

The Successful Diffusion of American Animations over China

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Abstract

This thesis aims at discussing and revealing some specific methods in cross-cultural exchange between the United States and China. By analyzing one successful sample, American animation industry, the main focus of the thesis would be exploring the reasons why American animations integrate into the social and cultural life of Chinese people successfully. The reasons mainly cover two parts, how to produce high quality animations and how to raise cultural resonance of local people. This thesis references some international and domestic academic thesis and reports, and also includes experiences as an individual audience. The research result will contribute to comprehensive and systematic understanding of the success of American animation industry, the improvements of the quality of Chinese animation industry, and methods to seek similarities between the two countries in cross-cultural exchange.

Introduction

Rationale

American animation industry, one of the most complete and successful American cultural industries, has already stepped into its golden age. It has been warmly embraced by the whole world, especially in China. Nowadays, it is a common phenomenon that Chinese people rush to the cinemas enjoying the latest American animations. The success of American animation industry can also be regarded as a milestone of cross-cultural exchange between America and China. Compared with

America, Chinese government and film-making companies are also endeavoring to improve the competitiveness of the animation industry. It comes to a critical moment for Chinese animations to keep up with the change of international audiences' appreciation, preference, and mentality. With the deepening and broadening of globalization, it's of vital importance to diffuse our culture and absorb the quintessence of other cultures.

Purpose and Objectives

By analyzing the successful spread of American animations, first, this thesis aims to systematically summarize the basic reasons and requirements for producing high quality animations and the various roles that the elements of film-making have played. Second, it aims to discuss some fundamental and efficient methods for animations to gain acceptance of the international audience despite of the enormous cultural diversity. Third, by compared with the most complete and advanced animation industry, this thesis reflects where the current strength and weakness of Chinese animation industry lies, and provides some suggestions on the sustainable development and diffusion of Chinese animations learning from the experience of American animation industry.

Significance

First, this thesis can present the American animation industry from a more specific and comprehensive perspective to the Chinese audience, thus, it brings

Chinese audience a deeper, intensive and comprehensive understanding of American animations and American culture. Second, it sheds some lights on the improvements of the Chinese animations from the perspective of producing high equality animations and grasping the mentality and preferences of the audiences especially when it is a critical period for Chinese animations to be more accessible and acceptable for the international audience. Third, the research results will contribute to the diffusion of Chinese animations and culture in the international arena. International audience can touch the essence and spirit of Chinese culture through the more developed animations. Fourth, seeking the cultural similarities and identities between the United States and China is not only applies to animations industry but also other cultural fields, and it is conducive to achieve the final purpose of facilitating the cross-cultural exchange between countries.

Chapter 1 Success of American Animations

1. Achievements and the Stages of Development

1.1 Developing Process of American Animations

It has been 108 years since the first animation in the world was produced by Stewart Bracton in America. Although undergoing ups and downs, the American animation industry always remains timeless and innovative.

In a general view, the history and achievements of American animation industry can also be defined as a progressive process of the Walt Disney Company.

During the first period, from 1937 to 1949, Walt Disney Company has been at the first attempt to produce animated feature films, such as, *Bambi*, *Snow White*, and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Despite of lacking of luxury visual presentation and advanced film-making technology, these animations are still regarded as forebears of the animated feature films.

From 1950 to 1966, Disney roughly developed at the fast pace of one animation a year. These animations, *Cinderella*, *Alice in the Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, depicted a fabulous fairy world for people who are yearning for purity and innocence of childhood fantasy. This delicate fictive world also buried several opponent companies for Disney in tombs.(Zhang, 2012)

However, after Walt Disney passed away in 1966, the whole industry met its doom to fade. There were merely four animations produced in the clear 1970s. The road to success is not always flat, yet where there is a will there is a way.

