



Analysis of Chinese Animation Movies and Its Impact on Cultural Identity

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Abstract. In this era of globalization and rapidly evolving technologies, the Chinese animation industry is facing profound cultural anxiety in its development. The impact of this rapid development of Japanese and American animation has threatened the very core of its national cultural identity and the Chinese animation is in a critical period of national cultural reconstruction and high-tech integration. Chinese animation creators now have an immense task in finding ways to reconstruct their traditional national culture. This study analyses the categories of Chinese animation movies from the year 2015-to 2022 through the literature. The analysis will also contribute to the creation of more national core-oriented original content and in building the animation art and culture with lesser or no imitation of foreign cultural elements.

Keywords: Chinese Animation Movies · Cultural Identity · Technologies · Cultural Elements

1 Introduction

With the widespread use of digital technology, animation production techniques have been greatly enhanced and changed. Many foreign animations that have maturely used these technologies to create new visual spectacles and audio-visual effects, have accounted for the majority of the animation hits at the box office and have greatly influenced and changed the perception and aesthetic pursuit of Chinese audiences towards animation. The Chinese animation industry was and still is heavily influenced by American and Japanese styles of animation production methods. In recent years, the successful commercial animation cases on Chinese animation performance methods, in general, are divided into two categories, a class of performance techniques technically consisting of foreign design tools like Maya, 3d Max, Adobe, etc.

The animation techniques imported from the US are combined with Chinese mythological storylines and traditional Chinese elements to form Chinese animation. There is another category that draws on Japanese animation, creating animations using the techniques consisting of 2D design tools such as Adobe after effects and etc.

On one hand, Chinese animation has begun to borrow more from the industrial and aesthetic experience of American animation films; on the other hand, the “nationalized characteristics” of the “Chinese animation school” at that time have begun to be impacted

by the globalization wave on all fronts; Adding on, with the development of technology, the media environment of informality and networking brought a new and more complex and diversified creative space for Chinese animation.

2 Status of Chinese Animation

2.1 Current Chinese Animation Policy

In the perspective of the current policies for the Chinese animation industry, a 14th Five-Year Plan was put forward by China's Communist Party (2021–2025) which aimed for the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (PRC) which was approved by the 13th National People's Congress on March 2021 [1]. In this five year plan the state government proposed that to improve the quality and efficiency of the animation industry, it is an utter necessity and important to tell the Chinese cultural stories through animation, which will amplify the process of spreading the core cultural and socialist values to enhance and strengthen the spiritual bond of the people, especially the youth. The 5 years plan further emphasized creating several Chinese animation brands to perform as a catalyst in promoting the development of the animation industry, its marketing image and licensing in which, such arrangements will help extend the chain of the animation industry and increase its value. Thus, making it an “all-industry chain” and “all-age group” market.

2.2 Chinese Animation Movies Trend

Before the box office success of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), was one of the few animated critically acclaimed series. The massive box office success of the *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) paving a way for how the future animation movies would look like in the future which gave birth to a whole new era of Chinese animation films. Not only did it show the maturity of the Chinese animation industry but also the Chinese audiences that are compelled to contribute to the box office. The film's achievement has been treated as a “milestone of domestic animation film production” [2]. Following the success and trend set by *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) in 2019, a Chinese animated film *Ne Zha* (2019) became notable when the film's extended schedule saw it top the box office with 50.35 billion yuan, firmly placing it at the top of China's animated film box office history. Accounted for 70% of animation film revenue for the whole year of 2019 (2019 box office 70.95 billion yuan), not only for these animated films but also for other animated movies like *White Snake* (2019): and *Jiang Ziya* (2020) too collected massive box office earnings. These are some of the best Chinese animations in the last five years at the box office, which mostly look at inspiration from traditional Chinese mythology and the animations are very much encouraged by the government. Moreover, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), *The Wind Guardians* (2018), *Ne Zha* (2019), *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake* (2021) have won China's three prestigious film awards. Namely The Golden Rooster Award, The Hundred Flowers Award, and China Huabiao Film Awards.

