



## Cross-Cultural Reconstruction of Shang Aesthetics in *Creation of the Gods I* under the Dual Perspectives of Film and Translation Aesthetics

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### Abstract

Taking *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms* as the research object, this study examines how Shang Dynasty aesthetics is reconstructed through both cinematic imagery and subtitle translation from the integrated perspective of film aesthetics and translation aesthetics. At the image level, the film draws on archaeological materials and historical documents to visualize the aesthetic characteristics of the Shang Dynasty—such as reverence for white, martial spirit, and ritual propriety—through six dimensions of audiovisual design: military affairs, script, costume, music, ritual vessels, and architecture. These are materialized into visual symbols including military formations, oracle bone inscriptions, costume colors, ritual music systems, bronze decorations, and palatial architecture. At the subtitle level, this study applies Liu Miqing's theory of aesthetic reproduction in translation, Xu Yuanchong's "three beauties" principle, and Wang Yu's dual objectives of "cultural imagery reproduction" and "artistic effect reproduction" to analyze the English translation strategies for key cultural terms such as divinatory terminology, the concept of "heaven's punishment" and father-son ethical maxims. By further integrating multimodal subtitle theory and cross-cultural communication theory, this study discusses the complementary relationship between image and subtitle in the encoding and decoding processes, as well as the risk of "cultural discount". The research argues that through the dual reconstruction of Shang Dynasty aesthetics, *Creation of the Gods I* provides a valuable path for cinematic expression of ancient Chinese civilization and cross-cultural communication, while also exposing tendencies toward simplification and "self-Orientalization".

### Keywords

Cross-cultural communication; Film aesthetics; Shang Dynasty aesthetics; Subtitle translation; Translation aesthetics

## 1. Introduction

From project initiation to the public premiere of the first installment, *Creation of the Gods* took more than a decade. The first film, *Creation of the Gods I: Chaos in Turmoil* (hereafter "*Creation of the Gods I*"), involved substantial investment in practical set construction, special-effects production, and actor training. Critics have regarded it as an important attempt at becoming a "Chinese mythological epic film" (Wang & Wang, 2023). In a context where an-

cient-costume productions have long been criticized as having a “photo-studio aesthetic” and a “weak evidentiary/historical basis,” the film demonstrates a relatively high overall standard in costume, props, and scene design, making its systematic visual depiction of Shang Dynasty civilization especially worthy of attention.

Existing studies on *Creation of the Gods I* mainly focus on its epic narrative and genre innovation. Zhang argues that the film constructs two core motifs—“power succession” and “the positioning of human value”—through a dual symbolic system of both history and myth (Zhang, 2023). Wang and Wang summarize the film’s innovations in narrative reconstruction, industrial aesthetics, and the reactivation of cultural symbols (Wang & Wang, 2023). However, these studies largely remain at the levels of narrative and genre, leaving relatively underexplored questions such as: “How are Shang aesthetic elements overall configured in the film?” and “How do subtitles participate in reconstruction in cross-linguistic communication?”

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on a dual reconstruction mechanism of Shang Dynasty aesthetics in *Creation of the Gods I*: first, how the film, within the framework of film aesthetics, achieves an overall construction of Shang aesthetics through visual elements such as “military, writing, clothing, music, ritual, and architecture”; second, how this Shang aesthetic is cross-linguistically reproduced in the conversion of Chinese and English subtitles—what kinds of interactions emerge between image and subtitle, and what roles and risks this has for cross-cultural communication. By building on an integrated examination of visual styling and subtitle translation, and from the intersection of film aesthetics, translation aesthetics, and cross-cultural communication, this paper explores the pathways and tensions of the contemporary reconstruction of Shang aesthetics.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Perspectives

### 2.1 Ancient Costume Film and Cultural Symbols from the Perspective of Film Aesthetics

As a comprehensive art form, film’s aesthetic construction depends on modern industrial technologies and narrative models, while also being deeply rooted in the cultural soil of specific nations. Shi notes that “the task of film aesthetics research is to observe film with an aesthetic spirit” (Shi, 2016). He further divides film aesthetics into two dimensions: ontology and functionalism. The former focuses on general artistic rules of film, while the latter emphasizes differences in aesthetic functions of film across different nations and historical contexts. Building on this, Huang et al. (1999) further argue that Chinese cinema, while absorbing global film experience, should in narrative and design clearly display distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics. This theoretical stance provides the basic perspective for examining how *Creation of the Gods I* reconstructs Shang aesthetics within a modern film-industry framework.

