

CULTURAL-IDENTITY AND EMOTIONAL-RESONANCE: THE IMPLICIT INFLUENCE OF CHINESE ANIMATED FILMS ON ADOLESCENT VALUES

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Abstract. Chinese animation has increasingly become a vital medium for transmitting cultural values and shaping young people's identification with Chinese culture. This study examines representative domestic animated films, including *Nezha*, *Big Fish and Begonia*, and *White Snake*, to explore how they influence youth values through cultural identity and emotional resonance. Conceptually, the research is designed around the integration of traditional cultural elements with contemporary narrative strategies, emphasizing how cultural symbols and storytelling techniques shape audience perception. Methodologically, the study adopts Roland Barthes' five-code analytical framework, analysing narrative, action, culture, symbol, and language. Findings reveal that domestic animation effectively stimulates cultural identity among young audiences by embedding traditional cultural elements within modern storytelling, while transmitting values such as freedom, responsibility, and courage. Through nuanced emotional expression and complex character design, these works encourage reflection on human diversity and foster critical thinking. Moreover, visual symbols and symbolic coding reinforce both cultural identity and emotional resonance, positioning Chinese animation as an influential cultural carrier. This study contributes to theoretical discussions on the interplay of semiotics, narrative, and cultural identity, while offering practical insights for culturally rooted creative industries and strategies for global dissemination.

Keywords: *Chinese animated films, traditional colour, cultural identity, adolescent values, emotional resonance*

Introduction

With the rapid development of Chinese animation, Chinese animation has gradually developed from localized cultural expression to internationalization, playing an increasingly important role in cultural communication. The "Havoc in Heaven" in the 1960s formed a unique national art style (Li, 2024). After the 1980s, Japanese and American animations had a huge impact on the Chinese animation industry and also forced the Chinese animation industry to transform into a market-oriented one. In recent years, the success of domestic animated films represented by works such as "Nezha", "White Snake", and "Monkey King: Hero Is Back" in the global market has marked that Chinese animation has become an important carrier of cultural communication. Adolescence is a critical stage for the formation of values. As a cultural product deeply loved by young people, animation has unique advantages in conveying values. With the acceleration of social informatization and the increase in cultural diversity, as well as the increasingly diversified channels for young people to obtain information and accept culture, young people are able to be exposed to more diverse values, but they are also faced with the confusion of value choices. In this context, the values conveyed by animation works are more easily accepted by young people. As an important carrier of

cultural communication, animation has a subtle influence on the psychology and behaviour of young people due to its intuitive, vivid and easy-to-understand characteristics. In the context of globalization, domestic animation integrates traditional cultural elements, such as myths and legends, folk tales, and traditional art, so that young people can be subtly influenced by national culture while watching animation, and at the same time enhance their sense of identity with Chinese culture.

Literature review

This study focuses on the impact of Chinese animation works on the values of young people. In order to further clarify the research objectives and significance, the literature review in this chapter will focus on the development of Chinese animation cultural identity, emotional resonance, animation aesthetics and cultural communication, and the impact of domestic animation on the values of young people. The construction of cultural identity in animated films. Cultural identity is an important part of national identity. It creates a sense of belonging in individuals through the shaping of cultural symbols, values and collective memory. It was pointed out in “The Exploration of the Nationalization of Chinese Animated Films” that animated films represented by “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” and “Nezha” have successfully aroused young people’s interest in and recognition of traditional culture through modern adaptations of classic mythological stories. As an animated film with national cultural characteristics, “Nezha” has demonstrated the unique charm of Chinese traditional culture in plot design, character creation and value communication (Wang, 2021). On the basis of adapting traditional stories, the film gives the characters a new growth path, allowing the audience to strengthen their cultural identity in the process of emotional resonance (Pan, 2019). “Big Fish and Begonia” constructs national cultural identity through Chinese philosophical thought. The film takes the image of Kunpeng in Zhuangzi: Happy Journey as its core, integrating themes such as freedom, responsibility and fate into visual spectacles, allowing the audience to subtly accept the values of Chinese philosophy during the viewing process (Wang, 2017). The film explores the philosophical proposition of reincarnation and individual choice through the emotional entanglement between Chun, Qiu and Kun (Li, 2016). In addition, a large number of traditional Chinese elements in the film, such as Hakka earth buildings, terraced fields, and landscape painting-style scene designs, all strengthen the audience’s sense of national belonging at the visual level (Jiang, 2018).

