

On the Nationalization Construction and Aesthetic Capacity Cultivation of Chinese Animation

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Abstract: Since the completion of the first independently produced Chinese animated short film "Studio Scene" by the Wan brothers in 1926, which gradually acquired a distinctively Chinese style, to the international acclaim of the first color animated film "Wu Ya Wei Shen Mo Shi Hei De?" in 1955, numerous outstanding animated films such as "The Princess of Iron Fan", "The Monkey King", "Little Tadpoles", and "Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King" have emerged. These works are all characterized by drawing materials from Chinese mythological stories and folklore, and featuring a distinct national artistic style. Collectively, they have forged the Chinese animation style with a sense of patriotism and family values.

Keywords: Chinese Animated Films; The Cultivation of Aesthetic Ability; Nationalization.

1. Introduction

Animation is a symbolic assemblage where artistic mirroring, realistic satire, and technological imagination overlap. In the digital era, animation demonstrates a hyper-realistic imagination seamlessly integrated into reality. The continuous convergence of film and technology not only generates creative means and conditions for imagination but also fully liberates people's subjectivity, intuition, and freedom of expression. The Chinese animation in the new era is undergoing an exploration process of "finding oneself - realizing diverse - expressing oneself".

This article aims to analyze the future trajectory and aesthetic capacity cultivation of Chinese animation from three aspects: imagination, nationalization, and aesthetic construction.

2. Imagination about Creation driven Force and Logical Starting Point

The legendary nature of imagination constitutes the core concept of animation creation. Animation films and short films such as "Big Fish", "Monkey King: Hero Is Back", "Legend of Deification", "White Snake", the "Ne Zha" series, "Yao - Chinese Folktales", the "Boonie Bears" series, and "Oh My School!" represent a diverse aggregation of textual forms and concrete expressions. They draw upon traditional cultural resources as the logical foundation for textual construction, finding a form that suits Chinese national characteristics and embodies a traditional aesthetic style and story type. Behind this lies a subconscious value consciousness and situational regulation, forming an immersive, touching, and imaginative aesthetic effect.

Imagination as a driving force endows animation films with a legendary charm. The key point of "animation" lies in the awareness of "representing movements that do not exist in reality through image media". The products created through this awareness for artistic creation are animation artworks. Animation artworks are received by people through images. When animation images are carried and screened through the medium of film, they become what is known as "animation films".

2.1. Original Imagination

Original imagination can be regarded as the ideological basis and driving force of animated films. Its significance in film narration largely depends on the creative guidance at the narrative level. The most important principle is to break and establish traditions based on the logic of the development of things and the logic of human emotions. In animated works, original imagination can be specifically manifested in cultural expressions such as theme structure, character creation, and landscape presentation.

Original imagination consumption is predicated on the virtuality, assumption, and post-truth status of products in the current global cultural industry. It proposes a thinking framework for cultural products in the post-human or metaverse era, which is highly contemporary. Under the guise of animation, it not only explores the unknown world, such as endless imagination about the past and future, but also reflects on the value of life, such as the relationship between animals and human society and the phenomenon of human alienation caused by modern society. It constitutes an imaginative community that combines philosophical meaning and commercial value.

2.2. Technological Imagination

In contrast to the embellishment and constraints of technology, the lifeblood of an image always lies in human emotions and imagination. The underlying principle of "imagination consumption" at the technological level is invariably human experience and association. Philosophical imagination often stems from the internal tension presented by the image community, that is, the mutual stimulation and achievement between narrative and technology, image and mirror image, scene setting and picture arrangement, which multiplies the cognitive and ideological value of the work.

2.3. Philosophical Imagination

Imagination at the philosophical level is manifested in the lofty significance of the work, which is the objective that creators, receivers, and all types of films should pursue. It can be stated that narrative is the foundation, technology is the wing, and philosophy is the tension. (2)