As an intersection of historical imagination and contemporary aesthetic experience, ancient-costume film aesthetics involve not only surface symbols such as clothing and props, but also how audiovisual language presents the spiritual temperament and value order of a specific historical period. Li (2022) argues that traditional cultural symbols in character costumes, architectural layouts, and ritual institutions are core carriers that enable ancient-costume themes to achieve “aesthetic imaging”. However, the meanings of these symbols are not fixed. From the perspective of theatrical and film art design, Song (2020) divides national cultural symbols into three levels: content, form, and materials, stressing that their significance is recoded in specific contexts. That is to say, when the Shang taotie motif is transferred from bronze ritual vessels to armor, palace walls, and costumes in film, its symbolic function expands: it not only

points to the ancient religious-political structure, but also serves to shape the overall “austere, mysterious, and oppressive” atmosphere of the Shang world.

This understanding is essential for grasping the aesthetic strategy of *Creation of the Gods I*. The film does not simply “restore” Shang elements found in archaeological catalogs; rather, through systematic integration of oracle bone inscriptions, bronze ritual objects, ancestral temple architecture, and battle-array compositions, it transforms Shang cultural symbols scattered across historical texts into a unified audio-visual style. This integration is simultaneously aesthetic construction and cultural interpretation: it requires creators to select and intensify the core features of Shang aesthetics under the premise of respecting historical materials.

## 2.2 Historical Foundations and Symbolic Resources of Shang Aesthetics

To understand the reconstruction of Shang aesthetics in *Creation of the Gods I*, it is first necessary to clarify what Shang aesthetics generally looked like in its historical context. In the Shang period, oracle bone inscriptions, bronze ritual objects, ancestral temple architecture, and sacrificial rites and music formed a relatively complete aesthetic world. Oracle bone divinations were not merely records of writing; they were also material carriers of the Shang people’s religious psychology of “divining everything.” Zhu (2014) research on the calligraphic aesthetics of oracle bone inscriptions shows that large characters were “bold, sturdy, round and turning,” while small characters were “fine, strong, and upright,” and that the layout and composition reflect a rustic yet orderly beauty of writing. This aesthetic quality concerns not only form, but is also closely related to the Shang people’s reverence for the “Mandate of Heaven” and their pursuit of order.

Bronze ritual objects are the most representative material form of Shang aesthetics. The taotie, kui-long patterns, and other motifs on bronze wares—through exaggerated eyes, complex lines, and strict symmetrical structures—create a visual impression of “terrifying-sublime,” which serves as a concentrated symbol of power, taboo, and religious awe (Li, 2009). The dual nature of “terrifying-sublime” arises both from the visual impact of the patterns themselves and from the sacrificial functions and hierarchical order they carried. In other words, the taotie motif is not merely decoration; it is a visual metaphor for the Shang political-religious structure.

In terms of color perception, “the Shang people favored white” is an important dimension of Shang aesthetics. Li (1991), through documentary research, argues that the Shang people generally esteemed white, linking it closely to sacrifices, arms and armor, and ritual practices. Du (2001) further contends that this color preference was not accidental but related to the Shang cosmology and political ideas. In *Creation of the Gods I*, large numbers of white-armored military formations and white ceremonial clothing provide a modern visual transposition of this concept, turning “favoring white” from textual records into a perceptible audiovisual symbol.

## 2.3 Translation Aesthetics and Cross-cultural Reproduction through Multimodal Subtitles

Cross-cultural dissemination of film works relies not only on the images themselves, but also on subtitles that cross-linguistically translate cultural meaning. From the perspective of translation aesthetics, Liu (1986) proposed the requirement of “aesthetic representation,” emphasizing that translators should reconstruct the original’s aesthetic features on the basis of semantic fidelity. Xu Yuanchong, by contrast, specified this requirement through the “three beauties” principle—meaning beauty, sound beauty, and form beauty—arguing that the translation should be as close as possible to the original in meaning, rhyme/sound, and form.

However, film subtitles differ from literary translation: they must deliver meaning within extremely limited time and with a very restricted number of words, and they are always constrained by other modalities such as images, performances, and music.

Wang Yu, in his research on film translation, proposes two major goals: “cultural imagery reproduction” and “artistic effect reproduction.” He argues that subtitles must seek a balance between preserving culturally loaded information and creating an overall artistic effect (Wang, 2020). This theoretical framework is important for analyzing the subtitle strategies in *Creation of the Gods I*. The film contains numerous Shang culture-loaded terms such as the divination expression “wuwang (no delusion),” the religious concept “tianqian (Heaven’s punishment),” and ethical aphorisms about kinship and subjectivity. These words contain rich historical and philosophical connotations in Chinese contexts, yet in cross-linguistic conversion they often face the dilemma of being “untranslatable” or “difficult to translate fully.” Subtitle translators must weigh “complete transmission of cultural imagery” against “ensuring audience understanding of plot and emotion.”

