

Study on Aesthetic Expression and Value Reconstruction of Folk Custom Resources in Chinese Animated Films

Taking “Little Door Gods” and “Mr. Nian”as an Example

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Abstract—The use of folk custom resources by Chinese animated films, whether it is the simplification of materials, conveying spirit by appearance in plastic art, or the modern reshaping of values, it all requires a balance between aesthetic expression and value reconstruction. For example, the "Little door gods" and "Mr. Nian" with folk custom as the theme, the misunderstanding of the folk custom connotation in "Little door gods" wasted the almost perfect visual effects; on the contrary, in "Mr. Nian", because the lack of aesthetic forms, it limited the acceptance and spread of the Spring festival customs.

Keywords—animated film; folk culture; aesthetic expression; value reconstruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese animated films have a natural close relationship with folk culture. Folktales such as myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, etc. provide inexhaustible materials, the use of plastic art in folk paintings, crafts and operas, the magical colors created by folk beliefs, all of which have made a unique Chinese style for Chinese animated films. Chinese animated film released its power again in the 90s with the aura of "Chinese School". The "Lotus Lantern" released in 1999, was boldly innovated from shooting to release, and it won a good box office. In 2006, the first 3D animation masterpiece of "Thru the Moebius Strip" which cost 130 million Yuan flopped badly at box office. After that the domestic animated films have been in a downturn, until 2015, "Monkey King. Hero is back" unexpectedly gained both public praise and box office; The "Little door gods" which released in early 2016 with the theme of folklore "Nian", it had cost more than 10 million Yuan but the box office is not satisfactory. The "Mr. Nian" was even less good in artistic aesthetics. Along the way, under the prestigious name, the glory of Chinese animated film and the "Chinese School" seems to be gradually drifting away.

How to realize the aesthetic expression of folk culture symbols, how to inject modern values, and so on, are the questions worth pondering. In the following, we will pay attention to the adaptation and re-creation of folktales through the simplification of materials; convey spirit by appearance, focus on the reference of traditional Chinese folk art forms, painting and music; inject modernity into the values, pay

attention to the response of folk justice, beauty and kindness, explore the aesthetic reproduction and value transformation of folk culture in Chinese animated films. Taking this as a standard, we will focus on a brief review of the two animated films "Little door gods" with the theme of "Nian" in 2016.

II. FOCUSING ON THE ADAPTATION AND RE-CREATION OF FOLKTALES THROUGH THE SIMPLIFICATION OF MATERIALS

There are four forms of animated film change folktales: one is strictly faithful to the original. The "Lotus Lantern" released in 1999 is based on the Chinese mythology with the same name. It tells a touching story of Chen Xiang experienced all kinds of hardships, learned from a master for the Kongfu, and finally regains the lotus lantern and cut off Huashan to rescue his mother. Whether it is the character image, the plot trend or the cultural background, the essence and charm of the original book are strictly preserved. The second is to intercept the classic chapters in the original work and describe them separately. The classic stories in "Journey to the West" such as "Da Nao Tian Gong", "Tie Shan Gong Zhu", and "San Da Bai Gu Jing" are the excerpts. The third is to properly adapt the original work to make it more contemporary. The Disney animated film "Mulan" turned the original filial daughter into an independent, brave and intelligent new woman. In the growing narrative of she join the army instead of her father, it successfully transformed the filial piety culture contained in "Mulan Ci" into the American version of Self-identity and individualism worship. The fourth is to take a motif and seems freely rendered and recreated it, that is, to abandon the original framework and practice the reinterpretation of the style of "Liu Jing Zhu Wo". The motif can be a subject, a character, a plot, or an image, and it appears repeatedly because of some unusual and moving power. In the folk, through the interpretation of stories, novels, operas, etc., the image of "Sun Wukong" who is not afraid of power and fighting with them has already been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, "Princess Iron Fan", "Uproar in Heaven", "Monkey King Conquers the Demon", "Journey to the West", "Lotus Lantern" and many other animations all have his figures, but when it comes to re-creating according to the modern spirit, the one with more contemporary temperament

would be the image of Sun Wukong who lost his power and frustrated in "Monkey King. Hero is back", it is a breakthrough of a personality which always fight the power and without any restraints. Because every adult can see a shadow of their own unsuccessful ambition from him, and thus feeling the sorrow and empathy; and each child has their expectations for the heroic temperament of "Huo Yan Jin Jing", "Qi Shi Er Bian" and "Xiang Yao Chu Mo".

