

# Tension Is the Kinetic Energy: Modernity Drives the Spiral Development of the Aesthetic Ideas of Chinese Animation

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**Abstract**—This paper first analyzes the relationship between animation and modernity, which pointed out that animation is the product of modernity. Then by analyzing the role of modernity in the various stages of the evolution of Chinese aesthetics, it is revealed that the aesthetic concept of Chinese animation has always been under the tear of the local nationalization and Westernization. The deliberate utilitarianism of nationalization and total Westernization are opposed to each other. This is the multiple tensions of aesthetic modernity and a node that cannot be bypassed in the process of Chinese animation modernization. It is also the dynamism and vitality of Chinese animation that drives China and the animation to explore the modern road.

**Keywords**—modernity; aesthetic concept; Chinese animation; nationalization

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 100-year history of Chinese animation from the beginning to the present is also the century when modernity flows from the west to China and has violent clashes. There will be many inevitable questions during the rough development of Chinese animation: why art films are renamed animation? Why the national style of Chinese animation does has not been finalized yet, etc. To summarize, as an external form of literary and artistic bearing, animation has no roots in Chinese cultural traditions. Although the application of traditional Chinese aesthetics seems convenient but it's unsustainable, which is deeply embedded in the internal mechanism of modernity. The aesthetics of animation is the embodiment of aesthetic modernity. One of the most crux weaknesses of Chinese animation is that ignoring the complexity of aesthetic modernity and simply believed that the surface transplantation of traditional art is enough to solve the cognitive bias of the national style problem. Chinese animation has open up again. Against the background of redefining self-identity in the context of globalization, it is an unavoidable way for Chinese animation to explore the deep cultural logic relationship between aesthetic modernity and nationality.

## II. ANIMATION IS THE PRODUCTION OF MODERNITY

Modernity is not a conception with identity and fixed connotation, but its "integrality" makes it a center of many modern theories. Actually, modernity is a kind of mobility that drives the reshuffling of global culture and life. The process not only triggered a revolutionary change in non-Western culture, but also made modernity a short-lived, broken, and open system under its reaction. Modernity began with the Enlightenment (also known as the Renaissance), and the disenchantment of theology was completed through a new rational order. However, the strong order of instrumental rationality led to the alienation of human beings, thus the aesthetics of modernity that went against the rationality and became the modernity of anti-modernity on the basis of enlightenment modernity. This is aesthetic modernity.

The production and development of animation is based on the modern technological environment. Animation has the characteristics of modernity at the depth level of thought and consciousness. Just as the combination of complete abstraction and instant synesthesia is the difference between animation and traditional art, while the pre-modern literary form can't combine them together. For example, the text is an abstract sequence of symbols, but it cannot instantly connect the emotions between the creator and the audience; the long-term accumulation of the same cultural circle is the key to solve the problem. For example, the Chinese version of *Song of God* and the English version of *A Dream in Red Mansions* must have a reduction in the meaning. Singing and dancing performances can instantly connect the creators and audiences with emotions but it can't be completely abstracted from the real actors or physical laws, thus it's impossible to achieve purely spiritual expression. Some scholars believe that the expression of life and movement has existed in ancient times; they regards the pre-modern movement images as the origin of animation. For example, the murals in the cave of the Spanish Altamira before 17,000 years ago painted the eight-legged wild boar and the ancient Greeks painted the running movements on the painting bottle and the vivid ancient Chinese paintings. It is believed that the performance of pre-modern sports is lack of modern

technology support; it expresses dynamic life with static and dynamic images which is still in a static aesthetic thinking mode. While modern animation technology is the production of technology after Enlightenment which is intrinsically different from traditional literary forms in terms of thinking methods, creation processes modes of communication, and viewing methods. As a result, the animation reflects the complex connotation of modernity and developmental trend with the kinetic energy as well as the ubiquitous contradictions and a vibrant future.

Modernity is a kind of driving force for social change in China which is an omnipresent and pervasive force and penetrates into all levels of modern society, but it cannot change the deep logic of Chinese life. The modernity had an induced and passive process in China that is different from the primordial and spontaneous process in the west. "It mainly refers to the enlightenment and salvation project that was forced to use Western modernity as a reference system in order to reconstruct the center after losing the center." [1] The tension between modernity and local tradition has formed a strong effect that leads Chinese animation presents a spiral forward approach, looking for its own direction in the constant swing. From the bourgeois aesthetics of American animation in the beginning to the at the beginning of China to the germination of national animation aesthetics on the eve of liberation, from the perspective of children's art film under the influence of political utilitarianism in the early period of liberation to the "animation" title of the 1980s, the aesthetic concept of Chinese animation still needs a constant exploration.