The study calculates the Chinese animation movie box office earnings from 2015 to 2022 June (Fig. 1). The total Chinese animation box office earnings in 2015 were 20.38

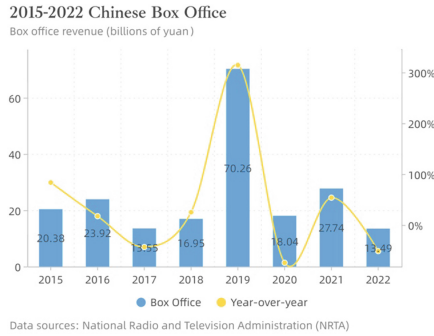



Fig. 1. 2015–2022 Chinese box office revenue.

billion RMB, which is the total of 45.5% over the years previously till 2015 and in 2016 the box office earnings increased and total earnings rose up to 70.56 RMB billion, and the percentage increased by 59.98% in just over a year. In 2019 the box-office reach the highest earning milestone of 107.97 RMB billion, over the period of 3 years the percentage increased by 158.35%. It has fluctuated considerably due to the impact of single animation movies.

However, despite their huge success both creatively and financially, the academic community has different assessments of Chinese animation after 2015. A part of scholars believes that as a revival and comeback of the Chinese animation school or national animation, Chinese animation movies no longer copy the contents, the artistic styles, and the technology of foreign countries [3] rather, they absorbed the essential part and advantages of foreign animations and then utilized those acquired techniques of the digital culture in their movie-making. This made them not only technically accomplished regarding their digital effects but also added a new chapter for the Chinese animation school [4] [5] and the representation of the “Chinese national cultural values”.



On the other hand, some scholars believe that Chinese animation has retreated from the peak of its national style in the 1960s and has changed with the cultural and ideological impact of globalization. The aesthetic perception of Chinese animation has been influenced by globalization and localization, where media technology overshadows, pressurizes, and adds difficulties to the elements such as good storytelling, and simply assumes that superficial transplantation of traditional art is sufficient to solve the problem of cognitive bias in the national style [6]. Narrowly interpreting the content as specific cultural elements and cultural props, most works lack originality, and blindly cater to secular aesthetics, resulting in bulk, large-scale assembly-line production, formulaic plots and stereotypical characters whereby it ignores the ideological core brought to the content by connotations [7]. This eventually makes Chinese animation fall into deep cultural anxiety [5]. Indeed, With the innovation and popularization of global digital technology, Chinese animation is struggling between ideology and western cinematic language.

Table 1. Chinese animation movies

Time/ Stage	Features	Representative work:
The budding stage [~1995]	Chinese animation went through the budding period and the Prosperous period and had made brilliant achievements. During this stage, the cultural identity of creation was inherited with various forms such as ink animation, puppet animation, paper-cutting animation, and shadow puppetry animation. It was known as the "The Chinese School Of Animation".	Havoc in Heaven (1964), Nezha Conquers the Dragon King  (1979)
The downturn period of Chinese animation Production [1995~2008]	With China's reform and opening-up policy, Chinese TV began to gain popularity on a global scale. Hollywood and Japanese animation were introduced to China and China was facing a talent gap, facing a hurdle for having backward technology, aging equipment, and rigid concepts. Chinese animation fell into a downturn period. On the other hand, the Chinese animator undertake other country processing of animation work	Lotus Lantern (1999) 
Chinese animation IPs development stage[2009~2014]	The series of domestic animation has achieved a stage of success but still has not shaken off the label of being childish and inferior. Quality productions are still distributed by foreign companies, mainly Disney. Chinese animation processing industry has more than 70% of Japanese cartoons (including TV and movie versions) and	"the series of Boonie Bears 

