

# Ancient for the Present: Analyzing Traditional Cultural Elements and Unique Modernity in Contemporary Animation Films

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**Abstract:** Entering the 21st century, as global cultures entered a new stage of intermingling, Chinese animation also rode the fast train of the times into a new stage of development, in which Chinese animation pushed the boundaries, from characterization to the cultural core of the story background, Chinese animation emerged as modernity culture wrapped in traditional Chinese culture, the two complement each other and together contribute to the narrative of storytelling expression. This paper takes a typical Chinese animated film between 2016-2023 as the object of study, and conducts theoretical research on Chinese traditional culture and the unique culture of modernity in animation narrative.

**Keywords:** Component; Chinese Animation Film; Chinese Traditional Culture; Modern Civilization.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of the rapid development of China's cultural consumption market, compared with the western cultural industry, especially the European and American cultural industry, China's cultural industry is in a late stage. Although the international discourse power is also in a relatively inferior state, China is still committed to finding a way out for the development of cultural industry.[1] The animation film industry has steadily increased its share in the cultural industry, and the integration of the upstream and downstream of the industry chain, all-age development and IP feature design have become the development trend of domestic animation in recent years. In recent years, Chinese animated films have been keen to take mythological stories as their creative subject matter, use modern civilization and culture as a strong agent, use the past as the present, create reflections on present-day value issues in the adaptation of classic characters and classic stories, perfect the narrative vein of thematic expressions, fuse many expressions that appear to be traditional Chinese characteristics, but actually wrap and present connotations of expressions that are unique to modern times, and enrich the Chinese It is a rich source of innovative artistic expression in Chinese animation films. This paper is a systematic analysis of typical Chinese animated films after 2016, not only to analyses the expression of elements of Chinese animated films in recent years from the perspective of multiple scripts, but also to explore the connotation of its traditional and modern expressions with unique research value at a time when the narrative framework of animation is diversified.

## 2. Local Animation Industry Development

Established in 1918, the Active Film Department of the Commercial Press was a relatively large-scale department of self-financing film production of China's national bourgeoisie at that time. In the early stage, it insisted on the idea of "film is an educational tool", which brought profound influence to

the development of Chinese animation films in the later period. [2] In the 1920s, the first silent animation film "Studio scene" by the Wan brothers opened the curtain on Chinese animation, and the first feature-length animation film in Asia "The Princess of Iron Fan" in the 1940s had a profound impact on the development of Chinese animation. The perfect western animation system and production technology for the rapid development of Chinese animation provided a new creative idea. In 1956, the first Chinese animated film "The Monkey King" entirely created and produced locally was successfully released, marking the beginning of the independent creation of Chinese animated films and becoming a pioneer of Chinese animated films. It was not until the 1980s that China's reform and opening-up policy brought new opportunities for the development of Chinese animation films, and Chinese animation films began to recover. Some excellent animated films such as Little Tadpoles Look for Their Mother were released. From 2015 to the present, under the country's strong call for establishing cultural self-awareness and self-confidence, the academic community has actively explored the creation path of domestic animation films, making it clear that the research on the development of Chinese animation films should deeply integrate the values of oriental aesthetics and the ideas of modern society, focusing on the construction of aesthetics and the profound expression of cultural connotations based on traditional cultural elements. The domestic animation film "Big Fish & Begonia", released in July 2016, earned RMB565 million at the box office. Nowadays, in the face of so many animation production platforms, it is undeniable that whether it is two-dimensional animation production or three-dimensional animation production, advanced animation production software can help animators provide creative inspiration in the creation process. [3] In 2023, the country officially entered the post-epidemic development stage. In order to stimulate the vitality of the cultural market players and promote the cultural digital development strategy, during the Spring Festival, "Boonie Bears: Guardian Code" and "Deep Sea" were the first to hit the big screen, entering a new era of development of Chinese animation films, adopting a

more multi-dimensional form of story expression, with the emotions of the characters and story lines expressed in a richer content.

### **3. Deconstructing Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements and Unique Modernity in Animated Film Texts**

In the construction of the textual framework of contemporary animated films, traditional culture as a textual carrier presents the medium and framework of modernity, integrating traditional cultural elements, core values, traditional habits and modern social concepts, personal destiny grasp and other issues, with both the embodiment of traditional cultural connotations and the emotional experience of modernity, reflecting the characteristics of the long history of Chinese culture, but also reflecting the development of the times. It also shows the breaking and reorganization of people's thoughts, the problems of modern society, and the future of cultural development under the background of the development of The Times.

