

Chinese Cultural Representation and Global Identity in the Movie *Over the Moon* (2020)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how “Over the Moon” (2020), a Sino-American animated film co-produced by Netflix and Pearl Studio, represents Chinese cultural identity within a globalized media landscape. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with semiotic and cultural analysis, the research focuses on how traditional Chinese symbols, myths, and values are visually and narratively constructed within the film. Guided by Barthes’ semiotic model and Hall’s representation theory, the analysis identifies key cultural signifiers—such as the moon goddess Chang’e, familial devotion, and the Mid-Autumn Festival—and interprets how these are transformed to align with global storytelling aesthetics. The findings reveal that “Over the Moon” synthesizes cultural authenticity and global accessibility through a hybrid mode of representation that preserves essential aspects of “Chineseness” while adapting them for international audiences. This interplay between localization and universalism illustrates how globalization shapes the rearticulation of Chinese identity in contemporary animation.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid globalization of cultural industries since the late twentieth century has reshaped how films are financed, produced, circulated, and interpreted across borders. In film studies, this shift is often addressed through the lens of transnational cinema, which treats “the national” as an insufficient unit of analysis for texts that emerge from cross-border collaborations, global distribution infrastructures, and heterogeneous audiences. Rather than assuming stable cultural origins, transnational approaches emphasize how identity and meaning are negotiated at the interface of the local and the global, while also cautioning against analyses that reproduce Eurocentric hierarchies in reading global media texts (Higbee & Lim, 2010).

This transnational condition has intensified with the consolidation of internet-based distribution, particularly subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services. Platform-driven circulation does not simply extend reach; it reorganizes cultural availability through licensing regimes, catalogue segmentation, and interface logics that condition what becomes visible and legible to viewers in different regions. In this sense, digital distribution creates new forms of “bordering” and “connectivity” at the same time, making global media flows both faster and more uneven. Internet-distributed television as a distinctive research problem precisely because

distribution, industrial strategy, and audience experience are reconfigured by platform infrastructures rather than by nation-based broadcast systems (Lotz et al., 2018). A related line of inquiry shows how SVOD expansion can reshape local media ecologies and policy debates even when “global access” is rhetorically foregrounded (Cunningham & Scarlata, 2020).

Within this global media environment, animated film occupies a particularly productive site for examining cultural representation. Animation is not bound by physical realism and therefore can design worlds in which cultural meanings are encoded through stylized visual systems—color palettes, spatial composition, character design, costume, and symbolic objects. Studies of cross-cultural animation circulation further indicate that hybridity is not limited to narrative content; it also appears in production practices, distribution circuits, and audience formations. Denison’s work on anime, for instance, frames “transcultural creativity” as a process in which hybrid identities emerge across production, text, and fandom, challenging simple binaries such as local versus global or authentic versus inauthentic (Denison, 2011).

Conceptually, these dynamics align with broader scholarship on cultural hybridity, which argues that globalization does not only homogenize culture but produces mixed, negotiated forms shaped by power, circulation, and contestation. Kraidy (2002) proposes hybridity as a way to understand how cultural forms are recombined through unequal global exchanges, where “mixture” is never neutral and always entangled with ideology and institutional power. For animated films that incorporate myth and folklore, hybridity is especially visible: mythic materials carry dense cultural histories, yet their global adaptation often requires selective emphasis, recontextualization, and narrative restructuring to fit internationally dominant storytelling expectations.

These tensions are evident in *Over the Moon* (2020), directed by Glen Keane and produced through transnational collaboration for global release via Netflix. The film draws on the Chinese legend of Chang’e, a mythic figure associated with longing and immortality, while framing the story through the conventions of a contemporary animated musical geared toward broad audiences. Existing scholarship has begun to address *Over the Moon* through semiotic and cultural lenses. For example, Zhang and Huang (2025) analyze Chinese cultural elements in the film—such as mythology and Mid-Autumn Festival motifs—using a Barthesian semiotic framework (signifier/signified, denotation/connotation). Their findings underscore the film’s dense inventory of cultural symbols and the interpretive work required to connect these signs to broader Chinese cultural meanings.

At the same time, much of the existing discussion—whether in academic studies or broader cultural commentary—tends to treat the film primarily as an instance of cultural adaptation (i.e., “how Chinese myth is retold for global audiences”) or as a catalogue of cultural references. What remains underdeveloped is a more integrated account of *Over the Moon* as a semiotic system in which meaning is produced across multiple layers: narrative structure, character construction, visual composition, spatial design, and recurring motifs that function together to build a globally legible form of “Chineseness.” Addressing this gap requires a methodological lens that can read images not merely as illustrations of narrative but as structured resources for meaning-making. Social semiotics and visual grammar offer such tools by foregrounding how representation, interaction, and composition organize the viewer’s relationship to what is shown (Moerdisuroso, 2017).

