

Beyond the Context of Cultural Confidence: A Study of Communication Competence of the Chinese School

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ABSTRACT

Chinese animated films such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* in 2015, *Big Fish & Begonia* in 2016 and *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny* in 2019 won higher box office and they achieved a similar popularity as the *Wolf Warriors* (2015 and 2017) in China's film market. Perhaps partially because these animations bring audience a sense of familiarization such as they reveal popular culture and collective beliefs (i.e., "I'm the Destiny" as a slogan) to promote cultural identity. On the other hand, the making of Chinese animated films has been gradually getting mature in narration, adaptation, and creation. Both the production mode and the industrial scope have been formed to compete with Japanese anime and American cartoons. Though there are still many problems in making Chinese animations, Chinese School has been working on interpreting and deconstructing the essence of Chinese culture in their animated works. This attitude also marks Chinese School's determination to disseminate Chinese culture so as to rebuild its confidence towards the animation world.

Key words: Chinese culture, Animation, Japan and America, Cultural confidence, Dissemination

A PROLIFIC PERIOD FOR MAKING CHINESE ANIMATIONS IN THE NEW CENTURY

In recent years, domestic animated works are produced with both quantity and quality. According to China Film Administration, by December 31, 2019, a total of 850 films have been produced, of which 51 are animated ones. Though animation only occupied 6% in that year, audience have been impressed by excellent stories, great characters and new and old artistic styles inserted in animated films such as *The Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny* (2019) and so forth. It is arguably to say that the emergence of these animations has reactivated Chinese movie industry, as Pan Jian has commented:

The box office in 2019 has surpassed its total amount in 2018, due to the contribution of the productive animated films. Domestic animation has been playing an important role in the film market; it marks that both Chinese animators and Chinese animation industry are gradually getting competitive in making animated works. (2020:28)

Another supported evidence is that, take 2019, the box office of animated films accounted for four seats in a list of annual Top10 movies of the year; some of them (e.g., *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny*) even outstripped the Japanese and American animations (Sun, 2020:145). This shows that the animated works produced by Chinese animators are capable to compete with the outside competitors. Also, it potentially indicates that the innovation and transformation in China's animation industry start to enter into an essential stage of success.

What is the secret for making a qualified animation? Or, what is the significant part of China's animation industry in producing competitive animated films in recent years? In the following sections, the paper will discuss the question by setting the content into five parts.

The first part, as can be seen in the above paragraphs, briefly introduces that the advent of the new century has given Chinese animation creators a new space to rewrite Chinese stories as well producing well-crafted works. The second part intends to tell the reader that animation is no longer a form of children's art so as to highlight that watching animation films may become a popular trend among adults. Especially in the 21st century, an animation meets new technology of digital to express animators' artistic styles; whether it is taken from traditional or modern stories, audience are able to sense the real meaning of the work. The viewpoints can be seen in both part three and four; the former, from comparison with American and Japanese animated works, it aims to suggest the Chinese School that the emphasis on cultural symbols in animation works shall become a main theme of cultural dissemination. The latter addresses that creation of the animation may couple with the aim for the construction of national culture (Pan, 2020:28), such correlation makes animation become a particular carrier for cultural output. By introducing themes and thoughts in animated works, audience may recognize the quality of Chinese culture, understand the special features of Chinese culture, so as to cognitively be interested in Chinese culture. This might be the meaning of cultural confidence emphasized at the end of this paper, and for the Chinese School, 'cultural confidence' will always be taken as an original intention as well as a targeted mission of making Chinese animations.

ANIMATION AND POPULAR CULTURE: AN EXTENSION OF THE AUDIENCE FROM CHILDREN TO ADULTS

Popular culture is different from serious culture in the traditional sense; it is a genre of culture that can be understood by the public and spontaneously disseminated among the public. As a product of the cultural industry, popular culture is as similar as mass culture, to some extent (Wang, 2021:222). The simple distinction of popular culture from the form of high art comes from the Frankfurt School; they consider classical music and classical fine art as aristocratic arts with an aesthetic tendency of the elitism, while novels, movies, pop music, etc. are excluded from the term "culture" (Wang, 2021:222).

The simple classification of higher and lower cultures by the Frankfurt School has been causing great controversy, while the mass culture they mentioned has become a symbol of popularity at an unlimited speed, targeting the public in the era of cultural industry under commercial and strategic promotions, it has obtained considerable economic benefits.

