

Expression Cultural Symbols in the Animation series “Legend of Chinese Medicine”

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Abstract—Animation is an artistic form with global influence, and cultural symbols play a vital role in animation works. By taking the animation series “Legend of Chinese Medicine” created by the author as an example, this paper discusses the way of using cultural symbols in the design of animated characters and animated scenes from the perspectives of historical and cultural background and lets the audiences be able to better understand how the cultural symbols convey specific values, social background and historical tradition as well as the cultural connotations and information experience conveyed by them through interpreting the cultural symbols in the design of animated characters and animated scenes.

Index Terms—Animated characters, animated scenes, cultural symbols, legend of Chinese medicine

I. INTRODUCTION

The global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has aroused people's attention and thinking about traditional medicine. The author chose the theme of "Traditional Chinese Medicine" to conduct animation creation, with a purpose of hoping that people will pay attention to the prevention and rehabilitation roles of traditional Chinese medicine, promote the scientific research level and international reputation of traditional Chinese medicine and guide the public to understand and use traditional Chinese medicine in a correct manner in the post-pandemic era. Thus, we can better give play to the role of traditional Chinese medicine in human health undertaking.

“Legend of Chinese Medicine” is a series of 2D popular science animation, which mainly tell some little popular science stories related to traditional Chinese medicine that happened in the daily life of Grandpa Sun, an old TCM doctor, and his grandson Dudu, Xiaocheng, a small-town girl and Yaobao, an AI robot in a Chinese Pharmacy “Chuan Cheng Hall”, Happy Countryside Town, Chengdu City. Its core is to spread the knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine, carry forward the traditional Chinese medicine culture and inherit the spirit of Chinese national essence. As a cultural treasure in China, traditional Chinese medicine is original, indigenous and unique to the Chinese nation, which is a unique cultural symbol of the Chinese nation. Rooted in the soil of traditional Chinese culture, it contains the spiritual core of traditional Chinese culture, and it is deeply imprinted with the spirit of the Chinese nation and is connected with other forms of traditional Chinese culture, forming a whole together.

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Traditional Chinese medicine has a long history of development. With the international concept of "harmony is precious" as the core, it focuses on harmony between man and nature, and harmony between body and mind, emphasizes the holistic concept of prevention and treatment, and advocates balance and adaptability. However, Chinese medicine is an important part of TCM, which uses natural herbs and other natural materials to maintain health and treat diseases by unique processing and formulation methods.

II. ROLE OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN ANIMATION CREATION

A. Concept and Characteristics of Cultural Symbols

Cultural symbols refer to “language symbols, patterns, objects and so on that are only recognized by the members of a cultural group and often have complex meanings.” [1]. That is to say, cultural symbols have diversity and plasticity in different cultural settings, and each cultural group will give symbols different meanings. The polysemy of symbols enables people to express their identity and sense of belonging through the use of symbols. For example, in western culture, red usually symbolizes love and passion; however, in Chinese culture, red has auspicious and festive meanings. These cultural symbols are not only a visual existence, but also a connection between emotion and thinking. At the same time, cultural symbols often have rich contexts and meanings, and their interpretation depends not only on the symbols themselves, but also on the background, nationality, experience and cultural identity of the viewers. For example, Chinese people regard themselves as “descendants of dragon” and think that dragon is an auspicious beast representing good fortune; but in western culture, dragon is an evil incarnation in most cases.

In addition, cultural symbols are also historic and rheological. With the passage of time and the evolution of society, some cultural symbols may change or fade, while others may be redefined or given new symbolic meanings. This historical and rheological existence makes the study of cultural symbols become a challenging and continuous work. For example, early Hollywood movies described Chinese Tang suit and Cheongsam costumes as complicated in style, weird in shape and poor in quality. “Tang suit was synonymous with Chinese men in the eyes of westerners at that time, and a symbol of lewdness and insidiousness; and Cheongsam was synonymous with Chinese women, and a symbol of eroticism and charm. Thus, Hollywood's aesthetic curiosity and prejudice against China can be seen from this. [2],” Since entering the new century, the cultural connotation of Chinese clothing has undergone comprehensive changes in