Building on these debates, this study approaches *Over the Moon* as a transnational animated text that negotiates cultural identity through semiotic orchestration rather than simple cultural transfer. It asks: (1) How are Chinese cultural elements (e.g., lunar imagery, lantern symbolism, food rituals, architectural motifs, and mythic figures) selected and stylized as signs within the film’s visual and narrative design? (2) How do these signs change meaning when embedded in global animation conventions—especially in a musical narrative structured around personal grief, emotional resolution, and individual agency? By answering these questions, the study reframes the film not in terms of whether it is “accurate” to tradition, but in terms of how cultural meaning

is constructed, simplified, intensified, or redirected through the demands of transnational production and platform circulation (Higbee & Lim, 2010; Lotz et al., 2018).

Therefore, this study argues that *Over the Moon* communicates Chinese cultural identity as adaptive and hybrid: recognizably anchored in specific symbols and mythic references, yet re-authored through narrative and aesthetic strategies optimized for global readability and affective immediacy. By combining transnational cinema scholarship with semiotic analysis of visual and narrative signs, the study contributes to current discussions on how animation participates in globalization—not only by moving cultural stories across borders, but by transforming how those stories signify within global media markets.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Recent scholarship has approached *Over the Moon* (2020) and other Chinese-myth animations as spaces where cultural signs are stylized for cross-border audiences. Using Barthes' denotation–connotation model, Liani et al. (2024) read mooncakes, lantern imagery, and the Chang'e figure as recurring sign-clusters that mark “Chineseness” while remaining globally readable. Beyond single-film readings, Whyke et al. (2021) show how *Nezha* (2019) updates “national style” by weaving tradition with digital modernity and contemporary values, suggesting mythic IP as a resource for reimagining national identity.

Work on industry context emphasizes that hybridity is shaped by institutional arrangements as much as by narrative. Caschera (2024), comparing *White Snake* (2019) and *Over the Moon* (2020), argues that Sino-American coproductions follow different trajectories: US-led projects align strongly with Hollywood conventions, whereas PRC-led productions respond more closely to domestic discourse on national cultural production. Fong (2025) similarly reads Sino–US animated co-venture films (including *Over the Moon* and *Wish Dragon*) as negotiating “Chineseness” across mainland, diasporic, and Asian American frames, complicating authenticity debates. Denison (2011) likewise frames transcultural creativity as spanning production, distribution, and fandom, where hybrid identities are co-produced through circulation in contemporary screen cultures.

Theoretically, this study draws on transnational cinema's call for a critical account of global–local interfaces (Higbee & Lim, 2010) and on hybridity as a power-laden process of cultural mixing (Kraidy, 2002). Methodologically, social semiotics and visual grammar support close reading of how images organize meaning beyond plot (Moerdisuroso, 2017), enabling analysis of *Over the Moon*'s motifs as signs within transnational storytelling.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design because it supports an interpretive yet “low-inference” account of cultural texts—staying close to observable details while producing a comprehensive description of how meaning is organized rather than measured numerically (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative inquiry is widely used in cultural and media analysis because it foregrounds context, interpretation, and meaning-making processes, which are central when films are treated as cultural artifacts whose values and ideologies are communicated through narrative and visual form. For animation in particular, meaning is frequently carried by visual resources such as symbolism, color, character design, and spatial composition; therefore, a qualitative approach enables these elements to be examined holistically in relation to story context and cultural discourse, consistent with social-semiotic approaches to visual-text analysis (Moerdisuroso, 2017). The animated film *Over the Moon* (2020) is selected as the primary data source because its Sino-American coproduction context provides a relevant case for examining how cultural identity is negotiated within transnational media production (Caschera, 2024) and, conceptually, how “the national” is reworked at the interface of global and local frameworks (Higbee & Lim, 2010), often through hybrid cultural formations (Kraidy, 2002).

