

Ustad Hotel and Cook Up a Storm: A Cross-Cultural Study of Heroic Portrayals

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Abstract

A hero is the one who mostly is a saviour by some means to an individual or a group. He becomes the center of attraction to the ones who he rescues or helps. Heroes in films are the ultimate cynosure, the most loved character by the audience. Every film has a different portrayal of heroes. It depends on various factors such as cultural background, setting of the plot, historical context, cinematic technique, philosophical belief and expectation of the audience. Among these, cultural perspectives play a vital role in the portrayal of heroes in different cultures. The films *Ustad Hotel* by Anwar Rasheed and *Cook Up a Storm* by Raymond Yip serve as a tool in analyzing the heroic portrayals across two different cultures, the Indian and the Chinese. The aim of the study is to understand how different cultural contexts influence the depiction of heroic characters. The study reveals both the commonalities and differences in how heroism is conceptualized and presented across these cultures and proves that cultural contexts significantly shape the representations of heroism.

Keywords: Cross-Culture, Cultural Context, Heroic Portrayal, Indian and Chinese.

Introduction

Heroic portrayal refers to the depiction of a character's qualities, actions and journey that embody the traits typically associated with a hero. This includes characteristics such as bravery, integrity, self-sacrifice and the ability to inspire and lead others. In the context of films, a heroic portrayal involves showcasing the struggles of the protagonist, growth and triumphs.

The films, *Ustad Hotel* and *Cook Up a Storm* are selected to study the heroic portrayals across cultures due to their rich cultural contexts and the common role of food in their narratives. Both films feature protagonists Sky Ko and Faizi, who are passionate chefs, but their journeys are influenced by their distinct cultural backgrounds. These films offer a compelling contrast and comparison of how cultural heritage shapes the heroes' motivations, conflicts and growth. By examining these two culturally rich films, the study uncovers how cultural contexts influence character development and narrative techniques, providing a stronger understanding of the role of culture in cinematic portrayal of heroes.

Heroism and its Cultural Perspective

Heroism is the quality of displaying courage, bravery and selflessness, in the face of danger or adversity, to achieve a noble or altruistic goal. Heroes are admired for their extraordinary actions. Cultural perspectives on heroism vary significantly across different societies. In Western cultures, heroism emphasizes individual achievements, personal glory and the pursuit of one's goals, with heroes celebrated for their independence and leadership. Eastern cultures link heroism to collective well-being, familial duty and societal harmony, with heroes embodying virtues like humility and wisdom. African cultures associate heroism with community leadership, wisdom and overcoming adversity for the group's benefit, highlighting both mythical and real-life figures. Indigenous cultures emphasize a hero's connection with nature and their role in maintaining ecological balance, reflecting cultural values and spiritual beliefs (Sun et al.)

In the modern global context, contemporary heroism blends cultural values, celebrating universal qualities like resilience, compassion and the fight for justice, with figures like Nelson Mandela (Ryan) and Malala Yousafzai (*Malala Yousafzai: What Makes A Hero?*) seen as heroes across various cultures. Understanding heroism through a cultural lens appreciates the diverse ways societies recognize and celebrate acts of courage and moral integrity.

Analyzing *Ustad Hotel* and *Cook up a Storm*

Ustad Hotel by Anwar Rasheed features a protagonist whose journey is of Indian cultural values, emphasizing familial duty and personal growth. The film portrays heroism through the lens of culinary mastery and the protagonist's transformation from a young, rebellious individual to a respected figure in his community. It is an Indian film in Malayalam language that follows the journey of Faizi, who is passionate about becoming a chef, against the wishes of his father, who wants him to pursue a conventional career. After a fallout, Faizi moves to Kozhikode to work at his grandfather Kareem's popular restaurant, Ustad Hotel. There, he learns the true essence of cooking, which is not just about taste but also about love, compassion and serving others. Faizi's experiences transform him, deepening his connection to his cultural roots and family values. In the end, he reconciles with his father, having discovered his purpose and the profound impact of his grandfather's teachings (Wilson).

Cook Up a Storm by Raymond Yip presents a Chinese perspective on heroism, focusing on competitive cooking and personal redemption. The film highlights themes of rivalry, perseverance and the quest for culinary excellence as central to its portrayal of heroism. It is a Chinese culinary drama that centers on the rivalry between two talented chefs, Sky Ko and Paul Ahn, who come from different culinary backgrounds. Sky Ko is a street-smart chef from a small restaurant, representing traditional Chinese cuisine, while Paul Ahn, trained in Michelin-starred establishments, embodies modern Western culinary techniques. The two chefs compete in a prestigious culinary competition, each showcasing their unique skills and cultural heritage. Throughout the film, they learn to appreciate each other's approaches and ultimately collaborate, blending their styles to create extraordinary dishes. The story highlights themes of cultural fusion, mutual respect and the universal love of food (Vernazzani).

Contrasting Heroic Journeys

Ustad Hotel and *Cook Up a Storm* feature protagonists who, despite initial appearances of being ill-suited for their culinary journeys, demonstrate remarkable dedication and growth. In *Ustad Hotel*, Faizi, hailing from a privileged Indian background, begins his journey with modern culinary training acquired abroad. He faces significant disrespect and mistreatment at the upscale Beachbay Hotel due to his unconventional career choice, which clashes with his father's traditional beliefs that cooking is a woman's duty. Despite

these challenges, Faizi's dedication and hard work shine through as he ultimately returns to his grandfather's traditional culinary stem. This decision showcases his inherent skills and his growth into a respected chef, proving his father wrong and embracing his cultural heritage.

