

# **A Study on the Dissemination of Chinese Folk Culture in Animation**

Huilian Xu\*

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi University of Finance & Economics, Nanchang, China

\*Corresponding author

**Keywords:** Animation, Folk culture, Dissemination.

**Abstract.** China's splendid 5,000-year civilization has nurtured rich folk culture. In the era of modern medias, disseminating folk arts, folk values and activities in animated works is an attemptable way to spread Chinese folk culture. The paper first shows that introduction of various folk arts in the design of animated works helps the spread of folk culture. Then it emphasizes that it is crucial to integrate folk virtues and values to enhance the charm of animated works, which, in return, improve folk values well known by people. In addition, it suggests that to design digital games with folk activities make people experience the folk culture virtually. Finally, it reflects the weaknesses of dissemination in animation and puts forward ways to improve it.

## **Introduction**

China, as a multi-ethnic country with a history of 5,000 years, boasts rich folk culture, which is a crucial part of Chinese traditional culture. China's General Office of CCCPC and General Office of the State Council published the opinions on implementing the project of inheriting and developing the fine traditional Chinese culture in January 2017 to build a strong socialist cultural country, strengthen the soft power of national culture [1]. Folk culture refers to the life culture created, enjoyed and passed on by the broad masses of people in a country or nation [2]. In process of continuous cultural fusion and blending among nationalities in China, Chinese folk culture has been integrated into Chinese cultural system, keeping its specific characteristics and varieties. Therefore, the dissemination of Chinese folk culture has been attached unprecedented importance. In the modern era of new medias, animated works are integrated with comprehensive forms of arts, such as the art of painting, cartoons, films, photography, music, and that of literature, etc. Animation has become a good channel to disseminate information and knowledge. In animation, folk culture can be vividly presented to people all over the world.

Animation can disseminate Chinese folk culture to the world. First, when various folk arts are used in animated works, they will be known by audiences. Secondly, when the virtues and values of Chinese nation is integrated into stories of animation, it not only enriches the cultural connotation of animation works but also helps people understand the essence of folk culture. Moreover, digital games in the mode of animation with folk cultural characteristics enable people to experience "folk activities" in virtual reality.

## **Application of Forms of Folk Art in the Design of Animation**

Chinese animation production involves in various traditional and novel art forms in Chinese folklore, such as Chinese ink and wash painting, papercuts, drawings with fine and delicate strokes with intense colors and so on. The application of art forms in animation promotes the efficient dissemination of Chinese folk culture to the world.

## **The Introduction of Chinese Ink and Wash Painting into Animation**

First of all, the introduction of Chinese ink and wash painting into animation has made a great breakthrough in the artistic style of cartoons. Ink and wash painting, one of unique traditional art forms of China, is representative of Chinese painting. It began around the time of the Tang Dynasty, and prospered in the Song and Yuan dynasties. The tools and materials used to create ink and wash

painting are brushes, rice paper, and ink, which are characteristic of Chinese culture. In ink and wash painting, the missing of water and ink usually creates different shades of dryness, wetness, thickness and thinness. The integration and infiltration of water, ink, and rice paper enable such paintings to convey rich images, and hence to achieve unique aesthetic effects [3].

Therefore, Chinese ink animation has been characterized with strong connotation of Chinese culture. It is deep understanding of the traditional art that enables Chinese people to make ink animation into cartoons. Masterpieces of this kind of animation, which have been awarded in International Film Festivals, are "The Little Tadpoles in Search of Their Mother", "Shepherd Flute", "Deer Bell" and "Mountain and Water regime".

Every child in China knows the beloved story of "The Little Tadpoles in Search of Their Mother". It is a water-ink animation done completely by hand painting. As it is known, an ink and wash painting is originally static, but when it is introduced to animation skillfully, people can enjoy the flow and movement of created water-ink creatures with vigorous vitality on the screen. It is a good way for people in the world to know the charm of Chinese ink and wash painting.

