A Study on the Reconstruction of Cultural Confidence in Chinese Animation

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Abstract—Before the 1980s, the Chinese film industry had released many excellent animations with distinctive Chinese characteristics, such as The Monkey King and Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King, which were deeply loved by Chinese domestic and foreign audiences and created brilliant achievements in the artistic creation of domestic animations. However, since the middle and late 1980s, faced with the fault of domestic animation talents and the impact of the rapid development of Japanese and American animation, the Chinese animation industry has presented a situation of "continuous decline" and "being over the hill". In the era of globalization and digitalization, the development of Chinese animation shows the profound cultural anxiety, with technology covering up the story and other pressures and difficulties. At present, Chinese animation is in a critical period of national cultural reconstruction and high-tech integration. It is necessary to take history as a mirror, study and organize the animation elements in traditional national culture, create original animations in line with contemporary aesthetics, and build animation art and culture with Chinese new era characteristics. This has become an important task for Chinese animation workers.

Keywords: cultural confidence, reconstruction, Chinese animation, tranditional culture

I. INTRODUCTION

In China after 1978, the economic reform and the market-oriented access to advanced western technology accelerated the overall pace of modernization. In the field of art, especially in the field of animation, the acceptance mentality of taking over and the orientation of acquiring advanced western technology have been replaced by the mechanical imitation, technology infatuation and pursuit of Chinese animation. In this period, there was a lack of rational criticism and cognition of the deep cultural elements such as nationalism, religious belief and cultural values hidden in western culture and art. Led by one-sided imitation and catching up with western advanced animation technology, it not only gave up the animation market, but also abandoned the responsibility of national culture in the field of animation art, lost the rationality and cultural cognition of animation art, and ignored the expression and construction of traditional culture and national cultural resources in the field of animation. Technical confidence and cultural confidence in the field of animation have been lost in the process of technical catch-up. At present, the dilemma of values and styles that Chinese animation is facing also reflects that Chinese animation creators are not confident in Chinese national culture and lack of creativity. The field of culture and art is an important part of national culture. It plays an important role in preserving, conveying and expressing traditional culture, educating the people, rallying people, inspiring national pride, cultivating and maintaining national self-confidence. The development of Chinese animation should establish the consciousness of subjectivity and responsibility of national culture, and should have rational cognition and value judgment.

II. LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS ON LOSS, CRISIS AND BREAKTHROUGH

A. Ambiguity of cultural identity

At the beginning of the new century, a variety of reasons led to the Chinese animation market in a weak state. The imperfection of the market economic system has led to many irregularities, self-discipline and immaturity in the operation of the whole art market. At the same time, in the background of globalization and industrialization, the animation industry of developed countries such as Europe, America, Japan and South Korea quickly seized the animation market of China, and spread the culture and values of these countries. Chinese animation industry has forced the survival and development, while trying to learn foreign advanced production technology, and outputting a large number of animation film and animation series, but most works lacked of originality, the lack of traditional cultural elements and background, market share declining, eventually put Chinese animation into a deep cultural anxiety.

In 1999, Shanghai art film studio released the animation film *Lotus Lamp*, which expressed the cultural anxiety and artistic breakthrough practice of Chinese animation art in the new era. This work not only used a new production concept, and CG special effects, but also tried to extract materials from the traditional Chinese national culture, has tried to find a balance between the impetuous and anxious Chinese animation market, so that the Chinese national animation would return to the audience's vision. Unfortunately, the characters in this work lacked originality, the story content was thin, and the expression of national culture and spirit was unclear. This fully reflected Chinese animation wavered between adhering to

tradition and promoting innovation, which led to the dilemma of vague national cultural identity, during this period.

On the other hand, The American Hollywood animated film *Kung Fu Panda* is a collection of Chinese architecture, tai chi and eight trigrams, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese cuisine, sedan chair, mahjong and a large number of local Chinese cultural elements. "Panda" is the ambassador of Chinese culture, while "Kung Fu" is regarded as one of the symbols of Chinese culture. In addition to the main character the panda Po, the golden monkey, crane, tiger, snake and mantis are some of the most distinctive examples of traditional Chinese martial arts. *Kung Fu Panda*, an animated film that reconstructs China's national culture, combined with American humor and the narrative structure of Hollywood classics, was a hit with Chinese audiences, taking in RMB 38 million in its first weekend at the box office. From the perspective of globalization, American animation pragmatism as a tool and utilitarianism as a marketization method, integrate advanced animation technology with traditional Chinese cultural elements, and uses the foreshadow of western cultural values to continuously erode the Chinese animation market.

