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## Significance assessment of modern folk paintings applied to animation style design

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### ABSTRACT

With an extensive and profound culture and a long history of animation industry, China started late on animated movies, however, many of its characters in movies merged the Chinese painting skills and the ancient costume styles. The thesis, starting from the profiles of the modern folk paintings and the animation design, mainly deals with the origin and the historical background of modern folk paintings, analyzes the artistic techniques of the Chinese modern folk paintings and conducts a study on the modern paintings' subjects and contents as well as the features of artistic expressions in various areas; the author of the thesis also analyses the factors of the appearance and action designs of the animated characters, makes a comparison of the artistic style of animation design between America and Japan. By comparing the applications of modern paintings in China's animation design and with those in other parts of the world, the thesis mainly discusses the significance of the modern folk paintings' application in animation design. According to the research, the modern folk paintings are important parts of Chinese fine arts. Currently, China's animation industry is faced with great pressure from the outside world. Applying the modern folk painting to animation design is conducive to the continuous increase of the innovative ability of China's animation industry, which will become the strong driving force for the development of China's animation industry and contribute to the realization of China's innovation and nationalization in animation design.

### KEYWORDS

Modern; Folk; Painting; Animation; Style design.



INTRODUCTION

China, with rich cultural deposits, boasts an affluent painting techniques and a national culture of 5000 years. China started late on animation industry, however, it does not lack the cultural foundations for development. *Mulan*, an animated movie of Disney, is based on Hua Mulan, an ancient Chinese story. The character shapes in the movie draw a lot from Chinese painting skills and the ancient costume styles. After its release, *Mulan* has gained widespread praise from all walks of life and it also provides an inspiration for the animation industry in other countries of the world. Since then, China-themed animation films emerge one after another, *Kung Fu Panda* for instance. What China’s animation industry lacks is not the cultural foundation but the ability and the spirit of animation innovation. Developing from the traditional folk paintings, the modern folk paintings are important components of China’s fine arts. In order to achieve an innovation in China’s animation styles, it is necessary to conduct a research on the application of the modern folk paintings in animation design and to realize its great significance.

As important parts of the Chinese fine arts, the modern folk paintings stemmed from the traditional folk paintings and emerged in the Anti-Japanese War period as an independent painting style. During the period of the War of Resistance against Japan, a lot of New Year paintings, reflecting the war and the production of the people, were created by the soldiers and civilians in the liberated areas of China. Compared with the traditional folk paintings, the folk paintings in this period expanded in their themes, changed in styles and were endowed with political publicity significance of resistance to save the nation. After the establishment of new China, numerous folk paintings were created in different regions in China. The works in this period were of primitive simplicity and clearly reflected rural lives at that time. It was not until 1970s that the folk paintings really rose, with the emergence of “Shanghai Jinshan Pattern”. In the past 30-plus years, the creating staff of China’s modern folk paintings expended increasingly and the outstanding works came put one after another in various regions. Modern folk paintings have become an important painting type of China. The following TABLE 1 is a categorization table of the different attribute of symbols in different fields:

TABLE 1 : The categorization table of the different attribute of symbols in different fields

		Industrial Design	Plastic Arts	Animation Design
Symbolic Entity		shape, color, material	shape, color, material	shape, color, material
Cultural Value	Denotation	Practical- Value-Centered	(No)	Transmission Function
	Connotation	Symbolic –Value-Supplemented	Symbolic Value Only	Both
Symbolic Function		Information Transmission Practical Value	Emotive Function	Transmission and Emotion
Structure		Purpose Composition	Non-purpose Composition	Commercial animation: Purpose Composition Experimental animation: Non- purpose Composition
Way of Thinking		Organic Integration of Imaginary and Logical Thinking	Imaginary Thinking	Organic Integration of Imaginary and Logical Thinking
Symbolic Perceptibility		Comprehensive Perceptibility Symbol with Proprioception as focus	Single Vision Symbol	Subject: Comprehensive Perceptibility Symbol Object: Vision Symbol
Symbolic Transmission Type	Denotation	Rule Dependence Model	(No)	Rules Followed Model
	Connotation	Rule Dependence Model Centered and Context	Context Dependence Model	Context Dependence Mode
Encoding Rules	Semantic Rules (Denotation)	Encoding Based on Objective Conception	(No)	Encoding Based on Objective Conception