Myths and legends are the cultural origin and spiritual root

of a nation. Reconstructing the multi-dimensional space-time where humans, gods, and demons coexist in a supernatural way has become a mode of expressing the understanding of the world through animation, thereby constructing a philosophical world of the Chinese people. The primitive and simple view of good and evil in the mythological world has become one of the resources for people to rebuild the moral utopia. The earliest Chinese works on ancient legends and ghost stories include "The Classic of Mountains and Rivers", which not only contain rich mythological thinking, but also provide valuable narrative resources for fantasy films. Historically, the genre of "zhi guai" which mainly focuses on demons and monsters, has never been absent. Tang legends, Song and Yuan story-telling scripts, and Ming and Qing novels... The strange space-time of ghosts, demons, and immortals has ultimately become an inexhaustible source of themes for early films. As a narrative mode that inherits the national aesthetic tradition, legendary narrative has consolidated the existing aesthetic tastes of the Chinese people, creating an extremely free Eastern fantasy system. In animation, a large number of esoteric elements are integrated to reconstruct the prototype symbols of ghosts, foxes, and other strange creatures, and embed the original cultural images with popular culture, including traditional Chinese cultural elements, in an attempt to make them more in line with the spirit of Eastern aesthetics and Chinese philosophy. (3)

3. Methodological Thinking Refers to the "Nationalization"

The core cultural competitiveness of Chinese animation is inseparable from the consistent adherence to "nationalization": that is, an animation creation style with specific themes, contents, and forms of expression. Reviewing the century-long development history of Chinese animation, it can be discerned that the fundamental issue of "nationalization" essentially lies in establishing a Chinese-style animation based on "nationalization". Therefore, it is essential to draw upon the excellent traditional Chinese culture, don't forget the origin. After the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese animated films actively sought inspiration from traditional arts, exploring the possibility of deep integration with various art forms such as paper-cutting, puppetry, and ink-wash painting, and creating Chinese animated films (puppet films) with the core of Chinese painting aesthetics and unique Chinese aesthetic charm. (4) Mr. Te Wei explicitly stated, " Chinese puppet films, like other literary and artistic forms, must possess their own national characteristics. Without a distinct national form and national style, there is no originality, and the national originality of literature and art is the concentrated manifestation of the people's creativity and a sign of the maturity of the literature and art of a certain era and class." (5)

From the perspective of ideological consciousness, "nationalization" calls for our concepts, emotions, and beliefs. It is necessary to clarify the distinctions between "Chinese characteristics", "Chinese cartoon style", and "nationalization": "Chinese characteristics" has a broader inclusiveness, while "nationalization" merely represents the national style. "Nationalization" is not a tangible entity that can be recognized but is gradually constructed and cultivated through culture. For a work, form is a tangible entity through which beliefs are manifested. Only when form no longer bears the responsibility of expressing beliefs will its materialized

shell become a "skin" (outer garment) that can be played with by others because it has lost its soul. The independent significance of form lies solely in this. Some works that merely have a "skin" are not favored precisely because there is no soul beneath that skin. (6)

3.1. Technical Aspects

Whether it is 2D, 3D, CGI, or VR, "nationalization" implies that the "Chinese Animation style" has consistently adhered to drawing on traditional cultural resources in terms of themes and promoting traditional aesthetic styles in terms of presentation. Mr. Lin Niantong, proposed an aesthetic theory marked by "wandering", with the center being the dynamic continuous layout of the hand scroll and the pursuit of mirror-like charm. by integrating concepts such as the artistic conception, scattered perspective, and horizontal scroll painting from Chinese classical aesthetics, In the construction of theoretical expression, it can clearly put forward a "Chinese characteristics" exposition and establish a theoretical discourse based on China. (7) In terms of the manifestation of nationalization, in the design and technical aspects of artistic elements, it is mainly reflected in the visual presentation such as tone design, editing rhythm, music arrangement, the application of ink-wash style, and the creation of characters in a single-line flat coating style. It also encompasses a series of technical means such as ink-wash style, paper-cut style, and puppet style, all of which are hand-drawn and polished frame by frame. Not only has it developed a systematic cultural aesthetic connotation and narrative discourse system in terms of style, but it has also gradually cultivated a traditional national animation production technique with a unique aesthetic glow, astonishing the world. For instance, "Ren Shen Wa Wa", which won the Silver Mermaid Award for Best Children's Film at the First Alexandria International Film Festival in Egypt in 1979, is a paper-cut character animation film, It reflects the greed of the landlords in the old society and the misery of the working people, and demonstrates the philosophy that good deeds will be rewarded with good and evil deeds will meet with retribution. It has a strong paper-cutting style and a unique charm.