In the face of the surging communication of American and Japanese animation culture, Chinese animation should not only get out of the predicament and defend the territory of domestic animation, but also strive to introduce truly excellent works to inherit and interpret Chinese traditional culture, so as to promote China's animation art to go abroad. The arduous cultural task not only requires the animators in the new era to accurately grasp the trend and background of globalization and integrate traditional national culture into globalization, but also requires them to be vigilant to prevent "cultural transfer" from the perspective of preserving and carrying forward national culture. Therefore, Chinese animation can only find its own style in the context of globalization by deeply understanding and correctly examining the identification of traditional national culture and effectively integrating the traditional cultural resources of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

B. Crisis of values

In recent years, the production of animation in China has been developing by leaps and bounds, but its artistic aesthetics and theme connotation are worrying. The reason is that commercial interests and artistic pursuit have not been integrated. Animation carries a huge cultural responsibility and plays a guiding role in the audience's psychology, belief and behavior. Correct values are the cultural guarantee of the quality of animation works and determine the ideological height of the works. At present, under the impact of entertainment industry and foreign animation, Chinese animation focuses on entertainment, ignoring the cultural responsibility it should have. Many works are superficial in content and seek vulgar taste for audience rating or box office. For example, the animated TV show *Bonnie Bears* has received a warm response from children under the banner of environmental protection, but has caused concern among parents. In this TV show, humans wantonly cut down trees, abuse guns and violent fights with animals, which go against

the values of harmony between human and nature in China, and bring bad effects to children. The red Wolf character in another animated TV program *Happy Sheep and Gray Wolf* subverts the female image in the traditional family concept, but creates the female image of the new era in an extreme way. The hostess red Wolf proves her power and family status with violence, and drives her husband to go out hunting sheep with her beauty. This kind of character setting goes against the "etiquette" and "diligence" in Chinese culture, and sets a negative example for the audience. The network animation TV *100,000 bad jokes* attempts to attract adults by deconstructing the classical literature and making absurd jokes on famous cartoon characters. In essence, such countercultural entertainment is based on deconstruction and unbridled parody traditions. [1] Robert Mackey, a famous screenwriter, said, "Stories are the art of expressing values to the world." [2] Throughout the history of animation, animation art in the United States and Japan after a long period of development and evolution, has become to spread its values and interpretation and important media platform to promote their own traditional culture, while Chinese animation is the sublimation of obvious lack of thought, the depth of understanding of traditional culture and the correct values judgment.

C. Lack of artistic style

Animation style refers to the overall artistic characteristics of art, performance, theme, meaning and music. It reflects the artist's thoughts, aesthetics, as well as the cultural characteristics of a nation and an era. In the past 20 years, influenced by the animation of Japan, Europe and the United States, the national style of Chinese animation is difficult to break through. The 2D animation style leans towards Japan. *Kuiba*, animated series films in character design, scene design and character action are "Japanese". Director of this animated series, Wang Chuan believes this is a global market positioning, with more than 80 percent of the current international mainstream market featuring such styles. In fact, except for fans of Japanese anime, Japanese-style animation is not generally accepted by the Chinese audience, so the box office is generally low after a hot debut. When the network animation *Young Bees* entered the Japanese market, Japanese audiences commented that it was a copy of Japanese animation, hoping to see the animation in Chinese style. In recent years, the development of network animation is rapid, 2D animation is basically Japanese style, such as *Corpse Brother*, *Monster List, Full-time Master* and so on. [3]

In the current mainstream 3D animation, Chinese animation takes the European and American animation as the reference object. Called "China's first original 3D animated film", *Moby Bius Ring*, the project cost RMB 130 million, took five years, brought together the world's animation talent, and hired *Mulan 2* director Gran Chaika, but the final box office was only RMB 3.65 million. The reason that the content of the story was separated from the local Chinese culture. Without innovation, the story blindly pursued new technology, which was difficult to resonate with the local audience. The 3D version of *Magic Brush Maliang* was supported by Disney. This fairy tale based on Chinese folk culture was packaged as a classic Disney-style animation, abandoning the national culture conveyed in the

original, leaving audiences with mixed feelings. In addition, *The Bonnie Bear · Fantasy Space*, *Mirror* and *Submarine* and so on animation works, did not finally break through Disney-style. The art director of Disney animation company Lasseter's famous saying "Art challenges technology, technology inspires art" is not only a wonderful explanation of the relationship between art and technology, but also can be regarded as advice on the creation and development of Chinese animation art. As a result, Chinese animation in order to realize the rapid and healthy development and beyond, should not only return to the standard of traditional and national culture, but also deeply realize the integration and organic connection of art and technology.

