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An Innovative Interpretation of Misreading through a Functional Perspective: A Review of *Civilization's Unfilial Sons: Chinese Narratives in Modern American Drama*

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Abstract: In the fields of traditional cultural dissemination and comparative literature, the study of “the image of China” was once confined to a simplistic framework preoccupied with judging its “authenticity,” while “misreading” was largely viewed as a stumbling block in cross-cultural communication. Although 21st-century cross-cultural narrative research has transcended the true/false paradigm, the significance of “misreading” remains a subject of ongoing academic debate. Professor Gao Ziwen’s work, *Civilization’s Unfilial Sons: Chinese Narratives in Modern American Drama*, uses the evolution of modern American theater as a case study. It reveals how American playwrights drew inspiration and intellectual nourishment from traditional Chinese culture, reconstructing it through a modernist artistic language to expand the boundaries of American drama. Taking this book as its central object of analysis, this paper examines its theoretical breakthrough in studying misreading from a functional perspective and explores its implications for fostering a mature national mindset among citizens in a contemporary major power.

Keywords: Image studies; Cross-cultural; Misreading; functionality

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标题：功能视角之下“误读”的创新性解读——评《文明的逆子们——美国现代戏剧的中国叙事》

摘要：在传统文化传播与比较文学研究的领域中“中国形象研究”一度陷入“真伪评判”的单一框架，而“误读”视为跨文化交流的障碍，进入21世纪，跨文化叙事研究虽跳出了以“真伪”为唯一标准的窠臼，但是对于“误读”的意义学界一直莫衷一是。高子文教授的著作《文明的逆子们——美国现代戏剧的中国叙事》以美国现代戏剧的发展历程为研究载体，揭示美国剧作家们如何从中国传统文化中汲取灵感和养分，现代性的艺术语言进行重构，拓展美国现代戏剧的边际。本文以该著作为分析对象，剖析其从功能角度研究误读的理论突破，探讨其对当代大国公民心态建设实践的启示意义。

关键词：形象研究；跨文化；误读；功能性

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Introduction

In the fields of cultural transmission and comparative literature, the image of China in the Western perspective has always been one of the core topics in academia. Early research often judged based on whether it aligned with the true face of China, categorizing Chinese narratives in Western texts as either idealizing or demonizing, subsequently criticizing Orientalist biases or affirming their objective presentation. With the development of communication studies, this view of judging the success or failure of cross-cultural communication based on the truthfulness of images has gradually waned in academic circles. However, within cross-cultural communication, how to view the phenomenon of China or Chinese culture being misread, and understanding the complex social and artistic meanings behind this misreading, remains a topic with diverse and numerous viewpoints in academia, without a consensus.

Professor Gao Ziwen's work *Rebels of Civilization: The Chinese Narrative in American Modern Drama* (China Drama Press, 2020; hereafter referred to as *Rebels of Civilization*), using American modern drama (from the early 20th century to the end of the 1990s) as a unique field of study and focusing on the Chinese narrative as its core, achieves a paradigm shift in traditional image studies. The book does not discuss whether the image of China in American drama is authentic or explore how inauthentic misreadings arose. Instead, it elaborates from multiple, interlocking perspectives on the function the Chinese narrative served within the American cultural context, and how the American theatre world used Chinese culture as a mirror for self-innovation and civilizational reflection. From this perspective, the core academic value of this book lies in: defining misreading as an intermediary for cross-cultural innovation, pushing traditional image studies towards broader functional-level research. Simultaneously, on a practical level, it not only provides methodological references for the contemporary going out of Chinese culture but, more importantly, the American theatre world's approach to appropriating Chinese culture offers a reference for how we might introduce Western cultural resources to achieve innovation and development in Chinese culture and civilization.

1. Resetting the Value Judgment Standard for Misreading

In the study of cross-cultural communication, *Orientalism* is a towering peak that all learners cannot ignore. Using rich historical materials, the book elaborates in detail how Western societies distorted, imagined, and constructed the image of the Orient to serve certain Western political, economic, or cultural needs. Professor Gao Ziwen raises questions about this in his own book, constructing his own system for judging misreading.

