



An Analysis of the Innovative Path of Chinese Animation's Popularity from the Perspective of Cultural Construction—Taking *Yao-Chinese Folktales* as an Example

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Abstract. Taking *Yao-Chinese Folktales* as the example, this paper discusses how Chinese animation succeeds in domestic and foreign markets in terms of cultural construction, and analyzes the innovation path and success factors of its great hit from three aspects: content deconstruction, form breaking and emotional resonance. Finally, in view of the current shortcomings of Chinese animation industry, this paper puts forward some suggestions for its future development, including the consistency of overall positioning, the rigor of information presentation, and the diversity of narrative perspectives. Through the analysis of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, this paper holds that the national animation industry needs innovation and development from the perspective of cultural construction in order to achieve the goal of internationalization and diversification.

Keywords: Chinese Animation's Hit · *Yao-Chinese Folktales* · Innovation Path · Cultural Revival

1 Introduction

1.1 The Origin and Significance of the Research

In recent years, with the development of globalization, various countries publicize their own cultural values, behavior patterns, lifestyles, symbols, etc. by exporting high-quality and exquisitely produced films and television dramas, music, books, multiform advertisements, or exporting different kinds of consumer products. Works of film and television agencies have exerted a subtle global influence, such as those of Netflix, HBO and Time Warner Inc in the US and Bollywood in India. However, a country's cultural construction has the same or even far-reaching significance as political construction, economic construction and social construction. Hence, it has strong significance of the times as for how to highlight Chinese cultural characteristics, maintain the independence of Chinese traditional culture and its influence, and enhance national cultural self-confidence and pride in the global scope.

“Chinese animation”, namely “Chinese national animation” [1], is an important carrier of cultural ideology. In China, “animation”, as an exotic product, has experienced five historical periods: start-up, exploration, gold time, loss and return [2], and has continuously developed a national animation discourse system with Chinese cultural characteristics. Among them, the domestic animated film *Monkey King Hero is Back*, which was released in 2015, was a great success at the box office and reputation, and it became a watershed in the history of Chinese animation. This is also the first time that Chinese animations have attracted wide attention and discussion from the society. Since then, a large number of outstanding animations have emerged constantly. Works such as *Big Fish Begonia*, *White Snake* and *Ne Zha*, play a pioneering role in inheriting and innovating cultural connotations and leading cultural recovery.

On January 1, 2023, *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, a collection of original online animated short films jointly produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio and Bilibili was officially launched. Without special advertising and excessive preheating of celebrities propaganda, it won the score of 9.6 in Douban (see Fig. 1. The score of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* in Douban) only after broadcasting two episodes, and ranked first in the list of real-time popular movies and TV shows. It gained high popularity on social media platforms such as Douban, Weibo and Xiaohongshu, and became the first popular animation in 2023. As of March 27, 2023, the comprehensive score of Douban in *Yao-Chinese Folktales* was 8.8 points.

At the centenary of Chinese animation, the popularity of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, an excellent national work, has enlightenment for the inheritance and “overseas spread” of national culture. Based on this, this paper discusses *Yao-Chinese Folktales* as a concrete example through case analysis, aiming at systematically grasping the innovative path of domestic animation's hit and analyzing the communication motivation of *Yao-Chinese Folktales'* popularity on the Internet from three aspects: content deconstruction, form



Fig. 1. The score of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* in Douban



Fig. 2. A still from the first episode of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, *Nobody*

breaking and emotional resonance. Combined with specific data and problems encountered in the communication process, the paper also puts forward corresponding improvement measures, so as to provide experience for future animation's creation and related researches.

1.2 Concept Definition and Literature Review

Animation contains animation and comics [3]. In 1900, the cartoon segment *The Enchanted Drawing* created by American director J. Stuart Blackton pioneered the world animation film. In 1917, Oten Shimokawa's *Imokawa Mukuzo Genkanban no Maki* marked the birth of Japanese animation. Foreign animation industry developed earlier, and its research and practice are in a leading position. In his book *Commercial Operation Mode of Japanese Animation Industry* [4], Masuda Hiromichi pointed out the important relationship between animation and national culture: animation can improve cultural self-confidence by showing the national image to the outside world, and can also be used as a form of national cultural communication and a means of implementing foreign policy.

