

Study on the Application Misunderstandings and Countermeasures of the Traditional Culture of the Central Plains in the Emerging Cartoon Culture Industry

Hui Li

School of Art and Design
Huanghe Science and Technology College
Zhengzhou, China, 450063

Abstract—In recent years, Chinese cartoonists have been awakened to the consciousness of nationalization but are catering to the market and seeking quick success and instant benefits. In the case of lacking cultural connotation for support, there exist some misunderstandings that lead to predictable results. In this paper, the previous achievements are reviewed using status analysis focused on relevant misunderstandings and the corresponding countermeasures. The successful application of the Central Plain's traditional culture in the emerging cartoon culture is proposed as a means to further integrate the traditional culture into the cartoon industry.

Keywords— *the traditional culture of the Central Plains; the emerging cartoon culture; misunderstanding; countermeasures*

I. INTRODUCTION

For the artistic works, a consensus on the significance of nationalization has been formed: “the more modern the human cultural life is, the more diversified the development will be. The more requirements on works with various forms, rich emotions and distinct characters are the national features, and internal national quality in the works will be more valuable.”² “From now on, we can confirm that those of our own in the art will be our native spirit. Only in this way can we find out our position in the art circle in the world in the future.”³ “The art attracting the attention worldwide must be able to produce the artistic charm peculiarly and obtain the exotic resonance.”⁴ Outstanding cartoon works in the world have always been a powerful proof of this point. Differences in geography and culture make the cartoon works originating from different countries and nations have different features. However, with the rapid development of the social economy,

science and technology, and increased exchanges of ideas worldwide, the cultures of various countries have interpenetrated and affected one another, resulting in a lessening of these differences. However, in the successful cartoon works, what remains behind the image and plot are the different values, aesthetic tastes and presentation of a national character under the nourishment of cultures and thoughts of different countries. The presentation of such “differences” is where the unique charm lies.

Though, in the last few years, Chinese cartoonists have awoken to the consciousness of nationalization, they have conceptualized and symbolized it blindly, made collaged presentations of culture symbols in the pursuit of foreign animation, and catered to the market by seeking quick success and instant benefits. In the case of lacking cultural connotation for support, there exist some misunderstandings. Today, Chinese cartoons are caught in the trough of creation and groping at the water. In this paper, the previous achievements are reviewed, focusing on the analysis of relevant misunderstandings and their corresponding countermeasures in order to facilitate the successful application of traditional culture into the cartoon industry. This is supported using the successful integration of the Central Plain's traditional culture into the emerging cartoon industry's current culture as a framework.

II. MISUNDERSTANDING ON APPLICATION OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF THE CENTRAL PLAINS IN THE EMERGING CARTOON CULTURE INDUSTRY

A. Excessive Reliance on Local Themes

In order to have Chinese characteristics, a Chinese cartoon often draws from traditional stories. For example, *Havoc in Heaven*, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Lotus Lantern* are derived from mythology or folklore. Until now, this subject material was still an important part of Chinese cartoons. However, most people have already become familiar with these sources through various forms of books, TV shows, games, etc. Therefore, they have lost their

² Words of Song Huimin, quoted from *An Introduction to Art* written by Li Weishi, Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011: 386.

³ Words of Li Luming, quoted from *An Introduction to Art* written by Li Weishi, Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011: 386.

⁴ Zhou Xing, *Survival and Development and Independent Character of Chinese Film in the Globalized Space, Conflict • Harmony: Globalization and Asian Film and Television*, Fudan University Press, Edition (8) 2003, 100.

suspense through the excessive re-interpretation in the form of a cartoon. Outmoded and humdrum subject matter make domestic cartoons feel unimaginative, unrealistic, and unappealing to the audience.

B. Blunt Imitation of Cartoon Culture in the United States, Japan and Korea

The traditional culture of the Central Plains has a history spanning more than five thousand years, accumulating a rich heritage with many spirits to which many still adhere. In particular, in the context of globalization, cartoons from the United States, Japan and Korea are widely sought after by young people in China, which can not only be attributed to market occupation. Entry of these strong cultures in great force indicates a colonization of Chinese culture. The value, ideas, and spirits carried by foreign cartoons have a leavening influence on the audiences. Antonio Gramsci once described the hazard of an emerging cultural hegemony because, in an opposite power discourse model, the peripheral state always acted as the weak foil to the powerful myth of the metropolitan state—a kind of self-depreciation assessment of the culture. Hence, there emerged such nondescript freaks as *Lotus Lantern*, *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, *Haier Brother*, etc. that not only wanted to imitate the West but also showed the national style. They either failed to inherit the national tradition or failed to integrate with the global demand in order to get a piece of the global revenue.