The multimodal perspective further reminds us that subtitles are only one part of meaning construction in film texts. Film texts can be categorized into four core modalities: visual non-verbal, visual verbal, auditory verbal, and auditory non-verbal (Yang, 2023). In *Creation of the Gods I*, taotie patterns, bronze color tones, elevated palace structures, and battle drum rhythms have already conveyed substantial Shang aesthetic information at the audiovisual level. Therefore, subtitles may in some instances appropriately simplify cultural explanations, leaving more work to the image modality; but for highly abstract concepts such as “wuwang” and “tianqian,” which lack direct and intuitive visual correspondences, subtitles must assume a greater burden of semantic interpretation. This multimodal complementary mechanism is both a basic law of film translation and the key to understanding the cross-cultural communication strategy of *Creation of the Gods I*.

#### 2.4 “Cultural Discount” and Symbol Encoding in Cross-cultural Communication

In the context of globalization, the core challenge for Chinese film going global lies in how to maintain cultural distinctiveness while reducing “cultural discount.” Film production is an “encoding” process, while the audience’s watching is a “decoding” process; in-between, there inevitably exist comprehension deviations caused by differences in cultural background (Li & Li, 2021). Chinese culture tends to be high-context: information transfer relies on background knowledge and implicit expression. The English-speaking world tends to be low-context, emphasizing explicit information and direct expression (Zhang & Qi, 2022). This suggests that for Chinese films to gain broader understanding in international markets, they need to strike a balance between “maintaining cultural difference” and “adopting globally intelligible narrative modes.”

Yet such a balance is also fraught with risk. Some works, in order to cater to “the West’s imagination of China,” overemphasize surface visual spectacles, treating national cultural symbols as decorations of exotic flavor while neglecting their underlying spiritual connotations and value systems—thus resulting in what is called “self-othering” (Li & Li, 2021). In the visual construction of Shang aesthetics and the subtitle transposition in *Creation of the Gods I*, precisely this tension is at stake: the film must present the unique temperament of Shang civilization through visual symbols such as white-armored armies, taotie patterns, and elevated palaces so that audiences from different cultural backgrounds can understand them through subtitles; it must preserve cultural depth while avoiding the trap of turning into a self-exhibi-

tion of “Oriental exoticism.”

### 3. Image Layer: Visual Reconstruction of Shang Aesthetic Elements

*Creation of the Gods I*'s reconstruction of Shang aesthetics is first reflected in the overall unity of its audio-visual style. Zhang (2023: 75) points out that the epic “sense of authenticity” comes from solid scripting, art research, and meticulous coordination of costumes, props, and set design. Through a systematic integration of color tones, camera language, and sound design, the film constructs a “Shang atmosphere” that differs from earlier ancient-costume films. In terms of color, *Chao* is dominated by cool tones: high walls, bronze columns, and the dim De Hall together create an oppressive atmosphere. By contrast, *Xiqi* is rendered in warm tones through golden wheat fields and homespun clothing, forming a visual contrast between tyranny and benevolence, oppression and growth (Wang & Wang, 2023). The camera language uses a large number of wide shots, overhead angles, and long takes to present battlefield and ceremonial scenes, making the grand scale of the Shang world and its power hierarchy intuitively visible. In terms of sound, battle drums and horns interact with bronze bells and chime instruments in military and ritual spaces, reinforcing the audience's emotional experience of Shang martial spirit and religious awe.

#### 3.1 “Military”: Military Formations as Ritual Display and Martial Spirit

The Shang regime had a strong military character; oracle bone inscriptions record numerous accounts of campaigns and hunts, reflecting a martial spirit (Shi, 2006). The film's reconstruction of the “military” dimension is mainly embodied in its army formation systems, pre-battle rituals, and weapon/armor design.

In the snow battle in Jizhou, the princely armies in white armor form neat square formations. White armor blends into the snow, echoing the “Shang people favored white” notion while producing a cold tactical effect (Li, 1991: 75). Overhead shots and wide shots highlight the aesthetic beauty of the array and the collective might, turning the army formation itself into a ritual-like visual spectacle. The brief solemn standing before battle and the silent gazes at the fallen after battle dilute any romanticization of war, emphasizing sacrifice and responsibility. The film deliberately underscores the princely youths' “flesh-and-blood mortal identity,” preserving the weight of individual lives even within the grand formation (Zhang, 2023: 75). Weapon and armor designs reference Shang bronze armor patterns; beast-face motifs and sharply angled features on chest and shoulder pieces reinforce the army's cold image. The army formation system and pre-battle rituals jointly transform Shang martial spirit from an abstract idea into a visible and ritualized aesthetic scene.