In *Animation and "Otherness": the Politics of Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Identity in the World of Japanese Anime* [5], Yoshida thinks that animation provides the audience with an imaginary space reflecting the complex concepts of "self" and "others", and discusses the representations in the fantasy world of Japanese animation and how media representations can help to clarify or re-clarify the "other" of culture visually and narratively to establish their own subjective conceptualization.

Dahlan Bin Abdul Ghani analyzed the dissemination effect of animation *Upin & Ipin* in promoting Malaysian folk culture in *Promoting Malaysian Cultural Value through Animation*, and found that animation significantly depicts Malaysian values, including the art of Islamic values, by providing a platform for harmonious relations among different social, group or religious backgrounds, so that the younger generation can appreciate Malaysian traditional folk culture.

It can be seen that although the research objects of foreign scholars are different, they all reflect the positive impact of animation development on national culture and even national soft power. However, the domestic animation industry started late, so there are few related studies compared with foreign countries. Nevertheless, in recent years, with the rapid development of domestic animation industry and the awakening of "cultural self-confidence", domestic scholars have also done a lot of related researches on the problems of animation industry, and made some progress.

Yin Jun [6] believes that the animation industry has the advantages of protecting national cultural security, enhancing national self-confidence and improving national cultural status. Therefore, we should constantly optimize the animation industry chain, cultivate a mature secondary model and establish a sound policy system to create an animation industry with high cultural influence and then make it an effective way to forge the "soft power" of Chinese culture. Yu Jianping [7] pointed out that the development of China's animation industry must firmly grasp the excellent culture of the nation from the "spiritual" level, make full use of the cultural resources of the whole world from the "physical" level, and correctly use abstract and concrete ways to produce animation.

However, some scholars deem that there will be some obstacles in the development of animation in China. Cao Tianquan pointed out the imperfect market, incomplete industrial chain and lack of professional talents in *Introduction to Animation*. To solve these problems, he proposed that vigorously supporting the construction of animation industry base, cultivating animation industry chain completely and increasing the training of high-end talents can be taken as the solutions for the further development of Chinese animation.

On the basis of this research, domestic animation has continuously broken through innovated. Since 2015, it has developed rapidly and more and more great animations have entered the public vision. Since then, domestic scholars have focused more on the reasons for the success of such works, emphasizing the importance of “cultural popularity” and “cultural self-confidence”, such as Zhang Minghao’s “*On the Modernization Adaptation of Chinese Animated Films to “Myth” IP*” and Zeng Yiguo’s “*Breakthrough: “Cultural Popularity” of Video Programs under Media Convergence-Taking Henan TV’s “Tang Palace Banquet” Series Programs as an Example*”.

2 Why Yao-Chinese Folktales Becomes Widely Known?

2.1 Content Deconstruction: Memory Inheritance, Classics Development

“Folktales” tells all kinds of “weird stories” based on Chinese traditional deification and folklore, so as to map the real society and arouse the audience’s thinking. From the content point of view, the eight stories of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* look at ancient and modern times and look forward to the future. The plots can be roughly divided into the following three categories: adaptation and derivative categories represented by *Nobody* and *Goose Mountain*, realistic folk customs represented by *Fool and God* and *Old Man Yang*, and future imagination represented by *Null Island* and *Fly me to the Earth*. In this creative era of “content first”, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* tells the inheritance, development and innovation of Chinese traditional culture from a more grand perspective of time period, and leads the audience to explore the unique value of Chinese civilization and oriental aesthetics.

The so-called “intertextuality” means that “every text is in other existing texts and is always related to these texts” [8]. The texts bearing intertextual memory are not only graphic materials, audio-visual products and network resources, but also language traditions, mindsets, social customs or cultural mirrors condensed in national memory, collective memory and individual memory [9]. For example, the authentic Henan dialect dialogue in *Fool and God*, the dubbing of Beijing dialect in *Old Man Yang*, and the pictures with rich old Beijing elements such as Hutong, tomatoes on sticks and Beihai Park all show strong regional cultures. In terms of traditional text materials, *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, especially the adapted derivative works, is mostly based on the characters in Chinese classic literary works, such as the Monkey King in the *Journey to the West* and the Goose Cage Scholar in *Xu Qi Xie Ji*. These traditional deified characters or stories try to arouse the submerged national cultural memory. On the one hand, the existing “old texts” in the audience’s memory storage are stimulated, and the protection and inheritance of classic works are realized. On the other hand, the psychological distance of the audience is narrowed. For example, *Nobody* is based on the *Journey to the West*,

four great classics in China. However, it changes the basic narrative routine of, instead, it takes monsters as the main characters of the film (see Fig. 2. A still from the first episode of *Yao-Chinese Folktales, Nobody*), and tells the well-known story of journey to the West from a new perspective. Combined with the current social situation, the film shows the ruthlessness and cruelty of “Demon Workplace” incisively and vividly, and it is easier for the audience to find emotional connection from myth stories, thus promoting the memory and dissemination of “new texts”.

