

History, Space, Plants: Cultural Identity in Persepolis

Li Yuan

School of Arts, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China
15355478477@163.com

Keywords: Persepolis; Cultural identity; Animated documentary; Jasmine; History

Abstract: In the context of globalization, cultural intermingling has become an inevitable issue among countries worldwide, and the issue of "identity" is constantly highlighted in the process of global cultural intermingling. The sense of identity expressed in the French animated documentary *Persepolis*, rooted in personal experience and grand historical narrative, has successfully broken the boundaries of tradition and entered the eyes of international film festivals. *Persepolis* is one of the standout films that employ an animated format to document the history of individuals and their home country, attracting a large global audience and generating widespread buzz in mainstream media and online. Stuart Hall, a British cultural studies scholar, argues that identity is a completed fact, while identity is a never-completed "work" in the process of flux. This paper uses documentary research and case study methods to analyze Marjane Shatapi's "East-West" identity anxiety due to cultural influences by taking her biographical work "*Persepolis*" as an entry point from macro to micro, abstract to concrete, and from three perspectives: the natural history of Iran, space, and region, and plant jasmine. "The analysis of Marjane's psychological journey to transcend mere imitation and return to a traditional and pure identity, and the conclusion of the three stages of cultural identity "rejection-acceptance-transcendence," aims to highlight how individuals find their identity in the historical process. The purpose is to highlight how individuals find their identity in the historical process.

1. Introduction

Based on an autobiographical cartoon by Iranian cartoonist Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* was nominated for several awards and awards in an era of glamorous 3D computer animation, and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 65th Golden Globe Awards, Best Animated Feature at the 80th Academy Awards, and was the only animated film to enter the competition. In 2007, it won the Grand Prix of the Jury at the 60th Cannes Film Festival. The animated film was well-received by critics and audiences alike and grossed over \$9 million at the box office^[1]. It has received worldwide acclaim for its infectious artistry. *Persepolis* sets a heavy tone with its simple black and white color blocks and abstracts the images with more symbolic techniques, thus forming a distinctive artistic style and strong impact. The simple colors highlight the cultural meaning of the social background of "*Persepolis*." At the same time, the abstract treatment of the images allows the viewer to feel the connotation of the characters' perspectives more intuitively. Although the visual form of the film is simplified in terms of colors and figures, the content of the film contains complex religious, revolutionary, and Iran-Iraq wars as well as Iranian Persian history and culture,

which not only serves as a vital record of historical facts but also expresses to us the identity anxiety of modern people under the impact of culture.

2. The germ of history: Family lineage establishes the identity

As Stuart Hall, the father of contemporary cultural studies, put it: identity is not concerned with what we are, but with what we will become; it is not frozen and static, but always in a state of fluidity and negotiation^[2]. The animated documentary *Persepolis* (2007, France) is based on a cartoon of the same name by Iranian director Marjane Satrapi. Whose protagonist, Marjane, is seen from the perspective of an ordinary woman and whose storyline reflects the historical turmoil and social reality of Iran over the last thirty years. Her narrative does not focus on the grief of a confined historical period. Instead, it uses a woman's unique sensitivity and meticulousness to tell the story of her own life experiences with a self-deprecating tone, a smile that recalls the past, and a touching and sympathetic emotion that reveals the identity issues revealed in her own harrowing experiences growing up.

The film is set against the backdrop of Iran's actual historical evolution, which significantly impacts the trajectory of Marjane's development. Marjane's childhood was lived in Iran in the late 1970s, on the eve of Khomeini's Islamic Revolution^[3]. Iran was known as the Qajar dynasty from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. It became a semi-colony of Britain and Russia because of its strategic geographical location and rich oil resources. In the film, Marjane's grandfather was a prince of the Qajar dynasty and a man of vision who was committed to overthrowing the Shah (the ancient title of the emperor in Persian). Marjane is a collateral descendant of the Qajar dynasty. The continuation of the genetic lineage is a potential factor for Marjane's awakening of self-identity and reversal of her views on the current situation in Iran.