Popular culture, as Richard Hamilton put it, is "consumptive, reproducible and collectively carnival". Products of the popular culture such as movies, pop music, fashion shows may

embody popular lifestyles and tastes, reflect social phenomena, or exhibit urban characteristics. (Liu, 2010:227)

This production-for-consumption culture looks at the 'contemporary trend' and forms its cultural realism (Lian, 2011:199). It arguably matches the critical thinking of the Frankfurt School. In other words, the feature of the popular culture is precisely out of the need to criticize "instrumental rationality" that the Frankfurt School believe, relating to that culture can be transmitted through the medium of communication, and if communication emphasizes the appropriateness and effectiveness of its channels, then speeches and images can possibly penetrate into the public, thus, to create specific mass or popular culture. In this sense, it might not difficult to understand why Mickey Mouse can last for ages, and the image of Ne Zha has made Chinese audiences unforgettable, because these characters are shown in popular animation works and they become the symbol of 'popularity'.

Since the 1950s, nearly 300 animated films have entered Chinese cinema; especially in late 1980s, movies or TV series such as *Black Cat Sheriff* (1984-1987), *Calabash Brothers* (1986-1987), etc. were popular with audiences. In recent years, audience are likely to watch animations such as *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* (2005), *Boonie Bears* (2012), *The Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny* (2019) and so on. It can be said that animated movies bring remarkable characters and they are favorite for all ages of children and adults (Ding, 2019:55).

First of all, Chinese animated films have added new elements in design characters to attract audience. For instance, Jiang Liuer, as a naggingly accompanied monk in *Monkey King: Hero is Back* can be seen as a comic role, bringing audience a lot of fun. The design of the characters in *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny* can be said to be a milestone in animation filmmaking, breaking the stereotype that main characters are good people with good looking, and enemies are bad ones with ugly face. Both Ne Zha and Ao Bin are rebels, along with Taiyi Zhenren, who speaks with a strong Sichuan dialect, and his rival Shen Gongbao, who suffers from stuttering. These characters make audience burst out laughing because they are anti-traditional, and they perform an entertaining function in the animation. As Liu Kewen and Deng Tingting noted:

Traditional Chinese mythical stories have been produced as animated films in recent years. However, creators not simply copied the myths, they adapted them by reconstructing the characters and setting new frameworks for the storyline. (2021:136)

In addition, the recent works frequently apply three-dimensional technology into the films, they have changed traditional water ink painting and line-sketching arts mode, and brought audience a remarkable visual experience. The three-dimensional shooting technology has also been used by a vast number of filmmakers, in *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny*, for instance, characters with various kinds of plots displayed lively in front of the audience, to some extent, it satisfied audience in a modern way of watching the movie. This potentially confirms animated films an indisputable fact that they have been becoming one of the sections of the popular culture (Ma, et al., 2011:12).

Meanwhile, in doing background music, animated movies are no longer the ones with children's melodies but conform to the need of the audience. Looking back to the earlier animated movies,

the prevalence of folk songs was frequently integrated into the animations. In late 1980s, animation has once again experienced a boom period because of the penetration of pop music. Audience can still remember that Zhang Xinzhe and other pop singers who involved in singing the theme songs. While the recent works bring audience a new sense of sensation. In other words, in doing the theme music, the composers creatively try merging the modern into the classical; in *Ne Zha: I am the destiny*, for example, the theme song is composed in rapping and rhyming style, and have attracted lots of Chinese youngsters.

It can be seen that the development of the animated films has gradually become a kind of art form with diverse and integrated cultural elements. Watching animated films is no longer the kids' patent, adults are audiences as well, as they enjoy what the animated movies have brought them consonance when they see the picture, sense the plot, and listen to the music, all of which can be translated into popular factors and may spread widely over a period of time (Ma, et al., 2011:12).

TWO MAJOR BOOSTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHINESE SCHOOL:AMERICAN CARTOONS AND JAPANESE ANIME

The continuing expansion of the audience also illustrates the effectiveness of new media dissemination. That is to say, the rapid development of new media has broken traditional constraints on both time and space and brought communicative opportunities for Chinese animations to go global; while at the same time, such rapidness and promptness also demonstrates the possibilities of information exchange in animated filmmaking, to a certain extent.