1.1 Theoretical Foundation: Function as the Criterion—A Paradigm Shift from Pursuing Truth to Pursuing Utility

Professor Gao Ziwen clearly points out the unreasonable aspects of Said's argument in his work. This is because the theory Said relied upon for his study of Orientalism originates from Gramsci's cultural hegemony theory, which understands Eastern and Western civilizations as something rigid and immutable, thus viewing culture as a closed, pure system with fixed meanings. From this perspective, naturally, any interpretation of a foreign culture that deviates from its original meaning (i.e., misreading) is seen as error, distortion, or even cultural aggression.

In the real world, however, civilization is a dynamic process. Viewing the birth and growth processes of all known civilizations on Earth, we can easily find that almost all civilizations have undergone or are undergoing changes. The obsession with a fixed civilization may not align with the facts of historical progress.

Functionalists also focus on culture, but they focus on the role and effect a cultural phenomenon or behavior plays in a specific context. Professor Gao skillfully applies this perspective to the field of cross-cultural studies. Thus, the focus of judgment shifts from "Is it true?" to "What does it do?" and "What effect does it produce?". This transforms misreading from an error that needs correction into a cultural phenomenon that can be analyzed and evaluated. This shift is entirely possible in theory because it moves the field of discussion from truth judgment to value creation.

This is not only entirely possible but also an inevitable requirement of practical reality. *The Yellow Jacket* is a typical example of producers intentionally using a foreign civilization for cultural innovation.

The play revolves around a Chinese prince named Wu Haojie, telling the story of his birth, growth and revenge. Scholars generally believe that the possible prototypes for *The Yellow Jacket* are two Chinese opera stories: The Orphan of Zhao and The Cat and the Prince. However, in the context of traditional Chinese narrative, the orphan or the crown prince is never the protagonist of the story. Looking back at the story of The Orphan of Zhao, I often doubt whether the orphan's motivation for revenge stems from his own active personal choice or is a behavioral norm coerced by Confucian loyalty ethics.

In terms of the story's core, *The Yellow Jacket* is completely different from these two traditional Chinese opera stories. In *The Yellow Jacket*, Wu Haojie is the absolute protagonist—his growth, love, and revenge form the core of the play, with all plots and scenes revolving around him. But in *The Orphan of Zhao*, it is difficult to determine who is the true protagonist, Zhao Wu or Cheng Ying. *The Yellow Jacket* consists of three acts: the first depicts his birth, the second shows his growth and adventures, and the third writes about his final successful revenge. This follows the protagonist's growth paradigm in traditional European chivalric romances and heroic epics, where the story ends with the hero overcoming temptations and monsters,

ultimately finding the yellow jacket that symbolizes his fated Holy Grail.

While the story seems Chinese, the characters' motivations and the handling of dramatic conflicts fully follow the conventions of Western psychological realist theater. It fits a story that should have been presented through stylized performance into a Western framework of family ethical tragedy. The playwright merely borrowed the form of China while completely filtering out its inherent aesthetic themes. The Chineseness of *The Yellow Jacket*, as an effective cultural strategy, used exoticism as a cover to smoothly conduct a local theatrical experiment, avoiding the risks that might come from directly challenging the audience's aesthetic habits. Ultimately, what it generated was not a profound understanding of Chinese culture, but an Americanized form of Chinese drama.

Therefore, since misreading is inevitable and the creative intention is fundamentally functional, the most effective and constructive critical approach is to acknowledge this reality and directly analyze the functions these misreadings achieve.

1.2 Practical Verification: How Misreading Creates Value

Let's still take *The Yellow Jacket* as an example.

Compared to its borrowing from traditional Chinese opera stories and appropriation of cultural symbols, the most successful aspect of *The Yellow Jacket* is its absorption of the forms of Chinese opera stagecraft. It can be said that its most artistically valuable contribution to the stylistic innovation of American modern drama lies in broadening the range of stage forms.

The most important of these is the borrowing of the stagehand from Chinese opera. In Chinese opera, the stagehand is a very interesting convention. His main function is to change props on stage, but sometimes he can also participate in the plot, and he can also explain the plot, connecting the scenes. However, the stagehand in *The Yellow Jacket* is different from that in Chinese drama; he cannot speak. The functions he carries are completed by the Chorus in the play. The Chorus introduces the background, plot, and changes of time and space for the entire performance. It is precisely because of its existence that the audience can maintain a clear understanding when the storyline of *The Yellow Jacket* switches flexibly in time and space.

