

The Influence Mechanism of Traditional Cultural Symbols On the Breakthrough of Chinese Animation

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Abstract:

In recent years, Chinese animation has garnered widespread worldwide attention, marking a pivotal stage in its development. Breakthrough works such as *Ne Zha* and *Black Cat Detective* demonstrate their growing influence. While this rapid advancement has gained broad recognition, a systematic understanding of its underlying mechanisms remains insufficient—particularly regarding the role of traditional cultural symbols in worldwide dissemination. Existing research generally lacks an integrated analysis of symbols, cross-cultural communication, and practical challenges. This study focuses on the construction and dissemination of cultural symbols in Chinese animation, examining three key aspects: visual presentation, narrative expression, and core values. Analysis indicates that innovatively integrating traditional symbols with universal values is a key success factor. However, challenges persist, including funding shortages, talent gaps, and an imperfect industrial system. To expand the worldwide influence of Chinese animation through a deep exploration of cultural symbols and promote the sustainable development of the Chinese animation industry. This study proposes recommendations, including deepening cultural substance, innovating artistic expression, refining the industrial chain, and optimizing dissemination strategies.

Keywords: Chinese animation; cultural symbols; cross-cultural communication; global dissemination

1. Introduction

As an important cultural medium, animation reflects social landscapes and trends. From its inception in the 1920s, through the era of the “Chinese Animation School,” to the recent period of “Breakthrough of Chinese Animation.” Chinese animation has become

a crucial medium for cultural exchange between China and the world.

The recent success of works such as *Nezha: The Devil’s Birth* and *The Legend of Hei*, alongside series like *Scissor Seven* and *Soul Land*, highlights its growing influence. This has prompted deep reflection on its cultural core, communication strategies, and

global impact.

Existing studies provide a comprehensive overview of the rapid rise of Chinese animation. For instance, Liu Siyu's research emphasizes the importance of constructing cultural symbols for global communication [1]. Man also pointed out that China's animation industry currently faces challenges such as an incomplete industrial chain and difficulties in balancing content innovation with the exploration of traditional elements [2]. However, studies that integrate cultural symbols, cross-cultural communication mechanisms, and real-world challenges into a unified framework for comprehensive analysis are still insufficient. This study aims to remedy this deficiency and provide a holistic perspective on the worldwide promotion of Chinese animation. As a visual narrative art, animation has the unique advantage of crossing language and cultural barriers, vividly presenting Chinese traditional culture to the world and fostering international understanding and recognition [3].

This study analyzes the construction of cultural symbols, dissemination mechanisms and challenges faced by "the rise of Chinese animation", aiming to provide guidance for Chinese animation to continue to break through and enhance its international cultural influence.

2. Development Status and Breakthrough Performance of Chinese Animation

2.1 Three Stages of Development

The trajectory of Chinese animation is a fascinating narrative of artistic and industrial evolution, which can be divided into three stages.

During the initial exploration and foundation stage (from the 1920s to the 1980s), Shanghai Animation Film Studio and its far-reaching "Chinese Animation School" exerted their powerful creativity to offer the world enduring classics such as *Havoc in Heaven* and *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. During this period, Chinese animation works were predominantly adapted from classical myths and folk tales, pioneering animation techniques such as paper-cut animation and puppet animation [4]. These works gained renown for their distinctive national style and exceptional artistic value.

This was followed by a period of market-oriented transformation and impact (1990s to early 2000s), in which the domestic animation industry faced a massive flood of overseas content, leading to a significant decline in both market share and creative innovation.

Finally, the explosive period of "the rise of Chinese animation" (2010-present). Under the combined effect of various factors such as the rapid development of the Internet,

the enhancement of national cultural self-confidence, and the surge of market demand, there has been an unprecedented boom in the creation and consumption of Chinese animation.

2.2 Indicators of the Chinese Animation „Breakthrough“ Phenomenon

The breakthrough indicators of Chinese animation are reflected in multiple aspects. There is a significant increase in box office and viewership. The animated film *Nezha: The Devil's Birth* topped the Chinese animated film box office with over 5 billion RMB, and the same series, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King 2*, topped the Chinese box office charts with 15.4 billion RMB. Animated series such as *Soul Land* have accumulated over 40 billion views, and *Hitori no Shita: The Outcast* has over 6 billion views across all platforms, with its comic reaching 28 billion views [5,6].

