



The Path of Nationalisation and Modern Transformation in Chinese Animated Film

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Abstract. Over a century of exploration, Chinese animated cinema has charted a developmental trajectory from "cultural self-awareness" to "cultural self-confidence," and from "formal imitation" to "spiritual reinvention." From the early "Chinese School" movement's meticulous cultivation of traditional arts to the contemporary "rise of domestic animation" deeply integrating modern technology with contemporary values, nationalisation has remained the core thread running through this evolution. Meanwhile, the modernity transformation has become the pivotal force revitalising tradition and aligning with the times. This paper examines the reconstruction of cultural connotations, the innovation of character imagery, and the transformation of traditional artistic techniques within animated films. Drawing upon classic creative case studies, it dissects the intrinsic logic and practical pathways of modernity transformation. It explores how the collision between tradition and modernity can achieve the contemporary blossoming of national culture, offering theoretical reference for enhancing the artistic quality, market competitiveness, and international influence of domestic animated films.

Keywords: Chinese Animated Film; Nationalisation; Modern Transformation

1 Introduction

As a vital artistic medium for conveying national culture and transmitting the spirit of the times, animated film's developmental trajectory has consistently resonated with national cultural inheritance and shifts in societal aesthetics. Since its inception, Chinese animation has drawn its roots from national culture, exhibiting distinctive artistic styles and spiritual cores across different historical periods. The early "Chinese School" drew inspiration from traditional arts such as shadow puppetry, paper-cutting, and ink wash painting, creating classics such as *The Little Tadpole Seeks Its Mother* and *The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven*, imbued with distinctively Eastern charm, thereby laying the foundation for the national character of Chinese animation. Entering the 21st century, particularly amid the wave of "domestic animation's resurgence," works like *Ne Zha*, *The White Snake: Origin*, and *The New Gods: Yang Jian* have broken traditional creative paradigms. By revitalising traditional aesthetics with modern technology and reconstructing classic narratives through contemporary values, these works achieve a profound fusion of national identity and modernity, resonating widely

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with audiences and achieving significant commercial success. The "Chinese School" emerged through generations of animation filmmakers' relentless practice, embodying distinctive artistic principles, creative methodologies, and expressive styles. It represents the creative transformation of national spirit and traditional art, serving as a vital vehicle for cultural outreach within the globalised context.^[1]

2 Core Dimensions of Modernity Transformation: Creative Transformation of Culture, Imagery, and Art

The modern transformation of Chinese animated cinema does not negate national traditions but rather pursues innovation and development through inheritance. Rooted in contemporary contexts, it achieves an organic synthesis of tradition and modernity across three core dimensions—cultural substance, character imagery, and artistic expression—thus revitalising national elements with renewed vitality in the present era.

2.1 Contemporary Interpretation of Cultural Substance: Dialogue Between Past and Present in Traditional IPs

The vitality of traditional culture lies not in unchanging preservation, but in its capacity to continually respond to the questions of the era and resonate emotionally with contemporary audiences. Animation creation against the backdrop of the "rise of Chinese animation" has transcended the "faithful reproduction" model in traditional IP adaptations, shifting towards a creative transformation of "dialogue between past and present." Through shifts in narrative perspective and the reconstruction of spiritual core values, it integrates traditional cultural essence with contemporary values.

Take adaptations of *Journey to the West* as an example: the early *Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven* employed grand heroic narratives to showcase Sun Wukong's spirit of defying authority and pursuing freedom; *Journey to the West: The Return of the Monkey King* reimagined Sun Wukong as a "disillusioned hero," conveying contemporary aspirations for upholding convictions and embracing responsibility amidst societal pressures; *The Little Monsters of Langlang Mountain* achieved a bolder subversion, where director Yu Shui creatively transformed the "classic myth" into a "tragic ballad of mortals." Through the absurd quest of the little monsters pursuing the "immortality" mirrors the real-world struggles of contemporary individuals navigating workplace survival, conveying the modern ethos of "I want to live as I please." Through such innovative expressions, contemporary animation continues to uphold the nationalised essence of the "Chinese School" while achieving breakthroughs.^[2]

Breaking free from the traditional narrative of "human-demon romance and Broken Bridge reunion" narrative of *The Legend of the White Snake*, focusing instead on the past lives of Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian. Through the love story of Axuan and Xiaobai, it explores contemporary themes of "identity recognition" and "equal love", conveying modern values of "breaking prejudice and pursuing true love" that align with contemporary society's advocacy for gender equality and inclusive diversity.