Perhaps inspired by the use of the stagehand, *The Yellow Jacket* went even further in its innovation of non-realistic staging, especially in the handling of the mother's soul ascending to heaven after her death, using a ladder to present a view of life where death does not represent finality.

The borrowing and imagination of Chinese non-realistic staging in *The Yellow Jacket* was a very important innovation, greatly influencing the development of American theatrical stage art. It offered a possibility for formal innovation to the then rigid American realist theatre. It allowed American audiences and playwrights to see that the stage need not be bound by realistic sets, that narrative could break the Three Unities, and that performance need not be completely immersed within the Fourth Wall. It directly inspired later theatrical innovators, the most notably is Thornton Wilder. The empty stage and the Stage Manager narrator used by Wilder in *Our Town* were inspired precisely by *The Yellow Jacket*.

When any cultural symbol or civilizational concept enters a new context, it inevitably needs to be interpreted through the cultural filter of the receiving party. The recipients, with their inherently different

cultural backgrounds, historical experiences and aesthetic habits, are destined to understand it through a creative reception that may differ from the original intent or Chinese cultural reality. This misreading is an unavoidable reality in cross-cultural communication.

Although the starting point was a misreading, it opened up a new possibility for cross-cultural dialogue, making the flow of meaning no longer one-way. New understandings and negotiations are generated in the collision.

2. Reconstructing the Value of Cross-Cultural Misreading

In *Rebels of Civilization*, Gao Ziwen repeatedly mentions that artists need two civilizations, just as the Renaissance needed Greece. From this perspective, by interpreting and analyzing modern American drama, this book unravels how the American theatrical community has utilized Chinese cultural symbols and the power of imagination to construct a battlement for criticizing Western culture, and explores the value of the misreading of heterogeneous culture or the other in this process of self-renewal.

2.1 Misreading as the creative starting point of Cross-Cultural Narrative

Early cultural transmission studies believed that misreading always stemmed from cultural barriers or subjective bias, leading to cognitive deviations in the audience's understanding of foreign cultures. Therefore, misreading needed to be eliminated. After the turn of the new century, communication scholars found the phenomenon of misreading to be very complex, and misreading in cross-cultural communication often brings more positive significance. Through cases such as the adaptation of Zen in Stevens' verse plays and the appropriation of Taoist thought in O'Neill's dramas, Gao Ziwen proves that misreading is the creative starting point for the generation of cross-cultural narratives – when cultural symbols leave their native context and enter a foreign field, interpretations that deviate from the original meaning precisely provide space for the localization and reconstruction of the symbols, transforming them from unfamiliar cultural specimens into carriers of meaning that can resonate with the local audience.

John Cage's Happenings are a typical case. John Cage was fascinated by Chinese culture, especially Zen and the *I Ching*. His works repeatedly used concepts such as change and nothing to elaborate his views and construct his theoretical system. This conceptual innovation ultimately gave birth to a type of work called chance music – namely, the piano solo piece *Music of Changes*.

In this work, he chose to use the *I Ching* to structure the music. He first used the method of throwing dice and coins to select words from the *I Ching*, then used the *I Ching*'s predictions to determine key elements of musical composition such as melody and duration. His musical construction was not driven solely by personal creativity, nor was it constrained by traditional rules, but relied entirely on a random decision-making process. The design of this random system benefited from divination activities unrelated to the creator's thinking. Although it seems absurd and difficult to understand, in practice, the choice of the *I Ching* and the use of divination were the result of Cage's careful consideration, because he saw in it the existence of the core concept of change: all phenomena in the world are constantly changing, but do these changes follow certain patterns? Cage's purpose was to show the world change and unpredictability, hence he adopted this form as a

component of his work.

And Wallace Stevens, who repeatedly introduced the imagery of Zen, did not follow the philosophical connotation of seeing one's nature in Zen or the practice tradition of meditation, but simplified Zen into a state of mind that transcends worldly troubles. For example, at the end of the play *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, he describes the worldview he believes in through the words of the third Chinese person; in *Carlos Among the Candles*, Stevens attempts to re-examine the living conditions of modern people through the Zen concepts of concentration and wisdom, expressing reflection on capitalist commercial civilization.