#### **3.1. The Convergence of Traditional and Modern Civilizations**

Chinese traditional culture is vast and profound, and the inheritance of excellent Chinese traditional culture is a national responsibility. The Opinions on Implementing the Project of Inheritance and Development of Excellent Chinese Traditional Culture issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council put forward that: "In-depth excavation of the connotation of the value of excellent Chinese traditional culture, further stimulating the vitality and vigour of excellent Chinese traditional culture". In recent years, Chinese traditional culture has become the narrative tone in the creation of many Chinese animated films, with numerous animated films adapted from mythological stories, and the expression of cultural connotations has changed from a single ancient civilization to a new civilization combining the ancient and the modern. In the excellent traditional Chinese culture, the ancients divided the elements that constitutes everything in heaven and earth into five energy forms, namely, gold, wood, water, fire and earth, and there is no shortage of modern creations that use the five elements of yin-yang to represent the attributes of the characters in the play. Water and fire are often two material forms that are mutually exclusive, with water extinguishing the flames of fire and fire repelling the softness of water. Zhu Rong fire family and Chi Song Zi water family work together to evacuate the characters from the danger zone and defend the clan. The ocean and the fire intermingle to help demonstrate although Chun lives in paradise, breaking through the limits and trying his best to reach earth in pursuit of freedom, and finding the answer to his own quest in the endless theory of the reincarnation of life between Buddha and Taoism. In the new stage of rapid development of digital technology, the team of "Deep Sea" is brave enough to research new digital media technology, using traditional Chinese ink painting as the form of expression and creating a new 3D animation form with vivid colors and rich colors, creating a richer effect experience and giving Chinese ink painting a powerful live. It provides a new way of expressing traditional culture.

Chinese civilization has a long history, and in traditional

opera the roles of characters are divided into Sheng (male role), Dan (female role), Jing (painted face), Chou (clown), each with its own basic fixed characters and performance characteristics. It has the character characteristic that can distinguish good from bad and right from wrong. In Realm of Terracotta, the character setting of General Xia Hou, from the beginning of the positive image of bravery, eliminating disasters for the people, to the end of the negative image of selfish interests, ignoring the world, integrates the camouflage and complexity of modern social humanistic concepts. The Legend of Hei is known for its minimalist art style but brings the audience an immersive and healing journey, exploring the world with self-feelings under the broad heading of man and nature, and forming the idea that there is not absolute good and evil in the world, and that there are two sides to everything, and that one has to make appropriate judgments based on one's own feelings and perceptions. In Zhuangzi's "Theory of Homogeneous Matter", it is said that "Heaven and earth are born with me, and all things are one with me, and heaven and human are one." In traditional mythology and philosophy, heaven and earth and us are born of the great use of the Tao mind, everything and us are the same essence and there is no difference between human and me and everything. To find out the nature and the nature of self is put forward by reflective thinking. The core spirit of modern critical thinking includes truth seeking, justice, questioning and reflection. Critical thinking, as a highly sensitive way of thinking, helps us to find the root cause of problems and get to the best solution to them. The animated film Deep Sea depicts Shenxiu meeting a deep-sea Hotel, she passed an ancient archway. On the front it reads "You are finally here." and on the back "See your fortune ", while in ancient legend, there is a couplet in hell with the horizontal line: "You are finally here." The most famous pair of ghosts in folklore are the Black and White ghosts. On the official hat of the Black Impermanent are the words 'Peace under Heaven' and on the official hat of the White Impermanent are the words 'See your fortune'. Shenxiu are trapped in the whirlpool which are used to lay the groundwork for the subsequent development of the plot of ego-struggle, as well as a reflection of self-contradiction struggle to find herself in the whirlpool of dreams.