#### 3.2 “Writing”: Oracle Bone Inscriptions and Theocratic Political Power

Oracle bone inscriptions are the most important cultural heritage of the Shang civilization. The Shang people wrote on oracle bones (jia: tortoise shells; gu: animal bones, mainly ox bones) either on top of writing or with cinnabar marks, along with ink inscriptions; some were written first and then carved, while others were carved directly without prior writing. Some characters were painted with cinnabar or ink; others even had turquoise inlaid—these constitute so-called divination inscriptions (Lei, 2019).

Through divination chambers and text reliefs inside and outside the De Hall, the film tightly binds the visual order of oracle bone inscriptions with the theocratic politics of power. Zhu's (2014: 83) study of the calligraphic aesthetics of oracle bone inscriptions shows that their

compositional layout expresses a “simple yet orderly” beauty of writing. This sense of order resonates with the stateliness of the Shang theocratic system: the standardization of writing itself is the visual manifestation of the idea that “the Mandate cannot be violated,” and only those who master writing have the authority to communicate with divine will. The film translates this mechanism into concrete images. Diviners carve and burn characters on tortoise shells; close-ups of crack expansion are paired with low, heavy music, creating an atmosphere of mystery and tension. Rows of standing tortoise shells and divination-related ritual objects form a space connecting humans and gods.

Shi Changyou’s research on oracle bones from Yinxu confirms that the writing and reading power of Shang oracle bone inscriptions was controlled by the royal family, becoming a political tool to monopolize divine oracles and strengthen royal power (Shi, 2006: 134). This power mechanism is fully demonstrated in the plot where Yinshou (King Zhou) distorts the divination. When “wuwang (no delusion) brings calamity” is twisted into accusations against the princes, the camera emphasizes the contrast between written text and human expressions: the oracle bone inscription is ambiguous, but the interpretive right is monopolized by the king.

Zhang Yuan points out that in the late Shang, patriarchy, monarchy, and theocratic power interwove, and oracle bone inscriptions were the key pivot of this structure—Yinshou, as both “monarch and father,” controls the right to interpret writings, and as “spokesperson of the gods,” announces heavenly punishment, thereby combining these three powers into one (Zhang, 2023: 76). Oracle bone inscriptions and divination rituals thus cease to be mere religious symbols and instead become visual metaphors for Yinshou’s consolidation of tyranny.

### 3.3 “Clothing”: Costume Color and Hierarchical Order

Shang clothing exhibited a distinct “white-favoring” tendency in both color selection and the application of patterns, and it strictly reflected hierarchical differences (Du, 2001). The film’s overall costume design follows a color system of “white as the main tone, black and gold as secondary,” combining the solemn style of Shang clothing with character psychology shaping.

Military uniforms heavily adopt white armor, both echoing the “favoring white” notion and playing a camouflage role in the snow battle in Jizhou. White-armored ranks become visual symbols of “coldness, neatness, and brutality.” Royal and noble attire is more complex in color and patterns: Yinshou’s regular and ceremonial clothes often use deep-colored fabrics paired with bronze patterns. In the coronation ceremony robes, taotie motifs on shoulders and chest echo the De Hall’s columns, reinforcing his connection to bronze civilization and ancestral sacrifices. The clothing of the Zhou people is clearly distinct from the Shang in color and materials: Ji Chang and Ji Fa often wear earthy yellow and bluish-grey homespun garments, which harmonize with Xiqi’s wheat-field environment, implying their proximity to agrarian life and “popular support.” The contrast between Chao and Xiqi costumes transforms abstract oppositions—“tyranny/benevolence” and “theocratic power/people-oriented governance”—into visible differences easily recognized by audiences (Wang & Wang, 2023: 147).

### 3.4 “Music”: Ritual Music, Dance, and the Reconstruction of Ceremony

Although Shang ritual music was not as systematically developed as in the Zhou period, archaeology and textual evidence show that it already had relatively rich musical instruments and traditions of ritual dance (Shi, 2006: 154). According to oracle bone divination texts, music and dance had already become important subjects for learning among the nobility’s children in the Shang dynasty (Wu, 2015: 124). Through scenes such as the sacrificial dance in

Jizhou, the princely battle dance, and the grand De Hall ceremony in Chaoge, the film reconstructs the spirit of Shang ritual music.

In the Jizhou sacrifice, drum stones and group chanting create a solemn and sorrowful atmosphere. The subsequent princely battle dance, accompanied by percussion and metallic sounds, forms a “martial entry into ritual” music-and-dance style: synchronized stomping and arm movements holding spears and performing gestures construct a choreography that is at once sacrificial and military drill. Fast-paced editing and low-angle tracking emphasize changes in formations and bodily strength, making the battle dance serve a dual function of ceremony and military training (Li, 2022: 88). In the De Hall ceremony, bronze chimes and bianzhong instruments produce a steady and deep sound. The music-and-dance rhythm is slow and solemn; paired with elevated palace architecture and the Xuanbird (mystical bird) totem, it builds a sacred yet oppressive power atmosphere. In Xiqi scenes, wooden instruments and string music are used more often, with gentle melodies and bright timbres that create an ambience of peace.

