderella meeting at the ball, Cinderella anxiously leaving when she hears the midnight bell, and trying on the crystal shoes, leaves ample room for the audience's imagination. In "Sleeping Beauty", the setting of the "true love's kiss" is utilized to the extreme. The prince's kiss is the only way to break the century-old curse. In the original story, the curse expires just as the prince arrives, and the kiss is a natural outcome.

In the original works of Grimm, the prince characters are typically there to rescue the princesses, without being portrayed in detail. Disney animation has significantly increased the screen time and initiative of the prince characters, such as Prince Philip's battle with the witch in "Sleeping Beauty" and the prince's hosting of a ball to find his love in "Cinderella". These plots reinforce the romantic love pattern of "the hero rescues the beauty", shaping more charming male characters, which aligns with the global market's preference for romantic narratives.

The endings of Disney animations are invariably grand, joyful weddings or celebrations. For instance, in "Snow White," the prince and Snow White receive cheers on the castle balcony; in "Cinderella," there's a lavish wedding; in "Sleeping Beauty," a grand palace ball; and in "Rapunzel," Princess Rapunzel and Prince Firenze have a grand wedding. These scenes, through their gorgeous visual presentation, create an unparalleled sense of happiness and satisfaction. This extremely romanticized, carefree ending of "living happily ever after" is the core charm of Disney's global image and a complete avoidance of the complexity of reality in cultural filtering. These similar fairy tale templates inevitably fall into the trap of "cultural homogenization."

#### 4.4. Add comedic elements and anthropomorphic supporting roles

In the film, the seven dwarfs are named "Doc", "Grumpy", "Dopey", "Doc", "Grumpy", "Dopey", and "Grumpy". The cute names and their interactions with Snow White (such as scenes of washing faces and eating) make the story more childlike. The anthropomorphic adventure storyline of Jack and Gus the Mouse, and Lucius the Old Cat in "Cinderella", as well as the character conflicts and comedic interactions among the three fairies (Flora, Fiona, and Merryweather) in "Sleeping Beauty", are almost entirely original creations by Disney or significant expansions of the original works. They serve to ease the atmosphere, add fun, cater to children's audiences, and drive the plot forward. These supporting characters and their humor are an indispensable part of Disney's global appeal and reflect the "sweetening" strategy in cultural filtering.

Disney's edits and adaptations are precisely aimed at minimizing cultural discounts, ensuring its products are seamlessly accepted by the global market. By removing dark content, Disney is essentially "de-specializing" the original text, stripping away its original cultural edges that might cause "discounting", and polishing it into a sleek, universal "global product" with minimal cultural resistance.

### 5. Discourse practice analysis

#### 5.1. Production background

The production of Disney animation is by no means a mere artistic creation, but a highly institutionalized, industrialized process driven by strong ideologies. The use of storyboards to create animated films is a pioneering and widely adopted method by Disney, which is used to visualize written scripts, plan shots, pacing, and narrative. From preliminary research, through the film production process, to post-production, every step is meticulous and rigorous to ensure quality. This process itself filters out content that is overly radical or deviates from mainstream values. The production of stories aims to maximize appeal to the global market, rather than artistic expression.

Disney never creates "original" stories; instead, it appropriates and adapts existing public cultural resources. This adaptation is not neutral; it replaces the original text's discourse system with Disney's own. Disney has the power to decide which version of the story will become the "authoritative version" recognized by millions of people worldwide. Disney is not just telling stories; it is defining what "fairy tale" means. It sets a global standard for fairy tale narratives and aesthetics. If other cultures want to produce their own fairy tale animations, they often subconsciously imitate or reference Disney's successful model, further consolidating its cultural hegemony.

#### 5.2. Marketing strategy

Disney's marketing strategy is closely intertwined with its content production, creating a robust commercial ecosystem: Disney animation is simultaneously distributed to every corner of the globe through cinemas, television channels, streaming platforms, and later, DVDs. This significant disparity in distribution capabilities makes it difficult for locally produced, small-scale cultural products to compete. Furthermore, the operation of the entire IP industry chain is Disney's core business strategy. Its film advertising, toys, video games, books, theme park collaborations, and more, together form a vast industrial chain.