#### **3.2. Traditional Clan Concept and Modern Individualism**

The characters in the animated film "Big Fish & Begonia" are set in a diverse characterization of traditional filial piety, clan values and the embodiment of modern personal ideals. Chun's parents are conservative in their family values, while Chun's characterization is characterized by a highly modern individualistic setting in which she insists on doing what she thinks is right. While Chun's grandfather's character in the play changes from the traditional sense of a strict, conservative father figure and follows in reverse the Confucianism's ideology and morality of loving people with benevolence. In the anime, Chun's grandfather said to Chun, "As long as your heart is kind, right and wrong are other people's business, you follow your heart, and grandpa will turn into a begonia tree and support you forever along with grandma." In the play, Chun is portrayed as a supporter of Chun's pursuit of happiness and freedom, and Confucius promotes the idea of "benevolence", which aims to warn people to love people and to treat others around them with love.

As an animated film to promote the lion dance in the south of the Five Ridges, "I Am What I Am" showcases its spiritual core in the form of a small but big picture. The spirit of never giving up, daring to fight, and fearless against all odds. The Realm of Terracotta is an oriental masterpiece based on the Terracotta Warriors, the eighth wonder of the world, and showcases classical Chinese culture. "Meng Yuan, the protagonist of the play, firmly believes in the spiritual connotation of "only I can define who I am" and pursues justice and peace. In the early stage, Meng Yuan's goal was to become a fearless general like Xiahou. Until the secret of Xiahou's "success" was discovered, Xiahou did not hesitate to throw the world into chaos for his own interests. In contrast, Meng Yuan did not blindly pursue his "idol", but pursued the truth, protected his "enemy" and people and safeguarded the peace of the world.

The animated film New Gods: Yang Jian comes as a surprise to countless mythology fans. It was released in the summer of 2022, with a total box office of 550 million yuan, ranking among the TOP10 domestic animated films in the film history, and gradually released overseas from November 4, 2022, and qualified for Oscar competition. It takes the mythic story as the theme, takes the spirit of traditional Chinese culture as the core, expresses new connotation for the revival of domestic animated films.[4] In terms of characterization, Yang Jian is betrayed by his master, Yu Ding Zhen Ren, who, in order to preserve his position and the Jinxia Cave, prevents Mount Hua from being split open, because once the Divine birds are released and the world is in chaos and dynasties are changed, Yu Ding Zhen Ren's honour will no longer exist. Yang Jian's character embodies the collective righteousness of the people of the world, accelerating the reunification of the world and fighting for the common goals and interests of the world.

### 3.3. Tradition and the Transformation of Reality in the Exchange of Material Desires

The culture of exchange has a long history of development in China. In primitive societies, people used barter to exchange the materials they needed, sometimes limited by the type of materials used for exchange, and in modern societies, the emergence of money has become the medium of exchange, and the culture of exchange has always been alive and well in human society. In the plot of *The Big Fish & Begonia*, Chun will exchange half of her life for the soul of a boy with a spirit woman in the pursuit of repaying the human boy for saving her life, using the traditional mode of expression of bartering to give the film a stronger sense of mythology and to highlight Chun's sincere feelings for the boy. In *Wind Guardians*, the mother of Shalen, Mei, exchanges wish with a fierce beast, Tao Tie, in order to restore the sight of her son, Shalen, who is eventually turned into a demon in fear of death. In order to save his mother, Long Ming has to go through a lot of trouble to obtain the wind spell and seal the Tao Tie. In the film *Deep Sea*, the ancient legend of the Tang Wuke has always been a symbol of immortality, the Tang Wuke is a good man who has cultivated for ten lifetimes and whose flesh is so precious that it is commonly referred to in Buddhism as the Golden Cicada. In the film "Deep Sea", there is a new expression of desire, customers are keen to eat sea elves, hoping to live forever, lost in the magic world of eating sea elves can live forever.

### 3.4. Traditional and Modern Women's Attitudes Towards Men

Confucius' "Chapter 17 of the Analects: Yang Huo Chapter" mentions that "Only women and villains are difficult to keep; if you are close to them, you will be disrespectful; if you are far away, you will be resentful." Traditionally, in ancient times, "men were the masters of the outside world, women were the masters of the inside", and the strategy of "A woman follows her husband no matter what his lot is." was used to support the career of the husband and to teach the children at home. Women's social place was not high at that time, and they themselves were in the "three obediences" and "four virtues". The three obediences includes obeying the father before marriage, obeying the husband after marriage, and obeying the son after the husband's death. Before a woman is married, she should listen to her parents' teachings. If her husband unfortunately dies first, she should try her best to raise her children to grow up, keep her duty and respect her children's life concept. The four virtues include virtue, appearance, speech and work, which emphasizes women's moral character, women's dignified appearance, women's words in conversation with others and women's way of managing the family. In Han Feizi - Loyalty Filial Piety, it is stated that "A minister serves his king, a son serves his father, and a wife serves her husband." There are also certain rules of obedience between husbands and wives.