2.3 Status of Cross-Cultural Communication

Chinese animation has also made great strides in cross-cultural communication. The film *The Legend of Hei* not only achieved a box office of 560 million Japanese in Japan [7]. *The Legend of Hei 2* also officially landed in cinemas in the United States and Canada. The animated series *Scissor Seven* is the first Chinese animation to be released on Netflix and has received positive reviews overseas. However, the global dissemination of Chinese animation is still in a critical period of transition from "single-point explosion" to "deep plowing worldwide". It still faces challenges in content adaptation for dissemination worldwide, communication strategy innovation, and improvement of the animation industry chain [4].

3. Presentation and Classification of Traditional Cultural Symbols in Chinese Animation

The core of the rise of Chinese animation is the ingenious integration and innovative presentation of traditional Chinese cultural symbols. These cultural symbols are more than just decorative elements. They are also the foundational pillars of the story, embodying its core values and narrative dynamics. This section will delve into the categorization and representation of these symbols, examining how they are brought to life through visual aesthetics, narrative structure, and the transmission of cultural values.

3.1 Visual Symbols

Visual symbols are the most intuitive and easily perceived cultural elements in Chinese animation. These symbols are derived from traditional Chinese art, architecture,

costumes and natural landscapes, which are processed through the art of animation to present a unique oriental aesthetic.

For instance, in *Nezha: The Devil's Birth*, the architectural style of Chentang Pass and the costume designs of Nezha and Ao Bing incorporate numerous traditional Chinese elements, such as the ink-wash painting effect and auspicious cloud patterns. Light Chaser Animation's film series, such as *White Snake: Origin* and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, the scenic design draws heavily on the artistic concepts of classical Chinese gardens and landscape paintings, and combines them with modern 3D technology to create a visual spectacle with both traditional flavor and modernity. In terms of the use of color, Chinese animation often adopts traditional hues such as vermilion, indigo, ink black and plain white to create a unique visual atmosphere and strengthen the national characteristics of the work. The film *Deep Sea* employs particle ink-wash animation, utilizing vibrantly colored ink washes to construct surreal spaces and dazzling scenes [8].

3.2 Narrative Symbols

Narrative symbols refer to the cultural connotations embodied in Chinese animation through its plots, character relationships, and thematic expressions. These symbols are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese values, philosophical thought, and ethical norms, yet they have also been imbued with new meanings in the context of the contemporary era [9].

For example, in *Nezha: The Devil's Birth*, the spirit of fighting against fate, "My fate is up to me, not to heaven." Not only is it a modern interpretation of the traditional Nezha story, but it also embodies the indomitable spirit of initiative in Chinese culture. The movie's portrayal of the relationship between family and master and disciple also reflects the importance of filial piety and loyalty in traditional Chinese culture. The film's portrayal of family ties and master-apprentice relationships also reflects the importance of respect and loyalty in traditional Chinese culture. *Soul Land* reflects the growth of the main character, Tang San, who embodies diligence, perseverance, and team spirit, resonating with traditional Chinese concepts of "heaven rewards the diligent" and "self-improvement." Under the Dome skillfully weaves elements of Taoist philosophy and the mystical art of Qimen Dunjia into a modern urban setting, exploring profound themes such as human nature, morality, and choices that shape destiny.

In addition, many Chinese animations draw inspiration from classical literature and mythical stories such as "Investiture of the Gods" and "Classic of Mountains and Seas", breathing new life into these classic works through adaptation of classic IP.

3.3 Cultural Value Symbols

Cultural value symbols represent the profound cultural concepts and values conveyed through Chinese animated works. These symbols often possess universal appeal, transcending cultural differences to resonate with audiences from diverse backgrounds.

The *Legend of Hei* explores themes such as the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, respect for life, and the cross-cultural appeal of friendship and trust. The successful communication of these symbols has enabled Chinese animation to become not only a storyteller of Chinese stories but also a disseminator of universal values. Furthermore, Chinese animation often depicts the industriousness, ingenuity, and courage of the Chinese people, as well as their pursuit of peace, unity, and development.

The successful dissemination of these cultural value symbols contributes to the international community's awareness and recognition of Chinese culture, thereby enhancing its global influence.

4. Influence Mechanisms and Constraints

Chinese animation faces a multitude of challenges in creating cultural symbols and achieving global distribution, which are influenced by several mechanisms and factors. Understanding these mechanisms and factors is crucial to promoting Chinese animation more widely and deeply around the world.

4.1 Cultural Identity and Cross-Cultural Communication Mechanisms

The influence of Chinese animation as a cultural symbol in intercultural communication stems mainly from its strong commitment to cultural identity, combined with innovation and the resulting distinctive distribution mechanisms.

First, the deep excavation and modern interpretation of traditional cultural resources is the key mechanism [10].