From the perspective of cultural communication theory, neither John Cage's use of the I Ching nor Wallace Stevens' understanding of Zen represents the culture in its original form, but rather their personal insights or imaginations. However, for American playwrights, Chinese culture is actually an external force and an ideal—by drawing on this force, they resist Western traditions and develop new ideas. Thus, misreading is not only an inevitable product of cross-cultural communication, but also a catalyst for cultural innovation.

2.2 Misreading as the Intermediary between Formal Innovation and Content Expression

In cross-cultural communication, the process by which heterogeneous culture is accepted is not merely a process of being influenced. Instead, creators often selectively interpret and reconstruct it according to local needs, ultimately serving local cultural innovation, artistic reform, or social reflection. The core feature of such misreading is that function takes precedence over truth—it does not pursue the faithful restoration of original cultural symbols, but rather focuses on whether they can fulfill specific cultural or artistic functions in the local context. The adaptation of the traditional Chinese opera *The Lute* (Pipa Ji) into the Broadway musical *Lute Song*, as discussed in Professor Gao Ziwen's works, provides us with an interesting and typical research case.

We can view *Lute Song* as a bold experiment in integrating elements of Chinese opera into American theatre. The play incorporated a large number of Chinese opera elements in its music, stage design and performance forms, such as the virtual acting and lyrical singing styles of Chinese opera. It is important to note that *Lute Song* did not strictly follow the procedural conventions of Chinese opera, for example, the integrated performance system of singing, speaking, acting, and acrobatics in Peking Opera was deconstructed. More importantly, *Lute Song* adapted the text of *The Story of the Pipa*.

First, *Lute Song* reorganized the temporal and spatial arrangement of *The Story of the Pipa*. The traditional dual-line narrative mode of the male and female leads in the original opera disappeared, replaced by a well-made play with a more orderly timeline and coherent plot, making the core storyline more concentrated. The creators' courage to interpret traditional Chinese opera in the way American theatre understood it is admirable.

The biggest change in the plot is at the end. In the original, after undergoing hardships to find her husband, Wuniang reunites with him, and the story ends with one husband and two wives. In Broadway's *Lute Song*, Wuniang takes no active action to find her husband; instead, Miss Niu helps her reunite with Bojie. At the end of the story, Miss Niu steps aside, and Wuniang and Bojie live together as a monogamous couple until old age. Here, Miss Niu's actions are closer to the Broadway theatrical ideal.

This is a very interesting adaptation. The most important theme in the opera *The Story of the Pipai* filial piety, while the American *Lute Song* has Bojie choose between the two women at the end, a treatment that significantly weakens Cai Bojie's characteristic of filial piety. Furthermore, the change from polygamy to monogamy in the ending of *Lute Song* was likely because the vast majority of audiences in the 1940s could not identify with the former.

On the one hand, we admire Broadway's inclusiveness in embracing *Lute Song*—a work with a narrative style and story entirely rooted in the East; on the other hand, we must clearly recognize that this is by no means a passive acceptance, but rather should be understood as an active utilization. Cultural integration has never been an either-or model of survival of the fittest (lit. you die or I live); instead, it is inherently a process of growth through metabolism. A foreign civilization can stimulate the weaker parts of the local civilization and culture, providing it with nutrients and facilitating its growth. Viewing misreading from this angle, so-called misreading is actually the intermediary through which local culture achieves innovation.

3. Extending Practical Significance/ The practical significance of extending reality

The value of the discussion on functional misreading in *The Rebels of Civilization* extends far beyond academic exploration, it holds extremely important practical significance for the contemporary world where globalization and deglobalization coexist, and obstacles frequently arise in China-West dialogues.

3.1 Shaping the Cultural Mentality of Citizens of in a Major Power

In the new century, alongside China's rapid development in economy, technology, etc., as China gradually moves to the center of the world stage, the relationship between China and the world is also in a delicate transition period. At this juncture, the Chinese people's psychology faces a core challenge: how to shift from a sensitive and defensive mindset to a calm and confident one. The most profound practical insight of Professor Gao Ziwen's book is that it provides a viable approach to fostering a mature and rational cultural mentality of citizens in a major power.

