

# A Study of Minor Characterization in “I Am What I Am”

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## Abstract:

“I Am What I Am”, a Chinese animated film, features a group of rural “nobodies” such as A-Juan, A-Mao, A-Gou and a middle-aged uncle Xian Yu Qiang, and reveals the lives of nobodies. Behind the storyline of the pursuit of traditional cultural lion dance is the emotional appeal of the nobody for dignity and loves. The dramatic performance in the animated film reflects the social phenomenon of left-behind children and urban workers under the rapid social and economic development.

## Keywords:

I Am What I Am, Nobody, Left-Behind Children, Lion Dance

## 1. Introduction

The animated film “I Am What I Am” revolves around the lion dance, introducing the inspirational story of A-Juan, A-Mao and A-Gou to learn the art from their teachers. In the film, left-behind children A-Juan, companions A-Mao A-Gou, give up the dream of the lion king salty fish strong, they are “we”.

## 2. “I Am What I Am” is a Sharp and Vivid Portrait of a Small Group of Characters

A-Juan is a sloppy looking boy with long hair like a girl because he is frail and sick. We can see from the details of the movie that A-Juan is a smart child. For example, when A-Juan and his grandfather were eating, there were many awards posted on the wall, and when his parents called him, they always asked him to study hard, and when he ran with his master a lot of Li Bai's poems came out casually. And under this wisdom, he also has a responsible and responsible heart. When her father came home from an injury, A-Juan immediately gave up her dream of lion dancing for many years in order to bear the burden of the family, and packed her bags and went to work in a big city. With a kind heart and a sense of responsibility, he took over the burden of the family and made the audience feel the hearts of the audience. When he left, he said to his mother, “You don’t have to worry about money, I have grown up.” After entering the city, A-juan worked several jobs in order to earn a little more money, and lived in the bottom bunk and suffered from all kinds of hardships. Years of practicing the lion dance and the tenacity of the spirit made him persevere. In the film, the kind and

stubborn A-juan struggles at the bottom of the city, reflecting the ordinary people who are struggling for life in the real society. In the end, when A-juan went back and knelt in front of the master with a lion head, this was his respect for the master. During the lion dance, everyone watched him jump on the high pile desperately to challenge Optimus Prime with a foot injury. Everyone was moved by his strength and perseverance. So people turned from looking down on him to admiring and praising him. At this point in the story, the image of this character is very full: the image of a tough boy who is responsible and responsible is also on the paper. From a scum who was bullied at the beginning, he gradually became taller, cut his hair, and exercised his muscles, and his whole body was completely new. With light in his eyes and a path in his heart, the village A-juan in the past has completely turned over.

“A-Mao” “A-Gou” means an insignificant walk-on in Cantonese. There is a line in the movie that says: “How does he know we are called A-Mao and A-Gou.” It shows that the situation of the three people in the main group is actually insignificant, anyone can bully the little people. The word “sick cat” is an everyday colloquialism to describe a person who is frail and sickly on the Cantonese side. A-Mao compared to the other two, non-mainstream hair with necklaces and bracelets, wearing torn pants with a chain around the waist. This is very much in line with the trend of the year sought after dress, plus he always wears flip-flops shaking his legs, an image of not doing his job is shaped. A-Mao crouching shaking legs, encountering opponents into a ball, giving people a “bad” boy feeling. But the A-Mao is also a person of great action, in A-Juan said the group lack of a drum, he immediately acted, pushing the tricycle shouting the horn to pull sponsorship. A-Gou is tall and big, but also a bullied character. When I first met A-Gou, he was wearing a polo shirt that looked like it was left behind by his father and was faded by sweat. He is clumsy and can eat, and he is also a left-behind child, but he wants to ease the burden of his family so he goes to work by hand to make cow pills. In the early days when he did not raise drums, he used his fat stomach as a drum. For the lion dance how simple his idea is, just want to eat a full meal after training.

