



Cultural Hybridization in The Lego Ninjago Movie: A Third Space Analysis Through Homi Bhabha's Theory

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Abstract

This study examines *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* as a cultural text that embodies the principles of cultural hybridization in a globalized media landscape. Grounded in Homi Bhabha's theory of the *Third Space*, the analysis highlights how the film blends traditional East Asian motifs with Western narrative conventions to construct a hybrid cultural identity. By focusing on the characters of Lloyd and Garmadon, the film presents a nuanced exploration of the tension between individual identity formation and the constraints of inherited cultural roles. The narrative and visual elements create a metaphorical space where diverse cultural elements intersect, critique, and transform one another. In doing so, *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* not only bridges cultural divides but also contributes to ongoing conversations about transnational identity, cultural negotiation, and the role of popular media as a site for intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Keywords: cultural hybridization, East-Asian cultures, multicultural, The Lego Ninjago Movie, Western cultures

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, as Adams (2007) explained, connects people and cultures from around the world through communication, transportation, and economic networks; speeding up the sharing of ideas and traditions, making cultural exchange faster than ever before. According to Robertson (1997), globalization allows universal ideas and unique cultural identities to influence each other, creating a mix of shared values and local traditions. This phenomenon often leads to cultural hybridization, where different cultures blend to form something new (Wang & Yeh, 2005). For example, cultural producers combine local traditions with global styles to make their work appealing to wider audiences. This process changes how cultures are expressed and understood, offering new ideas while raising questions about tradition and authenticity; thus the concept of “third space” by Homi Bhabha (1994) is introduced in order to understand how cultural hybridization works in creating ideas through the interaction between different cultural elements.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of “third space” is a metaphorical space where different cultures interact, negotiate, and transform each other; it is a space that is created by “fluidity and openness of cultural signs and symbols” (Bhandari, 2022) where the blendings of cultures involves negotiating, reinterpreting, and adapting symbols and ideas to create something new. Bhabha (as cited in Bhandari, 2022) rejected the view that cultural identity is fixed nor pure; instead, he argues that cultural identity is dynamic and constantly evolving. Within this space, individuals can adapt and create unique hybrid identities, reflecting the ambivalence between acceptance and rejection of dominant cultural norms, thereby opening opportunities for creative expression and transformation.

Through the scope of entertainment production, animated movies often reflect the existence of cultural hybridization, especially those that were produced for global audiences. One movie example in particular is a comedy animated movie entitled *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* that was released by Warner Animation Group on September 22, 2017 that depicts the blending of East-Asian cultures; particularly Japanese and Chinese cultures with Western cultures, particularly its humor, society settings, animation style and storytelling. *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* is a movie adaptation based on the successful LEGO animation series with the same name: *LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* that was first released in 2011. The movie is set in a fictional world called ‘Ninjago’ where many cultures, mainly Japanese, helped build the world. *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* gave many examples of cultural hybridization by blending the East-Asian traditional cultures, for example, the characters and the traditional Japanese term of ‘ninja’ itself and the

elements around it such as its costumes and the usage of martial arts are adapted in the movie by blending them with modern Western elements. Another example is the Japanese-inspired visual aesthetic chosen for the movie's architecture and landscape design are blended and adapted with the Western's artistic and animation style. The usage of Japanese traditional myths such as dragons, Oni (translated as 'demon'), as well as the depiction of giant monsters known as Kaiju are also used in this movie to help build the characters and to preserve the traditional Japanese culture.

The movie contains many aspects of cultural hybridization such as the characters themselves, the traditional Japanese term of 'ninja' and its elements, Japanese myths, as well as the visual aesthetics chosen for this movie to produce as an entertainment for a global audience. The LEGO Ninjago Movie is a reimagining of traditional Japanese cultures through the Western lens, thus, we believe that the object that we chose manages to demonstrate cultural hybridization using the concept of 'third space' proposed by Homi Bhabha.

METHODS

This article used a qualitative method to analyze The LEGO Ninjago Movie that was released in 2017 and used the concept of 'third space' theory by Homi Bhabha. The data was collected through observation to gain deeper insights. The concept of 'third space' by Homi Bhabha describes an area of interaction that emerges when two distinct cultures meet, generating new identities through dialogue and negotiation. Within this space, individuals can adapt and create unique hybrid identities, reflecting the ambivalence between acceptance and rejection of dominant cultural norms, thereby opening opportunities for creative expression and transformation. In the The LEGO Ninjago Movie, traditional Japanese cultures are not entirely preserved nor erased. Instead, it is reimagined through a Western lens, reflecting the dynamics of globalization and hybridization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Characters

i. Young Teenagers as Ninja and Practitioners of Martial Arts

One of the core elements of *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* is its characterization of the protagonists as young teenagers who also serve as ninja warriors. The term *ninja* becomes not only a narrative focus but also a cultural identifier, blending traditional Japanese concepts with modern Western sensibilities. The movie's title, "Ninjago," itself is a portmanteau of *ninja* and *Lego*, signaling this thematic fusion from the outset. Historically, ninjas or *shinobi* (忍び) were covert agents in feudal Japan known for espionage, sabotage, and guerrilla warfare (Kim, 2023). Their portrayal in Western

media—popularized by films like *You Only Live Twice* (1967) and the animated *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1980s)—has solidified their status as pop culture icons. The film continues this legacy by adapting the ninja trope for a younger audience, presenting teenage heroes dressed in stylized shinobi shōzoku. However, instead of using traditional black outfits, the characters wear colorful variants that reflect their distinct personalities, aligning with youth culture and merchandising strategies.

