



The Visual Meaning of Female Symbols in Chinese Animation

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Abstract

Looking back on the history, since 1926, Chinese animation had a history more than 80 years. Shuttling in a long time, classic domestic animations witnessed the unremitting efforts and exploration of several generations. The female symbol in domestic animation has always been a touch of bright color, and the female animation image that they have created reflected the Chinese traditional culture, the women's living context in the animation, role orientation and their character. In this paper, the author is going to study the China female symbols in animation from a feminist perspective to examine the visual meanings built by them.

Key words: Chinese animation; Female symbols; Visual meaning

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INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of twentieth Century to today, Chinese animation has created many works with artistic value and national style, especially in the early founding of new China after 1949, Chinese animated film succeeded in exploration the various forms of animation and achieving pioneering renovations in style, artistic conception, content and other aspects, which not only demonstrated the charming of Chinese folk tales and

traditional culture to the world, but also reflected the rich and deep Chinese traditional aesthetic charms. The unique charm is naturally shown through the perfect combination of form and content in animation, thus developing into the typical animation with "Chinese style".

Since ancient times, women have been the eternal theme of art creation. The female symbol in domestic animation has always been a touch of bright color, and the female animation image that they have created reflected the Chinese traditional culture, the women's living context in the animation, role orientation and their character.

The research object of this article mainly focuses the shape and expression of the female symbol in Chinese animation from the perspective of feminism and explores the visual presentation of women as symbols in Chinese animation, and the social background and social ideology, values and cultural traditions in them by watching, understanding, and thinking. And through interpretation of expressing way of the female symbol in domestic animation presentation, it reveals visual significance of female symbol of Chinese animation and gets deeper understanding how of female symbol in Chinese animation can be shown on the various aspects. The passage is also going to discuss how to construct harmonious animation symbol in the media presentation of women through the analysis of the phenomenon of female symbols influence on animation audience,

1. THE VISUAL PRESENTATION OF CHINESE ANIMATION FEMALE SYMBOL

1.1 Anime Female Symbols Are Ignored

There were only a few female images appeared in the over 900 animations throughout the 80 years in China, among which only two dozens of animation used female as heroine. However, in the animations such as Long-hair Girl and The Goddess Mended the Sky, women played as

the heroine are only “victim” who sacrificed their life for a happy ending. For example, the Goddess used her body to mend the crack of the sky, allowing the people created by her to live a happy life. And the long-hair girl had to suffer eternal in the body to exchange the spring for her fellow villagers. This misplaced realization of women’s values was clearly shown in the animations.

In the traditional discourse, the “woman” is weak and can be despised who can make “disasters and need to be tamed. One aspect of the society is to “respect the mother” and the other aspect is to “become a little woman”. Thus the traditional discourse separates the roles of female into “mother” and “women”. In the process of shaping “mother”, the “woman” is gradually being placed on the opposite of “mother”. The spirit of sacrifice is a common way to shape “Mother” such as the female symbol of the Goddess in Sky Goddess and San Sheng mu in the Lotus Lantern and other settings. In modern society, the separation of “Mother” and “woman” continues. As Chinese culture advocates reproductive, mother has a special significance in Chinese culture for the ability to fertile. “Mother” is given sacred significance, such as land and the motherland. “Mother” in the conventional discourse is alienated from the “woman”, and this process of alienation is the process that “mother” concept constantly goes away from its biological meaning (Zgu & Yu, 2007, p.79).

The female symbol that appears most is the image of mother, i.e., housewife, such as the mother who only appeared once invisibly in the beginning of the animation *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* when a subordinate of Li Jing reported the birth of Nezha, which demonstrated the identity of her role as Nezha’s mother. However, we know nothing about her appearance and personality in the whole animation and she has no speech right but a female symbol as Nezha’ mother. Also, mother apron in the animation of *Big Head Son and Little Head father* is a part of the family, but the various games and plans between the son and the father had no relations with her. For example, when Mother Apron wanted to talk about a funny thing in the dinner but burped so much that she forgot the funny thing to tell, then the father and son laughed a lot due to her behavior. In most time, she just reminds the father and the son to “have meals” or not “stain the clothes. This kind of shape for female housewife will restrict the view of women and the outdated media expression will mislead the audiences, especially describing “a world that no longer exists” for the socialized growth of women. It can be concluded that the animation performance of social roles for women are scarce, modular, the marginalized and degraded. The roles of women, especially those images of women in positions of authority, and women images as decision makers in social life of in the animated text are not fairly and adequately expressed.