Data collection was conducted through close textual and visual analysis of selected scenes

that prominently feature cultural symbols, mythological references, character representations, dialogue, and recurring visual patterns. Scene-based semiotic research commonly treats screenshots, dialogue excerpts, and visual descriptions as qualitative data to support systematic interpretation of signifying practices across multiple modes (e.g., image, speech, setting) rather than relying on plot summary alone. Scenes were chosen purposively based on (a) relevance to the representation of Chinese cultural identity and (b) narrative salience within the film. The analytical framework is grounded in Barthes' semiotic model—denotation, connotation, and myth—where denotation identifies literal meanings, connotation interprets culturally and affectively loaded associations, and myth examines how signs naturalize broader ideological narratives. This semiotic reading is further supported by Hall's theory of representation, which emphasizes that meaning is produced through cultural processes rather than simply reflected by texts; Hall's lens helps situate filmic signs within discourse and power relations, especially under globalization and transnational circulation (Higbee & Lim, 2010).

The data analysis procedure follows three interrelated stages: (1) identifying key cultural signs and recurring motifs in the selected scenes; (2) interpreting how these signs accrue hybrid meanings within transnational storytelling contexts; and (3) synthesizing how such meanings contribute to the construction of Chinese cultural identity in a global emotional discourse. To ensure trustworthiness and analytical rigor, the study applies theoretical triangulation by reading the same data through complementary perspectives (semiotics, representation, and transnational/hybridity scholarship) and checking interpretive claims against peer-reviewed sources—an approach aligned with established discussions of triangulation for strengthening credibility in qualitative research (Patton, 2002).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The semiotic analysis reveals that “Over the Moon” presents Chinese culture through a blend of traditional and global elements. The depiction of Chang'e reflects both classical mythology and modern reinterpretation—transforming her from a distant divine figure into an emotionally complex character, resonating with global audiences while retaining Chinese cultural depth. Similarly, the Mid-Autumn Festival functions as a cultural anchor, symbolizing unity, remembrance, and family devotion.

OTM Final Conformed Draft - 07.30.20 3.

MOTHER unties a SCARF from around her neck that has an image of the Moon Goddess, Chang'e, on it. Mother holds the scarf in front of FEI FEI, using it as a prop as she sings.

(Transition to a 2D animated style)

The story unravels on the scarf's surface - the Chinese mythology of Chang'e and Houyi.

SONG - ON THE MOON ABOVE

MOTHER
LONG AGO - AN ANCIENT STORY
BEAUTIFUL AND KIND CHANG'E
AND A HANDSOME MAN NAMED HOUYI
WERE IN LOVE--

YOUNG FEI FEI
True love?

MOTHER
TRUE LOVE
BUT SHE TOOK A MAGIC POTION
GIVING IMMORTALITY
THEN SHE FLOATED
LEAVING HER TRUE LOVE
AND SHE WAITS FOR HIM
ON THE MOON ABOVE-

Figure 1. Results of Semiotic Analysis

Color symbolism—especially the dominance of red, gold, and jade—reinforces Chinese

aesthetics while aligning with universal emotional appeal. The film's hybrid representation suggests an intentional balance between preserving cultural authenticity and achieving global relatability. This aligns with Appadurai's (1996) concept of cultural flows and Pieterse's (2019) notion of hybridization, wherein local culture is neither erased nor isolated but continuously reshaped through global media exchanges.

Ultimately, "Over the Moon" functions as a cinematic bridge between cultural heritage and global storytelling. It reaffirms Chinese identity while simultaneously participating in the global narrative economy, highlighting how cultural representation in animation can foster both preservation and transformation.

This dialogue appears at the beginning of the film, when Fei Fei reminisces about her mother, who often told her the classic legend of the Moon Goddess, Chang'e. The line carries deep cultural meaning as it contains the central element of Chinese mythology—the eternal love story between Chang'e and Houyi. This tale is one of the most well-known legends in Chinese culture and plays a significant role in the Mid-Autumn Festival (Zhong Qiu Jie), celebrated every year as a symbol of love, hope, and family reunion under the full moon. Through this dialogue, *Over the Moon* represents how Chinese cultural values are passed down intergenerationally—from parents to children—not merely as bedtime stories but as a way to preserve cultural identity in the modern world. The relationship between Fei Fei and her mother reflects the concept of filial piety (*xiao*)—a sense of respect, love, and emotional connection between parents and children, which is a fundamental value in Confucianism. Thus, the story of Chang'e is not merely a myth but also a symbol of the spiritual bond between family members and the cultural heritage that Fei Fei wishes to keep alive.

