



Discussion on Some Common Problems in Current Creation of Chinese Animation

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Abstract: Today's Chinese animation is booming, but there are still some problems in the creative process. Therefore, the author chooses to analyze some representative animated film works released in the past few years in multiple aspects (materials and themes, character building, era understanding and values, production technology and talents). In this way, the author discusses and summarizes some common problems in the creation of Chinese animation and the reasons for the defects of the works, hoping to give some inspiration to many Chinese animation practitioners, and to help the future development of Chinese animation.

Keywords: animation creation, multiple aspects, discussion and analysis, common problems, reasons for formation

Introduction

Although the start of animation in China is a little later than other European and American countries, it has developed rapidly in a short period of time and made remarkable achievements. In the peak period of China's animation creation, animation films were well made with profound meaning. And as a special way to promote Chinese traditional culture, animation has brought Chinese values and far-reaching influence to the world. Unfortunately, the development of animation in China has been in a relatively low stage [1] due to high cost, backward technology, market restriction and external competition in more than ten years after the comprehensive arrival of marketization of the industry. During this period, due to the lack of proper soil and operation environment, the quality of animation works has been in declining trend, and few of them can attract people's attention again, the glory of the old days has gradually become a nostalgic talk. Fortunately, in recent years, China began to support the development of the animation industry, more capital and business have been involved, so more and more professionals have devoted themselves to animation creation, and domestic animation films have made rapid progress and development. People's interest and confidence in Chinese animation has been rekindled.

Since 2015, the output of animated films in China has entered a stage of accelerated development, with an average annual output of 51 films (Figure 1). According to statistics, the box office of most domestic animated films was less than 10 million yuan in recent years, and even reached 70.6% in 2020 (Figure 2). It can be seen that quantity does not mean quality. In addition, a lot of domestic animation films with "big investment and big production" have emerged in the market in recent years, these films have been placed high hopes during the creation period and have accumulated a lot of popularity in the early stage of publicity, but after the release, many of these films have bad reviews and has been criticized for its flaws. The revival of Chinese animation still has a long way to go. Currently, animation is showing booming development, we should look more realistic problems of China's animation film, so I choose to analyze some representative animation films released in the past few years in multiple aspects, to explore some common problems in Chinese animation creation today, and to summarize the causes for the defects works.

1. Repeated material selection and relatively single selection of theme

Chinese traditional culture can bestow artistic design resources for our contemporary animation creation and play a positive role in material selection and plot design in the early stage. As an important part of Chinese culture, myth and legend not only reflect the characteristics of the nation, but also contain many great spiritual core of the Chinese nation. Therefore, it has become an important source of inspiration for artists since the beginning of Chinese animation. However, Chinese myths and legends as materials for creation are not inexhaustible. As Mr. Shen Yanbing once said, "Not only has Chinese mythology not been integrated into special books, but also scattered in ancient books, which are very fragmented, so it is extremely difficult for us to sort out a Chinese myth" [2]. Therefore, it can be seen that there are not many parts in the myth that have complete plots and can be adapted into film and television works. The myth and legend stories created by