However, “intertextuality” does not mean copying invariably. The essence of art lies in the defamiliarization of forms, which makes things that people are accustomed to and do not observe become novel and charming, thus arousing people’s keen feelings about things [10]. Chinese animation bears the heavy responsibility of cultural inheritance, and most of them are based on traditional stories in Chinese classic works, but this does not mean rigid and serious discourse expression. On the contrary, excellent national animation pays attention to the innovation of local stories on the basis of remaining elements of the original works. Through appropriate defamiliarization of plots, they make traditional stories full of modernity and interest and reflects or satirize the real society with traditional culture as the core.

2.2 The Form is Transformed: Refined Length, Rich Symbols

First, in terms of the length and differentiated forms of the works, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* reflects the fit of the times. With the development of science and technology and the progress of society, the pace of people’s life is accelerating, the information receiving time is fragmented, and the audience’s attention has gradually become an important scarce resource. In this case, the traditional “TV programs” are constantly transforming to the emerging “video products”, and the “short, dull and fast” content is increasingly favored by everyone. In the form of unit short stories, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* presents eight independent stories rooted in Chinese traditional culture. Each episode is within 25 min, and adopts the weekly shift mode, which makes the audience mainly young people no longer be limited by time. Besides, the movie-watching process becomes flexible and diverse, and even can be carried out in piecemeal time such as commuting, thus strengthening the attraction to the audience and improving the stickiness of readers. In addition, because *Yao-Chinese Folktales* covers a variety of art styles and production techniques, matches the focus aesthetics, and avoids aesthetic fatigue, it greatly meets the needs of different audiences and brings huge flow to the works.

Second, make full use of cultural symbols and combine multiple elements. Sun Chunying said in *Intercultural Communication: Theory and Analysis* that “the smallest unit of communication is symbol [11]. Information is the material of communication, and it is always expressed as a certain symbol.” The episode of *She Wolf*, “White mountain and black water, washing my innocent heart; Fairy mushroom grows under a tree, giving you eternal life; The way can not be seen, why won’t I go back” draws lessons from the rubbings of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes. The ancient soundtrack complements the boundless snow scene in the film, so that the audience can feel the profoundness of Chinese traditional culture in the film. In order to spread the long-history Chinese civilization to the public, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* re-creates various ancient image symbols, reproduces historical information with intuitive audio-visual language, and realizes the

balance between popularization and enjoyment. Especially in the poetic painting style of *Goose Mountain*, the second creation of traditional cultural symbols reveals the strange beauty full of traditional Chinese aesthetics: the fox scholar is dressed in the tunic of Tang and Song men; the rabbit woman's dress is the one of Tang women; the goose girl's makeup is the popular "blood halo makeup" in the middle and late Tang Dynasty. And all the details of those things taken from the fox scholar's mouth imperceptibly convey the profound artistic deposits of the Chinese civilization.

2.3 Emotional Resonance: Into Real Life, for Public Reflection

Hans Robert Yoss, a German aesthetician, believes that "the so-called sympathetic identity refers to the aesthetic emotion of putting oneself into a strange self" [12]. In order to realize sympathetic identity and narrow the distance between the protagonist and the audience, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* incorporates modern thinking and expression techniques on the basis of traditional culture. Through the "anti-hero" deconstruction and reshaping of the characters, the audience breaks the inherent cognition and has a strong visual and emotional resonance. For example, *Nobody* is based on contemporary young people, and the protagonist of the film, the pig demon, is a true portrayal of workers in the workplace. The pig demon dares to innovate when making bows and arrows, but is questioned by the bear coach, "You are telling me?", the mane on the body is ruthlessly used as a tool to brush the pot, as well as the details such as burning a thousand pounds of firewood cut by the pig demon after the wolf king changed his mind. All these symbolize the cruelty of the real workplace with the "demon workplace", and at the same time make the role of the pig demon closer to the audience's life, generating empathy and intimacy. The hero is a small potato trapped by life. In *Wave Mountain*, where he is located, there are bosses who exploit employees, best friends who work together, and family members who care about themselves. This narrative strategy of reconstructing traditional culture from a modern perspective makes the audience feel "unfamiliar but familiar", and countless workers feel empathy one after another, and in their comments, they express the feeling that "they are not small demons at the bottom". From the audience's point of view, the hero is the embodiment of himself in another world. After experiencing many difficulties, the protagonist breaks through himself and grows up. The audience seems to see the hope and encouragement of realizing self-worth, and the spiritual culture is constantly enriched.