Similarly, in *Cook Up a Storm*, Sky Ko, raised in a modest environment, starts his journey within the traditional confines of his family's culinary establishment. Unlike Faizi, Sky Ko's father encourages his culinary pursuits, reflecting the acceptance of male chefs within the Chinese cultural context. Despite this support, he faces disrespect from his rival competitors and struggles with internal conflicts related to his own aspirations and personal dreams. His journey involves not just proving his skills but also navigating the external pressures of competition. By the end of the film, Sky Ko's dedication and sacrifice for greater causes are celebrated, affirming his talent and challenging the expectations placed upon him.

While both characters exhibit a connection to their culinary heritage and face significant obstacles, their heroic journeys highlight distinct contrasts. Faizi's narrative is influenced by his privileged Indian background and his struggle with traditional gender roles, leading him to resolve his internal conflicts by choosing societal benefit and personal fulfillment over modern career aspirations. In contrast, Sky Ko's story is shaped by the acceptance of male chefs in Chinese culture, focusing more on external conflicts with competitors and career excellence. Sky Ko's journey is driven by a desire to prove his worth and achieve personal success, ultimately aligning his traditional skills with modern aspirations.

These contrasting portrayals vividly show how cultural backgrounds and personal circumstances influence the heroic journeys of Faizi and Sky Ko, reflecting different paths to growth and success within their respective narratives.

Cultural Influences on Heroic Portrayals

The cultural background of Kerala profoundly shapes Faizi's character and his journey in *Ustad Hotel*. Initially, the protagonist is portrayed as a young man trained in European culinary techniques, reflecting a modern, international approach to cooking. This contrast with his traditional Indian origins sets the stage for his self-discovery. Returning to Kerala, he reconnects with traditional culinary practices and blends his modern skills with the time-honored traditions imparted by his grandfather. This fusion highlights Kerala's rich culinary heritage and underscores Faizi's evolving appreciation for his cultural background. Family dynamics are crucial in shaping Faizi's character. His father represents conventional Indian expectations of pursuing a prestigious career and disapproves of cooking, creating a rift between them. This discord pushes him to seek solace and guidance from his grandfather, who embodies traditional Kerala values. His grandfather's influence is pivotal, teaching him to view cooking as an act of love and community service rather than just a profession. This generational transfer of knowledge and values guides him toward a holistic and culturally enriched understanding of his craft.

The communal and culturally rich environment of Kerala further impacts Faizi's transformation. The film portrays food as central to social cohesion and support, reflecting the cultural practice of feeding and helping the needy. This immersion helps him appreciate food's role in nurturing and uniting people, aligning his culinary passion with a broader social purpose. His journey becomes a quest for self-identity, embracing his heritage with pride and connecting with the strong emotional and spiritual significance of his work. The blending of modern and traditional influences enhances both his culinary expertise and personal growth, making his story a profound exploration of identity, family, and the true essence of food (Hierarchisation of Culture: Experimenting Bourdieu's Cultural Capital in *Ustad Hotel*).

In *Cook Up a Storm*, Sky Ko's cultural background significantly influences his portrayal. His identity is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culinary practices, with his family's renowned skills shaping his

cooking style and techniques. The film emphasizes his respect for the authenticity of Chinese cuisine, demonstrated through his meticulous preparation and reverence for traditional recipes.

A central theme in the film is the cultural clash and eventual harmony between Eastern and Western culinary traditions, epitomized by Sky Ko's rivalry with Chef Paul Ahn. This rivalry symbolizes the broader tension between Chinese and European cuisines and serves to explore the strengths of each tradition. His journey involves proving the worth of Chinese cuisine internationally while integrating Western techniques, reflecting the evolving nature of global cuisine and the adaptability of Chinese culinary arts.

His character is also influenced by traditional Chinese values, such as respect for elders and mentorship. His relationship with his mentor and father underscores the importance of learning from previous generations. Throughout the film, Sky Ko demonstrates a willingness to innovate while honoring his origin, showcasing the dynamic nature of culinary practices and his cultural pride. His success challenges stereotypes and promotes an in-depth appreciation of Chinese cuisine, making him a proud representative of his heritage in the film.

Conclusion

The interpretations of the study indicate that cultural contexts significantly influence heroic portrayals in both *Ustad Hotel* and *Cook Up a Storm*, revealing a complex interplay between tradition and modernity. In *Ustad Hotel*, Faizi's journey involves integrating Western culinary techniques with traditional Kerala values, reflecting a broader reconciliation of modern skills with cultural identity, culminating in a commitment to community service and personal fulfillment. In contrast, *Cook Up a Storm* demonstrates the evolving nature of global cuisine through Sky Ko's experiences. His confrontation with cultural clashes and stereotypes highlights the adaptability and international relevance of Chinese culinary traditions. Both films clearly mark how cultural backgrounds shape not only the depiction of heroism but also the protagonists' internal and external conflicts, thereby emphasizing the integral connection between heroism, cultural identity, and societal values.

Further research on the impact of culture on heroic portrayals in films can be explored by expanding cross-cultural comparisons to include a broader range of films from various regions. It provides a more comprehensive understanding of how heroism is depicted across different societies, revealing both commonalities and differences in heroic narratives and values. Genre-specific studies, effects of globalization and intercultural exchange on heroic portrayal, comparing cinematic portrayals of heroism with those in other media forms also provides a more holistic view of how cultural contexts shape heroic narratives across various platforms.

The study highlights that while both films celebrate individual achievements and personal growth, Indian heroism is framed within familial and traditional values, whereas Chinese heroism is linked to competition and self-reinvention.

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