Hollywood movies, and the beauty of Chinese clothing has been correctly spread, letting Chinese civilization be well-known to the world. In the movie "A Beautiful Mind", Chinese evening dress became a dress for Alicia to attend the Nobel Prize Awarding Ceremony, showing the charm of Chinese clothing. Moreover, in "Spider-Man 1", Marry wore a red cheongsam, showing a more charming and exquisite image in the global carnival. In "Tomb Raider 2", Lola wore Chinese embroidered clothing, becoming one of the classic role models. In "Kill Bill 1", David Carral and Uma Thurman were dressed in Tang suits, showing simple and distinctive Chinese clothing. The frequent appearance of Chinese clothing in Hollywood movies not only enhances the artistry and ornamental values of works, but also effectively promotes the correct spread of Chinese clothing culture around the world. Through an in-depth study of symbolic changes in different cultures, we can better understand the development track of society and culture.

Of course, cultural symbols also have universality and shareability. Although cultural symbols may be rooted in specific cultural settings, they can also cross the borders in some way to become a bridge for cross-cultural communication and understanding. For example, the carnival parade and colorful masks used in the 3D animated film "Rio" produced by American Blue-Sky Studio can not only convey the elements of Brazilian culture, but also attract the attention and love of global audiences.

1) Shaping animated characters and animation background

Animation is usually set up in a specific cultural context. It can help shaping the identity and background of animated characters, thus to obtain a deeper emotional resonance with animated characters and stories, using the cultural symbols such as environment, buildings, clothing and food of a specific area or symbolic images, signs, behaviors and language of a specific community. Using these cultural symbols, animation works enable the audiences to deeply understand and experience the specific cultural connotations, and better understand and associate their connection with a specific culture and generate their cognition and understanding of a specific culture. For example, DreamWorks showed "Chinese flavor" in the movie "Kung Fu Panda", and the leading role "Abao" was designed as "Chinese giant panda +Kung Fu" to create a symbolic cartoon image "Kung Fu Panda". "The Furious Five" (monkey, viper, tiger, and mantis) were designed according to the boxing and martial arts representing "monkey boxing", "viper boxing", "tiger and crane boxing" and "mantis boxing" in Chinese Kung Fu [3]. In "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child", Taiyi Immortal used the language design of "Sichuanese Standard Chinese" to express that Taiyi Immortal conducted meditation in Jinguang Cave, Qianyuan, Sichuan Province, and more let his image be closer to life by dimension reduction of saint in traditional cultural symbol, adding more entertainment plots for the film.

2) Delivering value concept

Animated film can deliver the values and morals using specific cultural symbols. These symbols can represent specific values, such as importance of family, value of friendship and spirit of courage and solidarity. The animated

works convey the values, ideas, and emotion of specific culture by specific cultural symbols. For example, most American animations show adventurous spirit, individual heroism and transcendent and eulogize the love beyond class and social categories.

3) Creating emotional connection

Cultural symbols can also play a role in creating emotional connection and creating a sense of identity and a sense of belonging in animation. In animation creation, special cultural symbols are used to emphasize the cultural background of the work and enhance the audience's sense of identity. When cultural symbols that share emotional or memory connection with the audiences are used in animation works, the audiences will have a sense of familiarity and resonance. Such resonance can help the audiences to establish an emotional bond with the animation works, which will produce a familiar and cordial feeling, and thus help the audiences to better understand and appreciate the works, urge them to establish an emotional connection with the works, create a sense of identity and belonging, and promote the audiences' identity with their own culture. For example, in the Disney Animation "Frozen", the cultural symbol of "ice and snow" becomes a theme expression of "love" in turn. In ancient Greek mythology, Demeter, the goddess of earth and harvest was sad because her daughter Persephone was taken captive by Hades and made the earth frozen, and hence there was only winter. In the film, the Dairy Queen made the earth frozen because she was suspicious and in fear of her younger sister. Finally, her younger sister's love became a solid shield to melt the estrangement between two sisters, so that the elder sister's love woke up and she controlled her own frozen magic and brought her.