Beyond its moral aspect, this dialogue also demonstrates how the film reinterprets culture in a global context. Although the story of Chang'e originates from Chinese mythology, its narrative is delivered in a Western-style storytelling manner—emotional, personal, and rich in modern characterization. Fei Fei views Chang'e not simply as a goddess but as a figure she admires and connects to her late mother. This creates a process of cultural hybridization, in which traditional Chinese elements are adapted to be understood and appreciated by an international audience without losing their original meaning. Visually, the scene is also supported by cinematographic elements that reflect Chinese aesthetics: soft lighting, warm color tones, and traditional Chinese ornaments surrounding Fei Fei as she tells the story. The use of red and gold hues carries symbolic meanings of luck and eternal love—two key concepts in Chinese belief. The combination of visuals, dialogue, and emotion illustrates how *Over the Moon* successfully brings Chinese culture to life in a touching, aesthetic, and globally accessible way. Thus, Fei Fei's dialogue about the legend of Chang'e functions not only as a narrative introduction but also as a profound representation of how Chinese culture is preserved, reinterpreted, and communicated through modern media. It serves as a bridge between the past and the present, between traditional values and universal messages of love, loss, and hope that can be understood by people from all cultures.

From a semiotic perspective, Fei Fei's dialogue about Chang'e operates at multiple levels of meaning. At the denotative level, the dialogue simply presents a mother telling a traditional story to her child. However, at the connotative level, the act of storytelling signifies emotional transmission, memory preservation, and cultural continuity. According to Barthes' framework, this scene reaches the level of myth, where the legend of Chang'e functions as an ideological narrative that naturalizes values such as eternal love, loyalty, and familial devotion as integral components of Chinese cultural identity. These values are not explicitly stated but are embedded within the narrative and emotional structure of the scene, allowing audiences to intuitively absorb their significance.

The spatial and visual arrangement of the scene further enhances its cultural meaning. Fei Fei is often positioned in intimate domestic settings, surrounded by objects associated with tradition, such as lanterns, patterned fabrics, and symbolic colors. These visual signs construct a

familiar cultural environment that reinforces the idea of home as the primary space for cultural transmission. In this sense, the film emphasizes that cultural identity is formed not only through grand rituals or public celebrations, but also through everyday familial interactions. This visual storytelling reinforces Hall's (1997) argument that representation actively produces meaning rather than merely reflecting reality.

Moreover, the emotional framing of Chang'e's story allows the myth to function as a universal metaphor rather than a culturally exclusive narrative. The themes of longing and loss experienced by Chang'e parallel Fei Fei's grief over her mother's death, creating an emotional bridge between myth and personal experience. This parallel enables global audiences—regardless of cultural background—to connect with the story on an affective level, while still engaging with its specifically Chinese cultural roots. Such emotional universality is a key strategy through which the film negotiates cultural specificity and global accessibility.

In the broader context of cultural globalization, this scene exemplifies how traditional narratives are adapted without being erased. Rather than simplifying Chinese mythology into exotic imagery, *Over the Moon* embeds it within character development and emotional storytelling. This supports Nederveen Pieterse's concept of hybridization, where cultural forms interact and transform through global exchange without losing their original identity. The legend of Chang'e remains recognizably Chinese, yet it is rearticulated through a cinematic language that aligns with global animation conventions. Therefore, this dialogue and its surrounding visual and narrative elements reinforce the film's role as a cultural mediator. By combining myth, memory, and emotion, *Over the Moon* demonstrates how animation can function as a powerful medium for cultural preservation and transformation. The scene underscores that cultural identity in global media is not fixed but continually reconstructed through signs, stories, and affective connections that travel across cultural boundaries (Moerdisuroso, 2017).

In addition to its narrative and emotional significance, this scene also plays an important role in establishing the visual semiotic code that continues throughout the film. The repetition of lunar imagery, circular compositions, and soft illumination creates a consistent symbolic framework associated with memory and emotional continuity. The moon, as a recurring signifier, transcends its mythological origins to function as a visual metaphor for constancy amid change. While Fei Fei's life is altered by loss, the moon remains present as a stable symbol, reinforcing the idea that cultural memory endures even as individual circumstances evolve. This repeated imagery strengthens the semiotic coherence of the film and deepens its cultural resonance. Moreover, the animation style used in this scene contributes to the process of cultural mediation. The character design avoids exaggerated caricature and instead employs a soft, emotive visual language that emphasizes facial expressions and subtle gestures. This stylistic choice aligns with global animation aesthetics, making the characters emotionally accessible to international audiences. At the same time, traditional visual motifs embedded in the environment ground the scene within a distinctly Chinese cultural setting. This balance between stylistic universality and cultural specificity reflects how global animation negotiates representation in order to communicate across cultural boundaries without erasing cultural markers. From a representational standpoint, the depiction of Fei Fei as an active storyteller rather than a passive recipient of tradition is particularly significant. By retelling the legend of Chang'e, Fei Fei participates in the act of cultural reproduction, demonstrating that tradition is sustained through engagement rather than mere inheritance. This reinforces the idea that cultural identity is dynamic and performative, shaped by individual interpretation and emotional attachment. Stuart Hall's theory of representation supports this reading, as meaning emerges through the active process of signification rather than through static transmission of cultural facts. Furthermore, the integration of myth into Fei Fei's personal narrative illustrates how collective memory operates within intimate spaces. The home setting functions as a semiotic space where personal and cultural histories intersect. Rather than presenting Chinese culture solely through public rituals or ceremonial spectacles, the film emphasizes domestic storytelling as a foundational site of cultural