The animated film *Green Snake* is created in a modern cyberpunk style, and although the general background of the story is based on the folklore Legend of the White Snake, the use of more modern elements combined with traditional elements is the most significant feature of the film. In the characterization, *Green Snake* undergoes a journey of self-redemption from dependence on men to independence for women themselves. There is a saying in the play: "This world is like the Shura ashram, if you want to cross the disaster, you must make yourself strong first." And self-crossing is an outward expression of self-power. In the early stages of the film, *Green Snake* believes that only a strong man can protect her, while someone abandons her at a critical moment. In the later stages, *Green Snake* learns that only when she is truly strong can she fulfil her obsession and become truly strong. In the *New Gods: Yang Jian*, Yang Jian's mother and his aunt, Yun Hua and Yang Chan, are the traditional images of a gentle and obedient woman who grows up and continues to be a woman for generations to come, and they fit the bill of what many people in ancient society and even in modern times expect of women. In contrast, the *Wushan Goddess*, who expresses the spirit of modern women in their quest for independence, becomes the 'villain' in the play, rebelling against what is taken for granted, against the so-called imperative of obedience and honesty, against the scorn or fame that is inflicted on her. As the divine maiden of *Wushan* says in the play as she caresses the remains of the battlefield, "It is said that King You of Zhou played the lords with fire to win the smile of a beautiful woman, but in the end, he died and his kingdom was destroyed. Women are to blame for everything."

### 3.5. Modern Expression of Traditional Object Imagery

*The Big Fish & Begonia* shows the traditional yin-yang doctrine of the circle of heaven and the circle of earth, demonstrating the architectural design concept of combining

Yin-Yang and complementing static and dynamic. The film vividly restores the traditional elements such as the round building style, the ancestral hall, the well design of yin-yang, the traditional high wall architecture and the green and grey tiles on the roof of the building, reflecting a more solemn looking living environment, a heavily guarded institutional society and layers of confining regulations. Although the clansmen live together in harmony and stability in the land, they are unable to achieve true freedom and their thoughts have long been solidified. In the film "I Am What I Am", "Sacred platform" has been used as a clue throughout the film. In the early stages of the film, "Sacred platform" has always represented the sacred, awe-inspiring and unattainable symbol of the lion dancing culture, while later in the film, the protagonist not only completes the race, but also leaps up and hangs the lion's head on the Sacred platform, indicating that there are mountains beyond the mountains and people beyond the people, and that the challenges in life are higher than mountains. The conquest of ideals and the crossing of difficulties expresses the indomitable spirit of real life, telling the inner nature of the modern spirit under the shell of the traditional cultural story. In the opening scene of *The Realm of Terracotta*, the film establishes Di Hou as a "villain" who wreaks havoc on society, but in reality, Di Hou is a righteous role. Modern society has a certain complexity, the surface is not necessarily really good, the surface of the bad is not necessarily really bad, we must look at the essence of the phenomenon.

### 3.6. Traditional Healing for Modern Problems

As mentioned earlier in the film *Deep Sea*, Shenxiu's depression stems from the neglect of children's psychological problems in modern reorganized families. And the real cure of the heart of ginseng is that ginseng really felt the love, warmth and love from strangers, felt the warmth of home in the deep-sea hotel, and harmonious family atmosphere. The traditional concept of "family and harmony" gives Shenxiu a strong vitality inside. In Shenxiu's dream world, she struggles to fight her way out of her bondage, to love those who love her, to save those who save her, to stop being inferior and weak, but to become a brave and fearless courageous person.

