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"The Children of Heaven" as a Cultural Mirror: Reflecting Ethnic Narratives in Iranian Children's Film

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ABSTRACT

Following the Iranian New Wave and the Islamic Revolution, Iranian filmmakers established a distinct tradition of children's film. Iranian films began to gain international recognition, being screened at prestigious film festivals and winning various awards. This article explores the emergence of children's film in Iran post-New Wave, examining its unique characteristics. It also delves into how Iranian children's films address ethnicity through themes, narratives, and filmic language, using *The Children of Heaven* as a case study. The rise of Iranian children's film has highlighted a key observation: what is national can also be global. In the context of globalization and the dominance of Western aesthetics as the standard, Iranian filmmakers have successfully crafted films that preserve national identity while appealing to a broader audience. This approach offers valuable insights for contemporary Chinese film.

INTRODUCTION

Iranian film has long been a vital and distinctive part of the Asian film landscape, with its origins dating back to the early 20th century. The story of Iranian film begins in 1900, when Prince Mozafferdin of Iran, during a journey through Europe, developed a personal interest in film. On his travels, he purchased a set of photographic equipment, a decision that marked the first step in the establishment of Iranian film (Naficy, H, 1979). This small act of curiosity and passion would later spark a vibrant film culture in Iran, which has continued to evolve and thrive over the years. Iranian film grew and developed by merging elements of Iranian culture, religious beliefs, art, and nationalism, while simultaneously creating connections with

other countries as globalization began to shape the cultural landscape of the 20th century.

However, Iran's status as an Islamic country posed unique challenges to its film industry, especially regarding content and form. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 was a turning point, marking a period of both restrictions and renaissance. While the revolution initially created an atmosphere of stagnation, it eventually gave rise to a flourishing film industry that garnered international acclaim (Karbassian, A, 2000). During this period, Iranian films began to gain widespread recognition, earning numerous awards at prestigious international film festivals. Directors like Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi, and others became the vanguard of this filmic renaissance, with many focusing their lens

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on the world of children (Sadr, H, R, 2006). By the late 20th century, a new wave of Iranian children's films emerged, offering a fresh perspective on childhood, struggle, and innocence (Nojournian, A, A, 2019). This wave of children's films captivated global audiences, filling a noticeable gap in the international children's film market and offering narratives that were deeply rooted in Iranian society, yet universally relatable. These films not only elevated the visibility of Iranian film but also demonstrated the power of film as a global storytelling medium, proving that powerful, authentic narratives could resonate beyond borders.

CHARACTERISTICS OF IRANIAN CHILDREN'S FILMS

Iranian children's films typically focus on ordinary children in everyday life, using their perspectives to reveal the spiritual world of the marginalized members of Iranian society. These films often highlight the warmth of human connections and the beauty of interpersonal relationships. Unlike Hollywood children's films, which are characterized by high budgets and elaborate productions, Iranian children's film eschews flashy, computer-generated special effects. Instead, it relies on simple, rustic storytelling and visual language to convey the purity and goodness inherent in children. The defining features of these films can be categorized into three key aspects: the universality of their themes, the simplicity of their narratives, and the authenticity of their visual expression.

Universality of Theme

Universal themes possess a timeless appeal, resonating not only with people in the present moment but also with all of humanity across generations. In Iranian children's films, there is a notable absence of grand narratives. Instead, directors focus on the lived reality of society's marginalized individuals and the personal, sensory experiences of everyday life. The camera often turns to the tangible, concrete struggles of these people, conveying the director's deep concern for their essence through these intimate observations.

Iranian children's films often evoke a strong sense of realism, and it is this authenticity that moves audiences. This emotional connection transcends national borders and cultural differences, tapping into the universal truths of human nature—truth, goodness, and beauty. These films are not designed to provoke curiosity, nor do they aim to

educate children in a didactic or utilitarian manner. They don't issue moral condemnations or preach about social issues. Instead, they quietly depict children's struggles in difficult circumstances and their unwavering determination to cling to their ideals. With a tone that balances melancholy and hope, these films reveal the warmth and beauty found in the children's world.

