A Study on the Combination of Nationalization and Internationalization in Chinese Animation

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Abstract: In recent years, the debate on whether Chinese animation should resort to nationalization or internationalization has become a controversial subject. Some scholars believe that we should forgo nationalization elements and pursue international forms of production; however, this does not apply well to Chinese animation. Others believe that the top priority in Chinese animation should concern nationalization elements. Consequently, this paper attempts to discuss a solution to this problem by conducting an analysis of the animated film, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*.

1. Origin of the Dispute Concerning the Nationalization and Internationalization of Chinese Animation Films

Both in terms of semantics and the origin of cultural spirit, the so-called dispute between "nationalization" and "internationalization" in China dates to the New Culture Movement of the early 20th Century. This movement was a reform in which new literature emerged that liberated nationalism from old traditions. Xueheng School (an institution that opposed the New Culture Movement) supported nationalization, but exponents of the New Culture Movement pursued internationalization. Overall, this debate delivered a historic reform. Since then, aspects of Western thinking have filtered into traditional Chinese culture. With modern vernacular Chinese replacing ancient Chinese prose, people nationwide were enlightened and became "receivers of internationalization." During the first 30 years of the 20th century, internationalization was mainstream; however, in the wake of the War of Resistance against Japan, thoughts of the salvation of the national culture surpassed enlightenment and became regarded as the only means of saving the country from its sufferings at that time. Consequently, nationalization was widely adopted and its prominence lasted for 40 years, seemingly destroying "internationalization." However, in the 1980s the question of "nationalization" and "internationalization" once again arose, represented by "roots culture" and "pioneer culture," respectively. Different to the dispute of the early 20th century, "roots culture" had no conflict with "pioneer culture," as both parties were forced to face modern history and take globalization into consideration when it came to the future of culture. In literary and artistic works, "nationalization" and "internationalization" referred to both "tracing the root" cultural spirit as well as modern Western narrative modes.

More specifically, in this paper, "nationalization" in regard to Chinese animations means a form of production based on the traditional culture of the Chinese nation; and "internationalization" refers to a production mode centered on Western culture (especially pop culture, particularly that of the United States, Japan, and other countries that produce popular animation). It is imperative to review China's animation history over the last century in order to clarify the relationship between the two parties.

A. An Attempt to Incorporate Nationalization and Internationalization in Early Chinese Animations

China began to create animation in the 1920s, which formed part of the New Culture Movement. In 1926, the Wan brothers created the first animated short film "Uproar in the Studio," and in 1942 they created the first full-length animation, "The Princess of Iron Fan." An analysis of The Princess of Iron Fan shows that the Wan brothers had already explored methods of combining international elements in domestic-made films. The film was completely based on a Chinese classic while also availing of the narrative method of early American animations. In regard to character and motion design, this movie adopted elements from both Chinese opera and American animation.

B. China Explores Methods of Filming Animation that Boasted Chinese Characteristics

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, a development that caused the cultural trend to tilt towards nationalism, China explored methods of creating national animation. "From the 1950s to the late 1980s, a series of animations with strong Chinese characteristics were filmed, mainly in Shanghai Animation Film Studio."

[1]These early animations include "Proud General," "Zhu Bajie Eats Watermelons," "Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother," "Uproar in Heaven" and, later, "Three Monks," "The Legend of the Sealed Book," and "Nezha Fights Great Dragon King ," to name a few.

This period is known as the golden period in the history of Chinese animation, as it marked a break from consciously obtaining influence from American animation and the beginning of a search for the all-round development of Chinese animation that featured national characteristics in its form, content, technique, and art. This culminated in an effort to film "Chinese School" animation that was rich in national elements. In regard to subject, this style employed traditional folktales, myths, and classics; for cultural connotations, it focused on Chinese traditional ethics and the spirit of heroism and romanticism; from the perspective of form, it took inspiration from Peking Opera, shadow plays, paper cutting, painting, and other traditional Chinese arts; in plot arrangement, it completely abandoned the melodramatic style of American animations, employing subtle and witty humor instead. Uproar in Heaven is a representative piece from this period, and it was highly praised for its rich national characteristics, strict narrative model, and uplifting theme, marking a milestone in China's animation. Its characteristics and popularity meant that the "Chinese School of Animation" had a suitable representative, and it is regarded as the benchmark for Chinese artists, particularly Chinese animation makers.