In 1989, the Disney Company began to rally. By applying the computer coloring technology, *Mermaid* gained worldwide applauses and praises. Since then, many big movie-production companies, such as, DreamWorks, Paramount, and Warner were rush to join the international animations arena. And the whole industry welcomes its second spring.(Zhang, 2012)

1.2 Current Situation of the spreading of American Animations in China

American animations are the most prominent and dramatic representatives

of American cultural industry. After years of accumulation and exploration, American animations have occupied the vantage point in the international animation field, especially in China. Its leading position of box office value in China is impossible to shake. According to *Chinese Film Newspaper*, in 1995, the box office of Lion King is 42,000,000 yuan, and this record has been kept until the appearance of Kung Fu Panda with a box office of 170,000,000 yuan. The market share of American animations has reached up to 67% in China. China averagely imports 20 American animations a year after joining the WTO in 2000. (Zhang, 2012)

Table 1: The List of American Animations Released to Public in China in 2011

Number	Name of the Film	Date (Release to Public)	Domestic Box Office in China (RMB)	International Box Office (Dollars)	Percentage of the World
1	Rio	4.8	139,000,000	484,000,000	Roughly 5%
2	Kung Fu Panda 2	5.28	603,000,000	665,000,000	Roughly 14%
3	The Smurfs	8.10	26,000,000	562,000,000	Roughly 7%

4	Cars	8.24	784,600,000	559,000,000	Roughly 2%
5	The Adventures of Tintin	11.15	13,000,000	331,000,000	Roughly 6%
Total Collection			Roughly 1210,000,000		

The statistics is cited from www.boxofficemojo.com

Their success not only lies in blockbusters with good box office, but also the long lasting pursuit and warm reaction of Chinese audience after watching the animations. With public praise, these animations are able to step in a virtuous circle. Generation after generation, “American animations” have already become a synonym for good quality.

2. Reasons for the High Quality of American Animations

2.1 Character Images---Originative, Distinctive and Vivid

American animations have created hundreds of impressive cartoon characters. In 2004, British media has released a report about *Global Top 10 Most Popular Cartoon*

Figures.()

Ranking	Cartoon Figures	Animations	Producers
1	Shrek	Shrek 2	DreamWorks
2	Marin	Finding Nemo	Disney and Pixar
3	Buzz Light Year	Toy Story	Disney and Pixar
4	Mickey Mouse	Fantasia	Disney
5	Snow White	Snow White	Disney
6	Captain Hook	Peter Pan	Disney
7	Jessica Rabbit	Who Framed Roger Rabbit	Disney
8	Bambi	Bambi	Disney
9	Cruella De Vil	One Hundred and One Dalmatians	Disney
10	Baruch	The Jungle Book	Disney

These imaginative cartoon characters cover a wide range of distinctive images. Most of them are presented with succinct lines and geometric figures. Normally, some of their characteristics are sure to be exaggerated to the maximization to identify them avoiding to be duplicated, and decorated with bright colors in order to refresh the mood of the audiences.

Among them the most typical one is Baymax who is a balloon-like large-sized white robot in the recent movie Big Hero 6. Its image looks like simple combination of several white balls; however, this simple cartoon image heals and tenders the hearts

of many audiences. For about whole two weeks, the Moments of WeChat were filled with various pieces of news related to this cartoon. That's the magic of American animations.

The images of characters can be simple but not plain, succinct but not coarse, delicate but not complicated. Nowadays, with 3D technology, the images of these protagonists are becoming more stereoscopic and real, and the postures of them are getting more flexible and fluent. They are like friends with exaggerated appearances in our daily life that bring us endless laughter and joy.

2.2 Background Music--- Independent and Emotional

Background music always bears the function to foil atmosphere and express emotions to the audience in an unconscious way. Perfect background music is not only an assistant tool, but also chants the melody of the animations. The most extraordinary works will not be forgotten as an accessory to the animation, but should be remembered as an independent art work. People may feel familiar with both the song *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* and the widely known animation *Lion King*, but many of them do not know the relations between them, and that is so called independent victories.

The theme song *Let It Go* of American animation *Frozen* has won Academy Awards for Best Original Song in 2014.() With the vivid and strong lyrics of this song, people can grasp the inner monologue of Elsa who is deeply depressed and frustrated

by her magic power. The rhyme raises audience's sympathy and also thoroughly expresses the strong intention of self-imposed exile. When repeating the lyrics "Let it go, let it go", the audiences are echoed with the intense pursuit of breaking the bridles. This song has been adapted into 29 different cover versions.() The background music can be the strongest voice in the animation. As to *Despicable Me*, the background music plays a different role. It depicts an evil and vivid image of despicable me through strong beats and rhythmmed rap. Background music can make the happy moments more funny, depressing time more gloomy, fictive scenery more dramatic, and a tragic ending more heart broken.