1.2 Stereotype Female Symbol in the Animations

The term “stereotyped image” was first proposed by Lippmann in his *Public Opinion*, which refers to form a fixed impression on certain types of people in accordance with social classification of gender, race, age or other professional. It can also be seen as that people have simplistic and general views on some social group which lags behind the reality of change. This can be expressed as stereotype and stereotyping, the former refers to the stereotyped views people has on certain things and the latter refers to the process of the formation of these stereotypes. Gender Stereotypes theory analyzes it from a critical point of view, and thinks that the shape of the image of women in the mass media text is in accordance with the desire of patriarchal culture. The image and role of women in the mass media are still in a passive state of alienation, and this complex and subtle way deepens the gender stereotypes in social life, resulting in prejudices for women and achieving the maintenance of patriarchal culture and concept. For example, “beauty-typed women” often appearing in the mass media continue to strengthen in the appearance of the female gender characteristics; the images of “good wife and mother” and “weak woman” is to emphasize the social division of labor and women’s mental state; and some images exaggerate and demonize the characteristics of personal ability and continue to look women from the traditional vision of men. Visual representations of the image of women in animation, in many cases, are the performance of “Stereotype” on women shape by the media.

In traditional discourse, the word “mother” has definite meaning and in the patriarchal society women can only be recognized by society and be respected by the family in terms of the role of mother. “Good wife and mother” has become the gender stereotype. And “mother” is always in the position of “sacrifice”. In the aspects of the behavior of a woman, the founder of sociology, August Comte thinks that woman are less institutional than a man; and theory of evolution of organism on women by Spencer, the representatives of sociology, stresses balance, thinking that “men work outside and women work inside family” is the best institutional arrangement, that is to say when women play the role as a good wife and mother, and men the breadwinners, then social equilibrium is reached. Their views were all influenced by the popular biological determinism in the thinkers’ circle at that time and were the results of patriarchal system (Zhu & Xia, 2007, p.1). The power of the patriarchal system made many women believe that performing the duty of a mother is their only responsibility.

The female symbols in animation are often limited to the level of supporting husband and children and emphasizes the sacrifice and giving for the family. On the surface, it seem that women get a personal independence when acting as mothers, and wives, but this kind of

“mother myth” serves for is the patriarchal system such as the Sky Goddess, Deer Girl, Mother Apron, the mother of McDull and San Sheng Mu mentioned above in the passage. To some degree, this kind of image implies the traditional expectations from men that women should “stay at home to take care of husband and teach children” and men’s own psychological expectations for the opposite sex overwhelm female subjectivity. Chinese animation female symbol exhibits excessive the characteristics of being materialized, invisible and demonized, which are just the stereotypes instilled by social cultures consciously or unconsciously.

1.3 Female Symbols in Animation Are Distorted

In the animation, the presentation of female symbols will be “demonized”. As mentioned earlier, in the animation Princess Iron shapes the Princess Iron Fan into lonely little woman of boudoir. In addition, the cow devil king’s sweetheart is a Jade face fox. This family relationships setting virtually strengthens the male’s center position while women here seem to be secondary, which is affiliated to man and is in the place of the others.

In the paper-cut cartoon “Calabash Brothers”, at the beginning of the animation, the gourd brothers are jumping out from seven calabashes. Strictly speaking, they have no mother but reared by the old man’s hard work. Here, the symbol of “mother” was replaced by the male character symbol. And the only female symbol is a snake, whether in the east or the west, snake has always been regarded as sly creature, representing the significance of “wicked wisdom”. The wisdom of snake is terrible and she has extreme rationality and ambition, even her husband scorpion belongs to one of the pawns to her. Every command comes from the mouth of the snake. The smart woman always regards the interests as the supremacy and is the most dangerous goblin.