### 3.5 “Ritual”: Bronze Ritual Vessels and the Majesty of Power

Bronze ritual vessels and taotie patterns are concentrated expressions of Shang material culture and aesthetic tradition. In Shang bronze art, the visual experience of patterns is emphasized; ruling groups always care about images that have strong visual impact (Wang, 2019). In the “ritual” dimension, the film systematically deploys these elements so that taotie patterns extend from ritual vessels to architecture, clothing, and weapon surfaces, forming a visual motif throughout.

In the De Hall scenes, firelight illuminates the depth and relief of three-dimensional textures; close-ups intensify the “terrifying-sublime” primitive aesthetics, implying religious majesty and power intimidation. The film keeps the taotie motif’s core features across different carriers—symmetrical structures and giant eyes and ferocious teeth—thus continuing the traditional “awe and admonition” meanings while also turning it into a visual mark of the Shang regime’s cold image. The placement of ritual vessels also conveys order: in the grand ceremony, ding and gui vessels are arranged symmetrically by rank; the royal seat is elevated above the others; the vassals and officials are placed in ordered tiers—space positions directly concretize power hierarchy.

### 3.6 “Architecture”: Palace Buildings and Spatial Power

The spatial organization of Shang architecture itself carries political implication. Through its reconstruction of the De Hall in Chaoge, the film builds a power space: elevated platforms, long staircases, and a symmetrical central-axis layout form a vertical system so that physical height directly corresponds to power rank. The camera often shoots from low angles at the base of platforms, intensifying the sense of oppression from below the power hierarchy. Characters’ actions of ascending/descending the hall are ritualized, implying that power ranks are impossible to transgress. Architecture space thus becomes a translator of political order: Chaoge’s city walls are closed and towering, with narrow streets and alleys creating a suffocating atmosphere; Xiqi is depicted with open plains and low, un-walled dwellings. This sharp contrast allows the ideological differences between “vertical authoritarian space” and “horizontal livelihood space” to be visually articulated (Wang & Wang, 2023: 148), laying groundwork for the later analysis of value conflicts in the Shang-feng universe.

Taken together across six dimensions—“military, writing, clothing, music, ritual, and archi-

ecture”—it is evident that the film constructs an aesthetic field of Shang culture through systematic integration of symbols. This visual encoding not only restores the ancient meaning of Shang civilization from an archaeological perspective, but also creates an imagery system that can be perceived by audiences from different cultural backgrounds, providing an important cognitive basis for cross-linguistic reconstruction in the subtitle layer.

#### 4. Subtitle Layer: Cross-linguistic Reconstruction of Shang Cultural Concepts

Each human language depicts the world in different ways, and each language constructs a set of possible worlds (Steiner, 2020). Language is one way of constructing aesthetic worlds, and translation is a process of reconstructing or representing those aesthetic worlds. Many concepts in Shang aesthetics—such as the divination term “wuwang (no delusion),” the religious concept “tianqian (Heaven’s punishment),” and ethical aphorisms about kinship and subjectivity—are highly localized culture-loaded terms. Subtitle translation must, while transmitting key information, also take aesthetic effects into account. Liu and Xu’s (2006) translation aesthetics stress that the translation should reconstruct the original’s aesthetic world in terms of meaning and form. Wang (2020: 30) proposes that film translation aims at both “cultural imagery reproduction” and “artistic effect reproduction”

Multimodal subtitle theory indicates that subtitles are only one part of the film text; many cultural meanings can be conveyed through images and music (Yang, 2023). In *Creation of the Gods I*, taotie patterns, elevated palace halls, and white-armored army arrays have already presented the Shang atmosphere through visual means, so subtitles may appropriately “step back”; however, for abstract concepts such as “wuwang” and “tianqian,” if adequate transference is not made, audiences may struggle to understand narrative logic. Therefore, subtitles must deliver aestheticized interpretations within limited word counts.

##### 4.1 “Guā (hexagram)” and “Wuwang”: An Adapted Translation Strategy for Terminology

In oracle bone inscriptions, “wuwang” functions both as the hexagram name of the Book of Changes and also carries meaning akin to “not indulging in delusions” or “not being deserving of disaster” (Shi, 2006: 85). In the film, when the diviner reports “wuwang brings calamity,” a direct translation such as “Wu Wang” or “Non-delusion” would likely puzzle viewers. In practice, the subtitles mostly adopt paraphrasing/meaning translation such as “unexpected calamity” or “disaster without cause,” weakening the technicality of the hexagram name while foregrounding the semantic core of “unexpected calamity.”