### **Introduction of Paper Cutting into Animation**

Originated from folk paper cuttings, Chinese paper-cutting animation has gained popularity among viewers at home and abroad. The excellent paper-cutting cartoons in different periods have won awards in International Film Festivals, which fully demonstrates that paper-cutting cartoons have been recognized domestically and internationally. Paper cutting is one of China's most popular traditional folk arts. Chinese paper cutting has a history of more than 1,500 years. It was widespread particularly during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. People in northern China do well in paper cutting. They cut paper with scissors or knives into a variety of decorative patterns and shapes, like figures, birds & beasts, fruits & veggies, flowers & plants, utensils, insects, sceneries, world treasures and modern objects, etc.

Moreover, the representative works of Chinese paper-cutting animation are adapted from folk stories, "Piggy Eats Watermelon", "Monkey Fishing for the Moon", "The fight between Hillyfish and Mussel" and "Gourd Brothers".

Chinese paper-cutting animations have vividly displayed the art of folk paper cuts. Most of the characters and backgrounds in Chinese paper-cutting animation are cut, carved and engraved on pieces of paper. The characters in the paper-cutting animation are paper dolls with joints. The moving actions are achieved by shooting static actions one by one. Its production integrates a variety of animation techniques, which endows the paper-cutting animated works with a strong artistic expression. Different from paper cuttings which are used to combine various kinds of life elements on flat paper, paper-cutting animation shows vivid characters with facial expressions, actions, words and stories [4]. Therefore, paper-cutting cartoons are characterized with strong national features.

### **Introduction of Folk Drawings into Animation**

Chinese folk-drawing animation are featured with folk styles which originate from Chinese New Year pictures, Dunhuang frescoes, drawings with fine and delicate strokes with richness in colors, etc.

The first style of folk drawings is New Year pictures, which are traditional folk works of art in China, used by Chinese people to greet the new year and pray for blessings when the Spring Festival comes. In ancient China, every household pasted New Year pictures to enrich festivity, usher in good luck and avoid disasters to welcome new year. The representative animation works with the style of Chinese New Year pictures are "Havoc in Heaven", "The Legend of Sealed Book", and "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King". The main characters in the representative animation are modelled from New Year pictures [5].

The second style of folk drawing is the one in Dunhuang murals. Carved in 492 grottoes in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, Dunhuang murals are divided into Buddhist scriptures and simple Buddhist statues. Most of the frescoes before the Sui Dynasty are the stories or fables of Buddha's

previous life as a king, a businessman, a woman, or a deer who did good deeds. The stories or fables in Dunhuang frescoes provide artistic references for mythological animation in China.

Dunhuang frescoes are displayed in chronological order from Western Wei to the Tang Dynasty. The paintings of Western Wei are characterized with simplified forms and brilliant colors in blank background. Whereas, the style in Tang turned to pursue richness in content and variedness in style with different themes and stories. The well-known animated film, “Nine-color Deer”, is adapted from a mural, telling a story of a deity who took the form of a beautiful deer with a sparkling coat of nine different colors.

The deer elegantly stands in the mural with a sharp pointed mouth, a thin abdomen and slender legs without joints, his neck being like a bent long hook. Such a figure is obviously not physiologically regular. However, it impresses people with lightness and elegance. The production of Nine-color deer Cartoon draws lessons from this technique showed in Dunhuang murals, showing the lighted and elegant beauty of deer deity [6]. The background, models and color matching have skillfully retained the characteristics of Dunhuang murals with Chinese folk elements.

The third style is in drawings with fine and delicate strokes with richness in colors. The style of the drawing originated from the religious murals of Han and Wei Dynasties, and entered the golden age in Tang and Song Dynasties. With a long history from the Warring States to the Song Dynasty, drawings with fine and delicate strokes are delicate and rigorous, beautiful and elegant, demonstrating the great similarity of real objects. In production of some Chinese animated works, techniques in creating drawings with fine and delicate strokes are employed. In the animated film, “Beautiful Forest”, birds and flowers are depicted in an artistic manner with intense colors. Birds are perching and eyeing up their prey. Wind blowing leaves in the trees, swimming shrimps are dyed in a pale green with algae in the water. Moreover, a water bird wobbles its feathers and cranes its neck while some birds are flying high in the sky. The scenery in the film made reference to the paintings with fine and delicate strokes with richness in colors in the Song Dynasty. [7]

### **Integration of Folk Virtues and Values into Animated Works**

Folk virtues and values being integrated into stories of animation works can enhance charms of animated works, in return, the works help to disseminate the essence of spiritual culture in Chinese folk tradition.