For instance, *Fox Spirit Matchmaker* transforms a classic folk tale into a romantic comedy. Meanwhile, *Non-Human* humorously transports ancient deities and mythical creatures into a contemporary urban setting. Both works showcase the innovative revival of traditional narratives. Similarly, the stunning visuals of *Fog Hill of Five Elements* seamlessly blend traditional ink-wash painting aesthetics with stunning martial arts action, creating a uniquely cultural and awe-inspiring style.

Secondly, integrating universal values and creating emotional resonance are key factors in achieving cross-cultural communication. Despite the regional nature of cultural symbols, the values they carry can be universal [11]. Chi-

nese animation skillfully integrates love, sacrifice, justice, growth and other common human emotions and values when telling local stories. The series *Heaven Official's Blessing* and *Mo Dao Zu Shi* have garnered international acclaim by exploring profound themes of compassion, redemption, and loyalty, weaving intricate emotional narratives that resonate with audiences worldwide. These elements, which transcend cultural differences, allow overseas audiences to connect and empathize with the Chinese culture embedded in the story.

Furthermore, the synergistic innovation of art and technology provides a powerful engine for the global dissemination of cultural symbols. With the advancement of technological advances, Chinese animation has achieved international leadership in visual presentation.

The animated adaptation of the critically acclaimed science fiction novel *Three-Body Problem* uses cutting-edge CGI technology to visualize complex scientific concepts, demonstrating China's increasingly sophisticated animation production techniques. The animated series "Yao -- Chinese Folktales" showcases the diversity of artistic forms. Each story drawn from folk legends is presented in a distinct animation style, ranging from traditional 2D and ink-wash painting to modern 3D and stop-motion animation. These technological and artistic breakthroughs have enabled Chinese cultural symbols to be presented to a more attractive and impactful global audience.

Meanwhile, multiple narrative techniques enhance the expression of cultural symbols. The series *Fairies Album*, for example, uses the form of an anthology to tell stories about various spirits who interact with humans, exploring different aspects of morality and humanity. This narrative innovation makes the work more infectious and engaging, effectively promoting the dissemination of cultural symbols.

Finally, international cooperation and the expansion of distribution channels are key factors promoting the global dissemination of cultural symbols. Through cooperation with international platforms, such as *Scissor Seven* landing on Netflix, Chinese animation can reach a wider range of overseas audiences. This cooperation not only provides distribution channels but also promotes intercultural exchange and understanding. Through participation in international film festivals, animation exhibitions, and other events, Chinese animation continues to gain greater recognition on the world stage. These mechanisms work together to enable the effective dissemination and recognition of Chinese animation cultural symbols on a global scale.

4.2 Constraints and Challenges in the Breakthrough Process

Despite significant progress in creating cultural symbols

and intercultural communication, Chinese animation still faces a number of limitations and challenges in its quest to "go global and conquer the world." These challenges are mainly reflected in funding, talent, and the industrial system, severely limiting the global dissemination effectiveness of Chinese animation [2].

4.2.1 Funding shortfalls and the superficial representation of cultural symbols

First, the lack of funding is the main obstacle to the development of Chinese animation. The complex production process of animated films requires significant investment of time, manpower, and capital. Compared to international animation giants like Disney, domestic animation production companies lag significantly in terms of capital scale.

High production costs and uncertain market returns have made investors cautious about financing animated films, which has further exacerbated the financing problem. Funding constraints not only affect the quality of productions but also severely undermine the international competitiveness of Chinese animation, making it difficult to compete with well-funded overseas works. Research by Li Xin and Wang Xue indicates that insufficient funding remains a critical bottleneck, impacting everything from animation quality to marketing reach in international markets [4]. This directly affects the quality of animation, the level of dubbing and market reach.

4.2.2 Talent gaps and the lack of cultural interpretation capability

The second major challenge is the talent gap, which is not merely a technical issue but, more importantly, a lack of cultural interpretation capability. The animation industry requires interdisciplinary professionals who not only master animation techniques but also possess a deep understanding of Chinese culture and a global perspective. As Wang Ning and Zheng Zhongyuan point out, the lack of a mature talent pipeline and training system is a primary bottleneck for the industry's sustainable development [10]. Even though many colleges and universities have opened animation-related majors. The training system is not yet perfect, and there is a disconnect between theory and practice in teaching, which makes it difficult for graduates to meet the needs of the industry. This directly impacts the effective construction and dissemination of cultural symbols in the worldwide dissemination of Chinese animation. Exported animated works are either overly obscure and difficult for international audiences to comprehend, or they lose their cultural essence in the pursuit of universal appeal. Therefore, the core issue in the animation industry's talent shortage lies in the inability to effectively translate the deep connotations of Chinese cultural symbols into a narrative language that global audiences can understand and appreciate.

