



Depictions of Characters in Chinese Cartoons and Their Impact on the Subculture of Furry Fandom

Ruilei Miao

University for the Creative Arts, Falkner Rd, Farnham GU9 7DS UK

mr1502683085@163.com

Abstract. This article explores of the depictions of characters in Chinese cartoons, including the history, features, and educational significance of these cartoon characters. It also defines the Furry Fandom subculture, tracing its origins, culture and activities in China. The study further discusses the relationship between the anthropomorphic characters in Chinese cartoons Furry Fandom from three aspects: emotional, cultural and social.

Keywords: Chinese Cartoons, Characters, Furry Fandom, Relationship

1 Introduction

1.1 Background



Fig. 1. Members of the Furry Fandom (Source: Xhslink, 2024)

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Connections between entertainment media and subcultural movements usually offer interesting perspectives on identity formation, emotional resonance, and cultural exchange. This article explores animal anthropomorphic characterizations in Chinese cartoons and their impact on the Furry Fandom subculture whose primary interest is animal anthropomorphic characters (see Figure 1). Chinese animation not only has a relatively long history and rich cultural significance, it is also an important tool used by people to convey social values and cultivate national identity [1]. With the continuous development of Chinese animation, it increasingly integrates modern influences with traditional themes, thus creating a multi-dimensional space, which enables Chinese animation to resonate with various audiences, especially children [2]. At the same time, the Furry Fandom subculture has spread from the west to the rest of the world, including China, where the Furry Fandom has attracted a large following. Furry Fandom members can explore different identities through animal personifications and form deep emotional connections with them [3].

1.2 Article Structure

The article begins with an exploration of the depictions of characters in Chinese cartoons, including the history, features, and educational significance of these cartoon characters. Secondly, this article introduces the definition and origin of the Furry Fandom subculture as well as its culture and activities in China. Finally, this article discusses the relationship between the anthropomorphic characters in Chinese cartoons Furry Fandom from three aspects: emotional, cultural and social.

2 Depictions of Characters in Chinese Cartoons

2.1 Historical Background

Chinese animation has a long history, the origin and development can be traced back to the early 20th century, the traditional Chinese culture and political background has a significant impact on it. China's first animated film was released as early as 1941, Princess Iron Fan (see Figure 2), which marked the beginning of Chinese animation [1]. Although its creation environment at that time was full of challenges, its birth demonstrated its unique Chinese narrative and artistic capabilities.

After 1949, the founding of the People's Republic of China boosted the development of animation, and animation was often used as a tool for ideological education and cultural communication [4]. The subject matter of early animation works often came from Chinese folklore and mythology, such as the classic cartoon Havoc in Heaven (see Figure 3) (1961-1964), which was inspired by Wu Chengen's classic novel Journey to the West. The contents of these animations are not only entertaining, but they are also cultural works that strengthen people's identity and moral values of the country and the nation.



Fig. 2. Princess Iron Fan (Source: Ixigua.com., 2024)



Fig. 3. Havoc in Heaven (Source: Jin Gege, 2022)

After the 1980s, with China's opening up and economic reform, the theme and style of animation also underwent major changes. The introduction of the principles of market economy has made the style of animation field more creative and diverse. Examples include the Black Cat Detective (see Figure 4) (1984) and the Calabash Brothers (see Figure 5) (1986), which combine traditional storytelling methods with modern animation techniques. Although their duration is shorter, these animations have become not only classics, but also childhood memories for many people. This period of animation was more commercial and less politically constrained, resulting in more diverse and innovative character and story development (Wang, J.,2012) [5].



