The Developmental Difficulties and Prospects of Chinese-style Animation: Taking *Yao-Chinese Folktales* as an Example

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As one of the important means to spread Chinese traditional culture, Chinese-style animation has been on the rise in recent years. Many excellent works have emerged, among which the Chinese animated short film series *Yao-Chinese Folktales* is one of the good representatives. It aroused a strong reaction from the audience as soon as it was released on the Internet, and gave the audience a shock to their mind and vision, which has brought some thoughts to the development of Chinese-style animation. Following a linear logic chain of past-present-future Chinese-style animation's development, this paper takes *Yao-Chinese Folktales* as an example and analyzes the developmental difficulties and prospects of Chinese-style animation. At the end of the paper, some suggestions about the development path of Chinese-style animation's future are given from the aspects of creation and dissemination, for the aim of promoting the Chinese-style animation's development and spreading the Chinese traditional culture.

Keywords: Chinese-style animation, Chinese traditional culture, *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, development

Introduction

For more than a decade, Chinese-style animation has struggled to develop in a difficult situation. With the rise of Chinese-style animation, we are pleased to see that more and more of Chinese traditional culture is being explored, innovated, disseminated and developed. In order to better promote the development of Chinese-style animation and spread the excellent Chinese traditional culture, we write this paper to analyze the developmental difficulties and prospects of Chinese-style animation.

To achieve this goal, we organize the paper into five sections. In the first section, we trace the history and introduce the origin of traditional Chinese-style animation. In the second section, we look at the present and describe the current status of Chinese-style animation. In the third section, we land on a specific example and analyze the *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. In the fourth section, we look into the future and explore the development path of Chinese-style animation. In the last section, we draw a conclusion.

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The Origin of Traditional Chinese-Style Animation

1920s-1940s: Budding Period

Chinese animation began in the 1920s, and the Wan Brothers played a significant role in its development. Between 1926 and 1940, the Wan Brothers collaborated on several animated shorts, including *Studio Scene* and *Dog Detective*. In 1941, they completed China's first feature-length animated film, *The Princess of Iron Fan*, which was rich in Chinese characteristics. At that time, China, which was facing internal and external difficulties, became the second-largest producer of animated films after the United States, opening the door to Chinese animation.

1950s-1980s: Development Period

The period from 1950 to 1980 was a stage of development for China's animation industry. In 1950, the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio was the leading animation company at the time, producing a total of 428 art films, accounting for more than 80% of the total national art film output. The older generation of animators used their own intelligence and wisdom to create many award-winning animated films both domestically and internationally during the difficult years when China's animation technology was not yet mature. For example, the production of *The Monkey King: Uproar In Heaven* in 1962 was highly welcomed and recognized worldwide, and it promoted the rapid development of China's animation industry and was highly recognized internationally. It can be said to be the cornerstone of China's animation industry. In addition, other influential animated films including *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *The Legend of Sealed Book* are all animated films with typical Chinese characteristics. "Animation art and painting art are similar in nature, and pay attention to the ancient strategy of 'unity of form and spirit'" (Xu, 2023, p. 12). Chinese animation combines paper-cutting style, ink and watercolour style and other Chinese characteristics to be unique on the world stage.

1990s-2000s: Recession Period

However, the good times did not last long. In the 1990s, when commercialization and industrialization developed rapidly, the finely crafted animation film creation model could no longer keep up with the pace of the times and rapidly declined. In 1979, China implemented the reform and opening-up policy and introduced many excellent foreign animated films. For example, in 1980, CCTV introduced and broadcast *Astroboy*; in 1986 it introduced *Lulu, The Flower Angel*; in 1992 it introduced *Saint Seiya*; in 1996 it introduced *Slam Dunk*; and in 2001 it introduced *EVA* and so on. This made the already stagnant domestic Chinese animation even worse. With the further development of opening up to the outside world, a large number of foreign-funded animation companies entered and recruited workers, causing many Chinese low-paid animation creators to choose to leave state-owned film studios. It can be said that the 1980s and 1990s were a period when foreign animation industries flourished, but China's animation industry was not prosperous and there was a shortage of supply. The audience was exposed to high-quality foreign animations while waiting for more domestic animations, and then abandoned domestic animations. The glory of domestic animation is gone.