Journey to the West is China’s classic literature and there are many animation works based on the theme of the story such as China’s first animated feature film Princess Iron Fan, Havoc in Heaven which laid the foundation of the international status of China Animation, and Golden Monkey Conquers the Demon, Ginseng Fruit, 52 episode animated series Journey to the West produced by CCTV, Taiwan’s first 3D animation works Red Boy and Flaming Mountain and super popular Japanese animation works *Saiyuki* and so on. Although the characters, personality of the characters and plot change with the different times, but the animation has all set up a female demon symbol, which is apparently influenced by the original work. There are in total 11 female demons in the original work, such as typical fox demon—Jade Face fox, the Nine Tailed Fox and White Face fox, which demonstrates that in the traditional patriarchal society fox demon already has being stereotyped as the symbol of “evil woman”. The fox demon is commonly known as fox spirit in the folk which are powerful and turn into human. In old

superstition, the fox can change into a spirit and become a beautiful woman to lure others. In the eyes of the ancients, only a flirtatious woman can compare with fox which has beautiful fur, little lovely body and cunning temperament. In modern Chinese, when describing a woman who is good at enamoring man, we often called her “the fox demon”. Male consciousness of the original work continued in the animations and changed the evil animal into a beautiful woman, reflecting the status of female for being watched in aesthetic activities to a certain degree. The existence of women is dependent on the beautiful appearance. However, under the beautiful appearance, the evil spirits and is disliked by the patriarchal society.

The demonization of female symbol, because of their presence has a great threat on the stability of male society, so patriarchal society often exhibits hated emotional and use the most vicious language to attack when shaping them. In fact, these goblins and shrew images in animated texts which distorted women are reflecting misogyny emotion in traditional patriarchal society. Men attack and slander women are to cover up their fear in some aspects. By demonizing female symbol, men are to alert women in the life, making them serve as an angel willingly to escape the stigma of demonization.

2. THE CAUSES OF CHINESE ANIMATION FEMALE SYMBOL VISUAL PRESENTATION

In cultural and ideological level, women expression does not get enough attention in popular culture and the media. Globalization and commercialization process of reform and opening have a huge impact and challenge Chinese mass media. On the one hand, professional women are increasingly playing an important role in all aspects of social life; Chinese women have more freedom in expression of gender identity. On the other hand, the mass media continues to show a conservative patriarchal ideology. The female character of tenderness and tolerance is considered to be a virtue and the main images of consumerism fashion and female bodies were filled with commercial media. Despite various social phenomena, what we see is that the lack of the recognition on female subject consciousness in Chinese traditional culture; the limiting effect of media on expression of gender identity diversity; the influences of media audience socialization process on shaping gender roles; and deep moral educational function that Chinese animation itself carries.

2.1 Influence of Chinese Traditional Culture

In traditional Chinese culture, the concept of male superiority went throughout the cultural context of the whole patriarchal society. Social attributes of gender carry a lot of social and cultural factors, and thus the

connotations of biological gender attributes are richer and much more complex. Social gender refers to the different constructions and expectations on social roles of men and women in social in behavior, morality, self-conscious. Patriarchal ideology is rooted in the dividing line between the public and private spheres in social political life, and in that “the activity range of masculinity is in the public domain, and the activity range of feminine is the private sphere.” Such distinctions between gender roles activities within the scope of the space recognize the view that the value of women in the intellectual and spiritual ethics is so inferior to men that female was placed under the control of the male point of view (Zhu, 2011, p.146).

This collective unconscious in China which has lasted for thousands of years has basic rules and disciplines in terms of gender distinction between men and women. In addition to this, there are also a number of sub-consciousnesses of male and female gender social distinction. For example, in appearance, men are tall and handsome while female slender and beauty; in the nature, men calm and self-confident while women loving and tender; in the social division of labor, “men work outside but women work inside the family.” These social rules which are generally accepted by the public hold the view that the social roles of women are mother and wife, daughter and that their social functions are to fertilize and bring up children. On the contrary, men are the backbones of this society with their perseverance, courage, wisdom and they are duty-bound to bear the family responsibilities of breadwinner and protector of the family. This strong traditional gender consciousness has become a deep-rooted social culture. Chinese women living in this male culture dominated society will naturally form a “collective unconscious” state. They are told to make a social submissive person and devotees in such social rules and their gender awareness is gradually domesticated. They can not only make a revolt, but play a role in the maintenance of traditional gender from the objective aspect. Meanwhile, the consumer culture of modern society exacerbated promotion of the traditional social rules. As a result, all resources that have the consumption potentials and entertainment value can be absorbed by popular culture.

