

# A Comparative Study on the Creative Transformation of Traditional Chinese and Japanese Cultural IP in Animation

-- Taking "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Demon Slayer" as Examples

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**Abstract:** Creative transformation is increasingly being utilized to inherit traditional cultural IP in various fields and nations. In a comparative study of the costume culture, ghost and god culture, and painting style of "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Demon Slayer," this paper finds that the interconnection of cultural components in film and television works, the degree of compatibility with the internal demands of viewers, and its continual binding with traditional culture directly affect the efficiency of traditional cultural IP transformation in the media field. In accordance with the findings of this study, if innovation and change are implemented in the production of works, the effectiveness of Chinese media in disseminating culture and conveying national characteristics and national image can not only be further developed and improved, but traditional culture can also more effectively enter public life and integrate into the context of the times.

**Keywords:** Creative transformation; Cultural inheritance; Cultural IP; Big Fish and Begonia; Demon Slayer.

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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of world culture in recent decades, people's reading habits and leisure systems have gradually entered the era of fast food, thus ensuring the continuous inheritance of traditional culture in a fast-paced society has become a problem that must be addressed in building cultural power. In recent years, animation, with its intuitive and succinct presentation, has garnered widespread acceptance and has become a key means of inheriting traditional cultural IP in the film and television industries.

By applying "creative transformation," the national comic book "Big Fish and Begonia" successfully concluded with \$566 million at the box office in 2016, while the Japanese comic book "Demon Slayer" series topped the ratings several times in 2018. The success of both have benefited from the "creative transformation" of their respective traditional cultural IPs, although the latter appears to be superior in terms of broadcast data. Therefore, this paper will compare and evaluate Chinese and Japanese anime in three aspects: costumes, ghost culture, and painting styles, as well as explore effective methods for the cultural inheritance of Japanese animation works. On this premise, the importance and value of creative transformation in the media model for cultural heritage are examined in order to promote the contemporary and vitality of Chinese traditional culture.

## 2. The Creative Transformation of "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Demon Slayer" under Costume Culture

The costume is a manifestation of human culture and a reflection of the times.[1] In anime, the costume serves as an implicit culture that influences the audience subtly throughout

the process. The Chinese costume culture has a long and strong history and has given rise to a multi-element fusion of costume IP. The secondary creation of traditional clothing IP in anime not only inherits traditional cultural symbols through vision but also allows the audience to build a cultural identity.

The creative transformation of traditional Chinese clothing in "Big Fish and Begonia" combines the background and characteristics of traditional clothing with the characters, avoiding the defect of inheritance in the form of lengthy texts and allowing the audience to understand the significance of the times contained in clothing culture more intuitively. Her styling design, like that of the heroine Chun's, is inspired by the image of female students changing their traditional clothing styles and fighting against feudal constraints during the Republic of China's "civilized new clothes," adding to the zeitgeist of modern women who dare to pursue, as illustrate by the character who dares to break the rules of the underwater world and pursue what she desires on the screen.

In contrast, "Demon Slayer" is more centered on the historical context of the work itself, with direct references to the costume elements of the era. The oni-kiri team's costumes, which are set in the Taisho era, not only portray the diverse fashion of the Japanese and Western eras but also clearly convey historical information to the audience. At the same time, the creators have incorporated various traditional motifs on the hagoromo worn by the main characters on multiple occasions, leaving the audience with a profound remembrance image. In the anime, for instance, Kamado Tanjirou always wears Ichimatsu patterned haori throughout the Edo period, while Agatsuma Zenitsu wears the oldest Japanese fish scale patterned haori.