The succession of Reza Khan's son, Pahlavi, begins to advance the Westernization and modernization of Iran. The film begins with female characters dressed in fashion and not wearing black robes (as shown in Figure 1). Khomeini's restrictions on certain people make it legal for alcoholic beverages to appear at parties. The film opens on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, when Marjane is enjoying a happy childhood, idolizes Bruce Lee, and likes to eat French fries with ketchup. As the slogans of the mass movement against the Shah come from the window (shown in Figure 2), Marjane is ignorant of the current situation in Iran and expresses her love for the Shah. As the father narrates Shah's dealings with foreign politicians, the Shah walks like a puppet on a string amidst decorative elements full of Persian connotations, indicating the decency and goodness of Marjane's parents and their anger at the current state of the Shah.

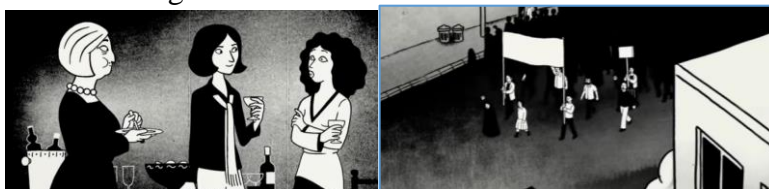


Figure 1 (left): At the beginning of the film, party women are dressed fashionably and can drink, and the late tension in the black

Figure 2 (right): The mass movement against the Shah outside the window opened the opportunity for my father to tell the young Marjane the true nature of the Shah







The escalating mass demonstrations finally led to a victory in the battle and the release of Marjane's uncle, Anlu, by the authorities. During his administration, the new President Khomeini renamed it the "Islamic Republic of Iran" and held a referendum to establish a new system. Anlu believes that the country is half illiterate and that only other forces and statism can unite the people,

but his misjudgment of the situation led to his re-arrest. After visiting Anlu, Marjane lies in bed and remembers the white swan that her uncle gave her in the black cage. The scene's background changes to pure black, and the swan gradually moves away in the flowing black waves, seemingly foreshadowing Marjane's departure. As the friends around Marjane's parents continue to sacrifice, the last words of advice when revisiting Uncle Anlu plant the seeds for Marjane to see the truth of society and learn to distinguish right from wrong. The new government uses the name of the Iran-Iraq war to crack down on domestic opponents. It begins to increase the intensity of arrests and executions. At the same time, the entire country is plunged into a dark and depressing place, women are forced to wear black robes again, and Marjane is also sent to Austria because of her parents' fear for her life because of her rebuttal to some of her teachers, and begins to embark on a foreign journey.

Although Iran was forcibly brought into the fast modernization track by the Shah's reform, there is still a certain distance between Iran and the West. As a cultural subject studying abroad, Marjane, under the impact of the firm and weak cultures, has a robust ideological shock and great spiritual suffering, and the cultural invasion has caused people to lose their identity. It is in this conflict that Marjane chooses identity.

3. The Flow of Space: Three Stages of Cultural Identity

Table 1: Marjane's analysis of the three stages of Iranian cultural identity reflects the choice of identity under different cultural perceptions

Stage	Identity Selection	Duration	Classification basis	Screen Analysis	
First Phase	Rejection	53 minutes	The film begins until Marjane lies about being French	 <p>Marjane reads Western literature into Austria</p>	 <p>The counter shot highlights the vain expression of Marjane when she lies about being French</p>
Second Stage	Acceptance	30 minutes	Marjane failed in love and chose to return to the country until the marriage embrace	<p>Marjane's return is treated like a foreigner, like a meeting between a king and a minister</p> 	 <p>Marjane's justified rebuttal as an Iranian</p>
Third Stage	Transcend-ence	13 minutes	Marjane divorce to leaving Iran	<p>Marjane once again chooses to leave Iran to say goodbye to her grandfather promising herself honesty and integrity.</p> 	 <p>At this point the scene turns to color, in the French cab Marjane calmly said I am from Iran</p>