Films such as *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, *The Children of Heaven*, and *The Colour of Paradise* have garnered international acclaim, receiving praise from audiences around the world. These films, which shine a light on both the broader Iranian experience and the specific challenges of children's education, have not only captivated international audiences but also enjoyed significant commercial success in global markets.

Narrative Simplicity

Simplicity is another defining feature of Iranian children's film, particularly in terms of storytelling. However, this simplicity does not imply a lack of complexity; rather, it reflects an underlying tension within a concise narrative structure. In contrast to the industrialized nature of Chinese film and the global dominance of Hollywood blockbusters, Iranian filmmakers continue to adhere to their own creative principles and maintain a distinct aesthetic, which is evident in their storytelling techniques. Iranian directors strictly follow the "three laws" of scriptwriting, typically employing linear narratives that align with these guidelines.

Storytelling in short stories, novels, plays, or films often hinges on a strong dramatic structure, where the plot elements are carefully organized to achieve the desired emotional, intellectual, or dramatic impact. Many Iranian children's films feature simple plot structures with a clear beginning and end, while maintaining a prominent inner tension that elevates the beauty of simplicity. While most of these films follow single-line narratives, they avoid becoming monotonous or predictable. Instead, the storylines progress with fresh developments, maintaining an inherent tension that captivates the audience.

Additionally, Iranian children's filmmakers are skilled in using open endings. Rarely do their films conclude with a neatly wrapped-up, happy ending. Instead, they often leave the outcome unresolved, offering space for the audience to reflect and imagine what might lie beyond the screen. This approach encourages viewers to engage with the

story on a deeper level and construct their own interpretation of the film's reality.

Authenticity of Image Expression

Iranian filmmakers have inherited the artistic traditions of documentary realism, yet they have seamlessly integrated these elements into their own cultural context, creating films that are deeply personal and reflective of their unique filmmaking style. However, the artistic reality portrayed in their films is not a mere reproduction of life as it is. Instead, these directors infuse their work with humanistic concerns, transforming reality into a compelling and emotionally resonant artistic experience.

Bazin, the founder of the long shot theory, argued that the objectivity of photography gives the image a convincing power that no painting can have (Morgan, D, 2006). Unlike the flashy stunts and complex editing typical of Hollywood film, Iranian films make extensive use of documentary techniques, non-professional actors, and long shots of nature. These techniques highlight realistic life situations and capture the raw beauty of untouched landscapes.

Films like *The Children of Heaven* and *The Colour of Paradise* showcase urban, rural, and desert scenes enveloped in a thin layer of black and grey, with the muted tones and somber narratives complementing each other. Iranian children's filmmakers excel at working with non-professional actors, whose innocent and unpolished performances have a raw, emotional impact on the audience. Their simple, genuine portrayals of life deepen the viewer's sense of immersion, enabling them to connect with the characters and emotions on a more personal level.

THE EMBODIMENT OF ETHNICITY IN IRANIAN CHILDREN'S FILMS

According to the French philosopher Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, race, age, and environment are the three fundamental elements that shape art (Taine, H, 2024). The influence of race on art manifests not only in content and form but also in profound aesthetic rhythms. It is precisely because each race has its own unique art that different racial groups often produce distinct spiritual connotations and artistic temperaments. As an ancient civilization, Iran takes great pride in its Persian heritage, having preserved both the Persian language and its cultural identity. Despite the Arab cultural influ-

ence that led the Persians to abandon the Zoroastrian faith, they never relinquished their Persian culture and language. For the Iranian people, Islam, as a comprehensive system of beliefs and teachings, has deeply shaped their individual and collective consciousness, becoming central to their culture and way of life. The history of Iran is rooted in Islamic civilization, which has merged with Persian culture, creating a unique blend that defines Iranian identity. It is this combination of ancient Persian glory and Islamic faith that gives Iranians their national identity, characterized by persistence, sincerity, and kindness.