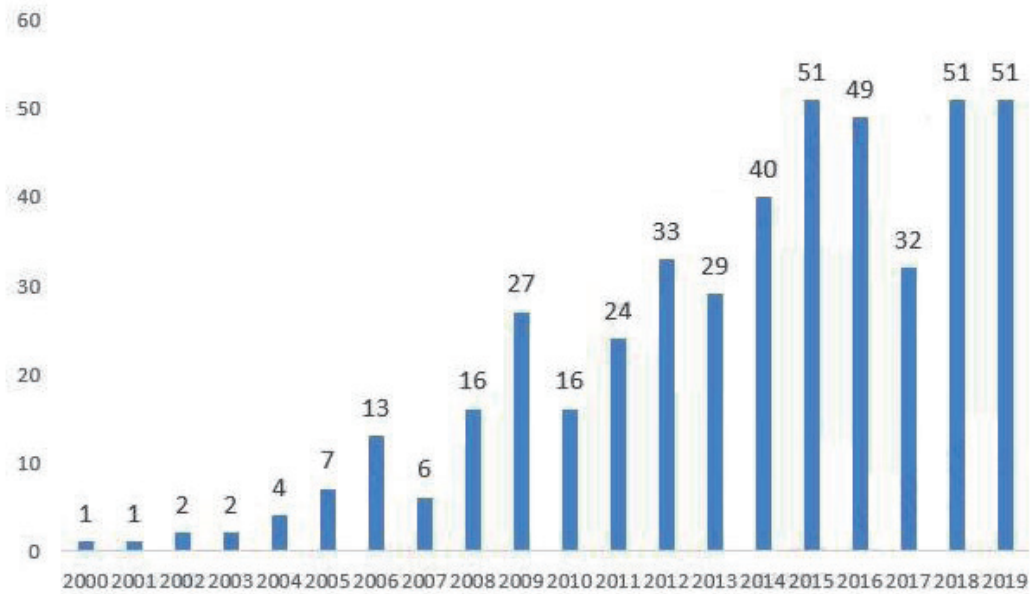


Figure 1. China's animation film output from 2000 to 2019 (unit: film)

Source: National Radio and Television Administration (compiled by Prospective Industry Research Institute)

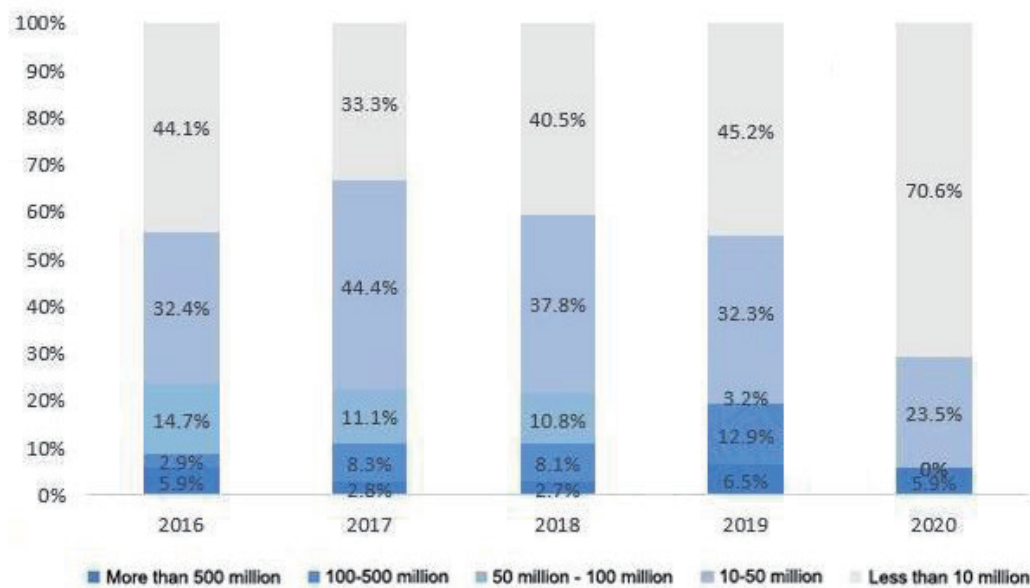


Figure 2. TOP 10 box office rankings of domestic animation in China from 2016 to 2020 (Unit: 100 million yuan)

Source: compiled by Prospective Industry Research Institute

predecessors and written with mature literary styles have been repeatedly sampled and adapted frequently, this is also one of the main reasons for the strong "remake" trend in the film and television animation market in recent years. For example, *Journey to the West*, one of the four famous novels in China, is a typical representative of the remake theme. In the 1940s, the Wan brothers directed the china's first full-length animation *The Princess of Iron Fan*, and Shanghai Animation Film Studio produced the color animated feature film *Monkey King* from 1961 to 1964. In addition, this novel has also been remade into the domestic animation *Journey to the West* in 1998 and the animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* in 2015.

Commercial constraints is also one of the main causes of "remake", some scholars came to the conclusion that animation no longer just refers to the animation industry. The development of the entire animation industry has already transitioned to the stage of enterprise commercialization, and the connection between animation and economy has become the most prominent feature of the entire animation industry [3]. Therefore, the productions of most domestic animation now have

to consider practical issues such as profit, production cost, energy and time. So the creators cannot start from scratch to consider an original script, so "remake" naturally becomes a popular trend. The market and readers to a certain extent have tested mythological classics such as *Journey to the West* and *The Legend of Deification*. These literary works already have a certain mass base, and only a few modifications can ensure a certain quality of the plot, and the producers do not have to take excessive investment risks.

In addition to repeated materials, many domestic animated films released in recent years emphasize the theme of "changing the fate" in their plots. For example, in the animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, Sun Wukong fought against fate and broke the seal; in the animated film *White Snake*, Bai Suzhen fell in love with mortals and dared to change fate; The protagonists in the animated films *Legend of Deification* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* are not afraid of power, insist on themselves and have the courage to overcome fate.