This treatment sacrifices the cultural imagery of the hexagram name, yet it ensures the key information necessary for narrative progression. As Wang Yu describes, “cultural imagery reproduction” is compressed here, while “artistic effect reproduction” is prioritized (Wang, 2020: 30). Nevertheless, in the scene of divination, the burning of the tortoise shell, the spread of cracks, and the dim environment of the divination chamber create an atmosphere of “divine will that is hard to fathom” through images; multimodal coordination largely compensates, to some extent, for the cultural loss caused by simplified terminology (Yang, 2023: 65).

##### 4.2 “Heaven’s Punishment”: Assimilation and Handling of Religious Concepts

In Chinese contexts, “tianqian” implies a tripartite order of heaven–person–ruler, referring to “heaven’s punishment of the unjust.” Behind it lies the Shang-specific philosophy of “the resonance between heaven and humanity”: Heaven’s will is manifested through the ruler’s virtue; when virtue is lost, Heaven sends disaster and omens accordingly. In subtitles, “tianqian”

is rendered as “heaven’s punishment,” “divine retribution,” or “Apocalypse.” The first two expressions are more linguistically close to the original, preserving the subject of divine punishment. “Apocalypse,” however, comes from Western religious tradition and carries strong apocalyptic connotations.

This assimilation choice faces a classic dilemma in translation studies. In terms of artistic effect, “Apocalypse” is more likely to activate English audiences’ apocalyptic imagination resources, intensifying emotional impact. But in terms of cultural imagery, it blurs the philosophical connotations of “tianqian”—Shang “Heaven’s punishment” emphasizes moral causality (loss of virtue → disaster and omens), while Western “Apocalypse” tends to focus on an ultimate judgment that is beyond human control. Film subtitles often have to choose between “cultural imagery reproduction” and “artistic effect reproduction” (Wang, 2020). Clearly, the selection of “Apocalypse” prioritizes the latter: replacing an unfamiliar Confucian-style Mandate of Heaven worldview with religious symbols familiar to English audiences yields more immediate emotional resonance.

Yet this assimilation-driven cultural simplification is partly offset by the film’s narrative imagery. The film presents the moral premise of “Heaven’s punishment” through a progressive depiction of Yinshou’s tyranny, the breakdown of ritual music and ceremonial order, and the accumulation of public grievances. It makes clear that punishment is not a disaster without cause; rather, it is the inevitable outcome of a tyrant who has lost virtue. The image modality injects ethical dimensions into “Apocalypse,” partially offsetting the stereotype of “irrational catastrophe.” However, the fine distinctions in the Shang philosophy of the resonance between heaven and humanity (for example, the causal chain of virtue → resonance → disaster and omens) remain difficult to convey fully in subtitles. This is precisely the inevitable “loss” when high-context cultural information is cross-linguistically converted (Zhang & Qi, 2022).

#### 4.3 Father-Son Aphorisms: Formal Reproduction of Ethical Propositions

In the film, the aphorism “It doesn’t matter whose son you are; what matters is who you are” concentrates the conflict between father-son ethics and self-identity. Zhang Yuan argues that the film’s epic themes crystallize into two motifs: “power succession” and “the positioning of human value.” Ji Fa’s choice embodies the turn from lineage identity to subjectivity awareness (Zhang, 2023).

A common English rendering is: “Whose son you are doesn’t matter. Who you are does.” This translation basically reproduces the original’s logic and rhythm in both meaning and form, using the parallelism of “does/doesn’t/matter” to achieve a certain rhetorical beauty. According to Xu Yuanchong’s “three beauties” principle, this translation performs well in both meaning beauty and form beauty.

But within cultural context, “whose son you are” is not only about family; it is tightly connected to the patriarchal clan structure and the structural analogy between family and state. “Who you are” also links to moral choice and the question of “what one should be loyal to.” In English contexts, “Who you are” tends to point more toward modern individualism and self-realization. Wei (2025) notes that the success of the *Nezha* series lies in transforming Chinese relational ethics of family into a globally comprehensible narrative of individual growth. The English subtitle rendering of this aphorism undergoes a similar process: it retains parts of the father-son relational structure, yet transfers the deeper family-state ethical meanings into a theme of “personal growth.” This transference benefits cross-cultural understanding, but it inevitably simplifies the complex meanings embedded in Shang ritual-system contexts.