Majid Majidi is one of the most renowned contemporary Iranian filmmakers, whose works have been nominated for and received awards at international film festivals. In 1998, his film *The Children of Heaven* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and grossed nearly ten million dollars at the U.S. box office. This marked a historic moment as the first Iranian film ever nominated for an Oscar, while also setting a new box office record for Iranian film at the time. The film tells the story of a poor Iranian brother and sister and a pair of small shoes, exploring the complexities of family bonds and the emotional weight of kinship. It highlights the inherent goodwill of humanity found in the lives of the impoverished, reflecting the struggles and resilience of ordinary people.

Multi-Layered Presentation of Iranian Culture

Any art form loses its vitality, or even its essence, when detached from the historical and cultural context that nourishes it. As a medium of storytelling and documentation, film is particularly inseparable from the humanistic soil that fosters its growth. In *The Children of Heaven*, there is a pivotal moment where Ali, initially aiming for third place to win sneakers, unexpectedly wins the championship. In a moment of sadness and despair, he removes his worn-out sneakers and dips his bruised and bloodied feet into a pond. As he does so, a group of red goldfish swims over and gently brushes against his feet. This scene is a deliberate choice by the director, who used it to showcase Iranian culture. In an interview, Majid Majidi explained, Goldfish are an important element in Iranian culture, symbolizing life and vitality. During the Iranian New Year celebrations, we always set up a *sofreh haft-seen* table, which includes a goldfish. Including it in the film conveys this positive wish (Dönmez-Colin, G, 2002).

Religion is a cultural phenomenon and a reflection of human culture. Iran, a nation-state with a secular government, holds Islam in the highest regard, and this faith is clearly reflected in Majidi's films. Islam emphasizes the "Middle Way," advocating for balance in all aspects of life, and calls for a society grounded in justice, equality, harmony, and tolerance. In *The Children of Heaven*, these values are subtly woven into the narrative. For instance, the younger sister swaps shoes with her brother to get to school faster, but the shoes don't fit and end up falling into a small ditch. A man from a roadside shop doesn't just watch the children struggle; he grabs a tool and helps retrieve the shoes for the sister, showing a quiet but profound example of tolerance and care, aligned with his religious principles.

Another scene illustrates this commitment to Islamic teachings. When the father of a family asks his daughter to bring sugar, she responds by saying that her father should take it in his hand. The father's righteous reply, "It belongs to the mosque, and we are only temporarily managing it," reveals the deep loyalty the Iranian people have to Islam and their unwavering belief in the sacredness of shared resources. In these small but meaningful details, the Iranian commitment to Islam and God is made clear, not through overt sermonizing but through simple, everyday actions.

The Portrayal of Human Nature With Truthfulness and Kindness

"Authenticity" refers to a fundamental requirement in artistic creation. The truth in art is not a mere replication of real social life but rather a distilled and refined version of certain aspects of reality, presented in a way that is often more compelling and persuasive than a direct representation of life (Newman, G. E., & Bloom, P., 2012). *The Children of Heaven* places a strong emphasis on the sincerity of human emotions, using its narrative to express the genuine and heartfelt connections between people, highlighting the purity of human nature. The film explores profound, deeply felt relationships, such as the sibling bond between Ali and his sister, the deep familial love they share with their parents, and the true sense of solidarity between Ali's family and their neighbors.

"Goodness," on the other hand, represents the highest ethical standard in artistic creation. While art strives to truthfully depict life, it also carries with it an inherent moral judgment—an evaluation of the world, life, and humanity, with "goodness" serv-

ing as the primary measure. Thus, exceptional works of art often embody humanity's aspiration toward virtue and noble qualities. In *The Children of Heaven*, we see this goodness reflected in the way the two siblings, kind and innocent, discover the girl who "took" the shoes. Despite her impoverished circumstances, they feel compassion for her rather than seeking retribution. Instead of demanding the shoes back, they forge a friendship with the girl.

Through the lens of these children's experiences, the director illustrates the Islamic values of compassion and empathy for the vulnerable. These beliefs are subtly woven into the everyday lives of Iranian children in a fairy-tale-like manner, while also reflecting the optimism and open-mindedness that Iranians aspire to through the children's actions.