However, in the study of Chinese animations, Chinese scholars advocated the Japan-US styles in previous years, causing 'Chinese Wind' to be in the production of 'aphasia' as an interesting debate topic (Wang & Hou,2020: 115). For this, Yuan Dingsheng pointed out:

There have been two main situations which relate to the Western academic influences on China. One is that, using Western academic paradigms to interpret Chinese phenomena. This might be in line with the strategy of globalization of the Western culture in the post-colonial era, and became a fundamental influence on Chinese scholars, their views on understanding China and the world. Another one is that, Chinese academia copied the Western conceptual structure in its entirety, gradually causing a Western-based academic 'ecology invasion'. (2003, p.78-9)

Reverse Thinking of the American Cartoons

There is no doubt that film production is usually influenced by Hollywood or Disney styles. Some of the Chinese filmmakers are growing up by learning and imitating the American model, and this becomes one of the reasons why Chinese scholars are worried about Chinese cultural aphasia. However, if, asking these scholars to take a closer look at the American dominant styles, they would not simply conclude that the works belong to an 'innate talent for entertainment', or they are benefited from the result of an established 'free-market'. Indeed, the success of the Disney style may relate to the huge advantage of an American symbol (Li, 2016:175).

First of all, one of the common characteristics of American commercial animation films is that, American cartoon makers have reproduced their works by adapting cultural resources of other

countries while they aim at promoting American values. For example, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991, see **Figure 1**) is taken from French folklore, *The Lion King* (1994) is derived from a British literature work *Hamlet*, and *Mulan* (1998) tells a story of old China in Northern Dynasty (see **Figure 2**). These animations have injected modern American behaviors, life and values into the genes of other nations.



Figure 1: *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)

Figure 2: *Mulan* (1998)

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/>

Second, an obvious tradition of American cartoons is that, the works describe the humanistic landscape of other countries as exotic 'others' (Li, 2016:176). The cartoons mentioned in the above section, for example, whether they are related to the romance of France, the sense of glory of British blood, or a heroine of the Chinese style, they are endowed as imagined characters by American filmmakers. Of course, such American-based cartoons are also good at combining elements of the 'others', while the principle of this combination is that, it separates the original characters from audience of the original 'other' regions, so that they see the new characters as not only different but also 'interesting' and 'attracting' (Ma et al., 2011:11). Take, the design of *Shrek*, it breaks the habitual plot mode of 'Heroes + Beauties'. In that film, audience see that Snow White slapped Cinderella, and that the King was a dwarf (see **Figure 3**). This anti-traditional storyline invisibly gives full play to an entertaining characteristic of the animation, forcing audience to reshape their sense of animated aesthetics.



Figure 3: Shrek

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/>

In this sense, or to simply put, the so-called American-based cartoons with Disney styles can be understood as the re-evaluation of socio-cultures of the others by American filmmakers. This process of reconstructing the cultures of the others may carry exclusions for certain reasons, along with the sense of cultural aggression that can be seen as inevitable in making Disney cartoons.

Japanese Anime as the Representation of National Culture

In the process of making animated productions, not only American cartoons, Japanese anime has also and always attracted attentions. The landscape of Japanese anime integrates nature, humanity and ecology, as Li Ting commented:

The environment is not set as a supporting role in Japanese anime. Instead, it lives independently and conveys emotions of the anime works." (Li, 2016:174)

Li's viewpoint implicitly claims that Japanese anime adheres to its national style, though folklore and myths are used in films, the theme of the anime has always been the exploration of the relation between human and the nature, war and peace, loyalty and betrayal, etc., wrapped in a strong spirit with Yamato or Samurai as national ideology in Japanese culture.

In the first place, Japanese anime applies Japanese style to its filmmaking. From creation of the characters, or narration of the plot, to setting of the scenery, they can be seen as patterns of Japanese culture. For example, Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984, see **Figure 4**) and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986, see **Figure 5**) borrowed from the Greek Poems and English landscapes, but the use of line-drawing becomes a unique style of the Japanese anime.



Figure 4: Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind



Figure 5: Laputa: Castle in the Sky

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/>

In addition, Japanese anime are likely to merge the stories with oriental philosophy and reflected the conceptions in their works. The film *Spirited Away* (2001, see **Figure 6**) describes the term 'Greed' as human nature as well as the swamp of the lost souls, and *Ponyo on the Cliff* (2008, see **Figure 7**) is seen as a metaphor for the infinite vitality of the ocean.



Figure 6: Spirited Away



Figure 7: Ponyo on the Cliff

Source: <https://image.baidu.com/>

Perhaps it is the series of Japanese anime that potentially help moviegoers share the legacy of Japanese culture and spirit; the consequence of this rather disseminates the perception of Japanese anime, and continues to encourage the creation of every new work.