4) Creating a unique visual style

Animation works can be given a unique style, identity and aesthetic experience using specific cultural symbols. The animation creators can create unique works to show their personality and aesthetics using specific cultural symbols and style elements, so as to bring unique visual charm and artistic appeal for works. Such personalized artistic creation can promote the differentiation and innovation of artistic work and make it different. For example, "digital upgrading and iteration of the celluloid ink animation originally innovated in China that amazed the world, has always been the goal of the new generation of animators, and the animations such as "Monkey King", "Big Fish & Begonia" and "Deep Sea" all used modern digital technology to achieve the picture style of ink effect as much as possible. These digital three-dimensional visual effects present the unique visual aesthetics of China traditional ink with elegance, freedom and rhythmic vitality on the big screen." [4]

5) Creating aesthetic experience and reflecting on cultural concept

Cultural symbols have certain aesthetic values. In animation creation, by dealing with cultural symbols using aesthetic principles and techniques, attractive, pleasing or shocking artistic works can be created. In addition, cultural symbols can also be used to challenge and reshape traditional cultural concept. By reinterpreting and re-presenting cultural symbols, artists can propose a criticism and reflection on traditional concept, thus triggering the audiences' thinking

and discussion on culture. For example, in Miyazaki Hayao's "Spirited Away", while using a variety of cultural symbols to create visual aesthetics, symbols are more about expressing reflection and expressing the natural counterstrike suffered by human beings due to their destruction of forests and nature.

6) Promoting cultural exchange and understanding it can promote mutual understanding and exchange between different cultures by displaying different cultural symbols and elements in animation

When different cultural symbols are integrated into the works during animation creation, the audiences can contact and understand the unique values and traditional customs of other cultures by appreciating and understanding these symbols. They can understand and respect other cultural traditions, customs and values by enjoying the animated films. In the meanwhile, such cross-cultural communication can enhance respect for cultural diversity, and enrich personal and social horizons. For example, "Coco" produced by Pixar fully reveals the traditional festival "Day of the Dead" set up by the Mexican in memory of the deceased relatives. In the movie, the "Mariachi" dance is a traditional Mexican dance, and "Coco" subtly integrates Mexican culture, music notation and family affection theme, which undoubtedly plays a positive role in promoting cultural exchanges, understanding and respect among the countries and regions in the world in vision and culture. For another example, in the animated film "Big Fish & Begonia", there is a fish in the northern sea, known as Kun, which is so big in volume that we don't know how far it reaches." This opening sentence conveys the audiences a keynote of Chinese Taoist ideology and culture of "doing nothing and doing everything".

To sum up, cultural symbols carry rich meanings and functions in animation creation, which can help shaping the animated characters, conveying the values, creating emotional connection and creating unique visual style in animation creation and is conducive to promoting cultural exchange and understanding. The animation creators use cultural symbols flexibly to create a variety of works that are deeply favored by the audiences, enriching people's cultural experience and vision.

III. EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN IMAGE SHAPING OF ANIMATED CHARACTERS

Using cultural symbols, the creators can endow the animated characters with specific cultural characteristics. These include their appearance, clothing, hairstyle, language, behavior and so on. These symbols can reveal the cultural background and identity of animated characters and embody the characteristics and values of a specific culture to make the animated characters more fit the story background and enhance their appeals to the audiences. Next, the four main animated characters of Grandpa Sun, Xiaocheng, Dudu and Yaobao in the animated film "Legend of Chinese Medicine" will be taken as an example for interpretation.

B. Biography of Characters

1) Grandpa doctor sun

He is about 70 years old, slim and tall, and healthy and strong, who was born in a family of traditional Chinese

medicine. He opened a Chinese pharmacy "Chuancheng Hall" in Happy Countryside Town, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province; with a wide range of knowledge, he likes reading ancient books and pharmacopeia of traditional Chinese medicine and is very familiar with traditional Chinese medical materials and legends, and can sum up the positive spirit from the legends and thus guide the children. It is a pity that his son didn't inherit traditional Chinese medicine, so he hopes his grandson Dudu can inherit it.

Personality: He is amiable and humorous, and patient when dealing with children's mistakes, and is good at using storytelling to let everyone find and correct the mistakes.