Rooted in China’s traditional folk culture, the Chinese modern folk paintings demonstrate an intense feature of China’s traditional culture. From the view of techniques, China’s modern folk paintings follow the technique of traditional folk arts, influenced by the local painting techniques. The marks of the local primitive arts can be found in the modern folk paintings in different places. As for the theme, China’s modern folk paintings mainly deal with the local folk custom and are characterized by chaos, spirit and customs, which reflect the local traditional folk culture.

With the social customs and the people in different places as their themes, China’s modern folk paintings are of distinctive regional features. From the nationwide wall paintings in the period of the Great Leap Forward to the “Shanghai

Jinshan Pattern” which was imitated by other places, in 1970s, today there are more than 100 “lands of paintings”. China’s modern folk paintings are divided according to regional features and different schools of painting take shape in the process of development. Taking the painting in Ansai of Northern Shaanxi province as an example, Ansai, north of Shaanxi Province, is a place where the ancient traditional Chinese national cultural is well preserved. Influenced by the local ancient traditional culture, the local modern paintings are simple, natural, bold and vivid in style. As for the theme, Ansai of northern Shaanxi province focuses on the agricultural production scene of the local farming and the costume culture of livestock and spirits. The following TABLE 2 is the details on semiotic views of the shape design of animation characters in cinemas and of experimental animation characters.

**TABLE 2 : The details on semiotic views of the shape design of animation characters in cinemas and of experimental animation characters**

		Shape design of cinema animation	Shape design of experimental animation characters
Symbolic Entity		Shape, color, material	Shape, color, material
Cultural Value	Denotation	Transmission value centered	(No)
	Connotation	Symbolic value supplemented	Visional value
Symbolic Function		Transmission and emotion function	Emotion function
Structure		Purpose composition (Commercial animation)	Non-purpose composition
Way of Thinking		Organic Integration of Imaginary and Logical Thinking	Imaginary thinking
Symbolic Perceptibility		Comprehensive Perceptibility Symbol with Proprioception as focus	Natural single visional symbol
Symbolic Transmission Type	Denotation	Rule Dependence Model	(No)
	Connotation	Rule Dependence Model Centered and Context	Context Dependence Mode
Encoding Rules	Semantic rules (denotation)	Encoding Based on Objective Conception	(No)
	Semantic rules (connotation)	Possible encoding in normal context	(No)
	Syntactic rules	Externality dependent encoding rules	(No)
Transmission Subjectivity		Address subjectivity	Addressee subjectivity
Channel Media Technology		Interactive and professional technology media, physical channel	Natural media

China’s modern folk paintings inherit the artistic features of the Chinese traditional folk paintings in style, draw the style techniques from the mainstream fine arts and gradually form a painting style with distinctive features. The style of China’s modern folk paintings is characterized by exaggeration and realism. Exaggeration is the essence of the Chinese folk painting techniques. The modern folk painting develops on the basis of the traditional folk painting. So, among the majority of the modern folk paintings, the painters adopt a method which intensifies the major parts and weakens the minor parts of the objects to make them more vivid and concrete. While, realism is a technique which is formed after the Chinese modern folk painting absorbs the formative technique of the mainstream fine arts. So the realism in the modern folk paintings is not the realism in the traditional sense but one which squints towards the mainstream fine arts, especially in pattern design, which take traditional objects as creative objects and create them with artistic techniques.