4.2.3 Imperfect industrial system and market barriers for cultural symbols

In addition, the imperfect industrial system restricts China's animation from achieving scale and standardized development [10]. At present, most domestic animation production companies lack a complete full-process creation and production system. Most animation works are done through outsourcing, which leads to high communication costs and inefficiency, and even affects the quality of special effects. This fragmented production model contrasts sharply with the highly integrated and efficient studio systems of Hollywood or Japan. The latter often has a single studio overseeing the entire process from conceptualization to distribution.

From the perspective of the industry chain, the Chinese animation industry chain normally covers only the broadcasting and distribution links. Insufficient development of high-margin segments, such as derivatives development and theme parks has constrained the industry's overall profitability and investment return cycle. For example, successful Western animated series often generate considerable revenue from peripheral merchandise, theme park projects and video games. These areas are still in their infancy in the Chinese animation industry. While the popularity of Chinese animation has continued to rise in recent years, with occasional breakout hits, a mature industry system has yet to be formed [12]. The Chinese animation sector urgently requires a commercial environment and investment model where cultural symbols and commercial IPs can mutually reinforce each other.

In addition, under the concept of pan-entertainment, a large amount of capital and resources have been dispersed to games, film and television works, novels and other derivative industry chain links. This has led to a decrease in the funds actually invested in the animation movie industry, making it difficult to form a virtuous cycle in the industry. This diversion of resources has further weakened the core animation production area, leading to the persistence of a vicious cycle of underinvestment that hinders long-term development. Meanwhile, the lack of a sound industrial ecosystem, including sound intellectual property protection and diversified revenue sources, hinders the long-term sustainable development and worldwide competitiveness of China's animation industry, especially in the face of disruptive technologies [10].

4.3 Cultural Differences and Aesthetic Barriers

Finally, cultural differences and aesthetic barriers are also challenges that cannot be ignored when Chinese animation goes worldwide. Although Chinese animation is committed to exploring universal values, certain deeply rooted cultural symbols and narrative techniques may still be difficult for overseas audiences to fully understand and

accept. For instance, stories based on traditional Chinese mythological and historical contexts - whether it is the intricate character relationships in *Fox Spirit Matchmaker* or the subtle connotations of Taoist philosophy in *Under One Person* - may set up barriers to comprehension for viewers who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture. The implicit humor, specific social rituals, or historical allusions embedded in the narrative are often difficult to capture for international audiences, resulting in a greatly diminished viewing experience [10].

There are variations in aesthetic preferences, viewing habits, and acceptance of animation genres in different countries and regions. This requires more precise localization in content creation and communication strategies. For example, certain markets favor fast-paced action scenes, while others prefer a quiet, deep narrative style. Understanding cultural differences and adapting communication strategies are critical to breaking through these barriers [4].

4.4 Suggestions for Future Development

To truly realize the transformation from "single-point explosion" to "global deep cultivation", it is necessary to make systematic improvements and innovations in terms of capital investment, talent cultivation, industry construction and cross-cultural communication strategies. This includes investing in market research to capture diverse audience preferences, collaborating with international partners with local market expertise, and developing adaptive content strategies that balance cultural authenticity with worldwide accessibility. As Li and Wang suggest, sustained cross-cultural research is essential to understanding and breaking through these barriers [2]. Only by addressing these multidimensional challenges can Chinese animation truly unleash its global influence and make a significant contribution to the promotion of cross-cultural understanding.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the construction of cultural symbols and the path of global dissemination of Chinese animation in the process of its "breakthrough".

The findings suggest that the "breakthrough" is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by policy, capital, technology, content and audience demand. Unique cultural symbols rooted in traditional Chinese culture and reinterpreted for modern audiences are at the core of its global competitiveness.

However, challenges remain, including funding shortfalls, talent gaps, imperfect industrial systems and cultural aesthetic barriers. These require systemic solutions.

For Chinese animation to further realize worldwide dissemination, content must take precedence. By reinterpreting traditional culture and incorporating universal values,

it deepens cultural connotations.

Besides, it is also crucial to enhance artistic expression through continuous technological innovation, improve the industrial chain by investing in upstream and downstream industries, promote cross-industry collaboration, and innovate communication strategies. This study, based on literature and case analysis, has limitations in quantitative audience feedback. Future research should expand data sources for comprehensive assessments, refine cultural symbol analysis, deepen research on localization strategies, and explore the impact of new technologies.

Continued research will undoubtedly contribute to making Chinese animation shine brighter on the world stage.

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