The martial arts component is equally integral, drawing from both Chinese Kung Fu and Japanese Ninjutsu. The narrative incorporates the Godai philosophy—Earth (*chi*), Water (*mizu*), Fire (*hi*), Wind (*kaze*), and Void (*ku*)—as the basis for each ninja's elemental powers (Syndu, 2024). This metaphorical use of natural elements functions both as a combat mechanism and a symbolic journey of self-discovery and balance, resonating with the spiritual goals of traditional Asian martial arts (Cowiecap, 2019).

Master Wu embodies the archetypal martial arts mentor. His pedagogy fuses ancient wisdom with humor and modern pop culture references (e.g., flute renditions of *It's a Hard-Knock Life* and *I've Got the Power*). This hybrid approach facilitates accessibility for a younger audience while maintaining thematic depth, echoing the master-student dynamic found in classic kung fu cinema.

b. Settings

i. Architecture

Ninjago City visually represents a cultural convergence, juxtaposing East Asian architectural motifs with Western futuristic urban aesthetics. The urban landscape features neon-lit skylines, modern infrastructure, and high-tech vehicles, yet interwoven within are distinct elements of traditional East Asian design—pagoda-style rooftops, lanterns, and curved wooden facades. This design choice reinforces the theme of cultural hybridity central to the film's narrative world.

The residence of Lord Garmadon exemplifies architectural orientalism, mirroring Japanese and Chinese mountain temples adorned with Kilin/Qilin statues, symbols of divine protection and good fortune. The use of red interior ornaments draws on East Asian symbolism, where red represents prosperity, strength, and celebration.

Other structures, such as the school building, reflect a mixture of traditional East Asian symmetry and Western functionality, creating a visually engaging environment where tradition meets modernity.

ii. Cultural Customs and Environment

In its depiction of daily life, the film blends East Asian customs with Western lifestyle elements. The high school setting reflects American educational norms—students wear casual attire, exhibit self-expression through hairstyles and hobbies (e.g., skateboarding, mohawks), and navigate a social culture less constrained by uniformity.

Yet subtle markers of Asian tradition persist. For instance, Lloyd and his mother Koko observe the customary removal of shoes before entering their home—a practice common in Japanese and many East Asian households. The interior of their apartment continues this fusion, combining Western minimalist furniture with Asian decorative patterns and symbolic objects like a Chinese dragon bowl and traditional wall hangings.

iii. Fictional Language

The visual language of *Ninjago* includes a fictional script known as *Ninjargon*, seen across signage, costumes, and vehicles. These symbols draw visual inspiration from Japanese scripts (Hiragana and Katakana) while remaining abstract, emphasizing a blend of familiarity and fantasy. This constructed language contributes to world-building and reflects the film's intercultural linguistic imagination.

c. East Asian Mythological Creatures

i. Dragons

The dragon, long revered in Chinese mythology as a benevolent and powerful symbol of luck and protection, appears in *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* as a technologically enhanced dragon-mech hybrid. This fusion of cultural symbolism and Western sci-fi aesthetics mirrors the broader thematic structure of the film—where ancient traditions are recontextualized through modern innovation for younger audiences.

ii. Oni

The character of Lord Garmadon is visually and thematically inspired by the Japanese Oni, mythical demons known for bringing misfortune and chaos. Although adapted for comedic and dramatic effect, Garmadon's red eyes, dark attire, and destructive impulses align him with the Oni archetype. His portrayal reflects a reinterpretation of Japanese folklore to suit the narrative needs of a Western-animated children's film.

iii. Kaiju and Mecha Aesthetics

The final battle scenes introduce Garmadon's robot, a towering mechanical monster reminiscent of Kaiju from *Tokusatsu* films like *Godzilla* or *Ultraman*, and mecha designs from anime series such as *Gundam*. While Kaiju typically represent nature's wrath or societal anxieties in Japanese narratives, here it functions as an entertainment spectacle, reimagining the trope for comedic and heroic effect. The robot's industrial design and cockpit lighting also nod to Western sci-fi villains, blending genres and cultural codes.

Synthesis of Cultural Representation

The film's setting, characters, and plot are rich with symbolic intertextuality, effectively merging East Asian cultural heritage with Western cinematic conventions. These cultural fusions are not merely aesthetic; they serve pedagogical and narrative functions—introducing young viewers to Asian philosophies and iconographies while maintaining accessibility through humor, music, and Lego's playful design.

The LEGO Ninjago Movie serves as a prime example of transcultural animation, where Eastern and Western cultural elements coalesce to create a globally resonant, yet locally inspired, cinematic experience.

CONCLUSION

The LEGO Ninjago Movie skillfully employs cultural hybridization to explore themes of identity, belonging, and the intersection of Eastern and Western cultural elements. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, the film presents the dynamic interplay between traditional Asian motifs and Western narrative structures as a metaphor for the evolving nature of cultural identity in a globalized context. Through its characters and storyline, the movie constructs a hybrid cultural space where inherited traditions and contemporary influences not only coexist but also reshape one another. This fusion functions not merely as aesthetic decoration but as a critical lens that interrogates cultural expectations and the complexities of transnational identity formation. The characters of Lloyd and Garmadon embody this tension—representing the dual forces of individual self-realization and the constraints of culturally prescribed roles. In doing so, *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* contributes meaningfully to the discourse on cultural hybridity and underscores the value of embracing diversity. Through its engaging visual storytelling and accessible narrative, it exemplifies how popular media can serve as a platform for cultural dialogue, reflection, and mutual understanding.

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