From the perspective of accepting aesthetics, adapt the folktales directly into animated scripts without any change of the original story will win a broad and stable audience market, but it is also very likely to get the bad name to betray the original work. The reason is that first of all, several old versions participated in the construction of stable and even stubborn aesthetic experience. Any minor corrections, additions and changes to the latecomers constitute an instinctual rejection; secondly, the imagination space in the story is difficult to be reproduced in the film, any claim that is faithful to the original will accomplish the very opposite. Therefore, through the re-creation of the motif, the dramatic elements and traditional cultural concepts have a dramatic collision and ablation, which has greatly promoted the development of the storyline and achieved a good screenplay. Use the same motif of "Nian", the story plot of "Mr. Nian" is more compact than "Little door gods", so it is easier to win the audience, especially the children's pursue and admiration. There are two clues in the story of the movie "Little door gods". One is the unemployed door god Yu Lei looking for and open the seal that suppresses the "Nian" to prove his own existence and awaken the world's attention to the world of gods; the other clue is in the human world, a mother and daughter guard the centuries-old dumpling shop left by her grandmother and pursue development in innovation. These two narrative clues occasionally have an intersection, but more often, they are self-contained. In the film, Yu Lei and Shen Tu came to the human world and met the single mother and daughter Xiaoying and Yuer in the town. The door god Yu Lei is obsessed with looking for the seal, and the relationship with Yuer and the human world is always detached. If we say that the door gods exorcising ghosts and dispelling evil spirits, and guard their homeland, then the original intention of Yu Lei to open the seal and release the Nian has betrayed the core essence of their duties. The timid and overcautious Shen Tu helped Yuer to fight the bad uncle next to their hundred-years dumpling shop, which saved the reputation of Door gods for a small extent. It can be said that the too many and chaos story clues are the fatal wound of "Little door gods".

In "Mr. Nian", the beast Nian trying to destroy the mysterious key to open the Spring Festival under the urge of the big fish, in order to completely eliminate the Spring Festival, but this key accidentally fell to the human world, and it was picked by a child named Shaguo. The two lines of heaven and earth continue to extend forward due to the stay of gone of the traditional festival "Nian". The beast Nian is very violent but the kindness beast Nian and the reluctant and obsessive Shuaguo, and they fight wisely and bravely around the mysterious key along the way, the family and friendship between the two are slowly fermenting as well. When the beast Nian knew that Shaguo's father could not go home for reunion

because of the cancellation of the Spring Festival, he began a desperate fight against the big fish who controlled the key, and opened up the adventure of joining the various gods to save the Spring Festival. The whole story structure is a circular narrative, starting with the destruction of the key, in the end protecting the key, starting with hating the Spring Festival, and finally looking forward to the Spring Festival, various characters such as the rich second generation Xiaozhu, the accomplice of big fish Xiaozhu's father, all the laid off gods have constituted various narrative conflicts, contradictions, and obstacles, but they never jumped out of this main line anyway.

III. CONVEYING SPIRIT BY APPEARANCE, FOCUSING ON THE REFERENCE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE PAINTINGS, ARTS AND CRAFTS AND OPERAS