Emotional resonance and value transmission. Animated films strengthen the audience’s identification with specific values through emotional resonance. “Nezha” shows the spirit of resistance of young people in contemporary society when facing prejudice and fate challenges through the friendship between Nezha and Ao Bing, the emotional conflict between parents and children, and the growth theme of “my life is in my own hands, not in the hands of God” (Wang, 2019). The shaping of this value system meets the growth needs of young people, allowing them to gain spiritual inspiration during the viewing process (Chen, 2022). Jiang Liuer in “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” symbolizes the growth process of young people. He learns to be brave in his journey with Sun Wukong and finally realizes his self-worth. This growth narrative can trigger young people’s self-identification and prompt them to think about their own growth path (Tan, 2022). “Big Fish and Begonia” uses an aesthetic narrative style, revolving around “reincarnation” and “self-sacrifice”, allowing the audience to accept the ethical concepts in Chinese culture while experiencing emotion (Hu, 2017). Through

the fate entanglement of the three characters Chun, Qiu, and Kun, the film explores the contradiction between the individual and the collective, freedom and responsibility, allowing the audience to be influenced by values while thinking about the plot (Liu, 2018). Although Sun Wukong in “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” experienced a low point, he eventually found his original intention under the influence of Jiang Liuer, showing the return of the heroic spirit. This narrative style not only conforms to the traditional heroic narrative structure, but also fits the modern society's value of giving equal weight to personal struggle and collective responsibility (Hu, 2019). Animation aesthetics and cultural communication. Domestic animated films draw heavily on traditional Chinese aesthetics in visual expression and combine modern animation technology to create an image style with Chinese characteristics. Nezha enhances the national characteristics of visual narrative through elements such as ink painting-style scene design and calligraphy-inspired combat special effects (Wang, 2021). The film uses dynamic shots and oriental imagery to enhance the visual impact while conforming to the aesthetic habits of modern audiences (Chen, 2020).

The aesthetic pursuit of “Big Fish and Begonia” reflects the “artistic beauty” of traditional ink painting. The film uses blank space, interlaced light and shadow, etc. to construct a surreal oriental mythological world (Zhao, 2017). In addition, the film incorporates Chinese classical music elements in the soundtrack, allowing the audience to feel the unique charm of Chinese culture in the audio-visual experience (Fu, 2016). The martial arts design, music and visual style of “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” all show a strong oriental charm, enhancing the audience’s sense of national pride (Zhao, 2015). The impact of domestic animation on young people’s values. Domestic animated films have enhanced young people’s cultural confidence through creative expression of traditional culture. The success of “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” has enabled domestic animated films to get rid of the stereotype of “infancy” and proved that Chinese stories can also attract young audiences (Zhou, 2016). “Nezha” uses modern story expression to give new vitality to traditional heroic stories and further enhance young people’s identification with local culture (Du, 2022). Domestic animated films use plot settings to subtly instil positive values in young people while watching them. For example, “Big Fish and Begonia” encourages individuals to follow their hearts, stick to their beliefs, and devote themselves to their loved ones even in the face of great difficulties (Li, 2016). “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” emphasizes the importance of loyalty, courage, and self-salvation, conveying a positive outlook on life to young people (Zhao, 2015).