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	many European and American cartoons.	
Chinese Identity Animation Boom Period [2015~2018]	The commercial success of " Monkey King: Hero is Back 2015" has rid the audience of the stereotypical impression of domestic animation as low quality and inferior, and has led to a boom in the production of domestic animation movies. Animation Outsourcing faces adjustment and transformation. The growth rate of the animation processing business has slowed down, and the number of companies engaged in the animation processing business has even decreased.	<p>Monkey King: Hero is Back (2015), Big Fish & Begonia (2016)</p> 
Development and rise period [2019~present]	Nezha (2019) was a huge success, becoming a milestone event for domestic animation films and igniting audiences' enthusiasm and confidence in local (domestic) animations. The box office ceiling has made a real qualitative leap forward for the domestic animations for an all-ages audience.	<p>Nezha (2019) White Snake (2020)</p>  <p>(2019) Jiang Ziya (2020)</p>

2.3 Chinese Animation History

Chinese animation has a history of nearly a century, and this 100 years old history is not only related to the development of animation art and technology but also closely related to the development of social politics, economic development, cultural art, philosophical ideology and even science and technology (Table 1).

This study will delineate the key stages in the development of Chinese animation, focusing mainly on the post prosperous period of the “Chinese School of Animation”. This study will also delineate the trends of Chinese animation under the impact of globalization, economic markets and technological innovation that came with China’s reform and opening-up policy.

To sum up, the development of China’s animation industry after the reform and opening up is the result of policy changes, market environment, historical factors, and the influence of foreign animation industry development. The Chinese animation industry became more of a foundry where ideas came from foreign companies and the labor (animators) was Chinese. The development of China’s animation foundry industry and China’s original animation industry has formed a “dual-track” system. While the Chinese animation foundry industry shows a development course of “prosperity - sustained prosperity – decline”, the Chinese animation original industry shows a development course of “rebirth - transitional development - transformation and upgrading”. One can confidently say that the original Chinese animation industry is in the process of “New Life - Transformation and Upgrading”.

3 Categories of Chinese Animation

3.1 Categories of Chinese Animation

Before the 1990s, the early Chinese animations were different according to the length of time. It can be divided into two categories: animation short film and animation feature film, among which the animation feature film is also called Meishu film.

After the 1990s, commercial animation works were formed, which are divided into TV animation, Original net animation networks, and animation movies accordingly to different broadcasting channels (Table 2).

The research papers is focus on Chinese animation movies.

TV animation refers to a class of animation series broadcasted through TV stations, such animation works have the characteristics of simple lines, simple plot content, cartoon characters, production costs, and production cycle compared to other types of works with the target audience focused on children.

Original net animation originated from the imitation of Japanese anime animation, and the structure of Chinese online animation is consistent with that of Japanese anime animation in recent years. The themes focused on genres such as metaphysical fantasy, history, science fiction, romance, comedy and war. These works are characterized by complex picture lines, distinctive character personalities, complex plots, and complete value systems, and their target audiences are teenagers.

Chinese animation Movies have been developed since the early animation art films, and the themes are focused on history, mythology, folk tales, and other subjects, targeting

Table 2. Categories of Chinese animation

Categories	Genre	Features
TV animation	Enlightenment Comedy	Simple plot, short production cycle
Original net animation	Metaphysical, historical, science, fiction, romance, magic, funny, etc.	Complex plot, complete value system, long production cycle
Animation Movie	History, mythology, folk tales, etc.	Distinct personalities, fast-paced plot, long production cycle

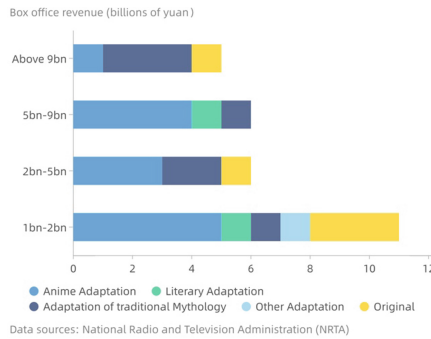


Fig. 2. 2015–2022 June Chinese animation adaptation forms with box office (This statistic includes Sino-foreign joint animation).

the general public, with some works targeting the younger age group. Among the three types of animation works, the animation film works have the longest production cycle, with a production period of more than two years, except for animation film works catering the younger audiences or children.