Overall, in subtitle translation of Shang culture–loaded terms, *Creation of the Gods I* generally adopts a strategy of “moderate domestication plus multimodal coordination.” For terms such as “wuwang,” subtitles prioritize conveying the “calamity” information. For “tianqian,” subtitles oscillate between religious punishment and apocalyptic imagery. For father-son aphorisms, subtitles balance formal rhythm with universal emotional resonance. From the perspective of translation aesthetics, these choices align with the basic requirement of “pursuing aesthetic representation under technical constraints” (Liu, 1986: 23; Wang, 2020: 30). The multimodal perspective also shows that subtitles are not a “panoramic window” into Shang aesthetics; rather, they function as a “selective window” that works together with images and music (Yang, 2023: 66). Much of Shang aesthetics is actually carried by costume and props and by staging/scene composition, while subtitles only provide language labels at crucial moments. Still, the problem of “cultural discount” persists: some Shang thought resources may be absorbed into globally mainstream narrative frameworks and interpreted as general disaster films or coming-of-age film language.

## 5. Interaction between Image and Subtitles: Pathways and Risks for Cross-cultural Communication

### 5.1 Multimodal Complementarity and “Cultural Discount” as Buffer

For overseas audiences, the Shang world in *Creation of the Gods I* must be decoded through the combined efforts of images and subtitles. Images create sensorial impressions and symbol structures, while subtitles provide minimal linguistic guidance. Yang’s (2023) theory of multimodal integration of key modalities indicates that modalities complement each other rather than replace one another. In the film, formations such as the white-armored army, taotie patterns, and elevated palace halls have already strongly presented Shang aesthetics visually; therefore, subtitles do not need to carry all the cultural explanation. Instead, they can focus on narrative clarity and emotional guidance.

From a semiotic perspective, this kind of multimodal complementarity can, to a certain extent, buffer “cultural discount.” In film production and reception, encoding/decoding are interactive processes. Meaning deviations caused by cultural background differences are inevitable (Li & Li, 2021: 5). In the encoding stage, *Creation of the Gods I* builds a narrative through differentiated Shang symbols and universal emotional motifs (power succession, father-son conflict, and individual awakening). In the decoding stage, subtitles lower comprehension barriers through domestication and simplification. Together, they enable Shang aesthetics to preserve a certain “heterogeneous feel” while not becoming completely incomprehensible.

### 5.2 Cross-cultural Storytelling Pathways for a Chinese Tale

Telling Chinese stories well has become an important mission for Chinese films to go global. Zhang Qi points out that Chinese culture tends to be high-context: communication relies on background knowledge and implicit expression; the English-speaking world tends to be low-context and favors explicit information (Zhang, 2023). In cross-cultural communication, Chinese cinema needs to transform the high-context cultural core into images and narratives that can be perceived in a low-context way. It must preserve cultural specificity while achieving cross-cultural understanding through universal emotional and narrative structures.

*Creation of the Gods I* exactly realizes this through “local aesthetics + mainstream narrative.” On one hand, Shang symbols such as white-favoring costumes, bronze ritual objects, oracle

bone divination inscriptions, and elevated palace structures form a distinctive Shang symbol group, ensuring the unique character of Shang aesthetics. On the other hand, in narrative structure, the film approaches a “three-act” pattern. In character portrayal, it strengthens Ji Fa’s growth arc and the father-son conflict, thus engaging in dialogue with globally mainstream heroic narratives (Wang & Wang, 2023). Subtitles render fate, Heaven’s punishment, and the importance of subjectivity choice—through expressions such as “fate,” “heaven’s punishment,” and “Who you are matters”—turning parts of Shang contexts into values language acceptable for global audiences (Wei, 2025: 43).

This strategy’s positive significance lies in the fact that Shang aesthetics is no longer merely a conceptual category from textbooks. It becomes a visible, perceivable, and communicable cultural resource. At the same time, it also means a certain degree of “decomplexification.” Zhang Yuan highlights that the precise Shang destiny worldview consists of a “triadic structure” of patriarchy, monarchy, and theocracy; yet within subtitles and a general global narrative framework, this fine structure is simplified into a more common pattern of “tyrant—hero—father-son conflict” (Zhang, 2023: 74).

### 5.3 Risks and Reflection: “Oriental Spectacle” and Self-othering

In global markets, exporting Shang aesthetics also faces the risk of becoming “Oriental spectacle.” Li Ran and Wang Jia Yi have warned that some works overemphasize surface visual effects, reduce national cultural symbols into decorative exotic flavor elements, ignore the underlying thought and historical logic, and ultimately fall into the predicament of “self-othering” (Li & Wang, 2021). Wu’s (2020) research further suggests that in ancient-costume dramas, the arbitrary patchwork of folk customs and clothing often dissolves the deeper structure of national culture, turning it into visual symbols that can be consumed casually.