To guide critical thinking, domestic animated films place more emphasis on character growth and reflection when creating complex characters. The character creation of Nezha and Ao Bing in Nezha breaks the traditional binary opposition between good and evil, allowing young people to think about the complexity and diversity of human nature while watching, thereby promoting the cultivation of critical thinking (Du, 2022). At present, research focuses more on the construction of Chinese animation aesthetics. However, there is still a lack of research on how animation specifically affects teenagers’ moral values, social responsibility, and interpersonal relationships from the perspective of cultural identity and emotional resonance. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on teenagers’ values from the perspective of cultural identity and emotional resonance and elevate it to a theoretical level. Through this research, we can not only deepen our understanding of the impact of Chinese animation on teenagers' values but also provide important theoretical support for the research of contemporary Chinese animation.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts qualitative research methods, mainly using observation and comparison methods for analysis. The researchers selected the following two types of works for comparative analysis and presented the research results in the form of charts: Based on the five key codes proposed by Roland Barthes in “S/Z”, this study explores how domestic animation affects the values of young people through cultural identity and emotional resonance based on this theoretical framework, and analyses its narrative mode, cultural symbols and value shaping mechanism. Using the five-step analysis method, the works are compared from five aspects: narrative code (Hermeneutic Code), action code (Proairetic Code), cultural code (Cultural Code), symbolic code (Symbolic Code) and semantic code (Semantic Code). The specific steps are as follows: Description: Briefly introduce the basic information of the work and describe the theme expressed in the picture. Analysis: Analyse the characteristics of the animation from a certain perspective, such as techniques or colour application. Explanation: Explore the reasons for the emergence of this feature and analyse it in combination with the artistic background. Evaluation: Based on the above information, compare the similarities and differences between the two types of works, and summarize and evaluate them. Through the above methods, this study aims to reveal the cultural identity and emotional resonance of Chinese animation, and to explore in depth the subtle influence of Chinese animation on the values of young people.

Results and Discussion

Sample 1: Narrative coding

This picture is from the Chinese animated film “Nezha” (2019), showing Nezha lying lazily. Nezha has a tired expression, holding a grass in his mouth, wearing red pants with flame patterns and traditional Chinese-style clothes, with antique Chinese buildings and trees in the background (*Figure 1*). This scene constructs the suspense and character of the narrative through the design of the character's actions and expressions: Nezha lies lazily, which contrasts with the image of the traditional “mythical hero”. The picture uses bright and warm tones to form a harmonious atmosphere with the ancient style scene. In terms of character design, the contrast between the flame pattern and the dark colour of the eye socket strengthens the rebellious temperament of Nezha, the “demon boy”. The camera angle uses a bird’s-eye view to further highlight Nezha's casualness and rebellious spirit. The emergence of this feature stems from the creator’s subversive reconstruction of the traditional image. In the original myth, Nezha is a typical representative of the “young hero”, and the movie reshapes his image into a rebellious and real boy, which is close to the emotional needs of modern audiences. The use of the element of fire not only echoes Nezha’s dual identity of “spiritual pearl and magic pill” but also symbolizes his inner strength to fight against fate. The overall colour of the picture is soft, and the ancient background adds to the cultural heaviness of the story, making the audience feel both novel and recognizable to traditional culture. Compared with traditional animation works (such as 1979’s *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*), Nezha pays more attention to the three-dimensional character creation and emotional expression. It builds suspense through the contrast in actions and expressions, which make the audience, look forward to and resonate with the character's growth process. This narrative and design technique successfully fits the contemporary

teenagers' pursuit of individuality and realism, and also reflects the further deepening of the narrative level of modern animation.



Figure 1. *Ne Zha.*

Sample 2: Action coding

This picture is from the Chinese animated film “Big Fish and Begonia”, showing the heroine Chun standing by the railing of a traditional Hakka earth building and gently raising her hand. The background is mainly traditional Chinese buildings, dotted with red lanterns, creating a warm but slightly mysterious atmosphere. The overall tone of the picture is soft, and the green sky and the orange-red lanterns form a contrast between cold and warm, suggesting the subtle emotional changes in the development of the plot (*Figure 2*). The action and background elements in the picture work together to promote the narrative and foreshadow the plot that is about to unfold. Character action: Chun gently raises her hand, which has both a delicate sense of pause and is full of emotional hints, showing the character’s contradictory mentality or key decisions in the plot. Background and props: Hakka earthen buildings symbolize closure and tradition, while lanterns are a symbol of hope and humanity. Combined with the atmosphere of the picture, it implies Chun’s inner struggle and desire for freedom. This feature stems from the film’s need for delicate portrayal of the inner world of the characters and plot transitions. As a film with philosophical connotations and national cultural expression, “Big Fish and Begonia” expresses the emotions of the characters through delicate movements and scene designs. Chun’s hand-raising action may imply her determination or inner struggle, and combined with the closed feeling of the background, it reflects her inner motivation to break through the limitations of the environment and pursue herself. “Big Fish and Begonia” prefers to promote the narrative through delicate emotional movements and scene atmosphere rather than relying on strong movements or conflicts. Chun’s movements are more restrained, emphasizing the inner emotional transitions and character growth. This low-key form of expression allows the audience to appreciate the delicate changes in the character's emotions in the details, while also highlighting the film's pursuit of cultural artistic conception and philosophical thinking.