### 3.7. Traditional and Modern Presentation of the Dream World

Eastern aesthetics has a unique cultural heritage, and classic texts such as "Zhuangzi" are full of colourful expressions of traditional aesthetic divinity. Zhuangzi's thought is characterized by a simple materialistic view of nature. In the creation of *A Happy Excursion*, Zhuangzi describes the freedom of the dream world, the pursuit of his ability to transcend the pain of infinite life and the misery of reality, to have a free and happy realm, to cultivate a spirituality that belongs to, and a vast spiritual world full of infinite natural harmony. In the film "Deep Sea", the story unfolds in a dream world, in which Shenxiu feels the kindness of people, the warmth of the world, the meaning of her existence, the redemption of herself, and emerges from the dream world with a true understanding of love, of the preciousness of life, and of the preciousness of every laugh she has. In the twentieth century, the psychologist Sigmund Freud said that dreams are the fulfillment of unconscious desires and childhood desires in disguise. In the depths of Shenxiu's mind, the attachment to home and the desire for love are what she subconsciously wants. The subconscious

hides our traumas, our impulses and desires that are not allowed by the rules of society, the ocean beneath the iceberg, which is dumb but out of reach. According to the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, beneath this ocean, there is the deepest layer, the sea bed, which is the sum of the traces of all human life over two million years, the collective subconscious. For the first time, the interpretation of dreams tells people by Carl who were once ignorant and full of doubts that a dream is a real dialogue with one's inner self, a process of learning from oneself, another life that is close to one's heart. In the hidden dream world everything seen and felt, breath, tears, pain and joy, is not all meaningless. [5].

### 3.8. The Intention of Presenting the Typical Object "Lamp" in Chinese Animation Films

When human civilization grew, light came with it. From natural fire to candles, from crude stone lamps to bronze lamps, from fine porcelain lamps to modern electric lamps, the evolution of lamps reflects the development of different societies. As a tool, lamp gives people the hope of life, but at the same time, the use of lamp in movies and TV dramas also has certain intentionality. The image of traditional lanterns to the east is related to religious folk culture, such as the dragon lantern, the Eight Imens crossing the Sea lantern, etc., with a certain mythological color, its deep connotation is placed in the outside world's pursuit of peace and smooth, happy life of the deification force. [6] In animated films, the existence of the spark gives the story a deeper cultural connotation. The story of "Realm Of Terracotta" is set in the underground city of figurines of the Qin Dynasty, where there is no sun and the figurines are illuminated by creatures called "glowworm", Kongming lanterns and various kinds of lights designed with traditional elements, including bronze tree lights and animal lights. The design of the bronze lanterns in the play is based on the "bronze sacred tree", "bronze bird" and "bronze ox-shaped cylinder lantern of the Han Dynasty", although the role of Qin Shi Huang does not appear in the film, it is not difficult to see the prosperity of Qin Dynasty at that time through the shape expression of the lamp, and the effect of the glowworm creating light also enhances the ambiguity between Meng Yuan and Shi Yu. Kongming lanterns, also known as wishing lanterns, were mostly used for military purposes in ancient times, but in modern times they are mostly used for praying for good fortune, for good weather and for a happy year.

The difference is that in *Big Fish & Begonia*, the red lanterns are also depicted, as they contain a festive atmosphere of joy, warmth and happiness. At the same time, red has seriousness and solemnness. "Red lantern" in the film is a tool to illuminate people's lives. It is also a symbol of the light that guides Chun to the path ahead and to the light in his heart. While depicting the festive atmosphere of the 'others', the images are structured to convey the strict rules and regulations of the clan.

In the animated film *New Gods: Yang Jian*, Yang Jian's mother, Yun Hua, is a saintly mother who guards the earth and protects the peace of the world, but her great love prevents Yang Jian from enjoying his mother's love at an early age, and Yang Jian's longing for her inspires him to "save his mother". "If you miss me, just look at the lights in the world and you will see me." Yunha said. At this point, the lights of all the homes are no longer the lights that light up people's daily lives, but a symbol of peace in the world, a symbol of

the good life of the world, and a symbol of the great love that spreads across the earth.