Fig. 4. Black Cat Detective (Source: MIGU Animation, 2019)

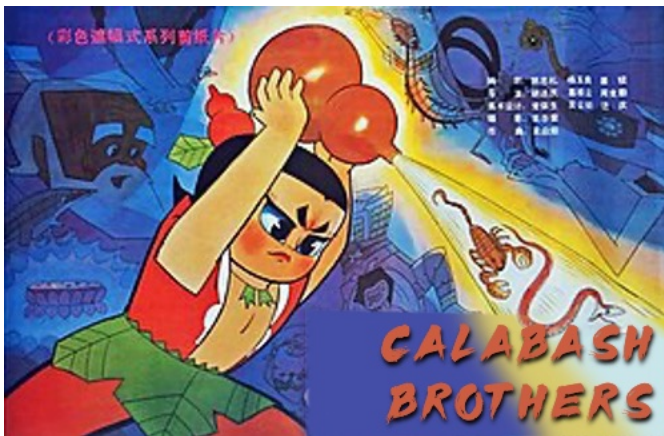


Fig. 5. Calabash Brothers (Source: Wikimedia Project Contributors, 2005)

2.2 Design and Style of Characters

In the image design of cartoon characters in China, strong and bright colors are often used, and the characters often have exaggerated expressions and unique costumes. Some characters often have features that anthropomorphize animals, which makes these characters both approachable and fantastical. For example, in Pleasant Goat and the Big Wolf (see Figure 6), released in 2005, the animal characters in the animation had human behaviors and emotions, which was a common theme in Chinese animation at that time [6]. Pleasant Goat and the Big Wolf has been widely loved by people since its release, many audiences will imitate some characters in the animation, and bring themselves into the characters to imitate some of the characters' language and behavior.



Fig. 6. Pleasant Goat and the Big Big Wolf (Source: Sohu.com., 2021)

In the character design of Chinese animation, the appearance of the characters is often carefully set, to better express their personalities. Positive characters or protagonists often have large, expressive eyes that convey their innocence and honesty, while villains are designed to be sharper and more angular, showing their cunning and malevolence. Animation characters are also very sophisticated in terms of clothing and accessories, and there are many implications, such as traditional attire can represent wisdom or inheritance, while more modern attire may be more inclined to suggest innovation and adaptability [7].

Traditional Chinese culture has played a very important role in the design of animation characters, such as Chinese traditional clothing Hanfu, mythological creatures such as dragon or phoenix, and popular and folk stories, which can often be seen in cartoons. The cultural symbols in these animations help to root animation in Chinese heritage and provide audience with a sense of identity and continuity [8]. This kind of embedded culture is crucial for cultural inheritance, because it is very effective in protecting traditional culture while further optimizing traditional culture and promoting the prosperity of Chinese culture.

The influence of modern culture on cartoon characters is also obvious, which reflects the rapid urbanization and globalization of China in recent years, and the integration of Chinese culture with the world. These modern characters may wear suits and will use some advanced modern technology, which reflects the fusion of traditional values and modern lifestyles. This dual influence not only ensures that animation can resonate culturally, but also gives it an international perspective [9].

2.3 Functions and Educational Significance of Characters

The characters in Chinese animation play a key role in the long development of Chinese education. These images often have many good qualities, such as honesty, bravery, kindness, etc., which set up good moral values for audience. For example, the charac-

ters in Pleasant Goat and Big Wolf always convey excellent teamwork skills, problem solving skills, and how to use intelligence to defeat brute force, which are great educational lessons [10]. These narratives play a crucial role in shaping moral values and inculcating them with social values.

Some of the educational cases in cartoons often involve some social issues, such as how to protect the environment and maintain healthy living habits. In recent years, Boonie Bears (see Figure 7), a popular cartoon released in 2012, mainly conveys the theme of environmental protection through the characters' adventure stories in the forest, and unsubtly conveys the importance of environmental protection to audience [11]. The main characters of the story are a hunter and two bears. These two bears are said to adopt the animal personification image, they always do some funny behaviors and things, which make the audience laugh. In my opinion, it is not only entertainment, but also education, so that the children can strengthen their responsibility for the environment in a relaxed and pleasant environment.