### FACTORS OF ANIMATION STYLE DESIGN

Animation character style design is the basis the animation design. Animation style design includes the design of the appearance and action of the animation characters and the appearance design of the animation characters include the design of looks and expressions. The style design of characters has a direct influence on the personality of the characters. Sponge Bob, the hero of *SpongeBob*, an American animation for example, he is simple in appearance and innocent in expression, which fully demonstrate his personality of innocence. So, the style design of the animation characters should serve the personalities of the animation characters. A full demonstration of the character personality is one symbol of a successful style design.

Animation style design comes from life but is above life. It is inevitable that the designer of the animation will be influenced by his or her domestic culture, and hence the animation style design cannot be separated from the domestic cultural environment (TABLE 3). In the long course of development, the animations of different countries develop distinctive

artistic styles of animation style. Currently, America and Japan are the two countries whose artistic styles of animation are most distinctive.

**TABLE 3 : The representatives of cinema animations with box offices over one billion yen in 2008**

Ranking	Title	Box office (Yen)
1	Gake no ue no Ponyo	15.5 billion
2	Giratina and the Sky Warrior	4.8 billion
3	Doraemon: Nobita to Midori no Kyojinden	3.37 billion
4	Detective Conan Full Score of Fear	2.42 billion
5	Crayon Shin Chan Movie	1.23 billion
6	Naruto Shippuden: Kizuna Drive	1.16 billion

American animation characters are quite concise, humorous, exaggerated and lively. Walt Disney Company is the most famous one in American animation industry. Such Disney works as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bambi and the Lion King are popular with many peoples of different countries in the world and the characters in the animations enjoy great popularity. On theme, the ranges of materials are very broad. As an immigrant country, America shows great capacity on the absorption of foreign culture so the social culture of America is of great diversity. Influenced by the diversified culture, the themes of Disney's animation cover American stories, European fairy tales, Chinese legends and other stories from other countries in the world. With a broad range of themes, Disney's animation characters have their own distinguishing characteristics. For instance, the positive characters are rectangular or circular, while the negative ones are usually inverted triangle in faces. Expressions of the animation characters are rich; the actions of the characters are exaggerated and humorous; and there are significant differences of expression and action designs between positive and negative characters.

Japan is advanced in animation industry, which is an important part of Japan's exports. Japanese animation industry is large in term of scale; there are many painting schools in style design; and there exist great differences in character design of different painting schools. For example, *Black Butler* belongs to gorgeous Gothic style; while *My Neighbor Totoro* is concise and cute. On the whole, the major features of Japanese animation are beautiful, fashionable, romantic and sweet. On story and character design, Japanese animations are strict in logic in plots and distinctive in character personalities. *Detective Conan*, a detective story, is strict in logic and science in plots and still enjoys great popularity though it has been serialized for 10 years. On animation style design, the design of Japanese characters is very beautiful and romantic. Japan's characters are fashionable and beautiful, and its action design is quite elegant. Among Japan's animations, the characters are boys or girls that are well-featured and good in shape. So, the Japanese animations are popular with lots of people of all ages and genders worldwide.

The following TABLE 4 is the top 10 animation characters and their box offices selected by British media.

**TABLE 4 : The top 10 animation characters and their box offices selected by British media**

Ranking	Title	Box Office (£)
1	Shrek- <i>shrek</i>	257018752
2	Marin- <i>Finding Nemo</i>	468482336
3	Buzz Lightyear - <i>Toy Story</i> (1995)	266692304
4	Mickey- <i>Fantasia</i> (1940-1990)	14004860
5	Snow White- <i>Snow White</i> (1937)	1.02 billion
6	Captain Hook- <i>Peter Pan</i> (1953)	53 million
7	Jessica Rabbit- <i>Who Framed Roger Rabbit</i> (1988)	191646992
8	Bambi- <i>Bambi</i> (1942)	147155728
9	Cruella- <i>One Hundred and One Dalmatians</i>	115 million
10	Baruch- <i>the Jungle Book</i> (1967)	113002424