Current Status of Chinese-Style Animation Development

Brief Description of the Overall Development Status

In 2005, *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* was released, and the series of animated films became a big hit and a major memory for the post-00s. The domestic animation market showed a tendency to create classic IP (Intellectual Property) images during this period. In 2012, *Boonie Bears* series became popular across the country, with six series of films being released one after another, grossing 2.5 billion at the box office. The market began to firmly believe that children were the largest audience for the domestic animation market. Therefore, cinemas were filled with children, showing a significant trend of "infantilization."

This trend has led to a lack of connotation in the films themselves. Peng Siqi said that in recent years, China's market economy tends to mature, and the animation market has great potential, however, the animation industry is still in a strategic period and no real industrialization has been formed (Peng, 2023, p. 10). Domestic animations, which mainly target children as their main audience, focus on the creation and presentation of IP, while lowering the requirements for the production level and story connotation of the film itself. "Lively but empty" is almost becoming a label for Chinese animated films. On December 31, 2014, the animated film of the same name adapted from the original comic *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* was released, with a box office of 120 million yuan, becoming China's first domestic non-infant-oriented animated film with a box office of over 100 million yuan. The domestic animation market began to have new thoughts on the audience group.

It was not until 2015 that the domestic animation industry ushered in a turning point, and a large number of excellent domestic animations emerged from traditional theaters and online video platforms. In July 2015, the domestic animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* achieved success with a box office of 957 million yuan, becoming the then domestic animated film box office champion. This year is also known as the first year of domestic animated films. While gaining box office revenue, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* also became the most sincere domestic animation production of the year in the mouths of many audiences and film critics. This film, which took eight years to produce, is extraordinary not only because it is the first Chinese animated film with a box office of one billion yuan, but also because it has opened up a feasible path for the development of domestic animation: breaking away from infantilization and polishing stories for the general public.

Looking back at the domestic animation films in theaters over the past five years, their popularity is actually traceable. Domestic animation is constantly exploring a development path for animated films that conforms to China's cultural background and audience aesthetic needs. Judging from the story background of excellent domestic animation works in recent years, it has grasped its own innate advantage—Chinese traditional culture.

The advantage of material selection is the magic weapon for domestic animation to distinguish itself from overseas animation and to take a Chinese path. The 5,000-year history of civilization provides a rich resource library for domestic animation creation, and every folk legend and mythological story is worth digging deep. Since its inception, Chinese animation has had a tradition of drawing materials from mythological legends and classical literary works. China's first animated feature film *The Princess of Iron Fan* was taken from the classic literary masterpiece *Journey to the West*. The audience is familiar with *Big Fish & Begonia*, whose story idea

originated from *Zhuangzi: Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease*, and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* was taken from the folk mythological story *The Investiture of the Gods*. The stories and spiritual core of these films fully reflect the advantages and characteristics of Chinese traditional culture. Domestic animation works adapted based on traditional stories are naturally more likely to be close to audiences in terms of content. Nowadays, various types of films are blooming everywhere, and the tastes of moviegoers are becoming more diverse, but Chinese traditional cultural stories can be suitable for all ages and have a wide population base, laying a rich content foundation for the success of domestic animation.

Of course, there are still shortcomings in domestic animation in terms of production level, talent training, capital support, copyright protection, etc., lacking a complete and high-quality industrial chain, making it difficult to form scale effects and brand effects. Domestic animation needs to strengthen the construction and coordination of industrial chains to improve production standards and market competitiveness.

Brief Description of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*

Yao-Chinese Folktales is an original online animated short film collection co-produced by Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio and Bilibili. It consists of eight independent stories rooted in Chinese traditional culture, including "Nobody"; "Goose Mountain"; "She Wolf"; "Fool and God"; "Ship Down the Well"; "Null Island"; "Old Man Yang" and "Fly Me to the Earth". These stories span the past and present, and look to the future, from nostalgia for the countryside to technological fantasy, from the theme of life to humanistic thinking, showing Chinese imagination and carrying Chinese national culture and philosophy. Its stories are not only interesting, touching, and philosophical, but also have unique expressive thinking, narrative methods, and cultural background that can touch the hearts of the audience. Its graphics are also a highlight, using a variety of Chinese art techniques such as paper-cutting, ink painting, puppet stop-motion animation, to create different visual effects and atmosphere.

