

COMMENT ON “CHINESE ANIMATION AND ITS EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND”

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Commented Article: MAN, Shengchong. Chinese Animation and Its Evolution and Cultural Background. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp Journal of Philosophy, v. 47, n. 4, e0240051, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14628>.

Received: 05/09/2023 | Approved: 11/09/2023 | Published: 27/02/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n4.e0240103>



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According to Man (2024), animation films are a branch of film art that encompasses various art forms, such as literature, visual arts, drama and music. They utilize painting or other forms of visual art to depict character design and environmental settings, employing techniques of exaggeration, resemblance and deformation. Through the use of imagination, fantasy and symbolism, animation reflects people’s lives, ideals and desires. It is a highly speculative form of film art.

The term “cartoon” is often used interchangeably with animation, particularly in the context of animated films (Xu; Fu; Cui, 2005, p. 79). The term “cartoon” refers to animated films that use the language of drawing to tell a story. It originates from the United States. The word “animation,” on the other hand, comes from Latin and carries the meaning of giving life. In the context of film, it refers to the process of bringing inanimate objects, such as puppets or drawings, to life on the screen. The equivalent term in China is “meishu pian.” (Wan; Wan, 1986, p. 31).

Animated films belong to the realm of visual art, using artistic forms to structure and depict images, employing the language of drawing to summarize and narrate plots, and utilizing music to evoke emotions and provide linguistic cues. Similar to how music can be seen as a physical phenomenon that directly appeals to the auditory and emotional realm of humans through technical means, animation, in conjunction with visual composition and

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montage techniques, plays a crucial role in conveying and suggesting character emotions, revealing relationships, showcasing environmental atmospheres, expressing thematic ideas, and driving narrative progression through implication, symbolism and foreshadowing.

The primary distinction between animated films and other forms of visual media lies in the fact that the creative process of animation always relies on delineating and rendering shapes and colors. Therefore, animation is also hailed as the art of fluid and moving drawings, where the audio-visual effects are largely conveyed through the medium of visual art. The virtual and stylized nature of theatrical stage art and animation bear remarkable similarities, resulting from the combined efforts of commerce, folklore, entertainment and art.

Moreover, animated films require corresponding technology to support their creation. Examining the origins and developmental history of animated films, each progress and advancement are closely linked to the development and application of relevant technologies. It is difficult to imagine mature and thriving animated films without the support of technological advancements. Furthermore, due to the highly assumptive and virtual nature of animation art, the depicted characters and events are not based on real-life individuals or objects. This enables them to transcend the constraints of space and time, allowing creators to freely roam within the realms of their imagination.

Chinese animation films are primarily created by Chinese creative teams, reflecting the Chinese people's cultural thoughts, aesthetic values, cultural concepts, social customs and lifestyles. They are rooted in traditional Chinese literature and painting, imbued with Chinese philosophy and aesthetic thinking, and filled with elements of national identity. Through its development, Chinese animation has constructed the "Chinese Animation School," forming a global animation system that stands alongside Western animation (Ding, 2007, p. 11).

The article "Chinese Animation Film Philosophy" consists of an introduction and conclusion, with a total of eleven sections (Wang; Wang, 2000, p. 101). It delves deeply into the philosophical aspects of Chinese animation and its development in the animation industry. The article begins by pointing out that the three major schools of philosophy in China (Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism) all converge towards an aesthetic understanding of the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. This philosophical view of "personification" is vividly expressed in the famous line by the Song Dynasty poet Xin Qiji, "I see the green mountains' charming beauty, and they must see me the same way" (Ning, 2022, p. 29). It represents the "unity of heaven and man" and an ecological philosophy that regards the human spiritual world and the natural world as an integrated whole, with mutual understanding and mutual forgetting.

This cultural difference, manifested in the philosophical realm, is precisely the distinctive feature that sets Chinese animation apart from animation films from the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other countries. For example, the Chinese animation film

“Three Monks” (1980), adapted from Chinese folk proverbs, reflects Buddhist philosophical views of compassion, karma and retribution. The film uses specific but whimsical plot elements, such as walking, fetching water and reciting sutras, to project this philosophical perspective. The number “three” in the film represents not only repetition but also hierarchy, reflecting the hierarchical concept present in the three cardinal guides and five constant virtues of Confucianism. Similarly, works like “The Fantastic Tales of the Book of Fantasy” (1983), which features three attempts to acquire the heavenly book. (1958 It should be noted that, in the aforementioned films, the synchronization of music rhythm and visual editing generates both surface-level and deep-level artistic effects. While highlighting the dramatic tension of the narrative, music, sound and visuals permeate and complement each other, forming a cohesive whole. It can be said that it is based on the technical characteristics and expressive effects of music and sound that the visual imagery is endowed with rich narrative information and content direction, thus advancing the overall narrative progression of animated films in another sense. Moreover, various aspects of Chinese animation film creation, especially in the development process of the “Chinese School” of animation, embody numerous philosophical ideas.