The costume design of anime characters directly impacts the audience's sense of substitution. Both "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Demon Slayer" make an endeavor to artistically adapt typical apparel IP. However, in "Big Fish and Begonia", in addition to Tsubaki's costumes during the

Republic of China, the creators added dozens of different temporal and spatial dimensions, as well as different styles of clothing, which resulted in the audience being unable to directly capture or be conveyed an accurate cultural message, nor a clear direction for in-depth understanding, thus devoid of real input. "Ghost Slayer," on the other hand, has built its own fantasy world in a historical setting. It strictly confines the character design to the framework of the era and employs cultural symbols constantly to intensify the audience's impression so that it has a clear inheritance direction after watching. In addition, the traditional Japanese clothing IP featured in anime has its wearing foundation in modern Japanese clothing. Apart from the custom of wearing kimonos for festivals such as the Summer Festival, Tengu masks of Urokodaki Sakonji, Fire Man masks of Haganetsuka Hotaru, and fox masks of Sabito are worn at temple fairs. Audiences have been indoctrinated into this type of clothing culture implicitly. "Demon Slayer" can be transformed on this basis and then modified and recreated in combination with the aesthetic tendency of the current people, causing cross-era resonance, thus becoming a tool for the audience to have an in-depth understanding and emotional inheritance of these costumes. Finally, it makes the traditional clothing patterns that were gradually rarely used return to mainstream society to achieve effective transformation and inheritance.

### **3. The creative transformation of "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Demon Slayer" under the ghost and God culture**

The Chinese animation film industry has recently begun to explore classical mythology, and the reproduction of a series of IPs, such as Nezha and Yang Jian, has contributed to the molding of the contemporary "Universe of Enfeoffment to Deities." The creators not only restated and rewrote based on the mythological motif but also extracted a variety of mythological elements that conform to contemporary values, allowing them to be liberated from obscurantism and transformed into mythological IPs that convey the connotation of national culture. The use of animation to inherit traditional mythological IP can not only reproduce ancient myths in a three-dimensional and intuitive way with the help of pictures and sound effects, bridge the time and space gap between modern and ancient fore-world eras, and allow the audience to appreciate the charm of mythology [2], but it can also promote the shaping of high-quality animation works and continue national memory with emerging media models.

"Big Fish and Begonia" quotes heavily from the "Classic of Mountains and Seas" ghosts and gods, and on the basis of aesthetic modification of their original grotesque images, it gives them human images and sentiments, achieving creative metamorphosis in narration and adaptation. For example, the image of Jumang in ancient legends is a figure that " has a human head, a bird's body, and a square face, wears blue garments and oversees the germination of trees and the growth of all things in spring. Based on the aesthetic demand of the audience, "Big Fish and Begonia" retains the elements of green clothes and managing the growth of all things in the world, and transforms the half-bird body into a design with a swallow crown on the head and birds around the body, thus metaphorically reflecting the characteristics of a bird, which leads that the overall image of the character retaining the

traditional charm while conforming to the modern image of the gods. In addition, as the underwater world gradually collapses, the gods who overlook the human world in the original text demonstrate the brilliance of human nature in the face of disaster - Chisongzi rides a crane to search for his lost companion in the rapids, the Phoenix unconditionally protects Chun, and Jumang uses up his divine power to build a vine bridge to escape the disaster. These human actions are imposed on the mythological characters, reconstructing the old worldview of ghosts and gods, increasing the likelihood that traditional IP elements of ghosts and gods, which were previously isolated from the public, will have an emotional resonance with the audience, prompting their own reinvention and dissemination.

The image of ghosts and gods in Japan persists more in Japanese yokai culture. After the Heian period, yokai progressively established a belief in the minds of Japanese individuals and began to cohabit with humans. By taking advantage of Japan's huge yokai cultural IP and the coexistence view held by the public, "Demon Slayer" constructs a unique worldview of ghosts and gods based on the "Hyakkiyakou Drawing Scroll" and diverse folklore. The "ghost" that appears in the chapter "Tired" of Nada Spider Mountain is designed with the same attribute of the yokai "Earth Spider" and "Nephila". The former has a ferocious personality, eats people, and is often found in the mountains; the latter is a lovely woman by day and transforms into a spider at night. Tired's image of feeding on humans, having an eccentric personality, inhabiting the mountains, and having a gorgeous appearance corresponds nicely with these qualities. The creators of the anime do not restrict themselves to restoring a single yokai IP, but rather employ the transformation method of screening and grafting traditional aspects to create characters that match the style of the anime, enabling the audience to immerse themselves in the traditional culture. Moreover, "Demon Slayer" effectively integrates ghosts and humans. For example, Tired suffered from ailments during his human life and, in despair, maintained his existence by becoming a ghost. And the sorrow of such ailments is also present in human lives. Ghosts in anime are depictions of people who make poor decisions in the real world and lead miserable lives. Empathy is applied in this shaping to allow viewers to integrate their life experiences with ghosts and generate strong empathy, thereby strengthening the ghost element symbols in the creative transformation so that the traditional ghost and god IP resonates strongly with the audience in terms of emotional rendering.