Figure 2. *Big Fish and Begonia.*

Sample 3: Cultural coding

This picture is from the Chinese animated film “White Snake”, showing a close-up image of the heroine Bai Suzhen. The picture depicts Bai Suzhen’s delicate face in a close-up, with the background of traditional Chinese landscape, including towers in the distance, hazy mountains and forests, and dotted peach blossoms. The character’s makeup is elegant, the accessories are exquisite, and it exudes a strong oriental charm (*Figure 3*). The painting makes full use of traditional Chinese aesthetic elements to convey specific cultural symbols and symbolic meanings. Background elements: The tower in the distance symbolizes traditional Chinese architectural culture, and its design conforms to the ancient Chinese philosophical concept of “harmony between man and nature”. Colour application: Soft green and pink are the main tones, creating a tranquil and dreamy atmosphere, while strengthening the sense of transcendence of Bai Suzhen as a “mythical character”. Character design: Bai Suzhen’s clothing, headdress and makeup have obvious traditional Chinese style. The design of the golden chain in the headdress not only enhances the visual layering but also highlights the aristocratic temperament of the character. “White Snake” is adapted from a classic Chinese folk legend. It integrates traditional culture into character creation and scene design through visual language to enhance the audience’s cultural identity. The landscape in the background echoes the ancient Chinese literati’s reverence for nature, which is in line with the artistic philosophy of “learning from nature outside and finding the source of the heart inside” in traditional culture. The image of Bai Suzhen shows the beauty and charm of traditional women through rich oriental elements, and also enhances the cultural sense of this role. “White Snake” pays more attention to the integration of delicate female image creation and traditional culture, and expresses the tranquillity and elegance of oriental aesthetics through soft painting style and delicate background. The picture evokes the audience’s recognition of Chinese traditional culture with strong cultural symbols, and conveys the unique charm of oriental aesthetics through exquisite picture language. This cultural expression not only gives the film a distinct national characteristic but also provides the audience with a deeper cultural experience.



Figure 3. *White Snake.*

Sample 4: Symbolic coding

This picture is from the Chinese animated film “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” (2015), showing the image of Sun Wukong at the moment of his outburst. In the picture, Sun Wukong has a ferocious face and red eyes. The flames and the light of the golden hoop are intertwined, and his armour reflects a cold luster. The background uses deep blue and black to create a mysterious and oppressive atmosphere. This picture symbolizes the awakening and release of power of the character under the challenge of strong emotions or fate (*Figure 4*). The picture constructs a strong symbolic meaning through colour, light and shadow, and character movements. Use of colour: Sun Wukong’s eyes are red and his hair is burning red, symbolizing anger, power, and overwhelming fighting spirit. The dark blue and black of the background are in sharp contrast, enhancing the visual impact of the flames and conveying the strong confrontation between the character and the environment. Light and shadow expression: The flame of the golden hoop in the picture emits a dazzling light, symbolizing the hero’s strength and indomitable spirit, and also metaphorically the moment when Sun Wukong regains his dignity and mission. Action design: Sun Wukong’s movements holding the golden hoop are powerful, conveying the character’s inner indomitable spirit and determination, and also symbolizing the theme of resisting fate. This feature is due to the film’s re-imagining of the traditional image of Sun Wukong. The original mythological image of Sun Wukong is a playful, witty hero, but “Monkey King: Hero is Back” gives him more emotional depth and human expression. His anger and awakening are conveyed through visual symbols (such as red flames and red eyes) to convey his inner struggle and transformation. The symbolic meaning of “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” is more focused on the emotional outburst and power awakening of the characters. Both use flames, red and contrasting colours to express the emotions and conflicts of the characters, but Nezha’s image tends to be rebellious and self-redemption of a young boy, while Sun Wukong’s image is more inclined to the awakening and fighting spirit of a hero. From the perspective of symbolic coding, the work uses visual symbols to express the inner world and value formation of the characters, strengthens cultural identity and emotional resonance, and shows the modern expression of Chinese traditional culture by domestic animation.