1 THE PHILOSOPHY OF TAOISM: CREATING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

Chinese philosophy is vast and profound, encompassing three major schools of thought: Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. The founder of Taoism is Laozi, whose work “Dao De Jing” represents a pinnacle of pre-Qin prose and encompasses profound and expansive thoughts. It has been regarded as a guiding principle in later generations, with its philosophical ideas further developed by Zhuangzi. In Chapter 25 of the “Dao De Jing,” it states, “There is something formless and perfect before the universe was born. It is serene. Empty. Solitary. Unchanging. Infinite. It is the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it the Dao... Man follows the Earth. Earth follows Heaven (Liu; Alves, 2022, p. 7). Heaven follows the Dao. The Dao follows nature.” This passage signifies that “something formless and perfect” existed before the formation of the universe. It is serene, empty and unchanging, cycling endlessly without depletion, serving as the root of all things. Laozi refers to it as the Dao, emphasizing that man should follow the nature’s flow and grasp the laws and principles of things in order to achieve sustainable development. When looking at the development of Chinese animated films, it is indeed in accordance with the development laws of artistic entities within its own reality and cultural context, forming a historical trajectory that aligns with the trends of the times.

In the early stages before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the history of Chinese animation creation can be largely attributed to Wan brothers’ pioneering efforts : Wan Guchan, Wan Laiming, Wan Chaochen and Wan Dihuan. The Wan

brothers initially studied the principles of animation by exploring traditional Chinese folk art forms, such as shadow puppetry and magic lanterns. Through continuous experimentation, they were able to simulate the most basic form of animation called “hand-flipped books.” In 1922, the Wan brothers created a one-minute black and white animated advertisement film called “Shuzhendong Huawen Typewriter,” which served as a precursor to Chinese animation. If the production of Chinese folk art provided the foundation for animated film creation, the Wan brothers soon realized that “to give the Chinese animation industry infinite vitality, it must take root in our own national traditions” (Wan; Wan, 1986, p. 41). In the 1930s, facing numerous crises, the Chinese nation, inspired by the spirit of unity against external aggression, produced a series of propaganda animated films with anti-Japanese themes between 1931 and 1937. These films, such as “Awakening of Compatriots” (1931), “Unity is Strength” (1932), “Detective Dog” (1933), “Blood Money” (1934), and “National Pain History” (1934), injected national will and public aspirations into animation creation. Through localized character depictions and a nationalized painting style, these animated films supported the Anti-Japanese Salvation Movement. These films were innovative in technique, closely integrated with reality, and achieved excellent educational and propaganda effects through artistic expression.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the socialist system and cultural context clarified the path of “nationalization” for Chinese animated films. National artistic ideologies served as macro guidance, state financial allocation provided funding support, and collaborative professional teams became the three fundamental conditions for the development of Chinese animated films. Additionally, China’s rich cultural heritage, including myths, folk legends, fables, traditional operas and novels, became a source of inspiration for animated storytelling. Works, such as “Havoc in Heaven” (1961), “The Monkey and the Moon” (1963), “Ma Liang’s Magical Brush” (1964), “Three Monks” (1980) and “The Proud General” (1989) drew from these cultural elements (Dong; Wang; Zhao, 2022, p. 15). Chinese ink wash painting is unique in the world, and both landscape and figure paintings, as well as flower-and-bird paintings, have distinct Chinese characteristics. The classics of ink wash animation, such as “The Little Tadpole Looks for Its Mother” (1960), “Flute Player” (1963), “Deer Bell” (1982) and “Mountain and Water Affection” (1988), were all created using ink wash techniques. Te Wei, the director of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, led his team to naturally render ink wash on rice paper. Instead of emphasizing outlines, they used a soft and poetic brush style. For example, in “The Little Tadpole Looks for Its Mother,” the little chick, with its golden and fluffy appearance, evokes a sense of beauty. The little tadpole’s story is like a musical motif, and with this smallest motive, the story can develop and evolve, providing the narrative with a flow of energy and a structural basis. The challenging journey of mistaking goldfish, crabs, turtles, and catfish as its mother represents four variations on this theme. It can even be said that “The Little Tadpole Looks

for *Its Mother*” is an animated film in the form of a variation. After watching “*Flute Player*,” a Japanese viewer left a comment saying, “I can hardly believe that ink wash paintings can come to life. But after seeing it, I was truly astonished. What technique was used to create such a work? It is truly unimaginable” (Ding, 2007, p. 19). In fact, the secret of ink wash animation lies in the photography process. Each character or animal, drawn on the animation paper, must be colored in layers. For example, even for the same water buffalo in “*Flute Player*,” four or five different colors must be used, including large areas of light gray, dark gray and sporadic ink colors. These colors are applied to several transparent celluloid sheets, and each sheet is separately photographed by the animator. They are then combined together and processed using photography techniques to achieve the effect of ink wash rendering. These animated films have won numerous awards, embodying the aesthetic of Chinese ink wash painting, profound artistic conception, and establishing the distinguished position of the “Chinese Animation School” in the world.

