

Research on Chinese-Made High-Concept Animated Films Since 2015—Taking *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *Deep Sea* as Examples

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Abstract

Derived from the Chinese traditional work *Journey to the West*, as a milestone of Chinese 3D animation from serials to movies, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* is known as the beginning of high-concept animated films because of its eight years of production, huge investment and well-designed martial arts animation. This article will review the historical process of Chinese high concept animated films since 2015, and explore the current status and prospects of Chinese high concept animated films through three works with contemporary significance: *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Nezha* and *Deep Sea*.

Keywords: high concept film, Chinese animation, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Nezha*, *Deep Sea*, 3D animation

1. Introduction

In the long history of Chinese film development, *Hero* brought the Chinese film market into the era of commercial films in 2002. Since then, there have been many high box office commercial films that have been both popular and popular, such as *The Flowers of War* and *Monster Hunt*, all of which are related to high concept. Although Chinese animated films have slightly lagged behind the development of live action films, since the development of animated films, especially three-dimensional animated films, they have continuously formed good relationships with high concepts with the advent of science and technology and the Internet era. From the embryonic anime series film *The*

Legend of Qin to the 2015 director Tian Xiaopeng's *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (hereinafter referred to as *Hero Is Back*), it became the beginning of the emergence of high concept anime films. Films such as *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (hereinafter referred to as *Demon Child*) and *Deep Sea* also emerged one after another. As a high concept animated film, there are similarities as well as differences in the theme and story, technology and visuals, promotion and marketing during the market operation process from text conversion to image projection. The following will conduct an in-depth analysis of the history, analysis, current situation, and prospects of Chinese high concept animated films.

The so-called high concept is a composite pattern emerging under the spread of American culture. American film critic and film historian Charlie Hickel once pointed out that the “high” of the high concept refers to the distinctive, simple and prominent characteristics of the film, which is not only easy to identify, but also easy to spread, not the profound characteristics of the film. Michael Dammann Eisner, who serves as Disney’s chairman and CEO, also proposed that “high concept” has a unique production concept that is original and can be simplified. High concept films inherit this creative characteristic and production philosophy. In their production mode, the entire process of a film from the birth of creative concepts, to filming and post production, to distribution, screening, and market operation is called a commercial project, rather than just a film production. Unlike traditional film genres, this unique commercial film model has the characteristics of being directed by a renowned director in terms of creativity, balancing program effects with grand scenes, having traditional routines but not lacking novel plots, high production costs and brand effect, golden schedule, and award-winning reputation.

Since the commercial film *Hero* directed by Zhang Yimou in 2002, Chinese high concept films have been continuously appearing in the market. From 2015 to 2016, the top ten box office imported films were almost high concept films or related to high concept films, with most of the top ten box office films in China, such as *Monster Hunt*. In terms of Chinese animation, in 2014, the Chinese animation film *The Legend of Qin* was released, which tells the story of a young man named Tianming and Shaoyu encountering an exotic girl named Xiaoli and participating in a war to capture the ancient dragon soul. The film is based on the IP prototype of the Chinese martial arts series *The Legend of Qin*, and the production team, Xuanji Technology, has accumulated experience in practice and creation over the years, bold exploration and innovation, using a dual camera approach, the production process of modeling, animation, special effects, and rendering has brought the level, depth, and depth of the image to cinema level, representing the highest technology in Chinese animated films at that time. It also won the Best Historical Animated Film Award at the 12th Canadian International Film Festival. Although this film is based on a national IP, due to issues with the

plot and audience, the response after its release was mediocre, which has connected high concept films with Chinese animated films.