3.2. Inner Aspects

For a long time, the Chinese animation school has adhered to the spirit of the Chinese school advocated by Mr. Te Wei, which is " initiate work on the comic style and exploring the path of the national form", telling Chinese people's own stories with Chinese traditional culture and national style. "Nationalization" can be reflected in the adaptation of Chinese classical literature in terms of story themes, as well as in the continuation of aesthetic styles and technological innovation. Based on the modern aesthetic needs of the times, it enhances interaction and inclusiveness in cultural character and constantly breaks through. As a collective cultural memory, nationalization carries the imprint of the ethnic group and is continuously inherited and disseminated. In terms of the adaptation of themes and the application of national elements, the setting of plots and characters, and the shaping of images, it triggers the "memory association mechanism" of the audience. (8) For example, the strange tales, as one of the creative sources of Chinese animated films, originated from Chinese legendary narratives and originated from the strange tales of the Tang Dynasty that recorded strange people and events. After the evolution and

development through the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, it became a general term for more legendary novels or dramas. In terms of artistic treatment, the traditional Chinese art aesthetic arranges the primary and secondary relationships of various elements in the work based on the inner understanding of the way of heaven and earth, including the relationship between artistic images and life forms, rather than merely presenting the subjective and objective relationships in art in a naturalistic way.

4. The Modernity and Aesthetic Spirit of Animation

Mr. Xu Fuguan's book "The Spirit of Chinese Art", attempted to explore the modern value contained in the spirit of Chinese art, that is, to grasp the key to the liberation of the spirit. In terms of the practice of modern animation works, the Chinese aesthetic spirit is both the modern transformation of mythological narratives and a visual imagery expression system with a Chinese style. Its core lies in the nationalized classic animation characters and the spatial imagery with Chinese characteristics. "Yao-Chinese Folktales" is an original online animation short film collection jointly produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio and Bilibili. Centering on the theme of "A dreamlike wonderland, I am within it", it consists of eight independent stories rooted in Chinese traditional culture. Through re-creation of various source texts, it grafts technological reality onto narrative imagination, thereby endowing traditional characters with contemporary emotions and values; through collage-like construction, it creates a surreal landscape that is both fantastical and sci-fi; it caters to the acceptance psychology and consumption expectations of the new generation of young audiences, and develops a new vocabulary of Chinese animation imagery distinct from that of American and Japanese animations. The emergence of "Yao-Chinese Folktales" can be regarded as a beneficial attempt in the stage of self-expression. It covers a wide range of topics, from nostalgia for the countryside to post-apocalyptic sentiments, from care for life to reflections on human nature, and the combination and mixture of various styles unfold a world full of Chinese imagination, presenting the charm of Chinese culture that transcends time and space. (9)

Unlike the advanced path of foreign animation films that pursue the aesthetic effect of "simulation" and "realism", Chinese animation is following a "nationalized" expression system, centered on the animation medium, reflecting the modern transformation of life, exploring how the world exists and the relationship between humans and the world, aiming to explore the expression methods of Chinese traditional culture and conduct Chinese-style thinking on the spiritual mechanism of existence.

4.1. Exploration of Spiritual Connotations

To understand the meaning of existence, to take the theme of thinking about how the world exists as the main purpose, and to develop multiple cognition of the real society and virtual fantasies, is one of the pursuit goals of Chinese animation in the new era. The creators of "Yao-Chinese Folktales" project traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts such as "life and death", "reality and illusion", and "good and evil" into the works, showcasing the Chinese traditional culture's contemplation on human life issues. In the episode "Yao-Chinese Folktales - Three Geese", when the goose

demon wishes to transform into a white goose and follow the peddler, the peddler, due to what he had seen before, secretly doubts whether she has ulterior motives. When the fox demon wakes up, the goose demon disappears, along with the other demons. Perhaps the essence of the world is the constant transformation and change, The bittersweet taste of life is the eternal truth of the world.

4.2. Potential Exploration of Aesthetic

It explores how humans experience the world and how films present the relationship between humans and the world. In narrative conception, topic selection, plot weaving, and character shaping, it considers how to become an aesthetic subject with cultural concern and emotional warmth, even with emotional arcs. The advantage of animation is that everything has a spirit, that is, to endow inanimate objects with life or give living things a different kind of life. (10) In "Yao-Chinese Folktales - LINLIN", the innocent little wolf LINLIN, who attempts to integrate into the human world, even though it can transform into a human form and is friendly to humans, is still not accepted by the hunters. The hunters' narrow-minded concept of either good or evil, either human or demon, ultimately leads to a tragic ending.