2 SELFLESSNESS AND HEAVEN AND MAN’S UNITY : PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON INTRINSIC CREATION

The spirit of “selflessness and unity of heaven and man”, in traditional Chinese culture, is not only a fundamental philosophical concept, but also an important aesthetic paradigm in classical Chinese aesthetics. It runs through the entire history of Chinese cultural thought and represents the realm pursued by Chinese philosophy and art. Both Confucianism and Taoism, in the pre-Qin era, explored the relationship between human beings and nature in relation to the concept of “selflessness and unity of heaven and man.” Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, once said, “At the age of fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At the age of sixty, my ear was attuned to them. At the age of seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without transgressing the norms.” He emphasized that humans can only achieve true freedom by uniting with heaven’s will and conforming to the nature’s laws. Mencius, a later Confucian philosopher, also proposed ideas, such as “alignment with heaven and earth” and “everything is prepared within me,” highlighting the dominant role of the self in unity. Taoism, on the other hand, believes that the key to the human beings and nature’s unity lies in the “*Dao*.” The renowned figure Zhuangzi proposed the following philosophical inquiry:

Once Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering about, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn’t know that he was Zhuangzi. Suddenly, he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuangzi. But he didn’t know if he was Zhuangzi who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi (Ge, 2023, p. 143).

In this context, objects are transformed into human beings, and human beings are transformed into objects. Human beings and nature merge into one, creating the state

of “coexistence with heaven and earth, oneness with all things.” The interpretation of the concept of “selflessness and unity of heaven and man” in traditional Chinese philosophy and culture not only focuses on the individual forms of everything in the natural world and their relationship with human beings, but also encompasses the universe’s holistic nature, of history and human life’s. This perspective is reflected in Chinese film art, which “refers to discovering certain ideal personalities corresponding to human beings from the natural world, making the natural scenery and objects become a material expression of the human spirit and personality. Thus, finding a point of harmony between heaven and man, revealing a certain consistency and correspondence between nature and society, and between human beings and objects” (Wang; Wang, 2000, p. 394). In the large-scale animated film “Confucius,” the orchid symbolizes the morally noble gentleman.

According to the article “Chinese Animation Film Philosophy,” after its release on September 28th, 2009, the animated series “Confucius” (26 episodes per season, with a total of four seasons) received numerous national honors (Tang; Shen, 2022, p. 59). It was simultaneously broadcast in over 60 provinces and cities in China and was exported to the United States and South Korea, gaining popularity among people worldwide. It was also invited to participate in top-tier international film festivals. The animated series “Confucius” has been designated as audio-visual teaching material for Chinese language education by the Confucius Institute Headquarters. It has been translated into various languages and distributed to over 300 Confucius Institutes and classrooms worldwide, playing an immeasurable role in promoting Chinese culture. The investment in the animated series “Confucius” was nearly 50 million yuan, with excellent production quality and a strong creative team. The renowned Chinese scholar Ji Xianlin served as the chief consultant for the animated series, and the first half of the script was written by Li Feng, a “gold medal screenwriter” employed by Zhang Yimou. The second half was written by the famous author Ye Zhaoyan. The renowned musician Kong Xiangdong composed the music for the animated series, and the famous painter Fan Zeng provided guidance on character design. A group of outstanding animators dedicated their efforts to various aspects of the animation creation process.

“Confucius” narrates the growth process of Confucius and the formation of the roots of Confucian culture in chronological order, focusing on his transformation from an ordinary person to a philosopher and thinker. The symbol of the orchid appears in the first episode of the first season. Young Confucius cannot bear to see the roadside orchids being trampled by carriages. He rescues one, transplanting it into a flowerpot, demonstrating a noble gentleman’s benevolence. In moments of adversity and hardship, the orchid appears in Confucius’ dreams through the voice of the flower fairy, inspiring him spiritually and urging him to study diligently, seek knowledge humbly, cultivate his character and uphold moral principles. Confucius praised the purity of the orchid in the “Kongzi Jiayu,” stating, “The orchid grows in the remote forest, but it does not withhold its fragrance when no

one is around. The noble person cultivates the Dao and establishes virtue, not changing principles even in poverty.” Just like the orchid that does not cease to bloom, despite the lack of appreciation, a noble person should maintain purity, uphold noble sentiments and demonstrate elevated integrity even in the face of adversity. It is because Confucius always regarded the character of the orchid as a benchmark that he ultimately became a sage and a role model for all generations. The theme song of the animated series, “I Am Your Fragrance,” equates the orchid with the noble person, likening the fragrance of the orchid to the noble person’s virtue, which blesses all beings.