### III. THE TRACTIVE EFFECT OF MODERNITY ON THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE AESTHETIC CONCEPT

The aesthetic concept refers to "having a clear aesthetic orientation, reflecting the content of a clear aesthetic relationship, and directly reflecting a more stable group identity trend and a special concept system of aesthetic value choice" [2]. The aesthetic concept of Chinese animation is influenced by the localization and modernization during the follow-up social changes: First, Western culture is regarded as a tool and technology, and it is localized by means of copinism. Second, the spirit and culture of the nation are modernized under the influence of modernity. The former is dominated by Chinese classical thoughts, intending to transform foreign things into a part of Chinese traditional culture oriented the past; the latter is dominated by modern ideas and tends to guide the development of Chinese traditional culture oriented toward future. However, the two dimensions cannot perfectly solve the problem of modern identity of the animated national identity. It can spread Chinese classicality but it is difficult to integrate into globalization according to the former's dimension and it is easy to lose the national identity according to the latter's dimension. From the historical perspective, the aesthetic concept of Chinese animation is full of contradictions, conflicts and embarrassment under the influence of Westernization and localization brought about by modernity; it is constantly explored and driven by the kinetic energy of

modernity. Spiral waves form development trend at the same time.

#### A. *Exploration of the Modernity of Early Chinese Animation*

In the early 20th century, Chinese animation was an artistic exploration in the flow of modernity, animation was introduced to China at the time and it was still a new thing for the society. Wan brothers, Wang Shuzhen, Teweï and other artists has explored the first step in Chinese animation rely on their profound artistic foundation. However, this exploration is not comprehensive, and the achievements are largely dependent on the artist's personal qualities and cannot be enlarged into large-scale group creation. Early Chinese animation was almost completely absorbed and accepted by modernity mainly about the study of American cartoons, in terms of styling, movement and form. China has suffered military aggression from the Western countries since the exploration of animation has not been completed. The rescue and survival has become the strongest voice of the times, the political propaganda in the form of the era has replaced the artistic exploration of the animation itself, and the spontaneous development of animation has been interrupted.

#### B. *The Aesthetic Concept of "Nationalization" of Chinese Animation After the Founding of New China*

Under the pressure of severe domestic and international situations, the struggle became the center of social life at the beginning of the founding of New China. In the 1950s and 1960s, under the comprehensive study of the Soviet Union, Chinese animation almost became a replica of Soviet animation. "Nationalization" is the natural appeal of Chinese animation self-identity. In the choice of how to shape the national style of Chinese animation, the stylized faces in drama and New Year paintings are used in the modeling of art films. The reference to folk art and legends and other national art has become the main way of creating national identity and that is the most convenient and easy to produce. The "Chinese School" has become the represent of China which has been widely recognized internationally. However, the aesthetic aesthetics is dominated by aesthetics and the political aesthetics is the main aesthetic value in the direction of the past, and the triangular relationship dominated by the third party replaces the natural aesthetic relationship between the creator and the audience. The surface transplant of traditional art has also become a political strategy that temporarily interrupts the flow of modernity. There are two characteristics of the aesthetic concept of Chinese animation in this period: one is to transplant the traditional art form in the past which leads to the static trend of the aesthetic concept of animation, the traditional aesthetics replaces the aesthetics of the animation itself. Some scholars believe that "the problem of national style can be solved by the combination of artistic aspects and techniques" [3], the animation "is more and more inclined to freehand", and even rejects the camera consciousness that appeared in American animation at that time. Second, "children" are imagined as agents of Chinese animation. The characteristics of animated moments are understood as a function that is conducive to children's education and the aesthetics dominated by

heteronomy emphasizes animation as an instrumental tool for education under the requirements of ideology. Children are imagined to be an educated, aestheticism of animation, the direct relationship between the creator and the audience in the relationship is replaced by a triangular relationship of the third party-led agent aesthetics.