In 2015, director Tian Xiaopeng directed *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, which tells the story of Sun Wukong the Great Sage, who is rescued by a small monk by chance and adventures together to find himself. The film combines old stories with new storytelling techniques, and incorporates 3D technology that is not outdated. It collaborates with multiple production teams to produce and bring the cute and handsome character of Sun Wukong to the big screen. While winning high box office and good reputation, it won the best art film of the 30th China Film Golden Rooster Award and the excellent feature film of the 16th China Film ornamental column Award. From then on, high concept and anime films became increasingly intertwined. In the same year, Chasing Light Animation debuted in 3D anime films and released *Little Door God*. In 2019, the 3D anime *Wind and rain spell* won a high box office and a gold medal for Best Art Film. However, it was also after 2015 that Chinese animated film creation, like *Hero Is Back*, relied on mythological legends, ancient masterpieces, and other creative sources in terms of theme selection; The character selection includes the familiar images of Wukong and Nezha; The use of magnificent, heavy, and grand scenes with a sense of wonder makes the situation slightly weak. Until the end of 2021, directed by Sun Haipeng, the realistic 3D animated film *I Am What I Am* with sports as the theme and elements such as Cantonese culture and lion awakening was released, becoming the dark horse of the year. The movie tells the story of a young Guangdong youth named Ajuan who dreams of lion dancing. With his dream and two friends, he creates a lion dance team and participates in a lion dance competition under the guidance and training of Xianyuqiang, who was once “the strongest lion king” in the town. Eventually, he transforms from being ridiculed as a weak person to becoming a “male lion” and creates miracles to realize his dream. The film has transformed from numerous mythological works to a regional color story environment full of Cantonese atmosphere, a youthful transformation based on realism, and a strong national lion awakening culture, leaving a new and significant mark in the Chinese animation industry. It meets the diverse needs of the

audience and provides a feasible new creative material selection and ideas for Chinese animation.

2. Analysis

It is not difficult to see from the development process of Chinese high concept animated films that the vast majority of those who have achieved high box office and good reputation are 3D animations. This is not only due to the high concept of large-scale production, large investment, large marketing, and the compatibility of high-tech characteristics with 3D animated films, but also influenced by the Chinese animation market and 3D production technology process.

By combining the 3D production process with the characteristics of high concept movies, taking *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, and *Deep Sea* as examples, the following analyzes Chinese high concept animated films.

2.1 Reconstruction of Theme and Story

High concept movies are usually produced using familiar stories as the background, and the coexistence of unfamiliar and familiar story patterns seems to be a template for success, making it easier to achieve both box office and word-of-mouth success. The 2019 release of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, as a shining Chinese animated film, grossed over 4 billion yuan in just one month, topping the domestic box office charts. Many works have the figure of Nezha, such as the 1979 film *Nezha was in trouble with the sea*. The success of the film cannot be separated from the public's memory of the story of Nezha. At the same time, Nezha, who has dark circles under his eyes, is bold in love and hate, and has a clear sense of love and hate. He controls his own life in his own hands, which contrasts with the image in the audience's memory. He inherits the ancient image and combines it with the times, breaking the audience's existing cognition, and has more expectations and viewing value. In terms of storyline, it tells the story of how in ancient times, the magic bead created by the Heavenly Master replaced Nezha, who was supposed to be a spirit bead, under the covert operation of the villains. The hero became a great demon king in the mixed world, but the mischievous Nezha was filled with justice in his heart. In the face of misunderstandings and natural disasters, he bravely fought, proved himself, and

ultimately realized his own value through a gamified narrative approach. Relying on the original mythological story and combining the image of Nezha in the film, the confrontation against it is created into a game like task. In the film, special effects or actions are used to enhance the difficulty and tension of the task, and the upgraded mode of fighting monsters allows the long-standing mythological story to grow and find oneself in the current era. Self recognition is combined with entertainment games loved by young people, and the theme and story are reconstructed, making the film full of a sense of coexistence of familiarity and unfamiliarity.



Figure 1. *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* stage photo

2.2 Superimposition of Technology and Picture

Most high concept movies tend to choose genres that are relatively large in audience and quantity, such as fantasy films, historical films, action films, etc., with strong drama, scene technology, super large scenes, and strong spectacle. For high concept animated films, the several steps of animation production include texture materials, characters, modeling, 3D rendering, generation, and animation, which together constitute the work of producing a complete movie. In the 2023 Spring Festival, *Deep Sea* was screened as the first Chinese 3D animation to be nominated at the Berlin Film Festival. The director combined the Chinese style "particle ink" 3D visual expression with a plot that is different from telling mythological stories. The experimental dreams and colors combined with the giant screen brought a new visual experience to the audience, and also made the international community see the uniqueness of Chinese animated films. The visual effect of the film is the most noteworthy, and its pioneering "particle ink animation" technology is a milestone for Chinese animation and even world

animation.