Folk paintings, arts and crafts, operas pursue "meaning" and forget "shape" in the aesthetic expression and aesthetic concept, their understanding of time and space has a strong subjective imagery, so it is very suitable for the space imagination of animated films. In fact, the early Chinese school works used the second translation of traditional opera, music, painting, folk paper-cutting and shadow play to promote the innovation and practice of plastic arts. In the design of the scene, drawing on the traditional paintings such as ink painting, creating a fictional and artistic conception with a rich and solid "ink rhyme", the audience can get its "meaning" by looking at its "shape". The whole film presented with ink paintings include "Little Owl Looking for Mom", as a kind of artistic conception, style, and type, which applied in the film of "Uproar in Heaven" and "Secrets of the Heavenly Book". The use of folk craftsmanship is varied in simple, and the enriched in unify, resulting in a number of classic works such as the folk paper-cutting drama "Yu Tong", shadow play "Bajie eating watermelon", puppet show "Laoshan Taoist", "The Legend of Shangri-la" which known as the most beautiful 3D animation has successfully used traditional cultural symbols such as shadow, paper-cut and Chinese painting. In terms of character design, pay attention to convey the spirit with appearance. For example, in the film "Nezha conquer the Dragon King", the image of Nezha has black eyes and the dashing eyebrows which reveal the cruelty of cut bones and the pick out meat; the image of Sun Wukong in "Uproar in Heaven" is so classic that it was directly used later in the animated TV series "The Journey to the West", the movie "Monkey King Conquer the Demon" and "Lotus Lantern". The character's gestures and martial arts use a stylized language of traditional opera, combined with the background music of the gongs and drums, to create a screen effect of scrambled in appearance but united in spirit. In "Uproar in Heaven" Sun Wukong and God Erlang's fighting, sparrow verse hungry eagle, big cormorant verse sea crane, fish verse osprey, water snake verse gray crane, and the flower bustard verse slingshot, looking dazzled and exciting.

Whether the folk culture symbols are properly used in an animated film should not only presented in forms, but also in the proper distribution of the style, realm and cultural connotation to be expressed. "What is the 'national characteristics'? The national characteristics are not a conceptual symbol. It is the essence and accumulation of a

national culture. It is a realm, a style, a philosophy of life and a confident attitude displayed by a nation."^[1] "Little door gods" used the shadow play "The Story of Nian" as the beginning of the narrative, which is both the tribute to the tradition, and also led the story to the depth, the processing is excellent. The imagination of the door god is not consistent in different dynasties. According to the "Shan Hai Jing", "In the middle of the Sea, there is a mountain named Dushu, there is a large mahogany on the mountain, and its length is three thousand miles, and its northeast branch named Ghost Door, which is the entrance for all the ghosts. There are two gods named Shen Tu and Yu Lei, they control all the ghosts, evil ghosts will be feed to tigers. So the Yellow Emperor made sacrifices to evacuate the ghosts. They will set up big mahogany people and draw the images of Shen Tu, Yu Lei and tigers on the door to prevent the ghosts".^[2] "According to legend, God Shen Tu and Yu Lei lived on the Dushu mountain and could catch ghosts. Every morning, they examined the ghosts under the shade of peach trees and if they found evil ghosts harmed the human world, they will feed them to the tigers. Later, people set up a peach wood figure to the door, and then draw the image of Shen Tu and Yu Lei to prevent ghosts. "Little door gods" refers to the imagination of ancient Chinese door gods, and makes different modifications to Shen Tu and Yu Lei. Shen Tu is short and fat, he is honest and sincere, armed with stove poker, he can prevent evil spirits; Yu Lei is tall and thin, he has high aspirations, his power is a metal body protection, which is hard and incompetent. In general, the image design of the two brothers is relatively consistent with their respective personality traits. The costumes and weapons have deep cultural symbol connotations. The scenes of the film create a traditional style, the color is magnificent, the quietness of the Jiangnan water town, the changes of the four seasons, and the crystal clear of a little drop of water, a petal gently flutter on the ground, all of which reflect the subtle beauty. It must be mentioned that the scenery of Yu Lei and Hua Xian confrontation is quite ancient, petals are flying all over the sky, two forces are intertwined with softness and hardness, the picture is magnificent and stunning.