4.3. Mirror-like Self-Reflection and Inquiry

From the northern landscapes to the alleys of streets, from the future universe to the rural life, spanning the past and the future, the themes of the stories in "Yao-Chinese Folktales" cover the yearning for the homeland, technological fantasies, and reflections on human nature. They carry the essence of Chinese culture and philosophy, and explore how China's fine traditional culture can convey its values. The reason why we choose animation instead of live-action films might be that animation has a higher expression efficiency and better acceptance effect in certain aspects. Animation can have a humorous touch beyond reality, a profound depth that breaks through logic, a fantasy that breaks free from the mundane, and a self-adjustment that breaks through inner taboos, as well as an emotional elevation that consolidates collective memory. (11) The self-questioning of the animation text, that is like imagination of "how to view itself", such as in "Yao-Chinese Folktales - Moon Rabbit", explores whether artificial intelligence can receive human love, which is an unsolved problem.

4.4. The Unique Writing of Animation Images

Classical aesthetics serves as a bridge between specific arts and philosophy, specifically the analysis and reflection on animation elements, mechanisms, and effects. Firstly, there is the mix-and-match of elements: suspense, road, action, horror, and aesthetic elements are presented in a highly dynamic way, enhancing visual appeal and interest. The heterogeneity of images and the diversity of time are present, presenting what Benjamin called "dialectical images".

Secondly, the use of rhetorical devices, such as appropriation, collage, and metaphor give it rich and diverse design colors and the collision effect of visual mix-and-match. There is a sense of "unreality" and freehand brushwork. This not only stems from the scene settings of traditional 2D animation but also is related to its 2D single-line flat painting image quality. For example, "Yao-Chinese Folktales - LINLIN" adopts a full 3D rendering style. By using CG technology, it can vividly present the subtle changes in characters' expressions, the lifelike fur of animals, the layered

forests, and the swaying branches, achieving an update in image modeling and skillfully capturing the essence of the artistic image, making it stereotyped, stylized, and characteristic. It retains the blank space charm of ink wash painting while also maintaining the advantages of details and perspective, achieving a fusion of 3D and ink wash painting aesthetics. (12)

Thirdly, the spectacular use of the magic cube of time and space. Regarding the spatial imagery of Chinese animation, it strives to use Chinese elements and pursue Chinese characteristics. For instance, the use of symbolic spaces, the construction of mountain and water wonders; the imagination of action scenes in martial arts spectacles. For example, "Big Fish" was created with reference to the design of The Storied Building of Fujian, borrowing this representative building of traditional Chinese patriarchal society to express the centripetal cohesion of the Hakka people and the close kinship of blood being thicker than water, showcasing traditional Chinese lifestyles and interpersonal relationships.

Finally, the demand for folk culture and local narratives. highlight value cognition and ideological underpinnings. As a form and style of cultural presentation, it exists in a complex, open, and diverse form. For instance, Mr. Hu Rui's "Yao-Chinese Folktales - Three Geese" is based on the strange tales of the Southern Dynasties "Pedant from YANGXIAN", the oldest and most literary of all the stories. Its technique uses a pencil sketch style with manual frame-by-frame hand coloring. Strictly speaking, it is not part of Chinese traditional culture, but the characters, landscapes, and aesthetic connotations it depicts all originate from Chinese traditional culture. Whether in form or content, it is very "unreal". (13) It can be seen that although the setting of the story is highly personalized and fictional, its enigmatic and ever-changing style and character design are full of cultural implications.

5. Summary

Remembering the past and looking towards the future, Chinese animated film creation needs to draw on traditional cultural resources and strive to create works with national cultural characteristics. It is not only necessary to face real life but also to absorb foreign elements. Only in this way can there be greater creative space. In the future, Chinese animation should change the traditional closed narrative in terms of narrative methods, and by leveraging the audience's viewing experience and imagination, help build the intertextuality between the animated script and the source text of the IP, triggering the audience's "memory association mechanism". In terms of creative focus and technical operation, it should shift from pursuing spectacular visual

presentation to pursuing high-quality script writing. In terms of theme exploration, it should change the overly simplistic dramatic formula formed due to long-term low-age-oriented creation, avoiding the homogenization of creativity and the simplification of plot settings. The innovation of the vocabulary and techniques of domestic animation is not merely an advancement in technical means; it should find a way of expression that internationalizes and modernizes the spirit of Chinese culture, showcasing the beauty of Chinese culture.

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