

The Transformation of Animated Character Images: A Perspective on the Shift in Contemporary Chinese Public Aesthetics

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Abstract

As a rising star among various film categories in China, animated films hold a pivotal position. Directly targeting a vast audience of children and teenagers, they enjoy a natural advantage in cultural dissemination and ideological guidance. Since the creation of China's first animated film, *The Big Stir in the Studio* in 1926, a distinctive national style has been one of the most prominent hallmarks of domestic animation. With the integration of modern artistic concepts and advanced animation production technologies, Chinese animation has, after a rich developmental journey, ultimately formed its unique creative paradigm and aesthetic philosophy. As a "young" art form, animation employs a wide array of content expression methods, encompassing artistic forms such as ink wash painting, sculpture, watercolor, and oil painting. Its "all-encompassing" nature also determines that animation art possesses a strong "moldability," making it more susceptible to the influence of various cultural trends during the creation process. This is particularly evident in the evolution of character design influenced by aesthetic preferences in different periods since the founding of New China. This article will delve into the transformation of public aesthetics since the establishment of New China by examining the artistic expression and gender body structures in characters from domestic animated films. It aims to contribute to the development of China's animation industry and promote outstanding Chinese culture.

Keywords: animated figures, mass culture, aesthetic shift, national characteristics

1. Traditions and Transformations in the Aesthetic of the "Chinese Animation Cultural Sects"

Since the 1920s, Chinese animators have been exploring and attempting to create domestic animation, producing pioneering works such as *The Painter's Nightmare* and *Princess Iron Fan*. The development of the animation industry cannot be separated from the support of the national

environment; politics and economics, as the underlying "soil" for cultural development, will directly or indirectly impact the growth of the animation industry. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the encouragement of the cultural policy of "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend," the Chinese animation industry entered its first golden age of

development. The Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which gathered a large number of talents in the Chinese animation field at the time, was also established during this period. It created a large number of high-quality, distinctly Chinese animated works such as *The Magic Brush* (1955), *Pigsy Eats Watermelon* (1958), and *The Fishing Boy* (1959). During this phase, Chinese animations mostly took the form of puppet shows or paper-cut dramas, fully expressing the “Chinese style” of “charm” and “atmosphere,” becoming a unique landscape in the international animation industry at the time.

The history of art is another manifestation of human civilization. The production technology of the animation industry inevitably evolves with the application of advanced science and technology. Zhu Guangqian, in his work *On Beauty*, points out that “beauty has class character.” In today’s world, as class antagonism gradually weakens, the production concepts of Western animation have merged with traditional Chinese stories in a localized context. Before the 21st century, the style of domestic animation production was relatively uniform, but with the changing international animation production environment and the upgrading and innovation of technology, the production methods and forms of expression of domestic animation have undergone a complete transformation.

Take the 2019 domestic box office champion *Ne Zha: The Demon Boy Comes into the World* (hereinafter referred to as *Ne Zha*) as an example. Director Jiaozi pursues a sincere experience of life and a delicate expression of emotion. He breaks the existing aesthetic conventions and boldly shapes his own version of “Ne Zha.” The “Ne Zha” in his work is both familiar and strange. Though still embodying a spirit of rebellion, symbolizing a challenge to convention, this “Ne Zha” is free from the burden of adult pressures, returning to the form of a child. He yearns for his mother’s love, desires the friendship of peers, and when bored, is keen on mischief to attract attention, just like a true child. In traditional works, “Ne Zha” carries the fate of the myriad citizens of ChenTangGuan, like a tragic hero born to “serve the people,” with his soul, much like the old dragon in *Ne Zha*, shackled by the chains of “death as retribution” in the deep-sea prison of “pleading for the people.” This “Ne Zha”, imbued with a sense of everyday life, lacks the bitterness and grudges of the adult world,

instead possessing only the joys and sorrows of childhood. He brings people more than just a spirit of resistance; he also inspires a longing for a peaceful and quiet life. Currently, most domestic animated films are targeted at children, with few masterpieces aimed at a wider audience. It can be said that the significance of *Ne Zha* as a model is even greater than the box office miracles it created. Amidst the double success of box office and critical acclaim, there are some critical voices questioning, “Without the traditional elegance and beauty of China, can this still be considered ‘Chinese-style’ animation?” “Does the success of this artistic style in film indicate that the ‘Chinese’ charm and depth are no longer suitable for modern audiences?”