Audio-Visual Expression of National Style

The proud legacy of Persia has instilled in Iranians a sense of cultural confidence and self-sufficiency, while the Islamic faith encourages self-discipline and respect. This unique blend of historical pride and religious guidance is one of the reasons Iranian filmmakers are drawn to the documentary style and long-shot filming techniques. These techniques not only capture the true essence of Iran, highlighting the aesthetic richness of Persian culture, but also help establish the distinctive tone and style of Iranian film (Sheibani, K., 2011).

Iranian directors frequently employ non-professional actors and use subjective handheld shots to create a natural, raw acting style that emphasizes realism. Additionally, many Iranian filmmakers believe that long shots offer a more complete depiction of time and space, making them a better fit for the film's narrative and reflecting modern filmic principles. In *The Children of Heaven*, the repeated long shots of the siblings running, and the alternating shots of them running through the streets, serve both as a narrative necessity and as a deliberate stylistic choice by the director. These long takes also introduce a sense of ritualized pacing, reinforcing the film's thematic depth.

In pursuit of authenticity, Iranian directors often use real natural settings and incorporate contemporaneous sound design to create an immersive time and space for the audience, drawing them into familiar life scenarios. This attention to realism fosters an emotional connection, allowing viewers to resonate with the characters' experiences. This

authenticity is a key factor in the smooth international acceptance of Iranian film.

Sound has become increasingly vital in modern film, with a film's realism deeply influenced by its sound, dialogue, and soundtrack. These elements add significant layers to the storytelling, providing both sensory and emotional impact that greatly enhances the audience's experience. The *Children of Heaven* uses lyrical soundtracks to express the characters' inner emotions. In a particularly poignant scene, as Ali participates in the long-distance race, his labored breathing overtakes the ambient sound, while a string composition underscores the tension. This combination of sound and image not only emphasizes Ali's physical struggle but also highlights his resilient character, showcasing his unwavering determination.

THE INSPIRATION OF IRANIAN CHILDREN'S FILMS TO CHINESE FILM

The rise of Iranian children's films has shown the world that, beyond Hollywood's industrially produced blockbusters, national film can still make a significant impact on the global film stage. At the same time, it has reinforced the idea that what is national can also be universal. Amidst the wave of globalization and the growing trend of cultural homogenization, Iranian filmmakers have managed to carve out a distinctive path, creating films that retain their national identity while appealing to global audiences. This approach offers valuable insights for the future of Chinese film, illustrating how filmmakers can maintain their unique cultural characteristics while engaging with broader aesthetic trends.

Focus on the Aesthetics and Creative Principles of Realism

By examining the development of Iranian children's films, it becomes clear that a documentary aesthetic rooted in reality has consistently been a core principle upheld by Iranian filmmakers. Drawing from Iran's deep religious culture and the national psyche shaped over centuries, these films present a unique visual temperament that is both introspective and resilient, pious yet full of life. The documentary style, in this context, has evolved beyond a mere technical choice and has become a central aesthetic feature that Iranian children's films advocate and embody.

This aesthetic not only imparts a distinct identity to Iranian children's films, making them easily rec-

ognizable in the global film landscape, but also sets them apart from Hollywood's industrialized filmmaking and genre-driven narratives. It opens up a distinct and thought-provoking artistic realm in the bustling film industry.

The success of Iranian children's films provides invaluable lessons for global film, especially for Chinese filmmakers who are in search of their own filmic identity. By embracing and deeply exploring the aesthetic and creative principles of realism, filmmakers can focus on the breadth of real-life experiences, strengthen the creation of realistic themes, and capture authentic moments that resonate on a deep emotional level. By developing a form of realism with Chinese characteristics, there is potential to carve out a new avenue for branding and communication in Chinese film. This approach could help elevate Chinese stories into a globally recognized Chinese film brand, which would not only enhance the international influence of Chinese film but also contribute to the transformation of China from a big film country into a strong film country (Tan, Z, & Zhang, Y, 2024).