As a tribute to the 100th anniversary of the birth of Chinese animation, which inherits the charm of excellent national style works such as *The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven* and *The Legend of Sealed Book*, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has sparked discussions and reflections on Chinese traditional culture and Eastern philosophy among many audiences and media, demonstrating the innovation and influence of domestic animation. There is a phenomenon that *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has reaped super-high popularity as soon as it went online, causing a stir among young viewers. It has over 250 million Bilibili plays, over 5,559,000 followers, a Bilibili rating of 9.9, and a Douban rating of 8.8 (Guo et al., 2023, p. 1). It can be said that *Yao-Chinese Folktales* is a significant milestone in the strong rise of Chinese-style animation.

YAO-Chinese Folktales

Undoubtedly, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has gained both buzz and word-of-mouth. As one of the outstanding representatives of Chinese-style animation, what is the code of success for *Yao-Chinese Folktales*? In this part, we will analyze *Yao-Chinese Folktales* to find the answer.

Well-done Places

The advantage of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* lies in its extremely Chinese imagination and aesthetic charm, which can show the diversity and depth of Chinese traditional culture, as well as the thinking and exploration of

reality and the future. It strives to explore the modern significance of the outstanding traditional Chinese cultural factors accumulated in myths and legends, folk stories, fables and wonders, display the charm and innovation of traditional Chinese culture, convey the longing and thinking of modern life and modern civilization, and reflect the cultural confidence and value pursuit of domestic animation.

On one hand, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has taken advantage of Chinese traditional culture, including classic traditional memories, typical Chinese symbols, and strong national values and beliefs. For example, *Nobody* is based on *Journey to the West*, a classic work that has accompanied generations of Chinese people. People are familiar with its characters, backgrounds, plots and so on. Therefore, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* can quickly get close to the audience. What's more, there are a lot of Chinese elements in the animation, such as ink and wash, paper cutting, traditional costumes and so on, which add special charm to *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. In addition, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* perfectly embodies the Chinese aesthetic. For example, *Ship Down the Well* extensively uses red and gold, Chinese typical colors, in the screen design, giving the animation a strong Chinese style. Furthermore, the ideological core of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* is also highly consistent with Chinese traditional culture. For example, *She Wolf* tells us that man and nature should live in harmony, which is fundamentally consistent with the ancient Chinese idea of "uniting human and universe." Across the long river of history, Chinese traditional thoughts still shine today.

On the other hand, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has been well connected with modern society. Firstly, it reflects modern life. *Nobody* portrays the confusion and dilemma of small people working in the workplace; *Goose Mountain* is a metaphor for human nature and desires, projecting the emotional experience of modern people; *She Wolf* recounts a brutal youthful story, which can evoke memories of many people's adolescent growing pains; *Fool and God* features numerous rural scenes that reproduce the collective memory of urban and rural change; *Old Man Yang* shows the hutong life of Beijing… Generally speaking, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* interprets traditional cultural themes with a kernel of contemporary values, triggering a strong resonance with the audience. Secondly, it utilizes modern technologies. Overall, it adopts the form of production and dissemination on streaming media platforms, bringing together multiple independent animated short films under a relatively loose theme, constructing an "animated short film universe", which is a rare attempt in domestic animation and provides new possibilities for the production and broadcasting model of domestic animation. Partially, every animated episode utilizes a unique method of presentation. We can see *Nobody* and *Goose Mountain* full of the landscape painting scene, *She Wolf* express 3D animation with Chinese ethereal landscape style, *Old Man Yang* and *Null Island* in three-touches, the paper-cutting animation *Ship Down the Well* combine the purely handmade work and modern filming and lighting technology, and the stop-motion animation *Fly Me to the Earth*. Generally speaking, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has not only traditional 2D, paper-cut, and even stop-motion animation, but also CG and three-touch modern technology (Xie, 2023, p. 1). With the support of modern technologies, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has given the audience a visual feast.