3.2 Categories of Chinese Animation Adaptation Forms

I have divided Chinese animation into 5 adaptation forms: Anime adaptation; Literature Adaptation; Adaptation of traditional Mythology; Other Adaptation and Original.

In Fig. 2, Anime adaptations are the mainstream form of domestic Intellectual property (IP) adaptations, Animations that have anime adaptation has a solid consumer group at the box office. Adaptations of traditional mythology have a wider audience base and obvious box office advantages.

Chinese animation caters categories of three age groups parent-children, all-age, and youth-oriented, but the animation quantity is still dominated by the animation movies created for parent-children age group category.

With the exception of the “Boonie Bears series”, all other parent-child domestic animations grossed less than \$200 million. Nevertheless, When we look at the performance of some of the animation series productions, we see that the series has achieved a steady

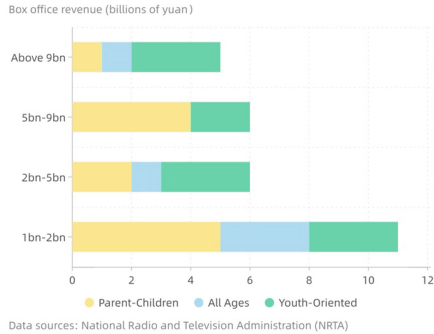


Fig. 3. 2015–2022 Chinese animation age group (This statistic includes Sino-foreign joint animation).

increase in box office revenues. However, the box office success of a few animation movies has stagnated or even declined. For example, in the Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf animated series the box office revenues did not increase year by year (Fig. 3).

Overall, movies that were the Anime adaptations have been able to achieve steady growth in box office revenues.

3.3 Categories of Chinese Animation Technology

In Fig. 4, we can see that 3D animation is more profitable in Chinese animation, 3D animation movies have contributed over 1bn RMB which makes 82% of the total revenue earned by the animation movies. This shows that 3D animation production is a trend in Chinese animation.

For example with *Nezha* (2019) using software such as Autodesk Maya, Adobe and Nuke, which presented CG-rendered photorealistic textured images in particular emphasizing its ‘technological advancement’, animation is being re-positioned as ‘technological’ and ‘modern’ – while still insisting that what it is ostensibly doing is ‘conveying traditional culture’, albeit in 3D IMAX [8]. They argue that *Nezha* (2019) represents a national image in which traditions and modernity are interwoven, and the focus upon the ‘technological advancement’ – its digitality – constitutes a refiguring of animation in China as symbolic representation of modernity.

However, Most of the animation software and animation capture technology required for 3D animation production was designed and developed in the USA. In addition, the most powerful animation companies in the field of computer graphics research and development in 3D animation are concentrated in the USA, some prominent names are Pixar/Disney, Pacific Data Images (PDI)/DreamWorks Animation/Sony Pictures Imageworks/Blue Sky Studios and Fox Animation Studios.

These studios have collaborated with the software development companied got get it tailor made according to their own needs and almost all of the core technologies involved in creation of 3D animations and continue to develop a wide range of softwares and technical equipment for different genres and effects, keeping them at the forefront of 3D animation. The United States has always been at the forefront of the global

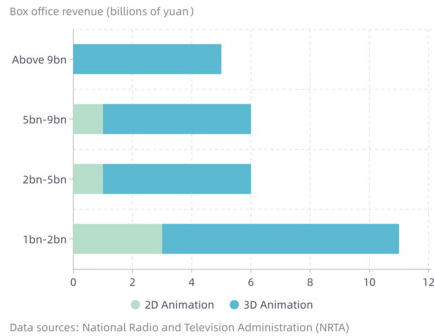


Fig. 4. 2015–2022 June Chinese animation technology (This statistic includes Sino-foreign joint animation).

market through its constant development of animation technology, and has exported this technology to other countries, making them economically dependent on the software and technology developed in the United States for the production of animation.