Fig. 7. Boonie Bears (Source: Boonie Bears, 2018)

The values and moral values expressed by the characters in Chinese children's animations are deeply influenced by Confucian philosophy. For example, respecting the old and caring for the young, filial piety and valuing education are common themes in Chinese animations. Roles are often put to the test about these values and ultimately make them vindicated, which reinforces social norms and expectations [12]. In addition, the concept of collective harmony is also an important theme in Chinese animation. Unlike Western animation, which often focuses on individual heroism, Chinese animation emphasizes collective effort and community harmony. Characters in animation often overcome difficulties and obstacles together, which highlights the importance of unity and cooperation [13].

3 Furry Fandom Overview

3.1 Definition and Origin of Furry Fandom

The Furry Fandom is a subculture characterized by an interest in anthropomorphic animals with human characteristics, such as the ability to speak, have human expressions, and think [14]. This interest can involve many different mediums, such as literature, art and performance. In the Furry Fandom communication, fans create a virtual animal persona for themselves, called a "fursona." User designers will give their fursona a unique personality and appearance as an alternative to their own human image [15]. Fursona can be any animal you like, including but not limited to wolves, foxes, cats, dogs, and even fantasy creatures like dragons and unicorns that don't exist in real life. Fans often commission artists or online merchants to create unique designs for their fursona. A fursuit can be obtained at a higher price, ranging from US Dollar 400 to more than 1,400 US Dollar, and clothing made by well-known studios can be even more expensive [14].

The Furry Fandom's roots go back to the 1980s, when an annual conference called the World Science Fiction Convention provided a platform for fans and creators with a keen interest in technology to share and showcase. It was also an important starting point for the furry culture, from which the subject of anthropomorphic characters began to gain traction (Davis, 1998) [16].

Some of the early Furry Fandom adoption was influenced by the work of contemporary artists, such as Walt Disney, especially his early cartoons such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. These characters have very clear animal anthropomorphic characteristics, they can use human language, can express emotions and have some complex interactions. These classic images have had many influences on Furry Fandom and are a source of inspiration for Furry Fandom enthusiasts in their early days and even to the present day. The appeal of these animal anthropomorphic characters is not only limited to their friendly and cute appearance which can be used to attract children, but also lies in the symbolic emotional expression conveyed by them, and they also have a variety of artistic styles and artistic elements, which makes them not only attract the love of teenagers, but also attract adults [17].

In the 1990s, the growth of the Internet spurred the Furry Fandom to become active in the online community, where fans shared art, personal experiences, and held regular meetings. This new kind of digital engagement not only made furry fandom more global, it also normalized the structure of the community, which had also encouraged the culture to spread globally and flourish [18].

3.2 Furry Fandom in the Context of Sexual Diversity

Austin's research shows that the distribution of sexual orientation among the members of the furry fan circle is diverse, and the proportion of the general population is smaller than that of non-heterosexual people, which reflects the strong cultural inclusiveness of this group [19]. Many Furry Fandom members identify as LGBTQ+ and have found corresponding support and recognition from the Furry community [20]. Reflecting on

how they became a part of the group, furry fans said they came up with the idea because they became interested in the group after constantly seeing pornography online depicting anthropomorphic animal characters. This phenomenon may occur due to conditioned reflexes rather than "sexual target recognition errors" [21].

Hsu and Bailey found that most male Furry Fandom members have a non-heterosexual identity, are sexually attracted to anthropomorphic animal figures, and frequently fantasize about becoming such animals themselves, a pattern consistent with Erotic Target Identity Inversion (ETII) [22]. Furthermore, research has shown that the inclusiveness of the Furry fandom is not limited to openness about gender and sexual orientation but is also open to the individual expression and identity of all members [23]. McLeod points out that the sexual preference of adults in the furry fandom is influenced by many conditions, such as cultural and social backgrounds, which makes animal anthropomorphic characters have different sexual attraction in different cultural backgrounds [24]. Although these overly sexualized phenomena and some behavioral omissions have generated some internal controversy, most members believe that engaging with furry fans helps them to better accept their interests and gain more acceptance [19].