Appearance characteristics: Appearance characteristics: He wears a Chinese double-breasted short gown, a Chinese waistcoat, and Chinese cloth shoes. With reading glasses on eyes, he often holds a Pharmacopoeia in hand.

2) Xiaocheng

She is a 10-year-old girl in the fourth grade of primary school. Her parents grow herbs near the town and Xiaocheng often delivers herbs to the Chinese pharmacy "Chuancheng Hall", helps doing odds and ends by the way and sometimes gets out to dig herbs together with her grandpa. Xiaocheng and Dudu often quarrel over something. Dudu thinks that Xiaocheng isn't like a girl, and Xiaocheng thinks that Dudu is too thin and weak and not boyish, but they will make peace soon and the two persons are very friendly at ordinary times.

Personality: She is lively and cheerful, careless, and quite boyish.

Appearance characteristics: She like sports (climbing mountains and trees), and singing, with a healthy wheat face; she always wears loose suspenders at ordinary times.

3) Dudu

He is a 9-year-old boy in the third grade of primary school. His father is a conductor of high-speed train, and his mother is a train attendant. Due to work reasons, Dudu was transferred to a town school from a city school and lived with his grandpa, an old TCM doctor. Dudu acquainted himself with Xiaocheng in his grandpa's Chinese pharmacy and the two persons became good friends who talked about anything. Dudu was full of curiousness about and interests in the Chinese herbs in the pharmacy and he gradually became a helper of his grandpa.

Personality: He is a little timid and coward and lack of masculinity and likes to escape from things

Appearance characteristics: with a big head, slim in dress, wearing a baseball cap obliquely, and wearing round myopia glasses on the eyes, a phone watch on wrist and sports shoes on feet.

4) Yaobao (Medicine Pot)

Dudu's ant sent his grandpa a version 1.0 AI robot with a mysterious birth, which can float in the air and is full of curiosity about everything. At ordinary times, it serves as an assistant of grandpa to scan medical materials and books and meanwhile serves as a question-and-answer machine of Dudu and Xiaocheng. As a growth-type AI, it likes observing the daily life of grandpa, Dudu and Xiaocheng and occasionally will take humanized actions. Sometimes, it is too fond of play and makes some small mistakes.

Personality: It likes a child of about 5 years old, and it is simple and a little playful, and sometimes will make a

misunderstanding.

Appearance characteristics: Yaobao (a rice cooker-like medicine pot--"robot style") + panda element (wearing a

panda cap), without limbs, can fly automatically, scan drugs, and talk about medicinal properties and legends (it is used to supplement knowledge points in the film).



Fig. 1. Main characters.

B. Interpretation of Image Shaping of Animated Characters

From the biographies of the above characters, it can be analyzed that the old TCM doctor is surnamed Sun, which lets the audiences easily associate him with Sun Simiao, the "King of Medicine" in the Tang Dynasty, suggesting that Grandpa Sun is a descendant of the "King of Medicine", and his medical skills are naturally exquisite and convincing. "These designs such as wearing a Chinese-style double-breasted short gown, a Chinese-style waistcoat and Chinese-style cloth shoes", presbyopic glasses and Pharmacopoeia props are particularly in line with Chinese people's cultural symbol positioning of the image of old TCM doctor. The nicknames Xiaocheng and Dudu have an implied meaning of "Made in Chengdu", and the latter more refers to Chengdu University (nicknamed Xiaochengzi). Dudu is the grandson of Grandpa Sun, and his parents work in the railway departments, and high-speed railway and bullet train represent high-speed development of China. "Big head, slim in dress, oblique baseball cap (optional), round myopia glasses, hand-held phone watch and sneakers" represent a social phenomenon that children in the city are generally picky eaters and partial eaters, and lack of exercise, leading to malnutrition and poor health, and a large number of video games and electronic products will even lead to poor eyesight and loneliness. However, Xiaocheng, who lives in a small town, "likes sports (climbing mountains and trees) and singing". Although her parents grow herbs, Xiaocheng is very healthy in body and mind, and often delivers herbs and is naturally close to grandpa Sun and his grandson Dudu in the Chinese pharmacy. Her careless character contrasts with Dudu who is timid, coward and unmanly. Yaobao is an important IP of this film, which is designed as a "rice cooker-like medicine pot-robot style". It combines the medicine pot for boiling traditional Chinese medicine with the latest technology AI and gives a cultural symbol of panda in Sichuan Province and even China.