It is a well-known fact that the United States has the best special effects technology in the world, and many countries, including China, have learned advanced visual techniques from Hollywood or other film giants. The export of American technology has had a significant impact on the positioning of the film and television industry in various countries.

In 2005 Medosch from the University of Sussex wrote in his master’s thesis that once new technologies have been invented and are released into the world they have an irresistible impact on the social world. This implies that history is largely a result of the impact of new technologies [9].

The United States has created a virtuous cycle when it comes to technological monopoly exports and the US 3D animation hegemony will be more stable in this cycle. Globalisation becomes increasingly homogenous in its development and behind globalisation is precisely the support of imperialism for the powerful cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological power of the United States. This invasion has unconsciously changed people’s perceptions of consumption and aesthetics.

This has resulted in Chinese animation having to compromise under the influence of globalisation, having to combine Western animation techniques with Chinese core values, Chinese visual elements and a range of other Chinese cultural characteristics to reflect the differences with American animation in order to achieve box office success.

3.4 Production Companies of Chinese Animation Movies

Beijing Enlight Media is the most influential name when it comes to animation movie production. From 2015–2021 the company produced a total of 9 animation movies and out of those 9 animation movies “Nezha (2019)” is currently the highest-grossing animation movie in China;

Light Chaser Animation another prominent name in animation movies started transforming their animation creation from children viewership such as “Little Door Gods

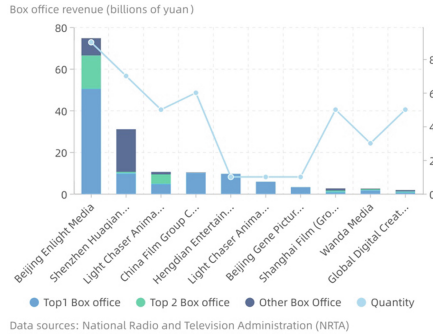


Fig. 5. 2015–2021 Production house companies cumulative box office (This statistic includes Sino-foreign joint animation).

(2015)” and “Tea Pets (2017)”, to a wider audience and created more Youth-Oriented animations such as “White Snake (2019)”, and “New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021)” ranking 3rd in the total box office of domestic animated movie.

New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) animation collected ¥4.56 hundred million (RMB) from the box office in its opening week. Light chaser animation the company behind the creation of this animation movie, integrated traditional mythology into a punk rock environment became the highlight of the film, while its adult expression differentiates its audience.

White Snake 2: Green Snake (2021) surpassed the box office takings of its predecessor: White Snake (2019): by first week of release, it bagged in 4.68 hundred million (RMB) Judging from the market feedback, people affirm the animation’s production capabilities. For example, the production of the water-filled mountain and the ink painting design of the duel in the realm of emptiness in White Snake 2 are examples of the industrialization of Chinese animation films.

Shenzhen Huaqiang is the second-highest-grossing animated movie in China with its headline Parent-Child animation series of “Boonie Bears”. Unlike the mythology series of animated movies, Shenzhen Huaqiang has created Boonie Bears a wide range of Boonie Bears IP such as animation TV, games, theme parks... Boonie Bears IP has now become a household name in China for family-friendly animation brands. The Wild Life (2020) is the seventh animation in the Boonie Bears series which gained the highest box office success in the year of 2021 (Fig. 5).

4 Cultural Identity in Chinese Animation Movie

4.1 Culture as Part of Identity Construction

After the founding of the country and before the reform and opening up, with the death of the old generation of artists and a series of complicated political and economic factors in China, the development of China’s animation industry stagnated and even regressed. During this period, most of the animation themes mainly reflected the revolutionary war or rural lives.