In the fantasy adventure story between two generations of uncle and nephew in "New Gods: Yang Jian", "Lotus lamp" is an important clue in the story of lotus lantern and Yang Jian joining hands to save Chenxiang's mother. The lotus has four virtues, one fragrant, two pure, three soft and four lovelies, as Zhou Dunyi of the Song Dynasty once said in his "Ode to The Lotus Flower": "I admire the lotus grows and blooms in the mud, yet neatly and clean out of it. I admire the lotus glows in the drop of water the yet graceful seen. I admire the lotus she has straight rachis inside yet branchless. A mysterious fragrance as the light in the mist and bristled touched in the water. Can only be admired yet not be dishallowed." [7] The Lotus Lamp carries the beautiful spiritual qualities of the lotus flower and represents the artistic realm of innocence, simplicity and prayer for goodness. The Lotus Lamp is a treasure of the altar of God, shining on the whole world, and it is with the power of the Lotus Lamp that Chenxiang obtains in the film to repair the broken Lotus Lamp and guard Mount Hua, successfully rescuing his mother. Originating from the spiritual connotation of saving the mother by splitting the mountain, he dared to contend with the supreme and inviolable power, the lotus lamp was also crowned with a symbol of filial piety, and its story connotation also extolled the virtue of "filial piety" in Chinese culture. In modern times, people often offer the lantern as a gift to their elders as a sign of respect and affection for them.

In "Big Fish & Begonia", a river lantern scene is shown at Chun's coming-of-age ceremony, a custom that is part of the traditional Chinese festival of the Ghost Festival. In the I Ching, seven is the number of changes, the number of rebirths. In the I Ching: "Repeating its path, the seven days come and go, and the heavens act." On the day of Chun's coming-of-age ceremony, he turns into a big fish and goes to earth to perform his rituals for a time limit of seven days, which is the time limit for one reincarnation of life to be reborn again, and this proves that the 'other' tribe to which Chun belongs are ghosts, and on this day the gates of ghosts open wide and a hundred ghosts walk at night, and new life occurs on earth with the encounter of mortal boys, Chun breaks the rules of heaven and breaks the clan and chooses to do what he thinks is right, gaining a new life.

#### **4. Animated Film Presents Traditional Chinese Culture in a Modern Style Significance**

In the past eight years, Chinese animated film texts have presented a composite, diverse and hybrid artistic design. Chinese culture has always been rooted in the hearts of the nation, and the development of the new era has created unlimited vitality for the creation of Chinese animated films, combining modern elements of design, thinking and aesthetics to present a new generation of creative thinking in animation texts that is unique today in combining tradition and modernity. Chinese traditional culture and unique modernity culture in the development of history, are giving us the answer to think about modern society, there are both conflict and tolerance between them, traditional aesthetics of classical culture for modern people to solve modern problems, has a certain ideological influence and consciousness influence, contemporary typical Chinese animation film wrapped modern story in traditional cultural elements or

traditional folk culture. It not only has an ideological collision with traditional history, but also sees the development of people's ideas, consciousness, ethics and other dimensions under the changes of the times in the long river of history. In today's globalized world, people's ideas and codes of conduct are influenced by different cultures, and the idea of "using history to understand reason and morality" allows us to look at everything in the world from a dialectical perspective. Chinese animated films have undoubtedly provided great emotional value and spiritual power for the present world, and viewing the dynamics of society from the perspective of animated films is one of the ways people think about history. "Li Ji University" said, "From the head of state down to the common people, everyone should take self-cultivation as the fundamental. If this is fundamentally disrupted, it is impossible to do the rest well." Self-cultivation to benefit people is the key guide to Chinese animation films unique to the times, and for animation creators, cultivating character is fundamental, story creation has to promote Chinese culture, Clear narrative focus, technology dare to break through is the key. The development of culture gives modern society a good background for creation, unique modernity interpretation is the emerging expression of traditional cultural connotation, modernity is the value of the genre under the condensation of the development of the times, unique modernity is the great progress under the silhouette of the development of the times, traditional culture is like a witness to bring modern society its unique charm of artistic value.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In this study, we follow the morphological expression of the cultural context from the Chinese classic animation works and compare the transformation of tradition and contemporary humanistic spirit. The wheel of The Times is moving forward, which does not mean that the traditional ideological and spiritual core does not have research significance, but in the background of the new era, Chinese animation works are used as the medium. The traditional thought and modern unique thought are integrated into the research, and the traditional ancient culture is endowed with new vitality. In Chinese animated films, ideological connotation and object intention still have a great space for research. The fusion of traditional classical roles and modern cultural spirits, and the transfer of emotion and connotation through the beauty of objects, will have greater research value in the future.

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