The name of the master, Salted fish Qiang, is a nickname for the shop owner in Guangdong. For example, there is a strong character in the name of the master, and his occupation is to sell salted fish, so he is called salted fish strong. The owner who sells meatballs has the character Hui in his name, so his nickname is Meatball Hui, and so on. The costumes in the movie are all in line with the reality and aesthetics of that era. The popular elements in the 1970s, the explosive head plus suit pants, belts, watches, and slippers are all must-haves for Cantonese. When A-juan started training the lion dance, he wore classic shoes of Huili. These details all reflected the production team's attention to the authenticity of the story.

### **3. The Emotional Needs of the Minor Characters of “I Am What I Am”**

At the beginning of the movie, A-Juan imitated her movements while watching the lion dance competition, which shows A-Juan's love for the lion dance. But it was his parents who really made A-Juan like the lion dance. In A-Juan's memory, his parents took him to see the lion dance when he was a child. He asked, “What is that?” Dad's answer was: “It is a lion dance, which can drive away the beast of the year, drive away disasters and dispel fear.” For A-Juan, who grew up without his parents, this is one of the few precious memories he has of spending time with them. After his parents went out to work and did not come home for many years, the lion dance was a

way to express his feelings for his parents and his spiritual support. Because the lion dance carries his fond memories, the seed of his love for lion dance is planted in his heart. In the movie, Juan plays a role in promoting the lion dance as an ambassador, heroically saving the “beauty”. The woman’s confident and upright posture deeply impressed the man and successfully awakened the seeds in his heart. Because Juan has always wanted to “turn over a new leaf” once. With the encouragement of Juan’s parents and her desire to go to the big city to see them, the story of learning the art from her teacher came to light.

A-Mao and A-Gou, at first a cat wanted to see a beautiful woman, a dog wanted to manage food. All three are temporarily enlisted according to their own desires, after the lion dance head was destroyed to fight back but also beaten by the black lion dance group, only then really want to prove through the lion dance is not born to be angry. The scene of crying on the rooftop and thinking back to the past when they were bullied and abused, they reached a unanimous goal. With the goal in mind, the effort is the impetus, and this is where the story begins to end. Step into the second stage - worship, regardless of the wind and rain are waiting for the sincere attitude, to follow the two wrong map trekking mountains or to go to worship the insistence of the teacher. Although they doubted the authenticity of the map, they did not give up lightly, but still went to keep trying. They did not complain about each other during the process, and even helped each other, and by this time they began to show the charm of a resilient team.

Salty fish strong, is the best lion dance in the village that year, the wedding is also their own dance. At that time he had light and hope in his eyes, and his wife was also very supportive of his love. But 2000 after China’s rapid development, then the street, although some people selling acrobatics, using traditional culture to make money, but all kinds of has been defined as “not a proper business”. The old man who was drinking at the wedding said, “How much money can a lion dance make?” In those days, everyone was proud of entering factories, doing small businesses, and working in cities to have a stable income. Slowly in the general environment, selling art is not profitable. Salted fish strong life after the change of profession, although rich, but put down the love of salted fish strong, but also really become a “salted fish”. Salty fish strong just began to collect salted fish, with a bamboo basket can also come on a lion dance, which shows that he has not put down the love of lion dance over the years. Afterwards, impressed by Ah Juan Ah Cat Ah Dog, stealing to teach them the lion dance because of fear of the master mother Ah Zhen angry. The master's mother, Ah Zhen, saw Master Salty Strong secretly teaching Ah Juan their lion dance practice, and began to be unbearable at heart. Watching her beloved regain his luster because he regained his teenage hobby, Ah Zhen chose to let go and fully support him to pursue his dream. Zhen recalls the story of the year when it was Salty Strong who was doing the lion dance at their wedding. The family was extremely mocking about it, but Precious kept speaking up for her beloved, saying he was exceptionally good and was proud of him for being a lion dancer. After Zhen agreed to teach him the lion dance, she went to deliver salted fish herself and was told by customers that Salty Fish Keung was not doing his job, she did not complain or cry just silently supported. This is salty fish strong and Zhen way of expressing love, since the ancient Chinese expression of love is more subtle. They told me with their actions, the love between husband and wife is not necessarily intense, but must be mutual protection. This simple and subtle love, in all the trivial sublimation out.