It leads to obsolescent thought that dominates a theoretical approach by viewing Chinese animation as a national ideological practice instead of an artistic representation that articulates the struggle among traditional cultural contents, cinematic language and visual modernity [10]. And after reformation and opening up, foreign animation products that had already developed maturely, poured into the domestic market, making the domestic animation stagnate even more. Amid criticism of domestic animation, some people began to focus on the nationalized components of domestic animation, arguing that the outdated national culture has hindered the development of contemporary domestic animation.

Many scholars attribute the problems of domestic animation to nationalization, yet the United States has proved the charm of Chinese elements with animations full of Chinese elements such as *Mulan* (1998) and *Kung Fu Panda* (2008). The main problem is not that animation should not be nationalized, but that tradition should be combined with modernity. Although “*Kung Fu Panda*” draws on traditional Chinese cultural elements, the core is American values.

Domestic animation needs to ask and think about the core of Chinese culture, and the expression is secondary. In the past few years, with the country’s strong support for domestic animation and the decades of development of the domestic animation industry, many animation companies have reawakened the importance of cultural identity for national animation. By using overseas animated film as a reference and together focusing on traditional and ethnic visual arts, the conception of animation was modified in a style of nationalization from the inside [10].

5 Conclusion

Globalization has affected the indigenous culture time and time again, but each has its branch where the imperialism continues and its reception mode also continues. Chinese animation is changed by globalized media technology at the same time is trying to add its own cultural identity as much as possible. To speed up the construction of the Chinese commercial animation platform, Chinese commercial animation has to imitate and learn from foreign classic animation works. However, due to the lack of sufficient attention to national independence in the early imitation and learning, there is excessive use of imitation which often appears superficial, programmatic, and raises other underlying issues.

There is no doubt that the advancement of technology has brought a strong impetus to the development of production. From the history of the Chinese animation industry, we can find that the late popularity of television in the last century, that is, the backwardness of science and technology is actually the fundamental reason for the failure of Chinese animation in the last century. Since then, Chinese animation technology has always been in a backward state. The practical application of the animation industry is another ten years of technological lag. 3D animation is quite popular in China, but most animators are only users, not developers, and they are always a step behind in technology. These are the factors that Chinese animation industry needs to pay attention to.

Nowadays, Chinese animation technology is transforming from 2D to 3D, relying on 3D animation production software to produce animation, which is a major trend of

global technological determinism. The most representative work is ink animation. The ink animator has done a good job of incorporating the ink technique of traditional painting in the animation. Such as *Where is Mama?* (1960), *The Cowboy's Flute* (1963), *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (1988). Even nowadays it is a great guide for many animation production practitioners. Traditional forms of animation have their drawbacks, as they are expensive and require a lot of manpower and resources.

However, the practitioners of Chinese animation have never given up the quest to somehow improve or integrate ink and wash animation techniques, for example, the use of ink-painting in combination with 3D animation by the *White Snake* (2019) technical team is considered an ingenious technological breakthrough it retains "Chinese aesthetics" [11]; This constitutes a significant visual shift in style from earlier 'national style' animation, visually referencing more mainstream, international, 'blockbuster' films far more so than Chinese traditional art.

On the other hand, animation technology is one of the means of expressing cultural identity and is an aid in telling a good story.

Animation is not only a work of culture and art, but in a market economy it has become an integral part of the cultural industry. In its early development, Chinese animation had achieved great success in terms of artistic and social benefits. However, under the conditions of market economy, facing the industrialized environment and the impact of imported animation products, the development of Chinese animation industry has been plagued with difficulties. Of course, the deep-seated cultural reasons for the development difficulties of the animation industry in China and other countries and regions under the influence of global new media technology and there are four main measures to solve these problems. Paying attention to the development of Chinese animation technology, combining with new media technology to develop Chinese animation that belongs to the Chinese painting style. Adhere to the positioning of Chinese animation culture and take a multi-polar development path. Persevere in the development of original Chinese animation. Reform and improve the management system, strengthen policy guidance and policy support. Improve the level of animation education in China and cultivate animation talents.

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