III. REBUILDING CHINESE ANIMATION IN THE NEW ERA WITH NATIONAL CULTURAL CONFIDENCE

A. Making full use of national cultural resources

The 5,000 years civilization of the Chinese nation has a long history, and the rich cultural resources provide a good environment for the development of Chinese animation. Chinese mainstream traditional culture and customs, ethnic minority culture, classical literature, and themes in current life are all sources of inspiration for Chinese animation creation. Dig from the traditional culture and customs. With the rapid development of The Times, some folk cultures from generation to generation have been continuously washed away in time, technology and fast-paced life, and people gradually forget them. Every festival in China contains rich national cultural characteristics and beautiful stories, and the traditional symbols resulting from them, such as red lanterns, door gods, Spring Festival pictures, lion dances, firecrackers and so on, are important traditional cultural elements. The animated film *Little Door God* released in 2016 told the story of two brothers facing the crisis of losing their jobs due to the development of science and technology, and a series of stories happened after they came to the ancient town of Nanxun. The film realized the combination and reconstruction of traditional culture and modern life. [4]

1) From the cultural resources of ethnic minorities

Ethnic minority culture is an important part of Chinese culture. Each ethnic group has its own unique cultural connotations and mysterious dream-like exotic customs, and has created a large number of legends, myths and moving stories. In 2007, Shanghai art film studio produced the animated film *Warriors*. The film focuses on a series of events triggered by A Mongolian young man Bateer, showing the courage and frankness of the Mongolian youth. Rational development and protection of minority cultural resources, the colorful minority story in the form of animation, not only to show the important link of the diversity of culture within the nation state, but also to build an important part of the Chinese culture confidence. [5]

2) From classical literature

Chinese classical literature inherits Chinese national cultural ideology, which has a profound influence on people's outlook on life, values and morals. These overarching literary stories provide rich material for original Chinese animation. In 2015, 3D animation film *The Monkey King: Hero is Back,* it was obvious that the prototype from Chinese classical novel *The Journey to the West* myth story. The director extracted and expanded the character. The plot of this film was excellent and well made, which broke the single and inherent impression of Chinese animation formed over a long period of time, and became the representative achievement of Chinese animation works with innovative consciousness and spirit, thus achieving the reputation of phenomenal works. Since the beginning of the new century, there has been almost no exploration of Chinese classic literature for Chinese animation. The vast and profound space of Chinese classic literature, which is deeply loved by the Chinese people, still needs to be continuously developed and expanded by animation workers.

B. Developing the artistic conception and aesthetic of traditional Chinese animation

Chinese traditional animation adopts the aesthetic conception of the unity of man and nature. The reason why Chinese traditional animation has gained the reputation of "The Chinese School of Animation" and had a glorious history on the world stage of animation is that it absorbs various artistic elements such as dance, music, painting, architecture and calligraphy, and integrates traditional philosophical thoughts, thus creating the uniqueness of Chinese traditional animation art. As early as in the song and yuan dynasties, the concept of artistic conception appeared in Chinese paintings. Since then, traditional Chinese paintings have shifted from the depiction of objective objects to the expression of subjective spirit, which is a realm of "feeling and scene meeting, meaning and image communication" formed in the artistic aesthetic practice of the Chinese nation. The artistic conception of Chinese traditional art originates from the ancient philosophical consciousness of "the unity of heaven and man", while western countries believe in the world outlook of "anthropocentrism" with the thinking mode of "subject-object dichotomy". The natural consciousness embodied in the traditional Chinese aesthetic culture of "unity of heaven and man" can make artworks have eternal vitality. [6] Animated film *Big fish & Begonia* released in 2016, relying on the Warring States period philosopher and litterateur Zhuang Zhou's masterpiece *Zhuangzi Innner Chapters: The Carefree Excursion*. The story is about a young girl Chun in order to repay a teenager Kun the grace of saving her life, to raise Kun's soul after his death. She spared no effort to fight the world she lived in, only to release kun into the sea and reborn. This work constructs a fantasy world of natural coexistence between man and god, presenting an aesthetic style with unique national characteristics in both shapes and spirits. [7]