3.3 Furry Fandom Culture and Activities in China

Furry Fandom though relatively new in China, has taken shape in recent years. The spread of the Furry culture in China has been aided by the flourishing of the Internet and social media, which has enabled Furry enthusiasts in China to connect with the Furry community internationally [25]. Chinese Furry Fandom members often engage in Furry Fandom communication using domestic online forums and social media, where they share fan art, stories, and some role-playing. These online Spaces are important platforms for their exchange of ideas and cultural adaptation, which reflects a fusion of global Furry influences and localized expressions [26]. For example, many famous Furry artists and writers in China have created animal anthropomorphic works with strong traditional Chinese art, which forms a unique cultural fusion.

In recent years, China has also started hosting Furry conferences and gatherings that, while smaller in scale than in the West, provide a space for Furry fans to connect with other furry enthusiasts and showcase their work. The emergence and development of these Furry conferences can indicate that the Furry community is gradually being accepted in China [27]. In recent years, the Furry community in China has expanded through social media platforms such as Weibo, QQ, and Bilibili, and has begun hosting offline gatherings and exhibitions [28]. For example, Furry parties and "Furry Con China" are held in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, with participants wearing Fursuits to socialize, perform and play. Online, members of the community often use Weibo and QQ groups to organize virtual role-playing activities and discussions of animal anthropomorphic characters and share related video content on video platform Bilibili.

The Furry Fandom community in China has some differences in organization and sexual expression due to cultural and social circumstances. Chinese communities tend to be relatively conservative about sexual topics, and many people do not discuss their

sexual identity and preferences in public [29]. Some longtime Furry fans in the community worry that some new followers drawn to social media influence could do something out of line, this time disrupting established community norms, leading to issues such as "design theft" and the "infantilization" of the community. Still, a sense of belonging remains the most important reason Furry fans stay engaged, surpassing enjoyment of the Furry content itself [15]. It can be said that the Furry community in China is not just an imitation of Western culture, but a fusion of the local culture to create a unique Chinese Furry community.

4 Relationship between Characters in Chinese Cartoons and the Furry Fandom

While Chinese cartoons and Furry Fandom may seem very different, but there is a lot of emotional, social, and cultural overlap. This section will explore the relationship between the two in detail from three perspectives: emotional, cultural, and social, all of which have contributed to the Furry Fandom's popularity and development in China and globally to varying degrees.

4.1 Emotional Resonance

One of the most important links between Chinese cartoons and Furry Fandom is the emotional resonance established between the animal personifications and the human beings. The characters in Pleasant Goat, Big Big Wolf and Boonie Bear all have amiable personalities, exaggerated expressions, and human-like emotions, which can build emotional bonds with audiences, especially children who are attracted to these characters and regard them as their role models [30].

The Furry Fandom thrives on the emotional bond it forms between its animal personifications and its members. Fans create one or more personalized animal personifications to represent their idealized inner selves [31]. This behavior can be understood as fans placing their emotions in this animal anthropomorphic image, which can provide fans with psychological comfort, identity and a sense of belonging. This is similar to the aforementioned bond people form with their favorite animal characters when they are young. It follows that the comfort and identity Furry Fandom received as a child grew up came from the animorphic characters in the animation.

For children, the animated characters offer help in understanding the emotional and social complexities of being human, while for Furry Fandom members, animal personifications provide a creative, healthy and safe space. Thus, helping them explore personal identity and emotional complexity [32]. In this sense, for Furry Fandom fans, the emotional bond with these cartoon characters is not just about entertainment, it's about finding self and community identity in them.