First, with splendid 5,000-year civilization, Chinese people have the lofty idea of harmony between man and nature. They have been pursuing to enjoy starry skies, lush mountains, green fields, singing birds and blossoming flowers. Chinese classical animation works often reflect Chinese people’s infinite pursuit of harmony in life and respect for nature. These can be displayed and reflected in a series of cartoons.

For example, in seven-minute-long “Beautiful Forest”, Birds are perching and eyeing up their prey. Wind blowing leaves in the trees, swimming shrimps are dyed in a pale green with algae in the water. Moreover, a water bird wobbles its feathers and cranes its neck while some birds are flying high in the sky. The animated film revives those ancient paintings without any dialogue but with elegant ancient music. It vividly exhibits a harmonious setting in nature. Eventually, however, a gun is seen to be pointing at one of the birds. The film ends with a gunshot and a hole in the painting. The abrupt turn arouses audience’s great unease. The theme of the works is to arouse the awareness of environment protection to pursue the harmony between man and nature. It tells us that we must cherish nature the way we cherish life. “Beautiful Forest” has made its way to the preliminary stage in the Best Animated Short Film shortlist of the 2017 Academy Award.

Another prominent virtue of ordinary people in China is fighting against odds and difficulties, which has been vividly described in Chinese folk stories and ancient myths. Animated works boasts comprehensive forms of arts, such as the art of painting, cartoons, films, photography, music, and that of literature, etc. Folk culture can be vividly presented to people in the world with the show of animated works. Actually, many animated cartoons or films with stories rich in Chinese people’s fighting spirit and determination were presented on the Fifteenth China International Cartoon and

Animation Festival held in Hangzhou in 2019. The stories have been told for thousands of years in China, such as the stories of “The Bird Jingwei Trying to Fill up the Sea with Pebbles”, “Yugong Moving Mountains”, “Song of Phoenix” and “Emperor Yu Tames the Flood”.

The myth of the Bird Jingwei Trying to Fill up the Sea with Pebbles reflects the bird’s dogged determination to achieve her purpose. It is the same to Yugong who was determined to move two mountains blocking the way of his family. In the story of Emperor Yu Tames the Flood, Chinese emperor Yu led local people to dredge channels to lead the floodwaters to the sea with 13 years of unrelenting efforts so that the Yellow River Valley was not stricken by rampant floods any more. All the stories are about Chinese people’s spirit of fighting against nature. When animated works telling Chinese stories are shown on screen, it becomes a direct and efficient channel for people in the world to know the spiritual culture in Chinese folklore.

Moreover, Chinese people have always been boasting a virtue of being kind. For those who repays kindness with enmity would always be punished. For example, in the animated film named the Nine-Colored Deer, a deity that took the form of a beautiful deer with a sparkling coat of nine different colors was a symbol of kindness. He did many good deeds to help out people in troubles and difficulties. It won Special Honor Award in Hamilton International Cartoon and Animation Festival in Canada in 1986.

Chinese animated works with national values and virtues have been recognized and have achieved honors in the world. It helps to tell Chinese stories with Chinese elements, winning penetration in thoughts and gain popularity of the world.

### **To Design Digital Games Featuring Chinese Folk Culture**

Games featuring traditional culture have deep connotations and attract a wider audience. A well-designed digital online video game with series of folk cultural symbols is an ideal media to spread Chinese folk messages. It is well known that games are welcomed by young people, they can get familiar with Chinese traditional culture as they play in virtual reality. It increases the number of channels available to us to spread knowledge about our cultural heritage.

Aspects of traditional culture could not serve merely as a background to the gameplay without offering detailed or realistic experiences. Instead, video play designers should try to dig out details and categorize them into sections of culture with unique cultural points, so that players can gain a deeper experience in virtual folk activities.

According to Lu Xiaoyin, the CEO of Perfect World Games in China, games with Chinese culture are available to players overseas as well. He says that some overseas players have a strong interest in Chinese culture, but it is too difficult for them to understand. Therefore, it is crucial for game designers to convey the culture in ways that they are familiar with to help them better understand.