Animations during this period completely absorbed the essence of traditional Chinese culture. Despite the high aesthetic achievements of Chinese animation during this period, the fact that China imported very few foreign animations at this time cannot be ignored. Moreover, there was also a lack of literary and artistic works at the time. Therefore, the success of these animations differed from those of other countries, especially with the Western style being the mainstream. The animations were excluded from international markets and were far from a success for the animation industry and business. Thus, this approach is no longer replicated.

C. The International Impact on Nationalization

In the mid- and late-1980s, China's ideological and cultural communities were still affected by the aftermath of disruption of Cultural Revolution, yet globalization had become prominent. Forced into pursuing modernization, China lacked self-contained development and was compelled to begin the process of global integration. In particular, the introduction of Hollywood movies into China in the 1990s, known as the "the wolf is coming," entered the Chinese film market into a "baby vs. giant" fight.

For quite a long period, China had almost become a graveyard for animation and animation factories specializing in OEM; domestic animation was particularly badly affected in regard to broadcasting and filming. On one hand, the lack of animation and the rising media industry gave great opportunities for strong animation powers like America and Japan to flood the vacant Chinese market, almost forcing domestic animation out completely. At the time, Chinese animations were like "saplings" growing in a greenhouse. China became alarmed by the sweeping influx of foreign animation and took notice of the fact that "its own industry was being overrun by foreign animation makers in areas from business models to market operations, from digital technology to content and form, and from filming value to artistic concept."[2]On the other hand, China had, by this point, transformed from a planned economy into a market economy and, consequently, the sudden lack of resources weakened animation studios like Shanghai Film Studio, meaning they were unable to film animations on a large scale. In addition, the old generation of animation artists gradually retreated from the foreground, while a new generation of animators dedicated themselves to making American-style animation, especially in the middle and late periods of production. Strong foreign competitors, the slumping domestic animation industry, and a dearth of talent made the situation for China-made animations more difficult.

During this period, "Saint Seiya," "Slam Dunk," "Transformers," "The Lion King," "Mulan," and other American and Japanese animations were especially prevalent. Such animations from developed countries brought a fresh aesthetic experience for Chinese audiences because of their industrialized production techniques and mature filming standards. They became very popular in the Chinese market, becoming favorite animations of the late-70s, 80s and 90s. Such a trend left a deep impression on young Chinese children, and the themes expressed in the animations, like foreign values and aesthetic orientation had direct implications for the animation preference of the main Chinese audience. Chinese audiences, especially young audiences, developed different aesthetic tastes while watching international literary and artistic works. As a result, they began to demand more of Chinese national animations. In this case, Chinese animation, actively or passively, began to neglect its traditional nationalization and to imitate international production styles.

D. Dispute over Nationalization and Internationalization in the New Millennium.

The new century has seen a consensus formed in regard to mainstream ideology in academia and markets—animation art is now considered part of a huge cultural industry chain. Concurrently, as works that foster early childhood enlightenment, animations are cherished due to their cultural connotations and ethical values; consequently, mainstream ideology and the market are collaborating to boost the development of the animation industry. This new policy has produced a number of influential animated

series, including "Pleasant Goat," "Big Big Wolf," and "Boonie Bears."

During this period, Chinese animation companies have exploded in quantity and quality, and China has surpassed the United States and Japan to become the world leader in animation production; however, due to a shortage of professionals and a lack of experience, China has produced a great deal of unsatisfactory animations. In blind pursuit of internationalization or nationalization, the animation companies have rarely considered how to achieve either internationalization or nationalization. Therefore, a number of inferior works were produced, both with internationalization and nationalization themes. A case in point is China's first 3D animation film, "Thru the Moebius Strip." This film professes to be an integration of internationalization and world-class productions; however, with westernized characters, grandiose scenes, weak narrative logic, and a thin plot, the shortcomings of this doomed animation are quite telling. Its failure suggests that if Chinese animations fail to create a cultural resonance among Chinese audiences, lose their spiritual core, and feature inferior technical aspects when compared with international blockbusters, then pursuing over-westernized visuals is not a feasible direction. Similarly, excessive localization is also unsuitable. For example, take "Malan Flower" and "The Magic Gourd," which emphasized nationalization in a simple manner. With localized figure designs and scenes, these films simply collated Chinese elements. Such nationalization is just not recognized by Chinese audiences.