An Eco-Critique of the Chinese Animations

The breakthrough and popularity of the American cartoons and Japanese anime have been meeting with audience's interest, leading the two terms (cartoons and anime) to be identified as cultural symbol and artistic pattern of the two nations, which also are deeply rooted in the heart of the animation industry. But this might not be the case in China. In other words, it is not easy to define Chinese animations as cartoons or anime as American or Japanese ones, except they can be seen as general animation works. The generality of frequent cultural communications pushes Chinese animation filmmakers to create animated works under the

trend of Hollywoodization; the two popular movies, *The Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) and *Ne Zha: I am the Destiny* (2019) used various digital technics, along with the use of the hip-hop music, and the reversed design of the characters in between beauty and ugliness (Tang et al, 2021:53), are relatively mimicked by Hollywood styles.

There is less doubt that Chinese myths were adapted and recreated by both Japanese and American animation filmmakers. *The White Snake*, for example, was adapted into an animated film in Japan in 1958. The anime abandoned an original image of a heroine, who always owns a chivalrous attitude, while she was set to be the lady who pursued love and family in its Japanese version. So did *Mulan* (1988). The adapted American story seemed to have little to do with filial piety or patriotism, but many of the details tried to prove that Mulan is an independent woman (Zhou, 2020:181).

It can be arguably seen that the Japanese and American animation creators know how to take good advantage of the stories of Chinese mythology, but they win the market mostly because they have added their unique styles as the functional symbol in making new films (Liu and Deng, 2021:137). In other words, the portrait symbols in both Japanese and American works are completely different from the original Chinese images; however, the difference is not simply embodied in character design, it refers to those signified symbols (Tang and Gong, 2021:420), which were interspersed with Japanese feminine, American feminism and other theoretical themes, challenging Chinese animation film-making in a global context.

APHASIA, RECREATION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: THE SENSE OF CULTURAL COGNITION

From the above analyses it can be seen that, a proper Chinese story constitutes the core element for making both American and Japanese animations; it is from narrating of the Chinese story that filmmakers of the two nations have expounded the typical humanity-based thoughts and characteristics in their animation works. On the one hand, main characters were set via different angles and orientations, and this helps creators easily introduce the background of the story, or tell how it goes in the process. On the other hand, each single character may reflect an in-depth spiritual connotation or value of a particular culture (Yang, 2020:124). In other words, through watching an animated film, both American and Japanese filmmakers may ask the audience to think over the real social relationship and national culture behind the story and the characters. This implicitly argues that the aim of making animations is for interactive communication, to a certain extent, it aims at emotional communication in between filmmakers and the audience.

The Critique of “De-Disneyfication”

Then, it must be noted that the Chinese animation industry has been facing two sets of criticism that are interrelated in the course of the development. One is the “de-Disneyfication” of the American cartoons (Tan, 2012:165). China’s long-term opening-up reform has introduced Western-based ideologies into Chinese society; sometimes artists may lose their self-confidence in making films, which are manifested in the fact that they do not pay attention to the originality but blindly imitate the American and Japanese animated styles in their works, resulting in the phenomenon of “aphasia” of their movie language. Animations such as *The Legend of Sui and Tang Heroes* (2004), with handsome boys and beautiful girls shown in the work, it was exactly the reflection of the Japanophile in late 1990s. Likewise, the producing of

Crazy for Music (2000) followed a campus-based theme and won lots of attention, perhaps it was because of the influx of the American dramas poured into Chinese market in earlier 2000s, and the target was to cater to the interest of Chinese young people who like the lifestyle of 'American Pie'. While *Crazy for Music* hardly convinced the audience that it is a Chinese-style animated work.

Looking back at the themes and genres of Chinese animations, myths and legends, folk tales, and historical masterpieces are cultural resources; in the process of being adapted, they also carry humanistic sentiment and artistic style of China. The viewpoint in relation to the "aphasia" in this sense may arguably claim less signs for its literal meaning, but it will always remind the Chinese School to think about where is the actual part of 'cultural aphasia', or from where they can improve the phenomenon of such aphasia. That is to say, for the Chinese School, the recreation of the original literature work is rather important, as Yang Biwei argued:

Intercultural communication has greatly expanded the scope of information dissemination, but the 'boundaries' between cultures have also been gradually 'consumed'. In other words, culture has both universality and particularity, in the process of the communication, "cultural discount" is inevitable and there is no exception for Chinese animation. (2020:125)

In 2007, *The Legend of Qin* (see **Figure 8**) integrated Kong Fu, fantasy, Confucian ethics and historical culture of the Qin Dynasty. With a strong sense of Chinese chivalrous spirit, the animation won the market in that year.