“Shanshui Qing” (Mountain and Water Affection), hailed as an incomparable classic ink wash animation film to this day, is the last artistic masterpiece before the commercialization of Chinese animated films. It tells the touching story of the encounter and inheritance between a recluse guqin teacher and his young disciple amidst the mountains and waters. This work has won prestigious awards, including the Best Short Film Award at the 14th Montreal International Film Festival (1990), and it is the only Chinese animated film selected in the “Animation of the Century: 100 Works” at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival (2006) (Ren; Wang; Lv, 2022, p. 37). In the film “Mountain and Water Sentiments,” there is a scene where the protagonist stands at the bow of a boat, immersed in the audiovisual world of undulating waves and mountains. At this moment, it is not appropriate to have a song or simply instrumental music parallel to the profound and compassionate imagery. Instead, the film employs a musical sound design that intertwines human voices, environmental sounds and the music of the qin instrument, creating a symphony reminiscent of the sea, rain and wind. It is through this approach that the protagonist can sing for the mountains and rivers, embodying the spirit and mission of carrying on the wisdom of the past, and presenting a perfect portrayal of their noble sentiments and dedication. Consequently, the music and visuals transcend the simplistic relationship of audio and visual combination, giving rise to a novel and multi-dimensional aesthetic creation, and paving the way for profound emotional expression in the film.

Since ancient times, mountains and rivers have been objects of closeness and love for the Chinese people. “Those who are virtuous take pleasure in mountains, while those who are wise take pleasure in waters.” Mountains and rivers have long been an indispensable spiritual medium in Chinese traditional culture. As a nature’s manifestation, they represent an eternal theme, while humans are merely fleeting travelers in this vast universe. Thus, “Mountain and Water Sentiments” uses mountains and rivers to soothe and convey emotions, showcasing the venerating teachers’ cultural traits and emphasizing the proximity of the path to humanity. Furthermore, the integration of water and ink, in Chinese painting, reflects the dialectical philosophical concept of the unity of self and the world. Presented in ink wash painting style, “Mountain and Water Sentiments” embodies the poetic realm of the heaven and man’s unity,

radiating the unique and ethereal spiritual essence of Chinese culture. Hence, it is hailed as a century-defining masterpiece in Chinese ink wash animation.

Film visuals depict tangible and visible phenomena, while music represents the individuals' emotional response to those phenomena, belonging to the realm of abstraction and generalization. Music, as an auditory art form presented in time, constantly unfolds through elements, such as pitch, color, duration and intensity. This dynamic nature forms the material foundation for the transmission of emotions through music. Based on this understanding, the juxtaposition of visuals and music, which are inherently contrasting art forms and mediums, can be dynamically and dialectically unified in a film. Consequently, it becomes evident that the film conveys not only the skill of playing the ancient qin instrument, but also the interplay of solidity and flexibility, the harmonious coexistence of yin and yang, and the imagery of the interdependence of substance and emptiness. It represents the poetic expression and spiritual revival of Chinese philosophy conveyed by the film.

CONCLUSION

The article “Chinese Animation Film Philosophy” also addresses the challenges facing the Chinese animation industry. Currently, there is still a significant gap between the Chinese animation market and the United States and Japan's one. Despite China having the largest audience for animation with 370 million children, a survey revealed that only 11% of children prefer Chinese animation, while the majority opt for American and Japanese animation. As a result, American and Japanese animated works continue to dominate the Chinese animation industry, with Chinese animation attracting only a young children's small audience.

It is worth noting that, although the Chinese animation industry has experienced rapid development in the past decade, it still faces numerous challenges. These include an incomplete industry chain, unclear business models, insufficient market operation experience, lack of intellectual property brands and a predominance of small-scale enterprises. The main consequence of these challenges is that the initial investment in animation production is substantial, the production cycle is long and the market return is uncertain. For instance, representative animated films, such as “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” (2015) and “Big Fish & Begonia” (2016), had an average production cycle of nearly seven years.

Furthermore, countries like the United States, Japan and South Korea employ precise, personalized and combination marketing and advertising strategies. These strategies not only generate significant economic benefits for their respective nations, but also facilitate the widespread dissemination of cultural product values and ideas. In contrast, the Chinese animation industry not only lags behind in this aspect, but also lacks a competitive advantage

on a global scale. The article concludes by emphasizing the need to continuously enhance core competitiveness and pursue sustainable development in order to create a favorable interactive competitive environment and a cyclical development model for the industry. This vision will become a shared goal for all creators in the Chinese animation film industry in the future.

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