Taking into account the early stage of animation at the Shanghai Film Studio, experimental and artistic visual performance works such as *Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother* and *Feelings of Mountains and Waters* used countless three-dimensional particles to pile up the form and visual effects of ink, while integrating the characteristics of Mercury materials and pastel paintings, achieving a dual balance between technology and art in terms of edge softening, color halo, and balanced particle sense, and building and creating an Eastern aesthetic system. And “particle ink” has also become the technical tone of the film. Through the extension of this technology, the organization of camera language, and color matching, the colorful underwater world and fantastical spectacle scenes are presented to the audience time and time again with the collision between reality and dreams. In addition, the film also underwent a new twist on the details of the screen. The production team members modeled the protagonist’s skin with every pore clearly visible, and the expressions of micro expressions, as well as the optical reflection and refraction of water, were very close to the real world. It is not difficult to see that in 2014, *The Legend of Qin* presented an upward trend due to technological development, and in 2015, *Hero Is Back* ushered in a breakthrough and explosion in three-dimensional technology. The continuous pursuit of high output, such as *White Snake* and *Legend of Deification*, was the result of market development, the maturity of practitioners, and the accumulated technical experience of predecessors.

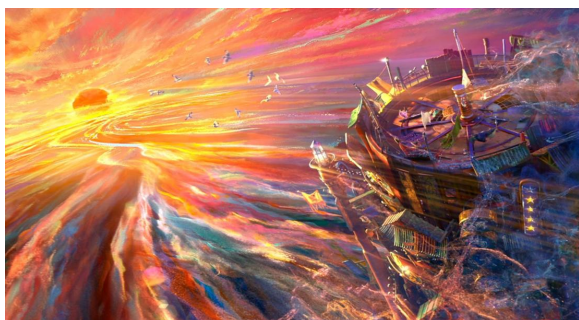


Figure 2. *Deep Sea* stage photo

2.3 Investment in Publicity and Marketing

Marketability is the core of high concept films. In the era of commercial films, the recognition of marketing and promotional images, sales of

related products, media and public evaluations, and the quantity and quality of reputation obtained are all closely related to the success of films. In addition, the arrival of the new media era has made platforms increasingly diverse, and the promotion and marketing of movies simpler. For example, current TV animations are keen on animating popular online articles, allowing previously accumulated high popularity IPs to reappear in front of audiences through audio-visual language encoding, gaining the attention of original book readers and animation party viewers.

In terms of animated films, *Hero Is Back*, which was released in the summer of 2015, received 956 million box office revenue solely due to topic marketing and word-of-mouth effects, without the involvement of renowned directors and actors who possess a high concept of real-life films. The film has a series of activities before and after its release, such as releasing various trailers to warm up, inviting famous singers to perform interludes, making an appearance at the Cannes Film Festival, collaborating with media such as Bilibili, and screening in the US market, with a short time interval, which keeps the film discussing and creating a sense of presence on various platforms. Collaborating with social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ, launching a large number of advertisements for promotion, and choosing to delay offline for one month when the market is popular and the audience is enthusiastic. This not only prolongs the lifespan of the topic discussion, but also allows the topic to further spread, allowing more viewers to participate. In addition, the character image and storyline of the film are highly familiar to the audience. The image and plot of the Sun WuKong are reasonably and moderately reconstructed, from distant mythological stories to seeking personal closeness to life behavior that resonates with young people. The production team also makes this ordinary Monkey King into various peripheral products, such as toys, umbrellas, T-shirts, etc., and encourages fans to make their own renderings and design drafts, create a good interactive relationship and a secondary creative atmosphere. This series of promotion and marketing achieved good results, resulting in the film ultimately earning a high box office of 956 million yuan.