In retrospect, in the Chinese history of animation dispute over nationalization and internationalization has been ongoing for many years. That being said, so-called "nationalization" and "internationalization" are never practiced in filming in real terms. Neither nationalization nor internationalization comprise a simple collage of elements and pictures; they don't resort to images of characters or scenes in a story. Behind the real meaning is the desire to grasp the spirit of nationalization and internationalization in cultural and cosmopolitan ways.

2. A Successful Combination of Nationalization and Internationalization: *Hero Is Back*

Now the question arises: how can a balance be struck between nationalization and internalization? *Hero Is Back* is a god example, as it combines internationalization in a narrative form with nationalization in a spiritual and cultural form. This film is based on the common cultural memories of Chinese people and retells an ancient story in a brand new narrative manner, garnering fruitful results in both the market and in regard to recognition.

A. Internationalized Narrative Pattern and Aesthetic Standards

It is noted that Hollywood films have a monopoly position from the perspective of contemporary film. Film theories developed in Hollywood have implications for commercial film-making and affect audiences' watching habits. In *Hero Is Back*, the story structure and narrative form are typical of American Hollywood. Such internationalized film language makes the entire story more smooth and logical, which is the key to differentiating it from other domestic animations and making it a success.

In *Hero Is Back*, the full plot is not the only successful innovation. It also features the famous "two-story overlap" style. The first storyline concerns the hero, the Great Sage, who is imprisoned under Wuzhi Mountain and is awaiting rescue, while the other story line concerns Jiang Liuer, a predecessor of the Tang Monk (a Chinese monk who is actually a reincarnation of Golden Cicada). The two stories overlap when Jiang Liuer rescues the Great Sage. The two characters are initially independent and interdependent of each other, but grow into two leading roles whose fates echo each other. Thus, the two sets of stories center on the two figures before arriving at a common ground in the final battle between good and evil that occurs at the end of the film, forming a compact structure and a complete story.

Meanwhile, instead of merely building the characters of the two main protagonists, *Hero Is Back*, also attaches a great deal of importance to peripheral figures, like the baby girl, God, Buddha, Zhu Bajie, ordinary people, and even the villain, Mountain Demon; these characters also have distinct personalities. This "supporting role leaning towards a leading role" style is also adopted from international films.

Furthermore, the film-making level is also worth mentioning. As we all know, an excellent story is complemented by a corresponding performance, which refers to filming skills in animations. *Hero Is Back* conforms with international humor patterns, thus making it a hit among domestic animation films.

The creators interspersed a great deal of humor, comedy, action, special effects, and other gimmicks often seen in large commercial films into the main plots of the film. A case in point is a scene in which the Mountain Demon chases Jiang Liuer and the baby girl in a city. This scene involves dynamic and stimulating chases and fights, while funny scenes like the Mountain Demon wearing a bikini cut from a sheet are also included. These small gimmicks were adapted from Hollywood films. They make the film more vivid and free it from the traditional forms of domestic animations, meaning they are essential factors in creating a hit.

B. The Core Values and Ethics of Nationalization

Hero Is Back expressed its nationalization by telling an ancient story in a contemporary world. "The anxiety of influence" mentioned in Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry would haunt future

generations in creative terms; similarly, China's most popular raw material for animations, "Journey to the West," has been adapted numerous times, such as The Princess of Iron Fan from 1942, Uproar in Heaven from 1964 and the full-length animation also titled Journey to the West from 1999. All these versions feature a heroic Great Sage who is invincible in fights with demons and monsters. In fact, in each successive production the character was stronger, and this made it more difficult for new versions to surpass previous ones. However, in *Hero Is Back*, the creators made the Great Sage more human, making him relatable by giving him strong emotions, just like ordinary people. Indeed, in the post-revolutionary era, the image of heroes as "high and noble" has succumbed to heroes that possess a human nature. It is widely acknowledged that a hero with humanity is a real hero who can understand people better and protect them. While *Hero Is Back* shows the emotional journey of the Great Sage, it is still based on the classic theme of sacrifice, justice, and self-redemption. Consequently, people living in a post-revolutionary world can easily relate to it.