In Chinese ink painting, "illusory" and "real" are important theoretical categories, including the opposition and unity of looming, shade, space, and black and white. This traditional concept of painting theory is widely used in traditional animation. For example, in the 1988 animated film *Landscape*, the half-side composition and large amount of white space are often used to reflect the fresh and elegant air. This ink and wash visual representation was also used animated film *Da Hu Fa* in 2017. This work combined the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences, the picture design was more concise, and with a lot of white space to open the distance between

reality and narrative space, showing a mysterious feeling and intention. Illusion and reality in the film and television works is the way to show the depth of field, through the foreground and background, illusion and reality change to reflect the sense of space. An important scene in *Big fish & Begonia* — the building surrounded by gods, a panoramic shot connects the space between the sky and the sea and gods. The transformation of illusion and reality makes the picture have a sense of space and cohesion, reflecting the energy absorbed from the traditional national art form.

C. *Constructing Chinese national cultural temperament from the world's perspective*

The construction of national culture of Chinese original animation is not only reflected in the external artistic expression, but also the construction of national spirit and national cultural temperament, which is enough to arouse the emotional resonance of Chinese people and even the global audience. The shaping of characters in animation is the key to embody the connotation of national culture. Animators must dig deep into the essence of traditional culture and combine with the needs of The Times to create animation works with distinctive national cultural characteristics. Based on *The Journey to the West*, the main character in animated film *The Monkey King: Hero is Back* has created a vivid character that overturns the previous understanding of the Monkey King. The Monkey King in the film is no longer the invincible god, the real human characteristics make the character more rounded. In this film, the Monkey King from self-denial to self-struggle, and from self-doubt to self-redemption, echoes the relationship between "self-cultivation" and "peaceful world" in Confucianism. There is no Monk Tang in this film, but the young monk Liu Jianger's journey from rescuing the Monkey King at Wuzhi mountain to helping him re-affirm himself makes the audience realize that Liu Jianger is the "incarnation" of the Monk Tang in the original work. Such "MacGuffin" performance techniques greatly improve the interactivity, topic and interest in the narrative process. The film adopts the classic Hollywood narrative technique, but throws away the individual heroism in American movies, and embodies the Chinese national cultural values. *NE ZHA: I am the Destiny*, released in July 2019, has topped RMB 3 billion at the box office in two weeks, becoming the highest-grossing animated film in the history of Chinese cinema. *The Monkey King: Hero is Back* is the first time that Chinese animation has been removed from its infancy. However, *NE ZHA: I am the Destiny* is actually a realistic animation that reflects the fate of various groups in the current society. This animated film reflects that there are no absolute good people in this world, nor absolute evil people. Evil and good people are the common majority. Even fairy demons are not immune from common customs, and it also reflects the influence of racial discrimination and prejudice on certain groups of people. The success of this animation lies in its success in conveying traditional culture, uniting people with the secular, and educating and influencing the public.

National culture, ethnic traditions and customs, etc., are all Chinese and appeal to a household name, the novelty of foreign culture is a kind of widespread human curiosity, is also a kind of open and study of the good point of view,

internationalization is the trend of The Times, is the human society and the trend of historical development, we should have a clear understanding and cognition, but how to deal with the internationalization and nationalization is every nation, every kind of culture and art field should grasp the philosophy of cognition. On one hand, the success of learning new technologies with an open mind, even learning how the United States embraces multiculturalism, and then using new technologies to create animation works; on another hand, how to excavate and sort out the elements of Chinese traditional culture, make use of Chinese traditional culture and the traditional customs of ethnic minorities, including all kinds of myths and legends, and present them in new forms and technologies is an important mission for the development of Chinese animation art in the future, and also the road to success.

IV. CONCLUSION

Original Chinese animation needs to constantly improve the technology and optimization tools, but more should rational analysis of foreign excellent animation culture and rational framework, with enough cultural confidence and advanced technical means, the correct interpretation and transmission of national traditional culture, not only to maintain cultural responsibility and promote the healthy development of the animation art market.

China in the process of opening up and healthy development is not only a gesture of high national confidence, but also a representation and interpretation of the mission and responsibility of an outstanding nation. In order to achieve sustainable development, Chinese animation art should first have an open mind, a spirit of learning from the strengths of various countries, and a high level of cultural confidence and mission. Chinese traditional animation art has made outstanding achievements in the field of aesthetic conception, which is the valuable experience and excellent achievements of Chinese animation art, but also a fine tradition that needs to be preserved and carried forward in the development process of Chinese animation art. China's extensive and profound traditional cultural resources and colorful national cultural resources are inexhaustible treasure house for the development of Chinese animation art.

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