Perhaps still influenced by European and American commercial films and cultural values, individual heroism has become the main spiritual core of these animated films. Because the story of counterattack is often the most dramatic and conflicting, it is easier for the audience to have a strong sense of satisfaction, and the climax of the plot will also make the audience watch with enthusiasm, so these animated films are easy to achieve high box office and good reputation, which also leads to the follow-up animation creations have been continuing this single theme, this choice will restrict the future development of domestic animation films.

2. The shortcomings in character creation

"In any case, characters are the key elements of the stories. If the characters can't make sense, stories and themes are not enough to attract the audience. [4] Generally speaking, the animated characters will leave the deepest impression in audiences' minds, and even become the nicknames of animated films. Some animations are directly named after the main characters, such as *Black Cat Sheriff*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Mulan* and so on. It can be seen that as the most dazzling symbol of animation films, the shaping of animation characters has become the first task of animation script, which plays a crucial role in the whole animation production and even affects the success or failure of the whole animation work.

Legend of Deification, a Chinese animated film released in 2020, has obvious design defects: For example, Jiang Ziya's desire is not obvious, the protagonist's mood swings are not strong, but his divine brilliance is too dazzling, which is completely contrary to the setting of "ordinary person" in the script, so the protagonist's performances are often out of the plots. Another example is that the setting of the protagonist's obsessive-compulsive disorder and character weakness does not conform to the logic of the protagonist's behavior in the film. These settings can neither be connected with the desires of the protagonist nor play a role in promoting the plot. In addition, in the face of the most important conflict, the protagonist is too calm and out of touch with the thrilling plot at this time, which makes the audience completely unable to empathize with this sense of crisis. The creator should understand that the characters have to make sense and the relationship in the story should be consistent in order to be convincing and accepted by the audience. If the protagonist of the film always has a sense of distance and cannot enter the hearts of the audience, the film will be seriously affected.

In addition, the weight of supporting roles is also very important, they are not only used to foil the protagonist and promote the plot development, but also play an important role in coordinating the narrative style of the whole film. In recent years, the design of supporting characters in some animated films is too simplistic and stereotyped. Some scholars have pointed out the shortcomings of *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* in this aspect: "Chaos as the devil leader is still a traditional villain. Zhu Bajie is still a greedy and incompetent character, which is only used to increase the comedy effect of the film. The master is still designed as a kind old man in the traditional concept. And the little girl seems to be just a prop, the White Dragon is more presented as a Chinese element, and the mountain demon is a pure ferocious creature [5]." If the creator wants to design rich and three-dimensional animation characters, they should no longer be affected by the stereotypes. In creation, the creator should remember that: "the setting of character types should not be limited to rigid patterns, and they are not defined by characters, gender or ethnic background, but by actions [4]."

3. The misunderstanding of epoch characteristics and values

Society is undergoing rapid development and changes, and each era enjoys its own characteristics and imprints. Art comes from life, as a mature comprehensive art, animation can well reflect the modern society and reflect the spiritual and cultural pursuit of a generation, and show the unique values of this generation. On the contrary, values in animation works will also play an important role in influencing and leading the era. As General Secretary Xi Jinping said in the 2014 Forum on Literature and Art, "Literature and art are the clarion call for the advance of the era, which can best represent the style and atmosphere of an era [6]."

At present, some Chinese animated films have a certain misunderstanding in the understanding of the era. They simply design animation characters and language actions according to the current popular elements, blindly follow the trend and ignore the filtering of those negative parts of the society. In the animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, there is a line based on the current rap and pop music style: "I am a little carefree and free monster. I kill people without wink of an eye, eat people without salt, eat seven or eight people a mouthful, burst my belly, go to shit in the toilet, but forget to bring paper. Your life is full of tears. The more you toss about, the unluckier you are. If you are tired of dying, it is better to collapse in bed and sleep..." This line is negative and depressing, but it is rapidly popular on the Internet in the form of limericks or rhymes. Although the film has the characteristics of the era, it lacks the introduction of positive energy, and such negative values do great harm to children and teenagers with poor discrimination. In recent years, children have been affected by negative and violent content in animations, often causing tragic events (see Table 1). For example, a boy in Lianyungang imitated *Big Gray Wolf* to burn his partner in 2013, and a boy in Guangzhou imitated *Logger Vick* to cut two fingers in 2014. When Communication University of China investigated the viewing situation in Beijing, it was found that negative and violent animations accounted for 36.5% of the total [7]. In a survey and interview conducted by Nanjing Morning Post, parents said: "Animation works should have educational significance with positive thoughts and convey correct values." They also called for strengthening control of animation broadcast platforms and establishing a rating system for animation. [8] Therefore, creators should pay more attention to the pursuit of spiritual culture and add the positive leading role of culture in their works to convey the correct values of the era.