### THE APPLICATION OF THE CHINESE MODERN FOLK PAINTINGS IN ANIMATION STYLE DESIGN

It is n far from a blind copy to apply modern folk painting to animation style design. A successful example of applying China's folk paintings to animation style design is *Havoc in Heaven* and *Prince Nezha's Triumph against Dragon King* produced in 1960s. However, in the following several decades, because of the shock of foreign animation products, the application of modern folk paintings in Chinese animation style design remained stagnant and even went backwards. Impacted by foreign animations, not a few Chinese animation developers designed products on the basis of animation theory

of foreign countries, such as Japan and America, and knew little about Chinese modern folk paintings. Besides, because of the fact that the majority of Chinese animations was taken by the foreign animations, some animation developers blindly imitated the foreign styles, and plots, so as to meet the needs if the market. These factors resulted in the fact that currently Chinese animation designs lack in Chinese characteristics and got into a plight.

*Prince Nezha's Triumph against Dragon King* is a milestone in the history of the nationalization of Chinese animation design. With distinctive Chinese characteristics, its shape design draws much of the Chinese folk paintings successfully. The shape design of *Prince Nezha's Triumph against Dragon King* absorbs the technique of 18 Depiction of Chinese traditional folk paintings and the lines are graceful and strong. In addition, it also adopts the technique of exaggeration of Chinese modern folk paintings. Exaggeration technique varies with the diversity in appreciation manner and preference in different countries, districts, nations and cultures. For example, the big hands and feet of the American Mickey Mouse, the big eyes and long hair of the Japan cartoon leads. The exaggeration of the Chinese cartoon style is consistent with that in the folk paintings. The dragon king in the animation *Prince Nezha's Triumph against Dragon King* came into being under the proper exaggeration of his images in the Chinese traditional opera and his photos in the New Year pictures. The complexity of the king's clothing shows the very dignity and extravagance life of the royal families. The king's tyrannical and cruelty features can be fully expressed by his green-lighting eyes when getting angry. That is what Chinese cartoon is, it just make a real treacherous, ferocious antagonist by virtue of the unique design and cooperation of the appearance, expression and movement. The design of Nezha's expressions is positive and kind-hearted, and his simple wearing, featured with distinctive colors, fully demonstrates his character of justice and goodness. In the scene of Nezha cutting his own throat, the comparison of positive and negative characters reaches the climax and the emotional resonance of audience was inspired shown as TABLE 5.

**TABLE 5 : Is based on the correspondence of related factors with animation style design in the process of symbolic transmission**

Addresser		Designers of animation style, a creative team
Addressee		Audience
Symbol		Color, graph and elements, etc
Encoding rules		Ways and rules of creation of style design
Channel		Channel of style design
Message		Animation character style (two-dimension, three-dimension)

Besides such works as *Havoc in Heaven* and *Prince Nezha's Triumph against Dragon King*, there also emerge some excellent animations in recent years, *Sales of Pigs* for example won the top prize in the public offering unit of the 11<sup>th</sup> Tokyo Animation Prize in 2011. *Sales of Pigs* was inspired by Pingwa JIA's *Mourning Father*. In character style design, it draws the features of folk paintings of northern Shaanxi province; its style is simple and natural, demonstrating the authentic custom culture of northern Shaanxi province.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF APPLYING MODERN FOLK PAINTINGS TO ANIMATION STYLE DESIGN

Applying modern folk paintings to animation style design is of great significance, which is embodied as follows:

Firstly, the innovation of China's animation style design calls for the application of the modern folk paintings to animation style design. Innovation is the continuous driving force for a country to stand firmly forever among the cultures of the world, while now the designs of the Chinese animation image are badly in need of innovation. In the late 1980s, the reason why the Chinese animation could progress so rapidly was that the animation creation was a simply pure art creation at that time which required the exploration of animation techniques and the innovative means of expression rather than the consideration of the market requirement. Presently, the Chinese animation industry is still fluctuating between the nationalization and the market requirement, which leads to its stagnation of the innovation. Meanwhile, plagiarism is a serious and main problem in the Chinese animation industry. For example, *Five Lucky Mice* (an animated cartoon in China) copied *Tom and Jerry* (an animated cartoon in America), *Chess King* (also an animated cartoon in China) copied *Card Captor Sakura* (an animated cartoon in Japan) and so on. The innovation of the animation image must be based on the folk culture, and every animation cartoon is influenced by its creator's culture in some degree. Compared with other industries, however, the copy in the Chinese animation industry can hardly gain the Chinese audience's favor because the cultural foundation is different between the copy and the original, and the copy is neither fish nor fowl as a result. To avoid plagiarism, the designer must break away from the noisy market and study the modern elements of the folk painting, so that these elements could be used flexibly in the designing process. And only when the designs of the Chinese animation image are nationalized, can the design innovation be accomplished finally.

In recent years, the Chinese modern folk painting has been successfully applied to the animation image design in two American animated films, *Mulan* and *Kung Fu Panda*, especially the latter. If the foreign designers are able to flexibly apply the Chinese modern painting elements to the animation image designs, the local born and bred Chinese can certainly do it better.

Secondly, to form the style of our own, it is the requirement for the Chinese animation to apply the modern folk painting to the animation modeling designs. At present, “Chinese style” is common and popular for the cultural works on the market, and it has been proved that those cultural works with “Chinese style” have met great favor in the market. For instance, although the game engine development technology of *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (a famous Chinese computer game) lags behind that of other countries, the market sale volume of this game is still very large. Nevertheless, the designs of these Chinese-style works are not pure, some of which are branded with obvious foreign features. *Qin’s Moon*, a very popular animated cartoon in China, which is a summit of the Chinese 3D animation for now, is a very typical example. Contrary to the animation design innovation, the Chinese 3D animation is developing rapidly in only a few years. 3D animation is an output of software and formula. For instance, the goals of the objective center rotation are achieved with the help of AS3 center rotation formula, which goes as follows:

```
public function on Enter Frame(event: Event):void {
    ball.x=center X+Math. cos(angle)*radius;
    ball.y=center Y+Math. sin(angle)*radius;
    angle+=speed;
```

With Qin Dynasty as its background, the costumes of the characters in *Qin’s Moon* are created by referring the ancient figures. Although the characters look like Chinese, actually, the shape design of *Qin’s Moon* is full of Japanese styles, in sharp contrast to such works as *Havoc in Heaven*. However, the success of *Qin’s Moon* exactly shows the fact that the souls of Chinese animations are missing gradually. Whether the past Chinese works, *Havoc in Heaven* and *Calabash Brothers* or the present *Kung Fu Panda* enjoys favorable market reaction. From this point of view, applying China’s modern paintings to animation design will be of great market value. If China’s animations want to go abroad and take a share in the world market, they have to develop their own styles.

Thirdly, applying the modern folk paintings to animation style design will become a strong driving force for the development of China’s animation industry. Currently, China’s animation industry is confronted with great pressure from the outside world. Great outside pressure is one of the reasons why the domestic animation industry frequently copies the works of others. Applying the modern folk paintings to animation style design is conducive to the continuous rise of innovative abilities of China’s animation industry and to strengthen the competitiveness of the Chinese animation industry. Only in this way can we change the situation of the present Chinese animation industry and provide great driving forces for the development of China’s animation industry.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, the modern folk paintings, which stemmed from the Chinese traditional folk culture and reflected times and local people’s life in particular ways, are important components of the Chinese fine arts. Exploring the application of modern folk paintings to animation style design is conducive to the achievement of innovation and nationalization of Chinese animation design and to enhance the comprehensive strength and competitiveness of China’s animation industry.

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