C. Valuing “Enlightenment” Heavier than “Form”

In Chinese tradition, there is a convention of “teaching through lively activities”. As a result, cartoon creation in contemporary China excessively values teaching through lively activities and emphasizes themes focusing on pedagogical meaning or scientific knowledge. Most of the cartoons have a low level of production and rough overall quality in regards to the pictures and make no account of plot arrangement or the application of visual elements. Producers concern themselves less about the language. The truth the story intends to reveal is revealed is placed in a prime location of the plot. To earn a place in the greater field of the cartoon world, the production concept of Chinese cartoons needs to be changed thoroughly. Cartoons should be a stage to show the human heart. The audience’s heart can be truly touched only when more humanistic cares are blended into the cartoon. Presently, cartoon producers in China have begun to learn the art of screenplay and how to tell a story using the film languages of the west. Nonetheless, it is apparent that they did not integrate ideas completely and there are still many loopholes in the cartoons played in numerous cinemas.

D. Stereotyping of Roles in the Cartoons

Most of the traditional cartoon roles involve flat, weak and single characters, showing a tendency of stereotyping. All villains contain several similar features, such as the following: arrogance, greed, evil, selfishness, coldness, cruelty, and, most importantly, departing from society and engaging in misanthropic behavior; the antithetical positive

characters are the embodiment of justice, being kind, brave, loving, altruistically caring for the good of society, etc. They can neither brush aside the fog of reality and go deep into the depths of the human soul, nor make a deeper philosophical reflection on the human existence to explain the formation of good and evil, causes of good and evil, or the interpenetration of good and evil. In other words, Chinese cartoons do not tend to start from the perspective of humanity and their reliance on traditional tropes prevents a deeper understanding of what it means to be a person, who is also affected by the social environment when the cartoon is created. In China, Confucian culture pays more attention to reality, cause and contribution, practice, etc. stressing realistic pertinence instead of concerning oneself with humanity in the creation of cartoon. Besides, Confucianism lays emphasis on the overall harmony instead of individual, and underlines social order. Under the influence of Confucian ethical norms, the individuals of the ancient times are melted into groups, or there is no concept of an individual. As a consequence, the focus on humanity’s destiny is favored to that of the complicated human character behind the encounter, and the focus on plot is in excess of that of the human character. Affected by this, insufficient attention is paid in regards to the exploration of the humanity shaping the character’s personality, which results in a flat personage and the audience finding it difficult to relate with the character.

E. Mechanical Application of Visual and Audio Elements in the Traditional Culture of Central Plains

The Central Plains culture has a long lasting history, rich contents and exceedingly abundant traditional artistic styles. The audio and visual elements, among them paper-cuttings, shadow puppets, Chinese ink paintings, clay sculptures, and Chinese opera and folk music, provide a rich resource for the nationalization to occur. To show the national character and realize nationalization in cartoon works, forms of artistic presentation are naturally important carriers. However, some people unilaterally understand nationalization as a mechanical application of visual and audio elements of the traditional national character and construe nationalization as rigid symbolization. In cartoon creation, this manifests as a superficial, isolated awareness that shows in the attempt to “nationalize” the creation using a collage of traditional culture and art. Works produced in this way are the rigid combining of isolated elements, resulting in a lack of artistic content in the form of arts. The works will lose the essence of spiritual and cultural connotation and value, eventually leading to an emptiness of spiritual culture. For example, if a foreigner wearing a yellow robe and jacket speaks Chinese, can you say he or she is Chinese? In short, this understanding separates the uniformity of art forms and artistic contents in the process of attributing a national identity to an artistic creation and fails to look at cartoon works comprehensively from two basic aspects of manifestation and ideological connotation.

III. RELEVANT COUNTERMEASURES FOR APPLICATION OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF CENTRAL PLAINS IN THE EMERGING CARTOON CULTURE INDUSTRY

A. *Taking into Account the Aesthetic Orientation of Audiences Worldwide*

In the advent of globalization today, world vision has also become an important factor in the success of cartoon films. What ethnicity is what worldwide? Nationalization is certainly an important factor in the success of cartoon products, but it is hard for the cartoon to only be limited to national subject matters, themes and aesthetic characteristics when beginning the process of globalization. The aesthetic taste of audiences in the era of globalization is no longer only influenced by the domestic cartoons, but also by the famous cartoon works from all over the world. The young audiences in China with the ability and desire to consume anime derivative products grow up with the edification of *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck*, *Transformers*, *SlamDunk*, *Ikkyu* and other animations from the United States and Japan, with diversified aesthetic tastes. It is difficult for works with strong feelings of enlightenment and images with low rhythmic sensation to meet the aesthetic tastes of such audiences. Therefore, it is not enough to adhere to the tradition and absorb the essence of the tradition. There needs to be a process by which the essence of the tradition is combined with modern consciousness and world vision, so as to gain a competitive edge alongside modern cartoons.

B. *Worldwide Materials Drawing and Diversified Cartoon Design*

In terms of subject selection, theme, figure design and plot arrangement, all aspects of the cartoons may learn from the exotic culture. The world vision is not denying nationalization but making the cartoon absorb the nutrition of exotic culture on the basis of nationalization so that the cartoon works can be sent abroad and national traditional culture can be promoted. On the one hand, long historical and cultural accumulation in China provides a steady stream of nourishment for the creation of cartoons. Ignoring outstanding cultural heritage in China in the cartoon creation is undoubtedly abandoning the foundation. So our animation creation must adhere to Chinese national style, not only focusing on learning a form but also on maintaining a national style in the content. On the other hand, current development makes the cultural differences among the countries and their aesthetic pursuits come together. In order to go abroad or be accepted by domestic audiences who have been deeply affected by the aesthetic styles of American and Japanese cartoons, Chinese cartoons must have a world vision, learning from these cultures and their respective aesthetic tastes. Only in this way can a Chinese cartoon brand be created.