Table 1. Tragedies caused by preschool children imitating violent acts in animations

Animation title	Consequences of imitation
Pleasant Goat and Big Gray Wolf	A boy imitated Big Gray Wolf and burned his companion (Wenzhou Evening News 2013.12)
Tom and Jerry	A little girl imitated Red Wolf and hit people with a pan (Changsha Evening News 2014.08) A boy lit a firecracker and wounded himself (Oriental Morning Post 2014.08)
Boonie Bears	A boy imitated Logger Vick to scold people (Zhongshan Daily 2013.07) A boy imitated Bear junior to bake wood, causing a fire (Qianjiang Evening News 2014.01) A boy imitated Logger Vick and chopped two fingers (Modern express 2014.03) A boy imitated Logger Vick to demolish the electric fan, left palm injured (Yangzi Evening News 2014.07) A little girl imitated Logger Vick and saw her sister's nose with a chainsaw (Nanfang Daily 2015.03)

4. Insufficient investment in production technology and lack of talents

The poor special effects technology was once an important reason that domestic animations were widely criticized, and the slow development of related technologies has always restricted the development of Chinese animation. Since the 1980s, 3D animation technology has developed rapidly in the field of film and television. China has a large market and 3D animation technology has a good prospect in China, but two aspects still mainly restrict its development in China:

First, the production cost of 3D animation is too high, which requires huge investment to update high-performance computers and equip them with high-tech technologies. Although small domestic companies have ambitions and creativity, they do not have enough economic strength, while large companies pay more attention to immediate profits and are unwilling to invest too much money in 3D animation technology. However, in order to meet domestic audiences' demand for 3D animated feature films, at present, co-production and technology outsourcing are mostly adopted in China to reduce production costs as much as possible and ensure certain film quality. For example, the film *Legend of Deification* has officially announced a set of data as follows: "The number of people involved in the production of this animated film is as many as 1,600 and more than 50 companies participated, which lasted more than 1,560 days; The total number of shots was 1851, and the number of special effects shots in the film exceeded 1300, accounting for 70% of the whole film...[9]". However, this cooperative production method will cause more defects in the film. For example, this can be clearly seen in the animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*: When the film is shown, there are big differences in the sense of lens and lighting effects, the drawing

style and level of the same animated character in different plots are inconsistent, and sometimes some two-dimensional or even sketch parts appear suddenly in the 3D special effects screen. It can be seen that the method of co-production cannot solve the problem from the root cause. The integrity and unity of the film cannot be guaranteed, the quality and picture of the film are still not as expected.

Second, as 3D animation technology started relatively late in China, the shortage of relevant talents cannot support the rapid development of this industry, which especially emphasizes "team spirit", as Wu Guanying, a professor at the School of Arts of Tsinghua University, said, "Disney brings together the most outstanding artists and talents in the world, only in this way can the animations be done well [10]." In order to meet the talent demand of the animation market, many domestic colleges and universities have set up the animation majors one after another and gradually subdivided the major directions. However, the orientation of the 3D animation talent training program is not accurate enough, which makes it difficult for graduates to become the innovative and compound talents demanded by the 3D animation market. Jia Xiuqing, the deputy dean of Communication University of China, analyzed this realistic problem in the seminar of "Animation Film Culture, Aesthetics and Industry" in 2012: "There are still many problems to be solved in the international training of animation talents in domestic universities, such as lack of cutting-edge, experimental and international teaching materials, experimental teaching materials are rigid in technical operation, lack of effective connection and integration with artistic expression, and lack of connection between theoretical materials and practical creation [10]."

Obviously, the best way to develop 3D animation technology in China is to increase investment in the training of relevant technical talents while improving animation technology down-to-earth.

5. Conclusion

There is still a long way to go for the revival of Chinese animation. As a member of Chinese animation practitioners, I hope to contribute to the future development of Chinese animation. Therefore, I have discussed and summarized some common problems and causes of defects in Chinese animation creations from the aspects of materials and themes, the shaping of roles, the production technology and talents, and the understanding and values of era. I hope the research results in this paper can give some inspirations to many Chinese animation practitioners, can help today's Chinese animation creation out of mistakes.

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