In addition to a "modern heroism" that is suited for contemporary context, nationalization should express introverted and comprehensive Chinese classical philosophy as well as aesthetics and a spirit of ethics. The former is achieved through the application of Chinese elements, especially in art design and music arrangement. In the beginning, the film imitates a classic 2D section of Uproar in Heaven, in which the Great Sage fights with divine troops descending from Heaven. The Great Sage, Pagoda-carrying Heavenly King, God Erlang, Nezha, and other characters are modeled on the facial paintings of Beijing opera but these are developed into modern exaggerated versions. In regard to music arrangement, the film employs traditional Chinese instruments. In the film, it is easy to detect the charm of traditional Chinese painting in many of the character designs, like those of Jiang Liuer, the baby girl, and other supporting figures. Scenes in Chang'an City, with its ancient temples and inns, give expression to the beauty of ancient Chinese architecture; the representation of the buildings is mainly characterized by "a combination of realism and romanticism" and "China's classical aesthetic temperament."[3] Specifically, as the entire story describes the sharp contrast between the rampage of Mountain Demon and the weakness of the Great Sage, there is huge disparity between the good and the evil. As a result, the belief in making sacrifices to obtain justice is raised. Therefore, the scene in which the young boy, Jiang Liuer, and the Great Sage, who cannot restore his power, fight with the evil King represents a romantic spirit of sacrifice. This "I am here for the world" philosophy is a unique part of the Chinese "knowing the impossibilities but persevering it" cultural and ethical logic.

C. The Aesthetic Acceptance of the Application of Fashion Elements

It is well known that a successful movie takes countless details into consideration. Such details lead to success or failure and have increasingly become one of major reasons whether audience chooses to go to the cinema to see the film or not. *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, starting with aesthetics and taking considerable additional details into account, selectively applied elements of cultural fashion. The audience range of *Hero Is Back* concerns those born in the late-70s, 80s, and 90s, with those born in the late-80s constituting the largest audience. As a result, the film draws on many elements from the movie *A Chinese Odyssey* (a film directed by Jeffrey Lau and starring Stephen Chow in 1995, which has gone viral for over 2 decades). For example, in the final chapter, when the Great Sage removes the seal completely and fights with the monster, the background music changes to classic music from A Chinese Odyssey, specifically, the scene in which Zhi Zunbao takes the hoop on his head and acquires the magic power to save Fairy Zixia. When the music begins, the audiences are then likely to think of the two heroes in the two different movies, which should resonate strongly with them.

Additionally, the image of both Chaos No Face and the Dragon are influenced by Hayao Miyazaki's cartoons. Furthermore, we can also detect elements of *World of Warcraft*, a western online game, in the stone man and the monster. Lastly, the chapter titled "Sleeping in Clip Joint" imitates a section from the movie "Dragon Inn." The application of these cultural fashion elements accord with psychology of the audience, and it is little wonder that the movie became popular.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, for contemporary Chinese films, whether to resort to internationalization or nationalization is a question that requires considerable deliberation, just like modern ideological trends in the 20th Century. This article takes *Hero Is Back* as an example and finds that the effective approach for contemporary Chinese animated films is to combine mental nationalization and narrative internalization, ethnic characteristic and modern elements, and identity recognition and uniqueness under the circumstance of constant exploration.

References

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Biography

Ning Xiang, graduated from Communication University of China, is now a teacher at Qingdao University of Science and Technology. His research fields mainly concern film and animation. With master's degree, he is currently an associate professor at Communication and Animation School of Qingdao University of Science and Technology.