Anime, as a cultural medium, can portray complicated information and abstract notions [3]. In this manner, traditional Chinese and Japanese ghost and god culture IP has allowed the nebulous ghosts and gods to be interwoven into various facets of human daily life, allowing traditional cultural elements to be inherited and developed indefinitely. Despite the fact that "Big Fish and Begonia" humanizes the gods, the story concept fully distances the gods from the viewers. The gods are not completely detached from their original image and still have a disregard for human life, which forces the traditional ghost and god IP to have an emotional and value confrontation with the audience during the process of communication. In the transmission of cultural information, the audience not only accepts the traditional ghost and god IP that is in line with the present but also suffer from the incomplete transformation of the same IP and the collision of

old and new ideas, which causes them to be unable to understand a complete traditional cultural concept, preventing the concept from being effectively and comprehensively inherited. Furthermore, since traditional ghost and god culture was not an essential component of the Chinese people's cultural life in the past, the masses lack a fundamental grasp of it. Nevertheless, as "Big Fish and Begonia" did not adequately sort out the cultural aspects it transformed when it was created, the audience was unable to accurately comprehend the objects the creators chose to transform when they watched the film. This makes it hard for individuals who are unfamiliar with traditional Chinese mythology to receive useful information, resulting in a cultural shift that is ineffective.

In contrast, Japanese yokai culture has permeated people's lives. Additionally, the public at home and abroad has a fundamental awareness of the traditional IP elements they have modified in works that rely on previously connected themes. The traditional ghost elements chosen by the creators to solve the problem of invalid inheritance are also well-known in Japan, thus the general public is no stranger to them. Therefore, in order to avoid the inability to captivate the public due to the repetitive application of the same traditional elements, "Demon Slayer" has greatly integrated and pieced together the existing traditional cultural IP so that the image design of different "ghosts" has two or three IP elements at the same time. This mode of creation, which allows the audience to maintain freshness while still being able to perceive the colors of traditional culture, has proven to be an effective means of utilizing creative transformation to strengthen the existing cultural symbols in national thinking, allowing the traditional Japanese ghost and god elements to be returned in the rolling playback of similar works.

#### **4. The creative transformation of "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Ghost Slayer" in the painting style**

The painting style is the hallmark of a piece, a direct indicator of whether a film or television production bears its own cultural color, and the most creative component of an excellent anime work.[4] At present, in order to cater to the demands of various groups, the painting style of Chinese animation has begun to experiment with adding traditional painting elements to individual interpretations on the basis of flat composition with color blocks, so as to achieve the effect of creative transformation. The painting style incorporates a variety of IP elements such as costumes, scenes, and character designs, all of which have a direct impact on the shaping of characters' representations, the presentation of characters' personalities, and the development of plot rhythm. And it is crucial in assessing if an anime can resonate with the audience at the beginning of its broadcast.