Telling Stories With Nationality and Universal Beauty

When looking at the broader landscape of Asian and global film, it's evident that Iranian film has not been engulfed or diluted by the dominant commercial forces of Hollywood. Instead, it stands confidently within the global film industry, offering a unique perspective and distinct voice. The vitality of Iranian film can be traced to its deep-rooted local consciousness and creative vision. Like a meandering river, it continuously draws strength and sustenance from the rich cultural soil of its nation. This driving force, originating from the core of Iranian identity, flows subtly yet powerfully through every aspect of the film, creating an emotional connection with the audience.

Iranian filmmakers have consistently chosen to tell their own stories, using the most familiar and intimate methods of expression to convey their joys, sorrows, and moral dilemmas. This rootedness in cultural soil gives Iranian films a sincerity and depth that is nearly impossible to replicate.

In recent years, Chinese film has made significant strides, with impressive films emerging and box-office records being shattered, showcasing a newfound vibrancy. At this critical juncture, Chinese filmmakers are tasked with creating more exceptional films that not only celebrate Chinese national culture but also explore universal human

values. This is not only an artistic goal but also a cultural responsibility. We look forward to Chinese filmmakers continuing to contribute to the high-quality development of Chinese film, helping to build its brand and enhance its international reach.

Improving International Communication and Helping Films Go Global

Film, as a powerful medium of cultural communication, has long transcended mere entertainment. It now serves as a prism, reflecting the spiritual identity of a nation and has become an essential symbol on the global map of human civilization. One of the core elements that sets Iranian children's films apart, contributing to their international success and widespread acclaim, lies in the unique cultural and religious context from which they arise. Iran, a nation both familiar and foreign to many global audiences, naturally stirs curiosity and deep anticipation from viewers around the world.

On one hand, Iranian filmmakers have consistently upheld their national identity in terms of formal language and aesthetic style, ensuring their works bear a distinctively Iranian mark. On the other hand, the themes and deeper meanings often transcend geographical and cultural boundaries, tapping into universal human emotions and values, which grants these films their broad international appeal.

The remarkable international success of Iranian children's films offers valuable lessons for the global film industry, particularly for Chinese filmmakers. We should not be content with merely skimming the surface; instead, we must dive deep into the texture of life, understand the pulse of our times, and find innovative ways to tell China's story. By doing so, we can create exceptional works rooted in rich national cultural heritage that resonate on an international scale. In this way, we can confidently and calmly share China's story with the world, ensuring that the voice of Chinese film is heard, understood, and appreciated by a global audience.

CONCLUSION

Since the late 19th century, Iranian children's films have been profoundly shaped by various factors, including the country's rich social culture, religious beliefs, and the strong currents of nationalism that have defined its identity. The trajectory of Iranian film, particularly after the Islamic Revolu-

tion, is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of its filmmakers, who transformed a struggling film industry into a thriving force. By capturing the essence of Iranian life and values, while also grappling with global cultural shifts, Iranian children's films have gained significant international recognition, winning prestigious awards at major film festivals and helping to elevate Iran's filmic reputation on the world stage.

In the face of globalization, Iranian filmmakers have managed to strike a remarkable balance between staying true to their national identity and creating films that resonate with global audiences. This ability to craft universally appealing stories without sacrificing cultural authenticity offers invaluable lessons for filmmakers worldwide. For Chinese filmmakers, particularly, Iranian film provides a concrete example of how to navigate the complexities of balancing artistic integrity with commercial success. Iranian children's films, with their poignant storytelling and humanistic themes, offer practical insights into how to create films that honor local traditions while appealing to universal human emotions.

By examining the successes and challenges faced by Iranian filmmakers, Chinese film can find a way to cultivate its own unique voice within the global film landscape. Embracing a dual approach that recognizes the importance of both artistic expression and industry standards will enable Chinese filmmakers to preserve and promote their national culture on the world stage. In doing so, Chinese film can carve out a distinctive space in the international film market, contributing not only to the preservation of cultural identity but also to the development of a filmic language that speaks to audiences globally. This vision for Chinese film aligns with the broader goal of enhancing its influence and recognition, moving it beyond the realm of a "film country" to that of a "film powerhouse." The path forward lies in embracing this challenge with creativity, cultural pride, and an open-minded approach to global collaboration.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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