Areas for Improvement

Regarding areas where *Yao-Chinese Folktales* can be improved, some character depictions are slightly thin in some stories, some plots are highly jumping in some stories, and some ideas are too abstract in some stories. Frankly speaking, it is difficult for many people to understand the theme of the animation, which limits the

audience of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* to some degree. Therefore, when creating content and themes for domestic animation, more attention needs to be paid to the individualization of characters, the logicality and coherence of stories, and the depth and clarity of ideas. Chinese-style animation should attempt to be appreciated by both highbrows and lowbrows, both the young and the old. In terms of dissemination and interaction, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* may need to consider copyright protection and authorization management, brand building and market development, international exchange and cooperation.

In brief, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has set a good example for the development of Chinese-style animation. We should learn from its well-done places and focus on its areas for improvement, to find the development path of Chinese-style animation's future.

The Development Path of Chinese-style Animation's Future

As we have mentioned above, there are some laudable aspects of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* and some other Chinese-style animations although there is still room for improvement. In this part, we will focus on these advantages and disadvantages to generate some practical and feasible ways on how to make a high quality animation and how to make an excellent animation popular.

Inheritance and Innovation

In previous sections, we have learned that *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has taken advantage of Chinese traditional culture while it has been well connected with modern society, which is nicely demonstrated in some splendid examples, including *Nobody, She Wolf, Goose Mountain* and many other episodes. There is no doubt that *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has done a good job of this. It tells us that when making high quality Chinese-style animations and spreading fine Chinese traditional culture, we should put inheritance and innovation of Chinese traditional culture in the first place. In this process, inheritance and innovation are recognized as an organic whole, which are closely correlated and supplement each other. On one hand, inheritance acts as the basics and foundation of innovation. Without inheriting traditional Chinese culture, innovation will be like water without a source and a tree without roots. On the other hand, innovation plays a key role in inheritance. Without innovation, culture that we inherit will be like an ancient people who have migrated to the modern society only to find it is hard to adapt and to be accepted. As a result, it is inheriting and innovating traditional Chinese culture at the same time that plays the most important role in developing Chinese-style animations and spreading fine traditional Chinese culture. To inherit and innovate fine Chinese traditional culture better, here are some simple ways. Firstly, reading widely can be a good method in inheritance. Since many familiar materials have already been used, exploring Chinese traditional culture more widely will be helpful for directors to find novel material that has the potential to attract audience. For example, there are many new types of Chinese folk tales in the *Yao-Chinese Folktales* that people are not very familiar with, such as Mystery folk tales. Additionally, the animation *Non-Human* shows us that we should consider creating relationship between modern items and traditional items when innovating. In this animation, the author creatively connects the magic weapons of the famous traditional character named Nezha with common things in modern life. For instance, the Wind Fire Wheels are associated with the skateboard, while the Mixed Day Aya is transformed into the red scarf on Nezha's chest. Such a relationship helps the audience associate modern items and traditional items together and understand the animation better. What's more, innovation of technology is also an important

approach in innovation. *Yao-Chinese Folktales* tries many technologies in only eight episodes, involving traditional 2D animation, paper cutting and watercolor painting, and new CG short films and 3D rendering. Similarly, the animated movie—*Deep Sea*, which was released during the Spring Festival 2023, is also a remarkable example of technology innovation. Based on the concept of Chinese brush painting, it used the technology of Particle Ink for the first time which turned the video of split paint into that of sea, showing the fascinating sea that we have never seen before. It can be said that this technology is a significant innovation of fine Chinese traditional culture, giving a new birth of Chinese brush painting in the high-tech era.