Identity is mainly composed of individual attributes, history and culture, and development prospects of the subject. It is a sense of belonging to an individual, a group, or a society acquired during growth. Each individual may belong to a different group simultaneously, has a different role,

and has a cultural meaning constructed during the role change^[4]. Cultural identity is concerned with the extent to which a group identifies with the cultural traditions of an individual or another group. In other words, cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of identity or self-awareness of belonging to an ethnic group. Cultural identity is an ever-changing process, a constant search for and identity orientation^[5]. Because different cultures influence the cultural subject, this cultural subject must see one culture as the collective cultural self and another as the other^[6]. "because it involves multiple spatial locations, identity may constitute a 'geography of identity': a historical location, a point of intersection of multiple knowledge, a dialectical territory, a site of active confrontation." Thus, the formation and affirmation of self-identity are always in constant flux and negotiation and are shaped by specific political, cultural, and economic factors^[7]. Marjane is experiencing the identity decision between Iranian and foreign cultures, trying to find the place of self and subject in history. While searching, she is fatalistically lost in the changing urban space. This process can be roughly summarized into three stages of cultural identity (as shown in Table 1): the rejection, acceptance, and transcendence of Iranian identity.

The film reflects Marjane's changing stages of her cultural identity by transferring three geographical spaces: Iran, Austria, and France. From the plot's development, the film's beginning to Marjane's first false claim to be French can be roughly summarized as the first stage. Marjane's rejection of her Iranian cultural identity. Marjane is already exposed to Western culture during her childhood and begins to reveal a vague sense of discontent with her native culture. She secretly wears punk shoes and jackets with Michael Jackson's head on them even when required to wear school clothes, looks for people selling rock records on the street, and spends her free time singing rock music in her room with a racket as her guitar. When Marjane entered Vienna as an Iranian, she got her first taste of Austria's cultural prejudice against Iran. For eating in a pot at the nuns' school, Marjane was judged by the nuns as "proof" that Iranians were disgusting and had no tutelage. Lacking a relevant cultural background and needing help to relate to the atmosphere of Christmas Day in Vienna, Marjane began to find her place in a foreign culture. Marjane moves from a friend's house to a shared room with eight couples to a maid's room alone, and finally to land in a home, where her landlady is a retired philosophy professor. In a social setting, Marjane begins a conversation with a man based on his opinion of the current situation, and for the first time, lies about being French and conceals her Iranian identity when questioned. When the identity shift appears to be different, Marjane loses her right to speak and express herself in the face of Western values, so she steps out of the dilemma of cultural identity and begins to complete an opposed transformation^[8].

The development of Marjane's marriage after her return is another important aspect of her identification with Iranian culture, highlighting the second stage of identity selection, namely the acceptance of Iranian cultural identity. The identification of "cultural identity" is based on belonging to "space" and "place"^[9]. The duality of identity makes Marjane suffer from the pain of cultural integration due to her foreign identity in Vienna. When she returns to Iran, not only does she not return to her primary identity, but she is scrutinized by her relatives and friends with the eyes of foreigners. At this time, the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq has ended, and Marjane recalls her childhood friend Zia who lost an arm and a leg due to the war but still lives optimistically. After treatment by doctors and consolation from the dream prophet and Marx, Marjane regains and chooses to continue her struggle to return to the university to continue her classes. When the school asks women to wear narrow pants, a hooded monk's coat with only two eyes exposed, hair wholly covered, and no make-up on the grounds of respect for the martyrs of the revolution, Marjane's reaction at this time is no longer the emotional outburst of a teenager, but a well-reasoned argument. "When her mother thinks that Marjane's choice to marry at 21 fails her careful education and cries, Marjane calmly says that she knows what she is doing. Even though

Marjane is dissatisfied with the current situation in Iran at this time, she dares to accept her identity and take responsibility for her actions.