In its publicity and character posters, "Big Fish and Begonia" makes extensive use of traditional ink painting elements and creatively integrates various Chinese painting techniques on top of them, presenting the overall characteristics of traditional Chinese painting with both boldness and beauty, allowing the public to intuitively experience the charm of the ancient style of ink painting. In addition, each character poster uses the technique of "white space". The creator did not add any other aspects to the picture other than the characters themselves, but successfully exploited the characters' demeanor and body language to

leave a lot of room for the audience's imagination. On the basis of the ink painting technique, the artist emphasizes the delicate character with thin lines and accentuates the steepness of the mountain with strong lines in the poster of the deer god's form. Next, the painter utilizes the technique of ink accumulation to smear layer by layer, displaying the light, shade, and ethereal of the character's costumes, and uses the ups and downs of a drape to highlight the characteristics of the Chinese painting of "Wu's band as the wind". The revival of traditional painting in the character posters immediately corresponds to the audience's long-term expectation of Chinese style works, showing the exquisite blend of ink painting and other painting techniques in the grand system of Chinese painting. It incorporates the Chinese painting style, as cultural rhetoric, into the audience's perception of beauty, thus deepening the public's understanding and appreciation of ink Chinese painting. Besides, it opens a new development path for the animation market, which has long been dominated by flat styles, promoting the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture. While the posters continue to express traditional Chinese cultural IP, the painting in "Big Fish and Begonia" film does not apply any traditional Chinese elements, which interrupts the audience's discursive communication with traditional painting culture throughout the viewing period. This terminates the creative transformation in intermittent cultural allusions and leads the audience to abate their exploration of the innovative transformed works of traditional painting, resulting in the problem of in-depth inheritance.

Numerous studios progressively settled on a single qualitative method of animation over the long-term development of Japanese animation. "Demon Slayer," on the other hand, shattered several years of innovation in the style of Japanese anime painting. It employs the traditional painting method of ukiyo-e in its works in a bold, direct, and unmodified way, presenting viewers with a dynamic ukiyo-e work, awakening the cultural memory of the people, and eliciting a strong response from a large number of Japanese people and even overseas Japanese culture fans. As a traditional Japanese painting style, ukiyo-e has a profound influence on the lines, colors, and character structure of anime works. Although the basic style of "Demon Slayer" is based on a flat composition of color blocks, the swordsmanship and skills of the characters are creative direct references to the colors and lines of the ukiyo-e work "Hokusai's The Great Wave". The moves of each character, such as Kamado Tanjirou's Breath of Water and Vulcan Kagura, Kamado Nezuko's Blood Ghost Technique, and Rengoku Kyoujurou's Breath of Fire, are all directly based on the line style of the water pattern of "Hokusai's The Great Wave". The curved and smooth lines fit the trajectory of the characters themselves, making the battle scenes flow smoothly with the addition of color changes. The "Demon Slayer" makes smart use of traditional painting IP elements. It creatively reflects its own unique characteristics when combined with modern animation and comic style, so that the audience not only detaches from the inherent expression form of past works in the viewing process, but also penetrates and influences traditional culture, which further deepens the audience's appreciation and interpretation of traditional classic works and realizes the innovative inheritance of culture.

#### **5. Conclusion**

As seen from the comparative study of "Big Fish Begonia"

and "Demon Slayer," the creative transformation of traditional culture IP in anime is a two-way street. On the one hand, the transformation of traditional culture infuses more cultural connotations into the creation of animation, resulting in works that are interwoven into history and have the bones and spirit of the nation. On the other hand, as a popular culture, animation revitalizes traditional culture and allows it to obtain new meanings and extension, allowing traditional culture to answer people's yearning for deepening the understanding in their hearts. Nonetheless, in order to avoid invalid transformation and limited inheritance, producers should pay attention to the reciprocal logic of traditional cultural element adaptation, the degree of fit with viewers' inner demands, and the relevance to the core of traditional cultural production while transforming.

In the future, the means to transform traditional cultural IP into creative works will become mainstream. If the transformation of traditional Chinese cultural IPs can be effectively incorporated into works, animation in film and television media can become an essential medium for cultural inheritance as well as a cultural symbol for national image

construction and dissemination. This not only helps to promote the people's attention and absorption of their own culture but also directly transmits distinctive cultural values and national characteristics to transnational moviegoers and enhances the ability of the media to carry out cultural dissemination in the age of globalization.

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