C. *Strengthening Originality and Digging the Traditional Subject Matter*

Selection of the subject matter is important when starting a piece of work as it will affect its overall structure and its key point of expression- one of the content elements of the

story. Subject matter selection of a Chinese cartoon is generally derived from traditional Chinese culture, mainly a mass of mythology, folktales, fairy tales and fables that has been inherited and accumulated from the Chinese culture for over 5,000 years. However, history is history, and though their contents cover essence and tradition, they are "outmoded". For the selection of historical and cultural subject matter, it now appears that simple and direct use is unwise and incorrect. Selection of subject matter also needs to be changed with the times and adhere to the requirements of modern demand.

For excellent cartoons abroad, a wonderful story is the prime factor. The reason why they are successful is that their story can arouse feelings in the audience. *The Prince of Egypt* produced by DreamWorks is the first piece of cartoon animation reflecting a seriously religious theme. The entire film selects the materials from the cultural background of Ancient Egypt in an artistic form. The character modeling has the distinct decorative style of ancient Greece. The Middle East musical sound, Hebrew folk songs, as well as Broadway musical grammar commonly used in some cartoons make the entire epic drama look gorgeous and sound brilliant. Notwithstanding, this film draws on the traditional molding style that appeals to the senses; the creation in the story plot organically integrates the modern and post-modern analysis methods. By synthesizing the excellent cartoon works from various countries throughout the world (including the quality, style and various characteristics), telling traditional tales has become a magic weapon of success without exception.

D. *Keeping a Foothold on the Mainland, Being Close to the Public Life*

In today's culture and education, we refer to a lot of elements of western civilization. However, on the whole, the influence of traditional culture still gets down to the bone, effecting and controlling the developmental path, behavior mode, values, aesthetic taste, etc. of the country. For the development of cartoon works in such countries, rigid implanting or inflexibly applying the practices of cartoons in the United States, Japan and Korea, (in other words the direct introduction of American humor, Japanese spirit and Korean elegance in our cartoons) will not guarantee the harmonious convergence between the style and content of the work and psychological needs and spiritual personality of the audiences. Abandoning the resources of traditional culture, ignoring the same cultural background, and adopting the elements with which we are not familiar will create works that only reach the level of an imitation. The failure of *Thru the Moebius Strip* with a large investment in the domestic box office is serves as exactly such a lesson.

Certainly, cartoon creation systems in the United States and Japan have matured and produce a classic works, moving hundreds of thousands of people and taking into account the market while spreading the local culture. But we must clearly recognize what the foundation of artistic creation is, what the ultimate purpose of cartoon creation is, and what is the most important aspect of the entire system. Only when the most important one is found can we give

consideration to the others. Domestic cartoon creators always focus on the surrounding factors instead of the most important and determinative aspect so they are destined to fail. The most important factor is the most valued aspect in the American and Japanese cartoon creation, which is creating excellent works with the national style containing rich national cultures. The works will move the audiences after moving itself. The works shall set a foothold on the mainland and be close to the public life. The works will be worldwide while also ethnic. Moreover, such a national character is not decided by the market, or by compiling, or by form creation, but rather a product of individual of cultural deposits.

IV. CONCLUSION

Under the background of integrating culture, science and technology, we must keep our brains wise and look at Chinese cartoons with a vision of long-term development. In order to be revitalized for greater prosperity, we must follow the path of integrating with the traditional culture. Only by sincerely and solidly reflecting the national culture and life will we avoid losing the value in pursuing the trend of taking up and adopting others' thoughts. But we will learn and draw. In the case of the increasingly international cartoon language, absorbing the experience of great cartoon powers such as the United States, Japan and France, creating Chinese cartoons into a spiritual culture that can highlight the unique oriental culture of Chinese nation. Making this culture widely known and spreading the national identity with cartoon works is the real direction for cartoon creation in China.

REFERENCES

- [1] [U.S.] Author: Robert· C· Christopher, *Japanism*, translated by Ma Quan, Sun Jianlong, Guangming Daily Press, June 1988.
- [2] Commager, *Americanism*, Guangming Daily Press, 1988.
- [3] Zhang Yinghang, *Introduction to Chinese Traditional Culture*, Zhejiang University Press, 2005.
- [4] Zang Hong, Zhang Haipeng, *Outline of Chinese Traditional Culture*, Anhui Education Press, 1996.
- [5] Li Weishi, *An Introduction to Art*, Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011.
- [6] Xue Feng, Zhao Keheng, Yu Fang, *Development History of Animation*, Southeast University Press, 2006.
- [7] Jin Zhilin, *Chinese Folk Arts*, China Intercontinental Press, 2004.
- [8] Yang Xiaolin, *Interpretation on the Animation Boutiques in the Global Cinemas*, Shanghai University Press, 2007.