The Iranian political situation enacts increasingly harsh decrees, and Marjane's good friend Ninmah is punished. As a result of the gathering for drinking and dancing, Ninmah dies accidentally during his escape. Marjane's disappointment with the current situation in Iran chooses to run to France, a process that highlights the third stage of identity choice, namely the transcendence of Iranian identity. Uncle Anlu does not choose to live a comfortable life after returning from his studies in Iran, but he is constantly involved in the country's progressive activities as an Iranian; his grandmother constantly teaches Marjane to be honest and upright in her daily life and when Marjane leaves home for the first time, her father urges her to "not forget your country and who you are. Under the influence of her family's words and actions, combined with the transformation Marjane herself experienced, when Marjane leaves Iran again, she chooses to cover her face with a black headscarf, opens her passport, and gets into a French cab; she finally says "I am from Iran" with aplomb—the picture's strong contrast between red and black shows Marjane's inner peace under the two civilizations.

The first stage is Marjane's family-centered culture, which refers to a specific cultural tradition in which Marjane forms a shared memory and beliefs with her family to express her rejection of the native culture. The second stage is the self-centeredness of Marjane, which refers to Marjane's beginning to see herself as an independent individual, returning to Iran to accept and recognize her identity. The third stage is socially centered, where Marjane begins to realize her value and significance as a member of society and begins to form a new cultural identity that returns to tradition. The three times of identity reflection allow Marjane to rediscover herself.

4. Jasmine's Call: The Return of the Subject's Identity

The film name is *Persepolis*, and Jasmine as a plant element does not appear many times in the play. On the surface, the jasmine element becomes the representative of the grandmother's identity so that Marjane can recall it to give herself strength no matter what dark moment she is in; the author believes that in addition to the explicit identity clues such as history and space, Jasmine serves as an invisible thread that constitutes the narrative and summons the return of identity in the film. In the visual atmosphere of the film, which uses black and gray colors to bring people a depressing psychological feeling and convey a heavy sense of decadence and feudal backwardness, the appearance of the jasmine element as a "point" element in the play plays a role of a four-two punch, making people seem to smell a fragrance in the darkness.

"Grandma, why do you always smell so good?" "Look, I pick some jasmine flowers every morning, and when I get dressed, I put them in my bra so that I smell good when I ask." For Marjane's grandmother, the meaning of Jasmine is a secret to keep her body smelling good and a reminder of her former home country and that she is "Persian" and not "Iranian." Jasmine has always been historically significant and culturally valuable in Persian culture. In ancient Persian, Jasmine is known as Yasmin, meaning that it is as noble as a gift from heaven. According to historical and botanical evidence, the Persian Gulf, as well as India and Pakistan, are among the top producers of Jasmine, which is one of the specialties of the Persian region that mastered the Eurasian trade route^[10]. Iran has been called Persia for the past 2000 years and was renamed Iran only after Reza Khan's military coup to overthrow the Qajar dynasty. Grandma Marjane, a descendant of the Qajar dynasty, spent most of her life in Persia, not Iran. The film describes that the grandmother would pick Jasmine daily and put it in her underwear to keep her body fragrant. In ancient Persian culture, the fragrance of the body symbolized respectability^[11]. Myrrh, frankincense, and musk were the most popular spices at the time. In the gardens of the rich and famous, most of

the precious fragrant flowers were planted, such as Jasmine, lily of the valley, violet and red rose, and the grandmother, as a descendant of Persian is still following this tradition to show the miss of the country and continually educate Marjane to understand the truth of today's Iran. Finally, from the English title of the film, *Persepolis* is translated as *Persepolis*, meaning the second capital of the Achaemenid dynasty of Persia.

As a critical botanical symbol of the Silk Road, the cultural significance of Jasmine has shifted from religious to secular, from material to poetic. It has been reshaped by religious, ethical, and aesthetic values^[12], becoming an aesthetic cultural symbol with oriental characteristics. The botanical nature of Jasmine was primarily used in ancient cultures for ritual worship. In the play, Jasmine is associated with female identity and purity and extends from Persian representation to the East, unconsciously calling for the return of Marjane's subject identity. There are two scenes of Jasmine in the film, both of which are of Marjane leaving Iran. The first time Jasmine appears is the day before Marjane leaves Iran to study in Austria, which is more of a prelude for the subsequent plot. The image of the grandmother is outlined in lines, and as the camera advances, the Jasmine spreads out and fades into the Jasmine of the flat screen, with Marjane snuggling in her grandmother's arms and smelling the fragrance of Jasmine on her body. The warm intergenerational scene forms a contrast with Marjane's dark experience afterward. The second is when Marjane is sitting in a taxi in France and closes her eyes to remember her grandmother's advice; at this time, the picture is dark and reproduces her grandmother's advice from the past. The two echoes of the imaginary and the real remind Marjane that in a foreign country never forget her "Oriental" identity, showing us a particular cultural aspiration arising from women's unique historical and objective situation in the Third World^[13].