Most viewers, especially children, adopt a dominant interpretation. They readily embrace the fantasy world, romantic love, and binary good-versus-evil provided by Disney. Through repeated consumption, viewers unconsciously internalize the underlying assumptions about gender (princesses waiting to be redeemed), race (stereotypes of "civilized" vs "barbaric"), class (romanticization of royalty/commoners), and consumerism (possessing magical items = happiness). Disney discourse thus participates in the construction of social subjects, shaping generations' understanding of "love," "happiness," "success," and "evil."

However, some audiences hold reservations about the film, no longer believing that princesses must wait for princes to rescue them, or that princesses necessarily have white skin and big eyes. This represents a rebellious force in discourse practice. These critical voices are fed back into the production process. In recent years, Disney's transformation (such as emphasizing sisterhood over prince love in "Frozen," focusing on Moana's self-exploration in "Moana," and showcasing diverse Asian elements in "Tale of the Dragon") is precisely Disney's response and incorporation of critical discourse from the consumer side. By adjusting its own discourse strategy, it maintains its legitimacy and hegemonic status in the new era.

## 6. Social practice analysis

Disney princess movies convey mainstream American values and ideologies to audiences worldwide. When the Disney version is disseminated to the entire world through its unparalleled global distribution and marketing network, its powerful influence makes the Disney version the "standard version." This, to some extent, brings about the consequences of cultural imperialism. When children (and even adults) around the world think of "Snow White" or "Cinderella," the animated images of Disney appear in their minds, rather than the original texts by the Brothers Grimm or the local versions of their own countries. This actually replaces and obliterates the folk heritage of other cultures with American cultural products, replacing local cultural narratives. For a long time, Disney has been committed to shaping princesses as a unified template, with big eyes, white skin, and thin bodies. This aesthetic preference has continued to influence global audiences for a long time and may have squeezed the space for other cultural aesthetic standards.

The core of cultural imperialism lies in the inequality of power among different cultures. As a global cultural giant, Disney possesses strong dissemination power and discourse power: it defines the initial cognition of many children around the world towards "princess", "fairy tale", "romance", and even "femininity". This "Disney perspective" has far-reaching influence. Overall, in order to reduce cultural discount, Disney adopts the means of "cultural filtering" to shape the characters in "Grimm's Fairy Tales" into a unified template that is more easily accepted by global audiences, and fills them with American values and commercial aesthetics. Finally, through its strong economic and cultural strength, it reversely sells this "American product" as a "universal classic" globally, achieving the effect of "cultural imperialism". This may lead to cultural homogenization, aesthetic standardization, and inequality of cultural power. However, audiences are not passively accepting all this information. Global audiences will interpret, negotiate, and even resist these cultural messages in various ways. Therefore, the relationship between Disney princess movies and cultural imperialism is a dynamically changing process, reflecting both the inequality of cultural power structures and involving continuous resistance and negotiation.

## 7. Conclusion

Disney animated films, through cultural filtering, minimize the impact of cultural discounts to the greatest extent possible, constructing a universal value system and a standard fairy tale template that are acceptable to audiences worldwide. It also utilizes marketing strategies for IP industry chain operations to make Disney characters deeply rooted in people's hearts, and leverages the powerful technology and information network of the United States to help Disney reach every corner of the globe. This not only brings cultural creation but also promotes the widespread dissemination of cultural products and business ideas globally. However, in this process, Disney's adaptations also obscure the traditional narratives of other cultures, leading to cultural homogenization; by embedding American values in the films, it maintains American cultural hegemony, thus achieving the effect of cultural imperialism. This study combines cultural filtering theory, cultural proximity theory, and cultural imperialism theory to reveal the important role of cultural symbols in the process of cultural dissemination, providing reference and guidance for the development of China's cultural undertakings and the overseas dissemination of cultural products. However, this study only selects a few early animated films from Disney, and the sample does not fully represent Disney's overall model today. Moreover, with the changes and development of the times and the global protection of cultural diversity, these strategies will also undergo some changes, and it is still necessary to analyze them in the context of specific historical periods. At the same time, we must respect the cultures of all countries, avoid the phenomenon of cultural imperialism, and jointly build a prosperous and colorful world cultural pattern.

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