4.2 Cultural Influence

Elements of traditional Chinese culture can be seen in both Chinese cartoon characters and Furry Fandom, and many themes of Chinese animation are derived from Chinese folklore, mythology, and traditional art. For example, Monkey King, Pig Bajie, and various mythical creatures such as dragon and phoenix are highly cultural symbols [33]. Especially the image of Sun Wukong (see Figure 8), he is deeply loved by the Chinese people, he has wisdom, courage and tenacity and other excellent virtues, but also many people's childhood idol. The Monkey King is a monkey with anthropomorphic characteristics, a persona that easily appeals to the Furry Fandom.



Fig. 8. Sun Wukong (Source: Xhslink, 2024)

Although Furry Fandom emerged late in China and the concept was introduced from abroad, the Chinese Furry Fandom has developed its own identity while thriving through the efforts of Chinese Furry artists and fans. For example, fursona's clothing will be designed with traditional Chinese characteristics, or set as mythical creatures or monsters from some Chinese legend. This cultural integration of Chinese Furry Fandom members expresses their global subcultural identity while also showing a strong sense of identity with their own culture [34].

4.3 Social Relations

The social relationship between Chinese animation and Furry Fandom can be explored in terms of media consumption, identity formation, and community building. Chinese animation is often used as a tool for socialization, teaching children to establish correct social norms and collective identity, while also standardizing children's moral values, such as respecting elders, valuing education and teamwork [13]. In short, Chinese animation focuses on helping children understand their role in society and building a collective sense of national identity for them.

In contrast, some of the social concepts of Furry Fandom are very different from those of Chinese cartoons. The group is personalized and encourages members to explore their own identities, even identities that do not conform to mainstream social norms, providing a safe and comfortable space for everyone who feels marginalized from mainstream society [32]. For many Furry Fandom members, there is a strong need for a social platform that can provide them with a sense of belonging and community identity, and there is no doubt that Furry Fandom provides a safe haven for some in societies that are more conservative about gender and identity issues [35].

Although Chinese animation and Furry Fandom differ greatly in their social roles, there is some overlap in their social functions, and they both provide a platform for their like-minded members to work together. The Furry Fandom in China already has its own community dynamic, such as social media groups, online forums, and offline gatherings and exhibitions [36]. While the animating fanbase and Furry Fandom members differ in age and culture, the platforms for social interaction in both communities are designed to provide members with a sense of belonging.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper mainly discusses the relationship and influence between animal anthropomorphic characters in Chinese cartoons and Furry Fandom from three aspects: emotional resonance, cultural influence, and social dynamics.

In the second part, it analyzes the historical evolution, character design and educational function of Chinese animation. Through its profound cultural tradition and educational value, Chinese animation has shaped the moral values and values of the audience, and has a profound impact, especially on the growth of children.

In the third part, the article reviews secondary data to explore the origin of Furry Fandom and the relationship between their sexual diversity. Furry Fandom is a unique subcultural interest group that not only demonstrates a love of anthropomorphic animal characters, but also provides a free space for its fans to be extremely inclusive and diverse, especially in terms of expression of sexual orientation and gender identity. Members of the Furry Fandom often express their identity through the exploration of the animal's anthropomorphic persona, and thus form a cohesive group.

The fourth part further analyzes the relationship between Chinese animation and Furry Fandom. Although there are many differences between them on the surface, the similarities between them are found through the analysis of their emotional resonance, cultural influence, and social interaction. The anthropomorphic characters in Chinese animation have vivid emotional expression and strong affinity, which makes them develop a strong emotional connection with the audience, especially members of the Furry Fandom.

There is one main limitation in this study. It mainly relies on existing literature and secondary data for analysis, and lacks first-hand data, which may lead to potential bias, reduced validity and reliability. Future research could conduct field research and interviews with members of the furry fandom community in China, in order to better understand the topic of this article, especially from the perspective of gender studies.

Besides, the Furry Fandom in China can be compared with the Furry Fandom in other cultures to study how cultural differences affect the development of this group.

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