We found that women shaped by the animation are beautiful. In traditional society, men claim women should be beautiful. So, women are materialized as tools of fertility and tools to please men and beauty is also an important criterion for men to choose mate. Even in modern society, women are still materialized as part of commodity consumed by men. Women’s bodies become visual landscape for male, and women become the object of appreciation and gaze. Then, the talents of women are no longer important. Appearance attractive becomes the most important criterion which is also internalized into the female standard. This plays a huge role in constricting the open creation of female symbol in Chinese cartoon.

2.2 The Influences of Media

The everyday information we receive from the media may not be objective representation of reality. Media texts give hegemonic definition on what “reality” we should receive. These definitions are in surface unavoidable, commonsense but patriarchal ideology lurks under the seemingly “non-ideological” “objective” “neutral” “no gender differences” discourse. The male perspective formed under the premise of male-centered cultural system is the reason for animation stereotype tendency of the female image in reality. On the definition of the image of women, they want to express expectations on women through some particular ways to tell society and women. This is not the real image of women, but desired image of men, female image that the male wants to achieve by consensus training. That is to say, these images in the animation are inevitably marked with discipline of male culture showing the expectations on women in male culture society, in other words, the patriarchal culture complete the characterization of women through participating in mass media. Typical example in the animation is that the male is usually the central figure among the families who carry out rational, authoritative activities in the public domain; women are usually domestic workers who are sensual and echoing the role of men. This may reflect the “real” reality, but it actually passes derogatory or negative social values of women. Another unavoidable reality is that the lack of female consciousness which is also an important reason for the formation of women image in animation. Women who are affected by long-term traditional culture and live in the male culture environment naturally bear preaching and domestication from male. Those gentle, beautiful, and non-threatening images of women are exactly the images in accordance with the values and desires of men, but these induce women during cultural heritage and promotion of the mass media, making women internalize these as conscious inner self-image expectations.

2.3 The Moral Enlightenment Function of Animation

Excellent animation could always make the audience actively accept the spirit and values conveyed in it through wonderful story and the social life reflected in the film will combine with audience inner emotional needs, making the aesthetic subject produce aesthetic pleasure. Chinese animation has the form of nationality as well as deep moral enlightenment function, which is also very prominent. This moral enlightenment function combines with the animated image of organically, reflecting people’s spiritual pursuit and spirit in a certain period. It serves for mainstream ideology through traditional stories handed down through thousands of years, or entertaining life stories. “Traditional” Chinese story cartoons are used to draw materials from traditional story text which are faithful to the original

content, use the mainstream ideology as the central ideas, give straightforward moralizing education. This results in a lack of innovation in the domestic animation script and theme which is precisely the art kernel of animation.

Animation is known as the dream of mankind and the dream is a relaxing place, but the moral enlightenment functions we put in animated films make people feel heavy. Animations present facts through the story which follow the traditional sense of generalized moral admonition and enlightenment. But such enlightenment does not take into account the construction of a new human spirit but just educates children as equal individuals. Under the influence of this concept, animators often underestimate the comprehension and understanding of the world of most of the audience, especially children. Obviously, this old concept has restricted the development of Chinese animation. Chinese cartoon characters in the spiritual charm, character development, language expression and portrayal of minor characters groups are waiting to be improved, so that forming their own unique style.

CONCLUSION

Chinese animation development has gone through stages of development which was tumultuous, which embodied the blood and sweat, pioneering spirit of generations of animators. Splendid culture, unique art form, entertaining style of Chinese animation influenced several generations, and this “animation style” also brings many honors for the Chinese in the world.

The female symbol reflected in animation is a kind of cultural ecology. From the point of view Chinese animation history, female symbol has simply become a psychological signifier catering to the audience. Under patriarchal power relations in society, women are always subject to the rule of male ideology and women cultural ecology is very uneven development. As Karl Mannheim said, art is only a utopian expression of the core in certain times shaped by various social forces and political forces (Mannheim, 2002, p.32). Therefore, the cornerstone of subjectivity construction of “she” is still the patriarchal society. Complexity of gender power relations is projected to animate text and it should be the formation of multiple expressions. Although there are still many imbalanced factors in cultural ecology of women, it has been greatly improved. In the era in which visual culture is popular, viewing itself has become a new way of reading. So, how to reach female narrative strategies, to achieve aspirations

gender equality in power, to create diversified images of women is still to be explored.

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