#### 4. The Cultural Pursuit and Realistic Reflection of the “Little People” Group

“I Am What I Am” incorporates two other layers of expression, one in the visual experience to give out one of the best in the history of national comics, and the other in the core of expression, reaching a depth that most domestic realistic live-action films can not reach. These two layers are the traditional Chinese lion dance culture, and the issue of foreign workers, small-town youth, urban-rural differences are explored. Juan’s love of lion dance is actually hinted at in the opening scene of the movie and Juan’s memories. First of all, the lion dance, from the beginning of the flow of ink animation viewers have been told that the lion dance is a traditional Chinese cultural treasure, especially in the Guangdong region is every person can not erase the muscle memory engraved in the bones. The film opens with an excellent vaudeville-like lion dance performance, allowing the audience to be immediately caught into the world of the screen. The huge lion’s head in the main red color, decorated with various beautiful decorations and big flashing eyes, seems to glow with a real vivid life under the control of the lion dancer. From the training to the rooftop solo dance, and then to the final lion dance competition, the lion in Ah Juan’s hands was seen to gradually become one with the other lions as her skills and emotions improved. In the lion dance competition, the lions have different styles because of the different personalities of the contestants. The lion dance is divided into north and south, the northern lion is mainly realistic, while the southern lion is mainly realistic, the southern lion is also known as “waking lion”, the Foshan region in Guangdong is the most famous waking lion. About the lion color distinction is actually the same as the face, understanding the lion dance culture can be more understanding role. The red lion of the main group represents Guan Yu, who is clumsy but loyal and steadfast. The allusion to Guan Yu’s passing through five hurdles and beating six generals corresponds to the story line of the main group from the beginning as a sick cat, overcoming physical weakness step by step to a small achievement, and then successfully getting the embroidered ball in the national competition. They overcame five hurdles and cut down six generals, displaying the spirit of Guan Yu to the fullest. The black lion in the village represents Zhang Fei, who is originally brave and aggressive in nature, exactly the same as the black lion lion head. Whether at the beginning and the female Ajuan fight for the red packet, or the audition ruthlessly tripping contestants to the competition to showcase talent, these can show the spirit of Zhang Fei.

The realistic topic is explored. A-Juan is an ordinary Cantonese teenager whose parents work outside the home and have been frail and sick since childhood. A-Mao and A-Gou, from Lu Xun’s work “My First Master”, which means “children who are easy to raise”, are no better than A- Juan, the same mediocre youngsters from the lower class. Before contacting the lion dance, their eyes were lifeless, as if they could see the end of life at a glance. This is actually the group of people who have lost their voices in domestic film and television dramas, most of which focus on first-tier cities. China’s population of 1.4 billion, first-tier cities are still a minority group, before the release of a set of data show that the size of the country’s Internet users nearly 1 billion, the number of people with a monthly salary of more than 5,000, less than 30%, the rest of that 70% is the majority of us. And foreign workers, rural left-behind children pay even less attention. As an urban dyslexic, Ah Juan is frustrated with the difficulty of integration into the city and the sense of wandering without family and friends in a foreign country. Because of her lack of professional skills, she has to enter