Reference and Interchange

In addition to inheritance and innovation, reference and interchange are also important methods. There is an old Chinese saying that when three are walking together, I am sure to find teachers among them; I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them. This means that we need to be modest and always ready to learn from others. As to making a successful animation series, it is also important to refer to animations that are already successful and extract key factors that contribute to success. Then, we should learn the key factors and try to use them creatively. What's more, it is also worthwhile to figure out if there are some drawbacks that may prevent an animation from becoming more famous. Avoiding them, if possible, is always a good policy. In addition, if there are chances, it would be best to contact or cooperate with some experienced animation companies, such as Pixar Animation Studio, DreamWorks Animation, Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which will be of great help. It can be said that the *Yao-Chinese Folktales*' success cannot be separated from the support of Shanghai Animation Film Studio. In an interview of Liaoyu Chen, the chief director of *Yao-Chinese Folktales,* he mentioned that in the process of making *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, they have received many suggestions and directions from some masters of Shanghai Animation Film Studio. These masters made suggestions for details of even one shot which were always enlightening. It is obvious that *Yao-Chinese Folktales*' production team learned a great deal from masters of Shanghai Animation Film Studio through communication. They learned not only how to make impressive animations, but also how to innovate traditional elements and retain their national characteristics at the same time. As a result, it is important to learn from famous companies. Since these companies have a lot of accomplishments, their directors and staff usually have many tricks of designing culture related characters and plots and making them popular all over the world.

Improving Industrial Chain

To develop Chinese-style animations and spread Chinese traditional culture, a complete industrial chain of animation needs to be built. As mentioned before, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* also need to pay more attention to brand building and market development. In our daily lives, there is a phenomenon that when people are asked to name a well-known animation or character, the answer is very to be Spirited Away, Zootopia, and many Disney princesses. However, there are also many impressive Chinese-style animations and characters. Why did these animations and characters not impress us as deeply as those world famous ones? It may be because of the lack of a complete industrial animation chain. Let us take *Pokémon*, a role-playing game produced by Nintendo in 1996, as an example. After this game caught on rapidly for its unique playing style, Nintendo took advantage of the popularity and released manga, novel, anime, film and many other peripheral products based on *Pokémon*. This series of measures quickly spread *Pokémon* to every aspect of people's life, making characters of

Pokémon famous all over the world and grabbing the market share. Although *Pokémon* is a game, not an animation, the great success of *Pokémon* series made by Nintendo teaches a good lesson. When *Yao-Chinese Folktales* catches public's attention, it is beneficial for the production group to grab the opportunity to release related works such as comics, novels, games and peripheral products like key ring and doll. Additionally, it is also helpful to cooperate with the catering industry and use advertising in public places to increase exposure to public. Through these efforts, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* which has already caught public's attention may become more and more popular, leading more and more people to be willing to watch the animation and buy the peripheral products which may in return provide money for a series of animation.

Making Use of the Internet

Yao-Chinese Folktales needs improvement in this aspect too. The Internet is a significant kind of media in modern society. According to *The 51st Statistical Report on China's Internet Development* released by China Internet Network Information Center, "As of December 2022, China had 1,067 million netizens, up 35.49 million over December 2021, and its Internet penetration had reached 75.6%, up 2.6 percentage points over December 2021" (Yan, 2023, p. 1) and "As of December 2022, the user size of online shopping in China was 845 million, up 3.19 million from December 2021, taking up 79.2% of all Internet users" (Yan, 2023, p. 1). There are many other data related with the Internet which all show that the Internet is a splendid way to gain public attention. As a result, film distributors are advocated to advertise on the Internet, do secondary creation by themselves, encourage bloggers to innovate according to the animation and try some other ways to spread their animations on the Internet. As for *Yao-Chinese Folktales*, the owner of the intellectual property of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* can make the animation more popular and have more commercial value through the Internet by secondary creation and advertisement. Since the Internet has a huge number of users with strong purchasing power, spreading animation on the Internet is likely to spread an excellent animation to people who like it and also are willing to pay for it.

Above are the four ways that may be helpful in Chinese-style animation development. Inheritance and innovation and reference and interchange aim at how to make a high quality animation, while improving the industrial chain and making use of the Internet aim at how to make an excellent animation catch up. We hope these ideas will be of some help to the current Chinese animation market.

Conclusion

Over the past one hundred years, Chinese animation, from scratch, from short to long, from black-and-white to color, from silent to sound, from two-dimensional hand-drawn to digital design, has always told Chinese stories and disseminated Chinese culture. Standing at the historical point of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Chinese animation, the success of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* points out the direction for the further development of Chinese-style animation. We should inherit the tradition and push forward the innovation in creation; deepen inward and widen outward in dissemination. Although faced with difficulties, Chinese-style animation still has a lot of prospects.

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