Figure 4. *Monkey King: Hero is back.*

Sample 5: Code encoding

This picture shows a traditional Chinese lion dance. The bright red hair and decorative mask on the lion's head dominate the picture, and the surrounding area is shrouded in mottled light and shadow. The background is a dilapidated building, and the sun shines through the broken roof, forming multiple beams of light. The picture highlights the dynamics of the lion's head and the mysteriousness of the environment. The theme focuses on the vitality and spirituality of the lion dance culture (*Figure 5*). This picture conveys the deep meaning of lion dance culture through symbolic visual elements and light and shadow effects: Symbolic elements: The head of the lion dance is mainly decorated with complex and bright red, which represents the auspicious and evil-repelling symbols in traditional Chinese culture. The lion's expression is full of power, conveying the metaphor of protection and strength. Light and shadow effects: the light beams formed by the sunlight through the gaps in the building enhance the drama of the picture. Colour application: The bright red lion head forms a strong contrast with the cold background, highlighting the core position of the lion dance in the picture, while implying the strong vitality of culture. Lion dance is an important part of traditional Chinese festivals, symbolizing auspiciousness and vitality. Its visual symbols are often related to Chinese people's beliefs and values. Red not only symbolizes good luck, but also coincides with the function of lion dance in exorcising evil spirits and praying for blessings. The use of light and shadow metaphorically represents the struggle and revival of traditional culture in a modern environment - despite the dilapidated environment, the symbol of lion dance still exudes strong vitality. "I Am What I Am" pays more attention to the direct expression of symbolism and symbolism, emphasizing the power and ritual of cultural heritage rather than the delicate narrative portrayal. Through sharp contrast and dynamic design, it successfully strengthens the significance of lion dance as a symbol of Chinese traditional culture. Through symbolism and light and shadow design, it conveys the vitality and profound significance of traditional culture. The dramatic expression method not only makes the picture full of impact, but also allows the audience to perceive the charm and value of Chinese traditional culture more deeply.



Figure 5. *I Am What I Am.*

In short, domestic animation has gradually become an important carrier of cultural communication and value transmission in the context of globalization. Through the clever use of cultural symbols and the innovation of narrative techniques, Chinese traditional culture is vividly presented in a visual way. Among them, “White Snake” uses landscape, peach blossoms and traditional costumes to show the soft oriental aesthetics, and “Big Fish and Begonia” expresses the philosophical thinking of Chinese culture through Hakka earth buildings and Zhuangzi’s philosophy. The reinterpretation of lion dance culture in the modern context of “I Am What I Am” not only conveys the ritual sense of traditional culture but also highlights the strong vitality of national culture. At the same time, these works create complex and vivid characters and convey profound values through the combination of narrative and symbolic coding. In “Nezha”, Nezha shows the spirit of struggle of “my life is determined by me, not by God” through rebellion and growth, inspiring young people to bravely face prejudice and fate. The awakening story of Sun Wukong in “Monkey King: Hero Is Back” evokes the audience's thinking about responsibility and resistance.

Conclusion

Domestic animations have successfully aroused young people’s sense of identity with local culture by integrating traditional cultural elements and modern narrative techniques. These animations not only explore core values such as freedom, responsibility, and courage in their narratives, but also trigger emotional resonance among young people through delicate emotional portrayals and character growth. In the process of watching movies, young people gradually internalize the values conveyed by the movies, and enhance their sense of cultural identity and cultural confidence. At the same time, domestic animations have strengthened cultural identity and emotional expression through visual symbols and symbolic codes, showing unique artistic expression and cultural charm. At the same time, these animations have broken the traditional narrative mode of binary opposition between good and evil, and by creating complex and three-dimensional character images, they have guided young people to think about the diversity and complexity of human nature and cultivate critical thinking. This narrative mode not only meets the aesthetic needs of modern audiences, but also further deepens the ideological connotation of the film. In addition, domestic animation should continue to explore the excellent traditional Chinese culture, broaden narrative themes, strengthen the multi-dimensional character creation and the integration of multiple cultures, so that young people can have a strong resonance when watching the

film and internalize the values conveyed by the film, strengthen cooperation with international platforms to enhance the global influence of domestic animation, and enable more overseas audiences to come into contact with and identify with the charm and value of Chinese culture.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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