### C. Re-connection Between Chinese Animation and Modernity

The creative mode of searching for the creative direction from the traditional, the individual desires of the audience, and the field of the works replaced by the power of the super-narrators to the audience in the special historical period is in line with the requirements of the times. The time span has lost the opportunity to develop together with the world animation from a longer view, making Chinese animation not only behind the development of world animation, but also unable to adapt to the growing aesthetic needs of domestic audiences. Some scholars believe that since the 1990s, under the powerful impact of the extra-regional animation led by the United States and Japan, Chinese animation has gradually lost itself [4]. From another point of view, the nationalization of animation in the art and film period as a strategy is essentially to resist the flow of Western modernity and quickly create identity and to transplant the surface of traditional culture which leads to lacking the future-oriented, fusion the pioneering and enterprising concept of nationalization and modernity is the fundamental reason why Chinese animation lags behind the world. Since the 1990s, the changes in the marketization of Chinese animation had brought completely different aesthetic concepts; the new era audiences have chosen to emphasize the way of complexity of the story and the aesthetic of individual's human desire for richness without hesitation. Thus, the aesthetic symbols of Chinese animation changed from the stylized and dehumanized face of the art film period to the "big eyes" represented by Japanese animation which emphasizing human desires. The aesthetic concept of Chinese animation turned to the acceptance of modernity and Chinese animation opened the way of all-round learning of advanced foreign experience again, the weight of the market has increased and the aesthetics of civilians and secularization have become a dominant way.

## IV. THE MULTIPLE TENSION OF MODERNITY IS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE CHINESE AESTHETIC CONCEPT OF ANIMATION

Aesthetics is not an independent spiritual activity in classicalism, but a tributary tool for other spiritual activities. "Aesthetics mainly serves religion in the West, while it mainly serves ethical politics in China." [5]. People is the main body of modernity, people here refer to diverse and differentiated individuals. The development trend of Chinese aesthetics is from the absolute value of classicism to multi-value from the macro level and driven by modernity. The transcendental unified aesthetic concept goes to the secular and diversified aesthetic concept, from the status of the vassal to the independence. However, modernity is an unfinished process. It is full of contradictions, oppositions

and kinetic energy, the historical inertia lasts for a thousand years in the Chinese context, the differences between China and the West are all indispensable in the process of modernity influences. The aesthetic concept of Chinese animation is driven by the kinetic energy of modernity, and naturally presents intermittent, tortuous and repeated forms under the influence of social changes in China.

### A. Modernity Is Opposed to Chinese Tradition

The national identity in the aesthetics of Chinese animation can only be created in a pioneering and innovative way. It can neither copy the aesthetic style of the West nor replace the aesthetic concept of animation with the aesthetic concept of traditional art. The aesthetic modernity is firstly the reconstruction of identity in the entanglement of Westernization and localization in the Chinese context, and it means the creation and shaping of self-identity for the aesthetics of animation. Wan Brothers first realized the national identity problems of Chinese animation. After a lot of learning and drawing on the American animation style, in 1936, Wan Yiming said in the article *Gossip Cartoon* : "Chinese animation industry wants has unlimited vitality, it must be rooted in the soil of its own national tradition." In the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese animations that were comprehensively studied in the Soviet Union and apparently "Sovietized" were also mistaken internationally as Soviet animations, prompting Tewe to put forward the slogan of nationalization and began to shape the face of Chinese animation. Under the political utilitarian requirements of "China's socialist content, China's national form" [6], the way of transplanting the surface of national art into animation in the past has made Chinese animation quickly recognized internationally. The opposition between modernity and tradition has not been properly handled, the nationwide system of film purchase and marketing has temporarily interrupted the flow of modernity instead. The super narrator of political utopia has replaced the narrator mechanism, stylized and racialized characters. The diversified and emotionally-rich role has led to the single point of view of the art film and the unreliability of the narrative and become the Achilles heel of art films, so it is difficult to continue after the country cancels the unified purchase and marketing system.

The aesthetic concept is continuous. The aesthetic concept of animation in the art and film period still affects Chinese animation. There are two important factors: one is children's animation. In the August 1949, the Ministry of Culture made it clear that the production policy of the film is "for the concept of "children's service" and "child" is derived from the imagination of collectivism." Children's defects are mainly imagined as the lack of socialist and communist collective personality. The main purpose of art films is to educate children to establish correct values and life and to encourage children to establish the concept of "altruism" and help children form collectivist ideas" [7]. The policy of serving art films for children forms the acting aesthetic concept of Chinese animation. The first subject of aesthetics is actually a third party such as a literary reviewer. The purpose of watching art films is mainly not for entertainment

and appreciation, but for the responsibility of performing the agency. Examining whether the function of art films cultivate to children's collectivist personality and whether the national characteristics in the overall style of art films are qualified, thus forming the public cognition that animation is mainly for children to watch. The other is the cognition of national style. The traditional surface transplantation is more than innovation. The innovation of animation process and animation creation concept is far more difficult than the transplantation of traditional art in the construction of Chinese animated national identity. The internal operation system of animation is still a basic method derived from foreign countries, and even in the name of the creation process, it is difficult to see China's own innovation.