“Imagine a British young man is at home, he opens his laptop and starts a role-playing game where he enjoys views of the Nanjing Qinhuai Lantern Festival as he rows down the Qinhuai River, completing set tasks along the way. This is one way for video gamers to enjoy the traditional culture of East China’s Jiangsu province during Spring Festival without having to travel there.”

### **Reflections on Dissemination of Folk Culture in Animation**

To successfully complete a piece of animated works, modern technology must be applied. Whereas, modern technology has created many unfavorable conditions for the survival of folk culture. First, modern medias are likely to result in the fading of the authenticity of folk culture because many folk activities, folk arts and crafts can be exhibited and spread on Internet medias rapidly and repeatedly. The spirit of veneration or worship in local folk culture can be only expressed in exact situations. However, when it is imitated virtually, the spirit is transformed to be “being expressed” or “being exhibited” [8].

In Hollywood, commercial animated films are tailored to audiences’ preferences in terms of the content of film scripts. If a story in an animated film cannot attract enough audiences, the film is

doomed to fail. Therefore, film producers may tend to sacrifice the authenticity of the folk culture to be delivered in order to cater to the audience. As it is known, the Dream of Jinsha was on the shortlist of the 83rd Academy Award for Animated Film, but it has taken only one million at the box office.

The Dream of Jinsha City takes the disappeared Jinsha ancient culture as the background with the ancient city scene. Tibet, Jiuzhaigou, countryside scenery in South China have been the prototypes of its background. In addition, it is integrated with abundant folk cultural elements such as teahouse culture, ancient architecture and clothes and so on. Moreover, the film shows the dream of Chinese culture well, delivering the values and ideas of the harmonious coexistence and prosperity between man and nature. The Dream of Jinsha interprets the love and the courage of Chinese culture. It should have been an excellent film to spread Chinese culture but it was defeated by the bleak box office.

Therefore, it demands much for animation producers who intend to spread national culture to the world. First of all, they must master skillful modern techniques and be acquainted with specific folk culture to keep the authenticity of folk elements in the process of production. Moreover, it is needed to invite experts in the field of Chinese folk culture for guidance. Animation producers or games designers can join a forum to discuss new ways to promote traditional Chinese culture through animated works.

## Summary

The production of Animation employed with techniques of folk art is facing great challenge to disseminate folk culture because of its own limitations and the single way of expression. The inheritance and application of folk art in animation should keep pace with the development of society. It demands much more for designers of animated works about how to make animation with Chinese traditional culture and national image. Only by grasping the spiritual connotation of folk culture, interpreting its soul and essence and giving it new vitality can we better spread the folk culture to the world in animation.

## Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by Jiangxi Research Program for Humanities & Social Science: JC17105

## References

- [1] Information on [https://baike.baidu.com/item/ Suggestions on implementation of projects to promote and develop traditional Chinese culture excellence /20400855?fr=Aladdin](https://baike.baidu.com/item/Suggestions%20on%20implementation%20of%20projects%20to%20promote%20and%20develop%20traditional%20Chinese%20culture%20excellence/20400855?fr=Aladdin)
- [2] Zhong Jingwen Introduction to Folklore, Shanghai Literature and Art Press, Shanghai,1998, pp.1-2
- [3] [https://baike.baidu.com/item/ink animation /5162636](https://baike.baidu.com/item/ink%20animation/5162636)
- [4] Wu Yunchu, Editor-in-Chief, Animation short Film creation, Shanghai Jiaotong University Press, Shanghai, 2010, pp. 83
- [5] SongJiang Wang, The Folk Art and the Anime, Science and Technology Press, Tianjin, 2012.
- [6] Pan Qiusi, The New Development of Chinese Animation, Jilin University Press, Changchun, 2016, pp. 36-37
- [7] [https://baike.baidu.com/item/beautiful forests/19841147?fr=aladdin](https://baike.baidu.com/item/beautiful%20forests/19841147?fr=aladdin)
- [8] Ying Li, A study on meanings in spaces of the dissemination of folk arts, Folklore Studies. 126 (2016) pp.133-139.