2.2 Subversive Reimagining of Characters: Fusing Ethnic Heritage with Contemporary Aesthetics

Character design serves as the core vehicle for cultural expression in animated films and a vital bridge connecting tradition and modernity. During the "Chinese School" era, character designs largely adhered to traditional artistic conventions and moral judgement criteria, presenting either idealised heroic archetypes or stereotypical villainous figures. In contrast, the "Rise of Chinese Animation" period has shattered this typological creative model. While preserving ethnic characteristics, contemporary aesthetics and values have been integrated to craft vivid characters with complex humanity and contemporary relevance. Traditional IP films propelled by the new "Chinese School" are reintroducing traditional national culture to the public eye through this character reinvention, utilising emerging artistic forms.^[3]

Ne Zha: The Demon Boy's Descent into the World completely subverts the traditional positive portrayal of the Lotus Child from Ne Zha Disturbs the Sea, reimagining Ne Zha as a rebellious, sensitive anti-hero yearning for acceptance. Born with the "demon sphere" attribute, Nāzhā faces misunderstanding and rejection from society. He arms himself with "smoky eye makeup," hands-in-pockets postures, and irreverent dialogue—appearing rebellious yet yearning inwardly for acceptance and validation. This "cold exterior, warm heart" character trait resonates with the "depressive" and "edgy" aesthetics of contemporary youth subcultures, accurately capturing the rebellion and confusion of modern young people under pressure. The reimagining of Li Jing and his wife's characters similarly reflects the essence of modern transformation. In traditional narratives, Li Jing is portrayed as a cold, ruthless patriarch who subdues Nezha with the Linglong Pagoda. Yet in the film, he abandons violent discipline, choosing instead to shield Nezha from heavenly tribulation with a "life-swapping talisman"—concealing profound paternal love within silent guardianship. Traditionally portrayed as a tearful, helpless supporting character, Lady Yin in the film emerges as a warrior capable of taking the battlefield to defend her nation, yet also a "cool mum" who can set aside her dignity to kick shuttlecocks with her child. Her balancing act between the battlefield and the home presents the image of an independent woman in the new era.

The reimagining of Xu Xuan in *The Legend of White Snake: The Beginning* is equally groundbreaking. In traditional adaptations, Xu Xian is the quintessential bookish scholar—timid and indecisive. In contrast, Xu Xuan is reimagined as an agile, courageous snake-catcher from the wilderness. He no longer passively accepts love but actively pursues true affection, daring to transcend the boundaries between humans and immortals. This transformation grants Bai Suzhen an equal footing in their relationship, dismantling the patriarchal lens of traditional narratives.

2.3 Technical Empowerment of Traditional Arts: Unifying Aesthetic Spectacle with Narrative Function

The core reason the "Chinese School" has secured its place in the global film industry lies in its nourishment from traditional arts, forming an aesthetic style uniquely imbued

with Eastern charm. However, the early integration of traditional arts with animation technology faced certain limitations. For instance, while ink-wash animation possesses immense artistic value, it "excels in lyricism but falls short in narrative," struggling to adapt to the pacing and market demands of modern commercial animation. The application of modern digital technology has enabled traditional artistic elements to retain their national flavour while significantly enhancing animation quality.^[4]

The advancement of modern digital technology has unlocked possibilities for the contemporary transformation of traditional art. The Tai Chi diagram sequence in *The Legend of Yang Jian* masterfully fuses ink-wash aesthetics with 3D technology, achieving a qualitative leap. Within the film, Yang Jian confronts his adversary within the Tai Chi diagram, where black smoke emanating from the characters intertwines with ink-wash blurred contour lines. As the characters move and their emotions shift, the ink's intensity, opacity, and texture constantly transform. This not only pushes the expressive aesthetics of ink wash painting to its zenith, creating a stunning visual spectacle, but also uses the visual shifts in ink wash to depict the characters' emotional states and life journeys, making ink wash an integral part of the narrative.

The Monkey King: Hero Is Back combines the stylised movements of traditional Chinese opera combat with modern motion capture technology. Sun Wukong's fighting sequences retain the powerful vigour and rhythmic cadence of opera martial arts while being technically enhanced for greater fluidity and realism. The musical design of *Ne Zha: The Demon Boy's Descent* blends traditional opera music with contemporary electronic and symphonic elements, creating a distinctive auditory experience that preserves the ethnic flavour of opera while enhancing the music's modernity and impact.

3 The Deep-Seated Logic of Modern Transformation: Contemporary Demands, Audience Evolution, and Industrial Advancement

The modern transformation of Chinese animated cinema is not merely an artistic innovation, but rather the result of the combined forces of contemporary demands, audience evolution, and industrial upgrading.

3.1 Demands of the Era: Dual Drivers of Cultural Confidence and Contemporary Concerns

Since the advent of the New Era, the advancement of the national strategy for cultural confidence has fostered a favourable policy environment and social climate for the nationalised development of Chinese animated films. Promoting the excellence of traditional Chinese culture has become a key orientation for artistic creation. As an art form with a broad audience and strong dissemination power, animated films have naturally emerged as a vital vehicle for cultural transmission.