Figure 8: The Legend of the Qin
Source: <https://image.baidu.com/>

Started by a spirit of the martial arts, *The Legend of the Qin* has as well conformed to the psychological needs of overseas audiences. To a certain extent, it is the mutual understanding of this animated work that has strengthened overseas audiences; their sense of cognition with Chinese *Wuxia* (chivalrous) culture. Such cognition potentially reduced the possibility or risks of cultural discount.

The Critique of “Exclusive Nationalism”

In response to the ‘cultural discount’, however, some have proposed the practice of reinforcing nationalism (Cao and Xia, 2020:76). They manifest constantly that reinventing of the Chinese School seems urgent and necessary.

The research on Chinese literature needs to break a discursive hegemony from the West, while at the same time, to build an oriental-based discursive system ... Only in this way can we restore the originality and regionality of the orientalism. (Cao and Xia, 2020:76)

It is not deniable that the term ‘East’ was consciously constructed by Western scholars, and some of them stand on the central position of the Westernism, contemplating or imaging of the ‘others’ (Yang, 2020:125). For example, the image of China is basically shaped by a small number of Western media such as *CNN*, *the Associated Press* and *the New York Times*. When talking about China, it always has a lot to do with terms such as ‘control’ and ‘illiberality’.

Added to this is that, the Oriental Studies in the West sometimes are aimed at emphasizing the differences or conflicts between the East and the West, and fail to explore the formation and development of the oriental culture, or misunderstand its connotations (Cao and Xia, 2020:77) within cultural contexts.

The symbolic violence of the Western media in recent years has in turn raised a negative evaluation of the Western culture; therefore, when producing animations, Chinese filmmakers are required to insert profound social value and national spirit into their works (Tan, 2012:165). This one-size-fits-all presentation may put ideology above all contents while it ignores that the new cultural discourse with Chinese characteristics lies in resolving the conflicts between cultures, emphasizing the ability of inclusion and harmony (Yu, 2021: 46).

In this sense, the advocate of the “nationalism” in making animations shall consist of retaining the reasonable parts of the originality as well as absorbing new elements of the others. Works such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, *Big Fish & Begonia*, *Ne Zha: I’m the Destiny*, and *White Snake* (2020) are still relating to ancient history, myths and legends, having profound Chinese painting styles. While the common feature of these animations might be that, they are made from an intercultural communicative perspective. In other words, what audience have seen are modern cyber-language, funny characters, sophisticated graphics, etc., all of which show a real China, Chinese society and Chinese culture, pushing Chinese animation towards popular and cognitive.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper talks about the making of the animations by the Chinese School under the perspective of cultural confidence. To some extent, it is the cultural confidence that helps the Chinese school win both the audience and movie market with their works. Also, cultural confidence has been becoming a starting point for Chinese animations to go global via cross-cultural communications. In this context, cultural confidence mainly contains two meanings.

The first is the national characteristics of the Chinese culture. Here, the culture of China includes traditional culture as the foundation and it shall be compatible with the progressive culture of modern and contemporary China, which not only allows the audience to understand the uniqueness of Chinese culture, but also incorporates Chinese culture into the system of world

cultural pluralism so that more people may get the chance to learn, to know and to familiarize with features of Chinese culture. In adapting traditional stories into new ones, Chinese school have tried a lot in their creations. For example, the character *Ba Jie* in *Journey to the West*, and the mythological stories contained in *The Legendary Creatures of the Shan Hai Ching* are not practical sources for making animations, but effective means to disseminate a pluralistic nature of Chinese mythology (Liu and Deng, 2021:138).

Secondly, cultural confidence is relating to the sentiment that arises on the basis of communication and value cognition. The culture of different nations has its uniqueness and strengths, and it is precisely because of this difference in cultural realm that the sharing and understanding of different cultures can be advocated to be resonances or concerns (Yu,2021:49). Since Chinese cultural elements such as panda and Kong Fu have become cultural resources for making animation works outside China, then literature works such as *Journey to the West* and *Creation of the Gods*, and characters such as Sun Wukong and Ne Zha shall be developed and shaped as intellectual property of Chinese animations. In other words, audiences are attracted to animated works with strong cultural symbols; the latter, to a large extent, may shift as a driving force to inspire the Chinese school to make qualified Chinese animations.

The above two viewpoints indicate that the making of animation films has undergone substantial changes, and it is not advisable to maintain the 'purity' of one's national culture, nor is it wise to adhere to the homogenization of culture in the context of globalization. Historical experience shows that excellent animated works with inheritance significance is the result of learning and understanding of different cultures. Perhaps that promoting a sustainable development and improvement of the animated works, China has to cultivate a freer environment for the Chinese School to seek common ground while reserving differences via intercultural communications.

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