The "Mr. Nian", which imitates Hollywood animation, is almost insulated from traditional aesthetic imagery, and that is a great regret. The protagonist Beast Nian's sculpt is very similar to the monster model of "Monsters University". It has a huge body and a grumpy temper. If we change the single horn of beast Nian into double horns and change the orange skin color into blue, the difference between the two images is very small; the images of gods such like the Goddess of the moon, Moon lord, local guardian god, and the Leigong, Leipo are also far from the traditional aesthetic habits. At the end of the film, the embedding of traditional cultural symbols such as firecrackers, firework show, and put on Spring Festival couplets have added a little cheerful and peaceful festival flavor. From the aesthetic standards of both form and spirit, "Little door gods" are no doubt superior to "Mr. Nian".

IV. INJECTING MODERNITY INTO VALUES AND PAYING ATTENTION TO THE RESPONSE TO FOLK JUSTICE, GOODNESS AND KINDNESS

Folk custom, as a behavioral model and thinking concept pursued by a region and a group, has a strong inertia, and each individual lived in it is affected in varying degrees. When the folk custom appears in the form of oral language, it is a myth, a legend, a fairy tale; when it appears in the form of thinking concept, it is the consensus of the public aesthetic level, the accumulation of culture, and the philosophy of daily life. The folk standpoints and the spiritual connotations of the early Chinese animated films still have vitality in the present, such as the irony of ugly, greedy and ungrateful acts in "Laoshan Taoist", "Nine-colored Deer" and "Proud General"; The praise of integrity and courage in "Nezha Conquer the Dragon King" and "Monkey King Conquer the Demon"; "The longing for free and beautiful emotions in "The Butterfly Lovers" and "Lotus Lantern"; "The Three Monks" and "Bajie eating watermelon" and "Lifting the Donkey" are known for their fun.

The Chinese have always attached importance to the Spring Festival. In the old custom, they have placed good wishes to clean away the dirt and old of the past year and user in the new, welcome the wealthy and the family harmony, and to convey the values of advocating good and suppressing evil. The philosophical propositions such as "What is happiness" and "Is joy equals happiness" which repeatedly mentioned in "Mr. Nian", is carried out by a syllogism structure of destroying the key, finding the key, and returning the key. In the happy reunion ending, the semantics of "happiness" point to the happiness brought by the friendship enjoyed by beast Nian, Shaguo realizes the difficulty of family reunion, and the gods realize their personal values in helping others. Each character in the film has its own "happiness" experience, and this experience is irreplaceable by the artificial happy spray. Yes, the film is presenting the age tendency, but on the other hand, children are the audience of this film, in children's eyes, happiness is to stay with family, happiness is union, isn't this a simple but profound expression? For "Little door gods", its narrative rhythm is procrastinating, to many plots, it is rather to say that it is lack of deep understanding of traditional culture in essence, the application of folk symbols stays on the surface level, and it is not yet touched the texture of folk culture. Regardless of world of gods or the human world, it is correct to be innovative based on the traditions, but it cannot abandon the most basic moral bottom line. Yu Lei chose to open the seal and release the beast, it lack of the struggles and contradictions in his heart. It could neither promote the development of the story nor lead the character image to be too thin. If the people living in the town of Jiangnan can use the firecrackers to drive away the "Nian", the course of Yu Lei's hard search seems meaningless; if the "Nian" is his inner curse, the self-identity course is somewhat a little strange. In contrast, the honest and sincere Shen Tu is more lovable, he is timid but loyal, and he took the responsibility at a critical moment. The breadth of his emotions and the depth of human nature are all better than Yu Lei.

V. CONCLUSION

At the moment when the Chinese film industry is booming, animation has also been eagerly pursued, thus forming a huge industrial chain. As for how to maintain the charm of Chinese animation, after all, it is necessary to re-examine cultural traditions with modern values and aesthetic tastes, highlighting its humanistic concern for individual life and human society. In the future animation film creation, it is needed to explore the brilliance and depth of human nature, find the individual's survival value and responsibility and reflect on the harmonious symbiotic relationship between man and nature, etc. It is especially valuable in this present which has "Disappearing childhood" claimed by Neil Postman and "Lost the halo" said by Benjamin.

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