continuity. This approach challenges reductive representations of culture as exotic or ceremonial, instead presenting it as lived, emotional, and embedded in everyday life. The emotional layering of the scene also enhances its ideological function. By aligning Fei Fei's mourning with Chang'e's eternal longing, the film reframes grief as a shared human experience that transcends cultural boundaries. This emotional parallel allows myth to operate as what Barthes describes as a naturalized ideological structure, where values such as devotion, remembrance, and resilience are presented as universal while remaining culturally anchored. As a result, audiences are encouraged to empathize with the emotional core of Chinese mythology rather than viewing it as distant or culturally inaccessible (Liani et al., 2024).

In the broader structure of the film, this early scene establishes a semiotic foundation that informs later narrative developments. Subsequent representations of Chang'e, Lunaria, and ritual imagery gain meaning precisely because they are rooted in this initial emotional and cultural framework. The audience's understanding of Chang'e as a symbol of loss and hope is shaped by Fei Fei's early engagement with the myth, reinforcing narrative continuity and thematic coherence. Within the discourse of cultural globalization, this scene exemplifies how local narratives can circulate globally without losing their symbolic depth. *Over the Moon* does not extract Chinese mythology as a decorative element but integrates it into the emotional logic of the story. This strategy supports the notion that global media can facilitate intercultural understanding by prioritizing affective connection over superficial representation. Through this process, cultural identity is not simplified but rearticulated in forms that invite recognition and empathy. Ultimately, the semiotic richness of Fei Fei's dialogue and its visual framing underscores the film's broader cultural project. By combining mythological reference, emotional storytelling, and symbolic imagery, *Over the Moon* positions animation as a powerful medium for negotiating cultural meaning in a globalized context. The scene demonstrates that cultural preservation in global media does not rely on rigid authenticity but on meaningful reinterpretation that allows tradition to remain emotionally relevant in contemporary contexts (Pieterse, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that *Over the Moon* constructs "Chineseness" through a hybrid representational strategy that keeps recognizable cultural signifiers (e.g., Chang'e, Mid-Autumn Festival rituals, and familial devotion) while reshaping them through globally familiar emotional storytelling and contemporary animation aesthetics. At the level of characterization and narrative function, Chang'e is reimagined as an emotionally complex figure, and the Mid-Autumn Festival operates as a cultural anchor that organizes themes of unity, remembrance, and family devotion. Visually, recurring motifs and color symbolism (notably red, gold, and jade) work as semiotic cues that signal cultural specificity while remaining legible to international audiences, reinforcing the film's role as a bridge between cultural heritage and global narrative conventions. The implication is that semiotic analysis can move debates beyond "accuracy" versus "inauthenticity" by showing how cultural identity is produced through layered sign systems (visual design, narrative structure, and affect), and how transnational animation can simultaneously preserve cultural markers and transform their meanings for global circulation.

This study is limited by its focus on a single film and a purposive selection of scenes, which supports depth but restricts the generalizability of conclusions across the broader field of Chinese-myth animation or platform-distributed transnational cinema. It also prioritizes textual/visual interpretation, so it does not directly capture how different audiences decode these signs, nor does it include production-side evidence (e.g., creator interviews, studio documents) that could clarify decision-making behind stylistic and narrative choices. Future research should therefore (a) conduct comparative analyses across multiple Chinese-inspired animated films (including PRC-led and US-led productions) to map patterns of hybridity more systematically, (b) add audience-reception work to test how cultural signs are read in different cultural locations, and (c) triangulate film-text analysis with paratexts and platform contexts (marketing materials, trailers, interface

framing) to better explain how global accessibility is shaped not only by aesthetics but also by circulation and distribution logics.

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