5. Summary

Persepolis deals with much natural history, and although there are serious topics, the unique black-and-white art style and Persian decorative elements add a rare touch of childishness and humor to the gritty atmosphere of this film. The multi-space and multi-territory perspective shift makes the film's protagonist Marjane produce cultural identity wanderings and choices. The two modern revolutions in Iran and the descendants of the Persian dynasty inject Marjane with the code of family genes, remembering the identity of her family and country under the contrast between ancient and modern, east and West, experiencing the flux of cultural identity in the hardship created by the black and white color blocks, Marjane makes a breakthrough in her life by rejecting, accepting and transcending the Iranian identity.

As the alias of the animated documentary, the name "Life of Jasmine" expresses the cultural identity of the "Ancient and the East - Persia and the East." For Marjane's grandmother, the Jasmine is a reminder of her family's past glory, justice, and the Persian Empire, and the smell of the past; for Marjane in a foreign country, the Jasmine reminds her of her family and the "honesty and integrity" of the East. In short, *Persepolis* shows us the identity anxiety of real individuals under the impact of radical social changes and depicts how individuals can achieve the freedom to keep their hearts and grow up in the flood of history.

References

- [1] Zhang Qizhong. (2009). *Multi-level spatial mirroring and broad reading--Analysis of the historical and cultural animated film Persepolis*. *Film Review*, (14), 54-55.
- [2] Stuart Hall, Paul Dugay. (2010). *Translated by Pang Li. Research on cultural identity*. Henan: Henan University Press
- [3] Wa Gangli. (2023). *Persepolis: why did they stage a coup in the first place?* BILIBILI. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1SW411j7HV/?spm_id_from=333.999.0.0&vd_source=024ca4019b3f7400a03bfa8e3c4be701. 2023-3-14

- [4] Han Qiqun. (2017). *Keywords of Western literature: the turn of things*. *Foreign Literature*, (06), 88-99.
- [5] Wang Tao. (2016) *The Trouble of Growing Up in Postcolonial Context--A First Exploration of the Theme of Adventure Season*. *Masterpiece Appreciation*, (27), 37-38.
- [6] Tao Jiajun. (2004) *Introduction to identity*. *Foreign Literature*, (02), 37-44.
- [7] Ma Nannan. (2018) *The identity and national imagination flow in Xu Anhua's films*. *World Chinese Literature Forum*, (01), 32-39.
- [8] Chen Shutong. (2019) *From novel to film: A study of the cultural identity of Young Girl Little Fisherman*. *Communication Power Research*, 3 (27), 1-2.
- [9] Jin Danyuan, Ma Nannan. (2013). *Spatial presentation and cultural identity in Xu Anhua's films*. *New Works in Cinema*, (02), 4-9.
- [10] Wang Chenzhu. (2021) *Jasmine's Silk Road Journey is Aesthetic Meaning Generation*. Lanzhou University, 2021.
- [11] Wan Xiufeng. (2007) *Foreign perfumes in the Qing Palace*. *Forbidden City*, (03), 198-203.
- [12] Li Shitao. Wang Chenzhu. (2022) *Jasmine's Silk Road Journey and it is Aesthetic Meaning of Cross-cultural Production*. *Journal of Northwest University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, (05), 147-154.
- [13] Luo Gang, Pei Yali. (2000). *Race, gender and the politics of text--the theory and critical practice of postcolonial feminism*. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, (01), 100-108.