Figure 3. *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* stage photo

3. Prospect

After the successful release of *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* in the decade-long trough of Chinese animation in 2015, this type of animated film story, character, and other models seemed to have become a way to win box office for a long time. Homogeneous high concept animated films emerged one after another, such as the *White Snake* series, *Legend of Deification*, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, and so on. Throughout the entire Chinese film market, the top ten box office films are mostly high concept films, indicating that high concept films are increasingly popular in the era of commercial films. The commercial linkage of animation itself is poor, and its potential has not yet been developed. Often, when a film is released, there is some linkage with other animation works, but once the promotion period and release period have passed, the industrial products also disappear, lacking the integration of the industry chain. Unlike live action movies, animated films do not have such a large investment intensity, without famous directors and celebrities participating, marketing topics, and relying solely on box office revenue is difficult to recoup or even continue with the next production. For example, animation director Tian Xiaopeng once stated that with the huge investment in *Deep Sea*, the opportunity for high box office profits to recoup is very small. Considering the subsequent commercial sales, the investors also hope that a movie will have stronger vitality. In addition to the box office revenue of the animation itself, it is best to drive the sales of surrounding products and even the gaming industry, becoming a sustainable development IP. Compared to the operating mode of Disney in the United States, Chinese animation companies such as Chasing Light, which are hot on the bare hands, produce well-known works such as *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* and the series of

movies such as *White Snake* at a rate of one to two each year, which have achieved good returns in the market. However, it is impossible to achieve transcendence development without making changes to the operation mode and industrial chain if the current creative state is still maintained.

For the outlet of Chinese high concept animated films, the creation of story text content remains the core. Only by telling a good story can we establish a foothold in the market. The wonderful stories passed down by China for thousands of years are endless, and they are an inexhaustible source of material for today's films. It should be integrated with contemporary culture, so as to maintain fresh vitality while not losing connotation. It can be seen that movies that achieve this, whether they are *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, or *White Snake* series, have all won a loyal audience and excellent box office at home and abroad. In addition, stories should not only be based on stories from the sky, blindly using mythological stories as creative texts. Realistic texts on the ground, such as the changes of the times, the long flow of history, and the lives of the people, should also be paid attention to by creators. The film *I Am What I Am* focuses on realistic themes such as left behind children, urban-rural disparities, and rural migrant workers, restoring classic cultural symbols and building a growth space environment for Guangdong boy Ajuan, and incorporating the elements of lion awakening culture into the struggle of young people, it expresses cultural confidence and promotes the national spirit. This provides a feasible creative material selection and approach for some of today's traditional elements that are simply copied or dressed in classical traditions.

For production technology, the vast majority of Chinese high concept animated films are 3D animations, and the most attractive aspect to the audience is the exquisite quality of the images, which is also the top priority in production. Reflecting daily humorous comedies, urban emotions, and other themes, it is not suitable to use three-dimensional animation forms for production. Due to the advantages of technology and visuals, science fiction and fantasy stories that require grand storytelling are the markets that should be focused on. Creating a Chinese style based on technology is an eternal theme. Disney's achievements are built on a Western cultural background, and

copying cannot succeed in a Chinese characteristic environment. Moreover, it is difficult to compete with Disney, which has been in operation for many years, in terms of technical talent reserves and commercial promotion. In addition, with the popularization of virtual interaction technology, AI, and blockchain technology, VR and AR applications are immersive in virtual reality. The continuous development of new technologies has made it increasingly difficult to achieve human-machine interaction, participation, and interactivity in interactive movies. This will add more interdisciplinary cooperation and imagination space to future animation content creation and implementation carriers, and more new creative forms and inspirations will continue to emerge.

Faced with the market and closely linked to new media, platforms, and industry chains, there are still many directions for the development of animation. For example, through multiple channels of communication, social software such as Weibo and WeChat have become indispensable platforms for people's communication and exchange. Animation videos can fully utilize social platforms in marketing communication, with functions such as forwarding, sharing, and social groups to further expand the marketing scope.

4. Conclusions

Starting from the 2015 film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, Chinese high concept animated films such as *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *Deep Sea* have always been associated with high concept in the reconstruction of the main body and story, the overlap of technology and visuals, and the investment in promotion and marketing, pushing Chinese animation forward continuously. The maturity of the market and industry, as well as the improvement of production technology and quality, are the current situation of Chinese high concept animated films. In the face of constantly changing audience aesthetic and market requirements, content oriented, local culture centered, and the creation of non-American and non-Japanese Chinese style films are its exports and outlets.

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