This film is a popular science animation for children and adolescent, of which dialogue is mainly in Mandarin, but in order to highlight the regional and cultural characteristics of Sichuan Province, some dialogues in the film also use some Mandarin with Sichuan dialect. Differences in language

expression means can convey the unique characteristics and atmosphere of the culture that the animated characters belong to. The appearance, behavior, language and so on of the animated characters can highlight their unique cultural characteristics through cultural symbols. These symbols can express the geographical, ethnic and professional identities of the animated characters, so that the audiences can better understand and identify with the personality and background of the characters, helping the audiences to better understand and feel the cultural elements in the story.

IV. EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN IMAGE SHAPING OF ANIMATED CHARACTERS

The scene setting of animation usually incorporates the symbolic elements of the culture represented by it. The story scenes are created with literary and cultural symbols or specific cultural elements such as architectural style, natural landscape, or characteristic landmarks.

A. Application of Ancient Chinese Cultural Symbols in Animation Scene Setting

Ancient Chinese cultural symbols refer to symbolic marks, signs, patterns, images or objects used in ancient Chinese society and culture, which have specific significance and symbolism. These symbols are widely used in Chinese art, literature, religion, architecture, clothing and other fields, reflecting the values, philosophical thoughts and aesthetic ideas of ancient Chinese culture. For example, "the Map of Mountains and Rivers" in the animated film "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" belongs to literary and cultural symbol, which stems from "Romance of the Gods". "It was originally a treasure of Nvwa, and was later vested to Yang Jian to collect the seven eccentrics of Meishan, which recorded the strike of mountains and rivers." [5] The house design of Li Jing's Mansion originates from the four-side roof and double-eave house. "It refers to an architectural style with double eaves and four-side roofs, with compacted soil as foundation, eave column and earth wall and towering roof without influence of ventilation and sunlight" [6]

The main town animation scene of "Legend of Chinese Medicine" takes Happy Countryside Town and Ludai

Ancient Town in Wenjiang, Chengdu City as the blueprints. "Happiness" is a state of life that people are striving for. The confucianists in ancient Chinese culture put forward a concept of social happiness or happy world; the typical happy world view of "Great Harmony" put forward in the "book of rites" embodies the Confucian conception of a great harmony society, that is, the political system and ethical ideas of a great harmony society are all for the public other than for the private; the government authorizes power to the sages and selects the people with ability; the society has good security and welfare, and people are willing to do their best for public affairs; it is an honest, harmonious and equal society. Happy Countryside Town is called "Chengdu people's own floraland." It is not full of poetic and pictorial splendor everywhere, but also is hidden with the site of Yufu Dynasty in ancient Shu Kingdom with a history of more than 4000 years. The site was once called "Ancient Liu City, Wanchun City" and "Ancient City Bank", where over 100 pieces of stoneware and dozens of potteries and a lot of cultural relics such as house ruins, city wall and toms were earthed, which is the most excavated Neolithic site in the western Sichuan Plain. As the cradle of the Yufu Dynasty in ancient Shu culture, there are many legends and stories related to Yufu

preserved, such as "Yufu King fighting in the Yinma River", "Yufu Building Bridge" and "Origin of Fish God Festival". The places such as Yinma River and Yufu Bridge still exist here today. The whole site is one of the most important ancient cultural business cards in Chengdu. Luodai Ancient Town was called "Wanfu Street" in the period of Three Kingdoms, and later renamed "Wanjing Street" when Zhuge Liang encouraged fair trade. The name of Luodai has two sources. According to legend, in the Three Kingdoms Period, Liu Chan, the prince of the Kingdom Shu of Han, accidentally dropped a jade belt into an octagonal well in the town while playing in Luodai, thus it gained the name "Luodai", and later became "Luodai" by gradual simplification and convention. In "Fairy Experience" written by Du Guangting, who was born in the late Tang Dynasty and early Five Dynasties, "Mo Yuyi, born in Luodai, Chengdu" was once mentioned.