Simultaneously, contemporary societal concerns have furnished animation with abundant creative material. Rapid social development has confronted modern indi-

viduals with a spectrum of real-world issues—identity crises, workplace pressures, familial dynamics, and value pursuits—all of which have become central narrative themes in animated films. The depiction of workplace survival in *Little Monsters of Waves Mountain*, the exploration of self-identity in *Ne Zha*, and the pursuit of equal love in *The Legend of White Snake: The Beginning* all respond to contemporary realities. This fusion of traditional IP with contemporary themes embodies the core of "spiritual reinterpretation".^[5]

3.2 Audience Transformation: Aesthetic Preferences and Value Demands of the New Generation

The audience structure for animated films has undergone significant transformation, with the new generation emerging as the core consumer demographic. Having grown up in the internet era, this cohort possesses distinct aesthetic characteristics and value aspirations: while deeply influenced by China's outstanding traditional culture and naturally drawn to national elements, they have also been extensively exposed to foreign cultures, resulting in broadened aesthetic horizons and a pursuit of artistic expression that values individuality, diversity, and innovation. Focusing on youth-oriented storytelling is a pivotal factor in the re-indigenisation of Chinese animation, as the value systems and aesthetic preferences of young audiences directly influence a work's dissemination impact and market performance.^[6]

3.3 Industrial Upgrading: Supported by Technological Advancement and Market-Oriented Operations

Advancements in digital technology provide the core impetus for the animation industry's upgrade. Modern techniques such as CG, 3D modelling, motion capture, and special effects rendering enhance production efficiency and visual impact while expanding creative boundaries. The ink-wash 3D effects in *The Legend of Yang Jian*, the intricate special effects in *Ne Zha*, and the ethereal scenes in *The Legend of White Snake* all exemplify the fruits of this technological evolution.

The refinement of market-oriented operational models has further safeguarded the modern transformation of animated films. As the animation industry has matured, a comprehensive industrial chain has emerged, spanning script incubation, production, promotion and distribution, to the development of derivative products. Professional production teams, established promotional channels, and diversified financing models enable animated films to better align with market demands, achieving a harmonious integration of artistic and commercial value.

4 Contemporary Challenges and Development Pathways

Despite significant achievements in nationalisation and modernisation, Chinese animated films still face numerous practical challenges.

Current transformation efforts encounter deep-seated difficulties: some works fall into the trap of "symbolic overlay," superficially incorporating elements like Hanfu attire and ancient architecture without engaging their cultural essence; excessive reliance on mythological themes leads to narrative homogenisation; and cultural discounting remains pronounced in cross-cultural dissemination—as exemplified by the complex "Fengshen Universe" setting in *Jiang Ziya*, which proved inaccessible to international audiences. Certain productions suffer from the superficial accumulation of ethnic symbols, mechanically assembling traditional motifs like Hanfu, ancient architecture, and mythological figures without delving into their cultural substance, resulting in works that are "form without spirit". The fusion of traditional and modern elements often feels unnatural, with some works exhibiting awkwardness in integrating narrative, imagery, and artistic expression. Additionally, insufficient originality and overreliance on traditional IPs are notable issues, with numerous works centring on classics like *Journey to the West* and *The Legend of the White Snake*, resulting in severe thematic homogenisation.

To address these challenges, Chinese animated films must deepen their modern transformation while upholding national roots, exploring sustainable development pathways. This entails: - Deepening cultural exploration to transcend symbolic representation. Creators should thoroughly research China's outstanding traditional culture, uncovering the underlying national spirit, values, and aesthetic sensibilities, and integrating these cultural dimensions into every facet of narrative, characterisation, and thematic development. Promote the deep integration of tradition and modernity to forge distinctive artistic styles. Narratively, uphold the creative principle of "dialogue between past and present"; in character design, preserve ethnic features while incorporating contemporary aesthetic elements; artistically, organically combine traditional art forms with modern digital technology. Strengthen originality cultivation and refine the creative ecosystem. Governments should introduce policies to bolster support for original animation; enterprises should prioritise the development and accumulation of original intellectual property; robust mechanisms for protecting original works must be established. Enhance international dissemination capabilities to build a Chinese animation brand. In cross-cultural storytelling, uncover the universally resonant spiritual core within national cultures; in artistic expression, balance national characteristics with international aesthetics; in overseas distribution, strengthen collaboration with international distribution agencies.

5 Conclusion

The century-long evolution of Chinese animated cinema fundamentally represents a process of continuous self-renewal within the context of national culture across different eras. From early direct borrowings and reinterpretations of traditional art forms to contemporary creative transformations of cultural substance, character design, and artistic expression, nationalisation is no longer a mere accumulation of symbols. Instead, it constitutes a dynamic developmental system closely integrated with modern technology, contemporary aesthetics, and real-world concerns. The transition towards

modernity has infused this nationalisation with renewed vitality, encompassing not only technological iteration and upgrading but also the adaptation of narrative logic, value systems, and aesthetic sensibilities to contemporary times.

Presently, while Chinese animated films face challenges such as overly symbolic expression, awkward integration, insufficient originality, and weak international dissemination, they also encounter historic opportunities: heightened cultural confidence, rapid technological advancement, and robust market demand. Moving forward, by adhering to the principle of upholding tradition while pursuing innovation, deepening the exploration of cultural substance, fostering profound integration between tradition and modernity, strengthening original creative capabilities, and enhancing international dissemination capacity, Chinese animated films will undoubtedly achieve higher-quality development. This will lead to the creation of more masterpieces that embody artistic, commercial, and cultural value, establishing an animation discourse system with distinctive Chinese characteristics, style, and grandeur. Through the art of animation, China's outstanding traditional culture will reach the world, contributing cultural strength to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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