*Creation of the Gods I* is relatively rigorous in image construction. Taotie patterns, bronze ritual objects, and elevated palaces are not isolated visual elements; they are closely linked to characters’ destinies and power struggles. The oppression of the De Hall space in Yinshou’s fall, the breakdown of ritual order when Ji Fa awakens, and the cold-savage presence of bronze instruments in the sacrifice of the princes—these symbols consistently serve a philosophical narrative about desire, power, and subject value. To a certain extent, this helps avoid a simplistic “spectacle pile-up.” However, when the film moves toward the global market, the dissemination discourse framework becomes equally crucial. If marketing strategies overly emphasize “Oriental magic” and “guofeng visuals,” while diluting the ideological connotations and historical thickness of Shang culture, the film may still fall into the trap of self-watching through “the eyes of the Western other.”

Risks also exist at the subtitle level. When “Heaven’s punishment” is categorized into a “Apocalypse”-style apocalyptic narrative framework, and when divination rituals are simplified into ordinary “fortune-telling,” Shang’s distinctive “resonance between heaven and humanity” worldview and ritual logic may be assimilated into foreign cultural interpretive frames. The academic value of this study lies precisely here: by systematically analyzing cultural connotations inside image symbols and subtitle strategies, the study can reveal the possible tendency toward spectacle. This provides theoretical references for creators in seeking a balance between market communication and cultural expression.

## 6. Conclusion

As an important practice of contemporary Chinese ancient-costume fantasy cinema in recent

years, *Creation of the Gods I* provides rich material for observing the contemporary reconstruction of Shang aesthetics and its cross-cultural dissemination.

From a dual reconstruction perspective—moving from image to subtitles—this study explores how Shang aesthetics is presented on screen and how it operates in cross-cultural communication. At the image level, the film integrates Shang elements across six dimensions—“military, writing, clothing, music, ritual, and architecture”—turning white-armored army formations, oracle bone divination inscriptions, taotie decorative motifs, elevated palace structures, and ritual dances into a cold, solemn, and mysterious visual field. This construction is grounded in archaeology and historical documents, while also endowing symbols with narrative functions through character portrayal and staging. Oracle bone inscriptions are no longer static cultural heritage but become instruments of theocratic political control. Taotie decorative motifs are no longer merely decorative motifs, but visual marks of the Shang regime’s authority and terror. The vertical space of elevated palace structures becomes a direct translation of power hierarchy. Through such narrative-ization of symbols, Shang aesthetics moves beyond the level of “cultural exhibition,” turning into an audiovisual system that advances plot and themes.

At the subtitle level, English subtitles negotiate the balance between “cultural imagery reproduction” and “artistic effect reproduction” when dealing with divination terminology, religious concepts, and father-son ethical aphorisms. Through paraphrasing, domestication, and rhythmization, subtitles guarantee narrative comprehension and emotional resonance while inevitably simplifying parts of Shang ideological resources: “Heaven’s punishment” is reframed within a Western “Apocalypse” framework; “divination” is simplified into the commonplace “fortune-telling”; and the Confucian ethical connotations embedded in father-son aphorisms are transformed into universal moral admonitions. Multimodal analysis shows that subtitles function more like a “selective window” in the cross-linguistic reconstruction of Shang aesthetics: the image layer preserves cultural difference through its visual symbol system, while the subtitle layer lowers comprehension thresholds through domestication strategies. Together, they form a compound mechanism of Shang aesthetics for overseas communication.

This mechanism demonstrates a feasible pathway for cinematic inscription of ancient Chinese civilization. On one hand, through systematic symbol reconstruction, cultural specificity is maintained, ensuring that Shang differs from the generalized “ancient China” commonly found in commercial blockbusters. On the other hand, by embedding cultural symbols into internationally recognizable heroic coming-of-age and ethical-choice narrative frameworks, differences become perceptible and shareable through universality. Yet this pathway also exposes risks: if subtitle domestication over-simplifies ideological connotations, and if marketing overemphasizes “Oriental magic” visuals, Shang aesthetics may still drift toward “Oriental spectacle” and “self-othering.” Future research can, based on this, further compare how different phases of the trilogy reconstruct aesthetics, incorporate audience empirical investigations, and conduct version comparisons of subtitles in order to examine more precisely the decoding pathways of Shang aesthetics under different cultural contexts. Research can also place *Creation of the Gods I* alongside works such as *The Assassin/ Demon Cat* and *Chang’an 30,000 Miles* in a comparative framework, exploring aesthetic strategies and translation strategies of cinematic inscription of ancient Chinese civilization across different times and spaces—thereby providing more empirical materials for building a cross-cultural communication theory of Chinese cinema with stronger subjectivity and depth.

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