the cheap labor market, which is highly substitutable, and the 2020 Migrant Worker Inspection Survey shows that the majority of migrant workers are still working in manufacturing, construction and an increasingly diverse range of service industries, such as factories, construction sites, assembly lines, logistics and other manual industries. They form the basic plate of society that can live normally, but they are repeatedly neglected as the basic plate. Yet this basic plate is so huge that the “2020 Migrant Worker Monitoring Survey Report” released by the National Bureau of Statistics shows that the total number of Chinese migrant workers will be 285.6 million in 2020, accounting for more than 30% of the entire working population. But it will be found that they hardly appear in our vision, and this huge group appears so transparent. Not being able to use social media skillfully to voice their opinions has led them to gradually lose their role in the Internet as a voice depression of the times. But *Lion Boy* focuses on these people, showing us their lives after the dramatization, seeing their longing for life, and more suffering and helplessness that no one may notice. This makes the kernel of the film, is no longer a simple story of a young man turning over a new leaf, but to add a more profound sense of reality.

## 5. Conclusions

Technically and graphically, the special effects of “I Am What I Am” have some regrets. But he also has a good place to do, in some scenes there is a kind of trance into the real world, can not tell whether it is animation or the feeling of the actual shooting. This is where the “I Am What I Am” in the national comic breakthrough, he made a rare smoke and mirrors in the national comic. The formation of fireworks, one is the need for the director art team to really go deep into the streets of Guangzhou to capture those details that need to be experienced first-hand to appreciate. The second is the need for the technical team to put more effort into the construction of the film's light and shadow on top of the sun shining on the characters, the golden light as if the sun really rose in the world of the screen. The lion dance scene in the backlighting of the lion's head style, each hair has a real prop general texture, all this creates those impressive screen moments. The intimate rural scenery of Chenjia Village, the city of Guangzhou with its tall buildings resembling a steel jungle, and the breezy final game, make the audience confused whether it is a real shot or animation. The story of the lion boy is a tale of a young man's salty turnaround, with the traditional Chinese lion dance culture, rare realistic references, and excellent animation technology into one film.

The main characters of the film are A-Juan, A-Mao and A-Gou, and the story is set in a modern city and countryside, with the core elements locked in the folklore lion dance and the characters positioned as ordinary workers. The originality of “I Am What I Am” is worthy of praise, of course, there are many elements of Stephen Chow's films, which is a typical tribute, and there is a high degree of fit between Stephen Chow's films and the place where the story takes place, Guangdong itself, especially many of the qualities of ordinary people in Stephen Chow's films about persevering in their dreams and struggles are also very close to the plot of “I Am What I Am”. Standing on the rooftop, young A-Juan picks up the lion's head and starts his own solo dance with the exciting music, from rusty and stuck to flowing, from the quiet night to the rising sun, the whole city from sleep to awakening. The montage of urban life that follows symbolizes the film's transition from a teenage coming-of-age to a truly realistic context. This solo dance uses the unique rendering of a song and dance film to visualize the transformation of A-Juan's persona from a

lion-dancing teenager with dreams in his heart to a laborer who takes on the burden of his family overnight. After a series of self struggles and choices, the young Ah Juan comes to the final round. It was a showdown between two separate teams, with the other team ending with a set of almost perfect moves, and Juan and Cat jumping to the finish line on thin ice would have been a perfect ending. But Juan looked at the symbol of the unscalable peak of the Optimus Prime in front of him, hesitated for a moment to leap into a lion, and the music of “Do not bully the poor” played to end the film. This ending gives people an unexpected surprise, the plot of the trope will let Ah Juan transformed into a lion boy successfully climbed to the impossible peak, salted fish turn around from then on to the right path in life. A counter-route might have been written so that Juan did not succeed in climbing to the top and lost the game to continue his working life. But the lion boy both did not choose, it chose to end abruptly at the climax with the pause in the rhythm of the music. When the music starts again shoot on the title of the film, A-Juan finally stood or not on the Optimus Prime important, but also does not matter. This atypical way to end a movie is relatively rare in China, most screenwriters seem to have a lot to say as long and tedious, which can be extremely impactful ending, and the lion boy has such courage is very surprising. Juan finally finished the game and returned to life after the glory. This is a reflection of our ordinary people.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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