For a long time, Chinese animation has a vague understanding of audience positioning, and generally sticks to young groups. Adult audiences can only become "companion audiences" for children. In fact, according to the past data of China Animation Yearbook, the proportion of domestic animation audience under 14 years old is only 11%, and teenagers and adults over 14 years old are the main force of animation market consumption. Since 2015, domestic animation works represented by *Monkey King is Back*, *Big Fish Begonia*, *White Snake* and *Ne Zha* have gradually broken the stereotype of "low youth" left by traditional animation, turned their attention to the adult market, and gained good reputation and box office. On this basis, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* adheres to the creative strategy and orientation of all ages, and further broadens the audience by arousing the emotional resonance of audiences of different ages, showing the audience

a complete and full of tension Chinese story, and enhancing the harmony and unity of cultural construction and people's spirit.

3 Reflection and Enlightenment

Yao-Chinese Folktales has been widely spread based on the linkage of multimedia platform. On the one hand, the publicity was further intensified after the work gets famous and popular. For instance, making use of hot topics such as # *Yao-Chinese Folktales* being deified # and # *Yao-Chinese Folktales* portrays Beijing Hutong vividly # to stimulate fans' enthusiasm for discussion. On the other hand, a variety of welfare activities have been launched, and the second innovation upsurge has been set off among fans in the form of "side stories". Whether it is various cultural and creative products distributed in Taobao flagship store, or cultural practices such as makeup imitation special effects of fox scholar on Tik Tok platform, frequent hot stalks of "Crossing Waves Mountain" and fan creation of the combination of pig demon and crow monster, the audience's attention to the works has been further deepened, the program production has continued, and new cultural space has been expanded. On the whole, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has attracted much attention after getting popular, which not only enhances its brand value, but also achieves a win-win situation between commercial value and social benefits. It has also become a "phenomenal" cultural product. However, there are some shortcomings in it, such as word-of-mouth differentiation before and after, controversial painting style, obscure emotional conception, etc., which deserve further consideration and discussion.

3.1 Obvious Differences in Word of Mouth Before and After Broadcast, Necessary to Strengthen the Consistency of Overall Positioning

The director teams of the eight episodes of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* are different, so the production level and story quality are mixed. In particular, the starting point of the first two episodes is too high, which lays the aesthetic tone of "national style" and "weird stories", and raises the audience's expectation that the follow-up works should constantly break through on this basis. However, when the follow-up works fail to achieve a breakthrough and present deviations in theme and style, the audience will inevitably issue negative comments such as "3D animation is not Chinese style", "using the edge plot of old terrier", "outdated youth pain literature", "dialect stress is misread and jumps away from characters", which leads to a decline in the reputation of the works, finally resulting in the whole works showing a trend of "excellent stars and common ends". In this regard, the production team should do a good job in early planning, clarify the creative direction of the whole work, and strengthen the quality of the script and the coherence of the story in the production process. Meanwhile, the team should also pay attention to the presentation of visual and sound effects, and control the matching of each episode and the unity of the overall content, so as to ensure the consistency of word of mouth before and after the work.