These questions indeed require our serious consideration. What does the so-called “Chinese Animation Cultural sects” represent? Is there a clear scope defined for artistic expression forms, or are the themes and characters limited to sources from traditional culture? These are the issues we must ponder upon as we navigate the future of Chinese animation.

2. Perceptions of Hegemonic Aesthetics in the Evolution of Gender Role Body Constructs

Hegemony theory manifests in the realms of politics, economics, and culture, echoing Foucault’s assertion that power is omnipresent. In modern times, power theories are more closely tied to culture, with power operating in various new forms. Aesthetic activities have increasingly integrated into the exercise of power, playing a more significant role in contemporary power dynamics. This constitutes the historical context in which contemporary hegemonic aesthetics occur.

Hegemonic aesthetics, when reflected in gender relations, is the male hegemony over female aesthetics, a fundamental reality of patriarchal societies. Due to men’s dominant position in the economy, this leads to men having a higher social status than women, with men always occupying the leading role in gender relations, evaluating and scrutinizing women. In the process of “looking” and “being looked at,” men are always in the active position while women remain in the passive position. Therefore, the standards for evaluating a woman’s “beauty” fall into the hands of men.

Men’s standards for evaluating women are not diverse. Within a specific period and region, a

fixed female image tends to form, with the woman and the physical features she embodies being labeled as beautiful. The standards for women's physical features are holistic impressions. The female image is broken down into various forms and parts, with each element after dissection having its unique standard. These include the body's fatness or thinness, height, skin color, and minute details such as hair, eyes, nose, etc. Due to the disparity between most women and the "standard" image requirements, in an effort to appear more "beautiful," women have begun to alter their bodies. This practice dates back to ancient times, including practices like foot-binding, waist cinching, piercing, and tattooing.

Foucault's focus on history is the history of the body subjected to punishment, the history of power transforming the body as a tool for taming and production. It operates from the top down, manifesting in localized and fragmented ways. Men scrutinize women, overemphasizing female characteristics against a single standard. This plunges women into a state of self-image negation. When women look into the mirror, they do not see their true selves but rather fantasize an image that conforms to male desire. Women have no power to choose; if they do not alter their bodies through cosmetic surgery to "meet the standard," they will be subjected to a different gaze. Thus, women's self-transformation is the result of power's "discipline," a discipline that permeates every detail of daily life. Simultaneously, this also reacts back onto men. In previous societies, the average man did not wear makeup or concern himself with skincare. However, in contemporary society, men's cosmetics have become a consumer trend, with men beginning to care for their own skin. This is also the subconscious result of male model images in the era of mass media. The effeminate male images portrayed on television, characterized by delicate features, smooth skin, gentle temperaments, and often a girl-like shyness, highlight traits opposite to the traditional rugged male image. Under the subtle influence of such imagery, men have also started using cosmetics extensively.

From the analysis above, we can see that behind various aesthetic practices, there lurks a control of power. Behind every prevailing aesthetic form, the will and value orientations of a particular social group are reflected. Though aesthetics

aspires to transcendental ideals and the pursuit of pure beauty free from the mundane, in reality, in the realm of social aesthetic practice, it is intricately linked to power. Aesthetics becomes a stage for power to unfold. In modern times, the coerciveness of aesthetic hegemony sometimes reveals itself starkly, at other times it is masked by the power of art. It is attached to a strong power system, bearing distinct ideological characteristics. It may manifest through macro-level social movements. By contrast, in postmodernity, power no longer needs to brazenly flaunt its authority. It is more deeply hidden behind a myriad of aesthetic phenomena, not easily discernible. The operation of aesthetic hegemony has transformed. In postmodernity, aesthetic hegemony operates in a concealed, enduring, and micro-level manner.

3. Conclusions

To this day, China continues to witness frequent intellectual collisions regarding social transformations and shifts in aesthetics. With the prosperity of China's market economy, the demand for spiritual and cultural civilization has grown increasingly vibrant, fueling the robust development of the cultural industry. Presently, China has emerged as one of the world's largest markets for film and television culture, garnering greater attention for its indigenous film, television, and literature. As an abstract art form, film and television literature not only delivers aesthetic enjoyment to the masses but also acts as a mirror, reflecting the cultural orientations and aesthetic demands of the era's public.

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