These ancient Chinese cultural symbols have far-reaching influence and significance in Chinese culture, reflecting the unique characteristics and values of ancient Chinese culture, which can add strong cultural deposits for the newly designed town and make it become a historical, story-telling and distinctive cultural ancient town.



Fig. 2. Panorama of happy countryside town.

B. Application of Specific Environmental Cultural Symbols in Animation Scene Setting

In "Kungfu Panda", in order to embody the specific environment of China, the design team referred to a lot of books and data about ancient Chinese arts, building, totem and scenery, and also investigated Mount Qingcheng and Wolong Panda Reserve in Sichuan, landscape of Guilin, Pingyao Ancient City in Shanxi, Shaolin Temple and some Buddhist and Taoist temples. In Abao's noodle shop, the clamus hung, onion and garlic, well-arranged tables and chairs, porcelain bowls, cotton, linen and silk clothing on the master and swordsman all reflect Chinese characteristics in detail.

In terms of overall architectural design style, the main town animation scene in "Legend of Chinese Medicine" is dominated by traditional courtyard-style folk houses in western Sichuan, which use the wooden tenon through

structure that is characterized by sloped roof and thin eaves board to make the buildings open and transparent, light and natural. The buildings have a relatively small beam column section, of which external wall use the form of high plinth and half pile pedestal and indoor space use timber floor overhead. These residential buildings and the characteristics of thick and evergreen vegetation in Western Sichuan Plain complete mutually. The backyard buildings in the Chinese pharmacy "Chuancheng Hall" are simple in color, which mainly use grey tiles, yellow-grey walls, dark brown beam column, brown or burlywood doors and windows. Preserved pork and sausage, specialties of Sichuan Province are hung under the eaves, and a tea set is quietly waiting for the host to pour tea and drink slowly on the stone table under the ancient banyan tree. The details such as Chinese herbs air-dried on the wooden shelf in the garden, the medicine roller at the root of wall and the Chinese herbs decocted on the small stove not only imply that this is a very traditional time-honored Chinese

pharmacy but also reflect the regional characteristics of Sichuan Province.



Fig. 3. Backyard of “Chuancheng hall” Chinese pharmacy.

The distant mountains in the background reveal the geographical features of Chengdu City in Sichuan Basin and highlight many landmark buildings in Chengdu City. For example, Global Center, the largest individual building in the world, Twin Towers of Financial City, “Wall-climbing Panda”

in IFS on Chunxi Road, Anshun Gallery Bridge dating back to the Yuan Dynasty, and 339 TV Tower, the tallest tower in western China, etc. These symbolic environmental settings can enhance the cultural touch of story, and make the audiences accept it and immerse themselves in the world of Chengdu, a specific culture.



Fig. 4. “Chuancheng hall” Chinese pharmacy.

V. CONCLUSION

Cultural symbols are a product of social consensus, a basic tool for human thinking and communication, and a kind of visual, auditory, or symbolic expression form widely existing in human society. They appear in visual, auditory, or symbolic forms, representing the meaning and values under a specific cultural background, and are also an important tool for cultural exchange and understanding. These symbols can enhance the storyline, create a background atmosphere, emphasize the characteristics of animated characters, and create cultural integration and so on. But at the same time, when the creators convey specific meanings and emotions with cultural symbols, they need to pay attention to the

diversity and cross-cultural interpretation problems of the works when they are interpreted.

Cultural symbols play a very important role in animation creation. In this paper, the author only interprets the expression of cultural symbols from two aspects: the main animation characters and the main animation scenes. However, other representative cultural symbols involved in the series have not been expressed, such as the Shu-Han culture in the “Legend of Chinese Medicine-Lophantherum Gracile”, the dietary culture in the “Legend of Chinese Medicine-Cordyceps sinensis”, and Mount Qingcheng, the world intangible cultural heritage in the “Legend of Chinese Medicine-Ligusticum wallichii, which shall be experienced by the audiences themselves when they watch these films.

In the future, our team will consider setting up more characters for this animation and explaining more knowledge about Chinese medicine, so as to make animation works with richer plot and more comprehensive content.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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