#### B. Enlightenment Modernity Opens the Diversification of Aesthetic Concepts of Chinese Animation

In the context of China, the complex characteristics of modernity are shown as: modernity is the source of modern Chinese and local traditional fractures, and one of the driving forces of national animation renaissance. China's social theory and spirit flow has a modern consciousness under the influence of modernity. In the deep operation mechanism and cultural spirit of society, modernity and local tradition are forming a staggered rheological form and Chinese tradition needs the expression of modernity, the modernity also needs the recognition of local culture. The contradiction, opposition and unity in cultural form have formed a strong tension relationship which is the powerful kinetic energy of Chinese animation aesthetic concept. The opposition between aesthetic modernity and enlightenment modernity is a pair of tension relations within modernity and exists in the process of modernity.

The rational worship of enlightenment modernity aims to construct a new order, and the culture brought about by the order of enlightenment modernity has become a subversive force and has gone to its opposite: it represents inconsistency, incoordination, illogicality and other non-rationalities, thus avoiding the society becoming a completely instrumental and rational world. The main body of modernity is human beings. The opposition between the two is essentially a necessary complement to the demand for human diversity. The enlightenment modernity prompted China to start the process of modernization. China became the world's second largest TV producer in 1985, and the film purchase and marketing policy was abolished in the 1990s, overseas animations flooded into China. The popularity of TV culture and the reform and opening up of China help Chinese audiences have the right to choose. The extra-domain animation, especially the Japanese animation, has no ideological restrictions on "children". The complex plots and the satisfaction of audiences such as emotions, exploration and fantasy fill the art and the vacancy of the film "Save the spirit of the collective and destroy the individual desire" has won the favor of the Chinese youth audience. The aesthetic concept of Chinese animation has shifted from the resistance to modernity into acceptance. Chinese animation started a diversified learning path comprehensively from overseas animation.

#### C. Aesthetic Modernity Drives Chinese Animation to Create Its Own Aesthetic Concept

Matei Calinescu pointed out in *The Five Faces of Modernity* that aesthetic modernity should be understood as a concept of crisis involving triple dialectic - opposition to tradition, opposition to the enlightenment modernity represented by instrumental rationality, opposition to itself [8]. As a product of modernity, the crisis of aesthetic modernity is the contradiction and contradiction, and it is also the kinetic energy that drives the aesthetic concept of animation. Opposition and tradition mean that the dilapidation is the inevitable development of the aesthetic concept of animation. The opposition between aesthetic modernity and instrumental rationality refers to the aesthetic concept of animation will continue to move toward individual desire and diversification. Opposing itself means that the direction of animation aesthetics is novel and Variety.

If the tension between aesthetic modernity and enlightenment modernity reveals the complex relationship of modernity, then the tension within aesthetic modernity reflects its kinetic energy. Aesthetic modernity has got rid of the transcendental ideal of classical aesthetics, from the eternal beauty of the latter to the instantaneous beauty. Its core value is novelty and change and uses pluralism and difference to resist uniqueness and resist mechanized instrumental rationality that reflects the rejection of mediocrity and irrationality in human nature. The internal tension of aesthetic modernity reflects two characteristics: one is the otherness, which is the rejection of the mediocre daily life since enlightenment modernity; the other is reflective, which is the conscious critique of the identity pursued by instrumental rationality. The tension of aesthetic modernity determines that the aesthetics of animation is still in the unfinished process with uncertain changes, full of the pursuit of change and novelty, and the praise of short-lived, fleeting beauty. In that sense, classic animation works can only be a milestone in the development of animated aesthetic concepts, and no longer a "model" manifested by classical aesthetics. Therefore, the achievements of any foreign animation should not become the specifications and restrictions in the development of Chinese animation.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The aesthetic concept of animation is moving forward and in the still unfinished trend driven by modernity. Many possibilities of Chinese animation development can be seen under this point, it's unnecessary to pursue the development trajectory of Japanese or the United States. Instead, introducing the kinetic energy of modernity into the internal mechanism and activity mechanism of animation, and absorb the experience of superficial transplantation of traditional art forms, so that modernity takes root in the cultural spirit of animation. Explore the modern nationalization of Chinese animation and reshape the face of Chinese animation in a creative way with the innovative spirit.



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