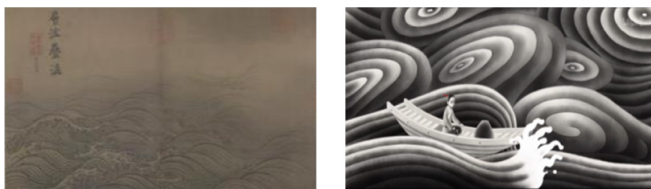


Fig. 3. Ma Yuan's *Layers of Waves* (left) and the innovation through animation (right)

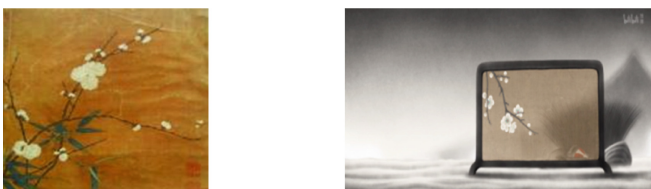


Fig. 4. Ma Lin's *Plum Blossom Map* (left) and the innovation through animation (right)

3.2 Controversial Picture Effect, Urgent to Improve the Rigor of Information Presentation

Through multiple technologies, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* comprehensively uses and displays different folk art forms such as sketch, ink painting, paper-cutting, puppet, etc. The audience can not only find the shadow play from *Ship Down the Well*, but also see the combination of stop-motion animation and puppet show from *She Wolf*, and the intention of ancient painting from *Goose Mountain*. Some famous ancient paintings, including Ma Yuan's "*Layers of Waves*" (see Fig. 3. Ma Yuan's *Layers of Waves* (left)) in the Southern Song Dynasty, Ma Lin's "*Plum Blossom Map*" (see Fig. 4. Ma Lin's *Plum Blossom Map* (left)) and Mi Youren's "*Xiaoxiang Wonder Map*" (see Fig. 5. Mi Youren's *Xiaoxiang Wonder Map* (left)) in the Northern Song Dynasty have been presented with innovation through animation. However, the diversified presentation forms fail to fully meet the universality of different audience circles. For example, parents have complained and reported the strange black and white painting style of *Goose Mountain*, and thought it was not suitable for children to watch. As for this, for one part, animation creators should pay attention to the rigor of information presentation, fully consider the characteristics of different groups of people, reduce possible disputes in works, push works to a wider audience, and improve their recognition and influence. For another part, industry managers should pay attention to marketing and promotion strategies, target audiences and formulate targeted publicity plans, and strengthen the hierarchical and accurate dissemination of works.

3.3 Obscure and Single Emotional Expression, Necessary to Focus on the Diversity of Narrative Perspectives

Due to the particularity of cultural background and theme, netizens reflect that some works of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* will fall into a strange circle of odd for odd's sake,



Fig. 5. Mi Youren's *Xiaoxiang Wonder Map* (left) and the innovation through animation (right)

which leads to a certain viewing threshold for the works. Most viewers say that they don't understand and have to search for the deep meaning of the story. In order to solve the problems of obscure content and deliberate conception, the creators can release the in-depth interpretation behind the film in the later communication process, so that the audience can better understand and feel the thoughts, emotions and cultural connotations expressed in the works. In addition to the obscure conception, the single perspective is another major problem in the emotional expression of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. Throughout the eight episodes, they all use male protagonists or male perspectives to tell, ignoring the important role played by female characters in the story. The inner world and emotional changes of female characters are often more delicate than those of male characters, and the expressive ways can touch the softness of the audience's heart, thus increasing the depth and appeal of the story. Therefore, in the future, we can strengthen cooperation with female cartoonists, screenwriters and directors to increase the integration of female perspectives and female elements in film and television works, which not only helps to increase the diversity and layering of story plots, but also conforms to the diversity and equality of modern society, better reflects the development and progress of society, and thus promotes the development and progress of the national comic industry.

4 Conclusion

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China made important arrangements for the prosperity and development of cultural undertakings and cultural industries, and put forward "the national cultural digitalization strategy". Under the trend of accelerating integration of culture and science and technology, Yao-Chinese Folktales fits the background of the times, and realizes the digital dissemination of cultural industry through technical blessing in content, form and emotion, which lays a solid foundation for the works to "get popular" and plays a positive role in promoting the construction and development of Chinese cultural undertakings.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that the industrial development of Chinese animation still needs to be improved: After the content of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* reached a certain popularity, it gave birth to the demand for peripheral products, but the related industrial chains did not do a good job in time, such as single peripheral types, low product quality, frequent piracy in the market, and some derivatives "sold out when they were put on shelves", which could not match the production level of animation works themselves and damaged their own brand image. In the future, excellent

domestic animation works should increase communication and cooperation in content output and derivative development, strengthen industrial chain construction and product quality control, and improve creative level, so as to achieve the development goal of diversification and internationalization of Chinese animation industry.

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