The experiences of the past century of modern history and long-term unequal discourse exchange between China and the West have made our public opinion prone to fall into a either black or white binary opposition when facing cross-cultural phenomena. This simplistic cognitive framework is inherently inadequate in addressing the intricate global reality. The dramatic cases presented in Professor Gao Ziwen's work are extraordinarily complex, and his analysis reveals that the motivations and effects of cultural interaction are highly diverse: well-intentioned practices may lead to negative outcomes, while seemingly offensive acts may stem from a deeper desire for learning. Such understanding and acceptance of the world's complexity constitute the core essence of citizens' rational mindset, enabling us to avoid overreaction and make more precise and strategic responses.

When confronting misreading in cross-cultural communication, there is a desire to be recognized and be vindicated, hoping that the outside world will see an authentic China. Behind this appeal lies more or less an uncertainty about the value of one's own culture, which needs to gain self-affirmation through the recognition

of others. Professor Gao Ziwen reveals a profound cultural law in his book: all dynamic cultures are inevitably subject to continuous misreading and will also misread others. Civilizations and cultures have never been rigid entities with clear boundaries; only through collision, misreading, and re-creation can culture maintain an endless source of vitality. Being unafraid of adaptation, appropriation, or misreading is itself a process of participating in shaping global culture and world civilization. When we no longer rush to refute how the world sees us but focus on jointly shaping the future of the world, this shift in mindset is an indispensable internal dimension for China to truly become a cultural power.

3.2Broadening Global Perspectives

In *The Rebels of Civilization*, Professor Gao Ziwen shows us that whether it is Eugene O'Neill's Westernized translation of Taoist thought, Bertolt Brecht's defamiliarization transformation of traditional Chinese opera, or Wallace Stevens' adoption of Zen—all these practices satisfy their specific creative needs through the selective absorption, transformation, or even intentional misinterpretation of Chinese cultural elements. Such seemingly unfaithful interpretations have yielded unexpected innovative effects. They draw inspiration and nourishment from traditional Chinese culture, but reconstruct it with modern artistic language, revitalizing ancient cultural resources in the contemporary context.

Thus, Professor Gao's work reveals a profound cultural connotation: true cultural vitality does not originate from self-enclosed purity, but lies in open dialogue and creative collision.

However, it is noteworthy that American theater has always maintained a distinct sense of subjectivity when absorbing Chinese cultural elements. Instead of simply replicating the superficial features of Chinese culture, they proactively select, transform, and utilize Chinese elements to express their own concerns, starting from their own social and cultural needs. This model of cultural borrowing reveals an important insight: engaging in global dialogue by no means implies losing oneself; on the contrary, it is precisely through dialogue with others that we can gain a clearer understanding of ourselves and define who we are. In the process of Chinese culture going global, there is an equal need for such a confident sense of subjectivity—not passively accepting external influences, but proactively selecting, absorbing, and transforming foreign cultural elements to serve the modern transformation and innovative development of Chinese culture.

Our cultural workers should, like those American playwrights, face foreign cultures with an open and confident attitude, boldly engage in creative misreading and transformation, thereby stimulating the inherent vitality of Chinese culture and promoting the innovative development of Chinese civilization in the modern context. This creative transformation based on cultural confidence is the true meaning of our introduction of Western cultural resources.

Conclusion

The core value of Professor Gao Ziwen's *Rebels of Civilization* lies in the fact that it redefines the criteria for judging misreading from a functionalist perspective, redefines misreading as the starting point and

intermediary of innovation, provides theoretical tools for understanding the dynamic logic of civilizational interaction, and opens up new paths for cross-cultural communication and comparative literature research. In the present era where globalization and cultural diversity coexist, this research approach that breaks through traditional frameworks and focuses on functional value can not only promote academic development but also provide theoretical support for dialogue and mutual learning among different civilizations. After all, the ultimate goal of cross-cultural communication should not be eliminating misreading, but to use misreading to drive cultural innovation and equality of power. This is also the most precious insight that this book offers to the academic community.

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