2.3 Dubbing--- Attractive and Professional

In America, there are two choices for producers accomplish the dubbing mission. One is inviting famous film stars. The whole process is accomplished by first comparing the most suitable sound to the cartoon figure, then recording all of the scripts, and finally designing the facial expressions and body postures of the cartoon figures based on the recording sounds. This pattern has become a tradition and is pretty mature in America. Cameron Diaz, Eddie Murphy, and Mike Myers have all dubbed in the animation *Shrek 2*. On one hand, the producers believe that not only the face of film stars, but also their sounds can bring enormous profits due to the star effect. On the other hand, film stars are quite satisfied with the reward from the producers. For example, each film star in the animation *Shrek2* can get 5,000,000

dollars. (Li, 2004)

And the other choice is employing professional seiyuns who can imitate the sound of any people at any age. At first, their rewards are not as high as film stars, but as the animation got a good box office, their rewards of next animation will be much higher. For example, the dubbing speaker in The Simpson Family can get a reward for 250,000 per episode. Star effects combined with highly professional dubbing speaker are sure to attract the audience. (Li, 2004)

2.4 3D Technology--- Innovative and Advanced

Since 1995, Disney and Pixar Animation Studio began to do researches on 3D technology aiming at bringing more real and deluxe visual enjoyment to the audience. This technology developed with the rapid progress of hardware researching. Technicians initially use the 3D software to establish a fictive world and then preinstall the motion trail of the model, the motion of virtual studio, and other animation preferences. After these preparations, they need to match the suitable material and shed some light on the models. Computers can automatically operate and produce the animation afterwards. (Niu, 2008)

From 2001 to 2003, this technology advanced with leaps and bounds. The famous animations Shrek 2, Monsters Inc. Finding Nemo, and Shark Tale are all made of 3D technology. With only a pair of glasses, audience can have personal visual experience. The dropping rain, running gigantic monster and a powerful punch are no more plane and mortal to the audience. They are real and touchable from now on. That's also a

critical reason for Chinese audience to go to cinemas enjoying a film willingly.

3. Measures for American Animations to Gain International Acceptance

3.1 Scripts and Topics---Diverse and Inclusive

Script can be called the spirit of animations. Especially for American animations which are all feature films. The quality and audience's acceptance of the scripts are essential. When choosing scripts, American animation companies not only restrict to their own country and culture. They always resort to different cultural resources.

For example, the animation *Mulan* borrowed the classic story which is widely known by Chinese people. Chinese audiences are driven to the cinemas, because they want to know how foreigners arrange the familiar plots and shape a brand new character about the acquainted story. It is a safe bet without worries of being unaccustomed to the local culture.

The masterpiece *Lion King* borrowed the content of celebrated Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. ()However, it made adaptations to the setting, inserting the whole story into an animal kingdom on the African Plain. Although the plots of the animation nearly remain the same which still discuss the vengeance of the prince towards his uncle, the tragic ending was changed into a happy ending. Happy ending is also a conspicuous feature of American animations regarding the script.

From the colorful tropical jungles to solitary desert, from barbarian ancient times to technology oriented future, from mysterious wildlife to modern social life, the

scripts of American animations covered a wide range of topics. It is impossible for audience to find two identical stories and feel boring. Shrek originated from European fairies Puss in Boots, Aladdin excerpted from The Thousand and One Nights, and Rio is integrated with much Brazilian culture. Absorbing the international cultural resources, the topics and scripts of American animations are diverse and inclusive. Diversity and inclusiveness make great efforts to build cultural identity and arouse resonance of the international audiences.

3.2 Local Cultural Elements--- Authentic and Detailed

Combining American animations with local cultural elements is the most common way for American film-making companies to strengthen their international influence. Except for raising audience's curiosity, creating identity familiarity is also an important factor for these companies to drive audience into the cinema. It can be seen as a form of localization which means foreign culture partly or fully integrating into the local culture.

Taking Kung Fu Panda for example, its success is largely due to the elaboration on authentic and detailed Chinese cultural elements. First, the scene in this animation is an absolutely Chinese style. The elements in traditional Chinese paintings can be seen everywhere, for example, ancient palaces and temples locating among the mountains, narrow alleys with scattered small Chinese restaurants, and zigzagging mounting steps paved by lumps of quartzite. Second, the choice of food is very loyal

to Chinese customs; most of them are local traditional snacks and iconic Chinese cuisines. Kung Fu Panda 2 also starts with the scene that Po has eaten more than 40 steamed stuffed buns. In Po's father's restaurant, except for buns and noodles, there are also hot pots, Mapo bean curd, and even stinky tofu. Third, another spotlight in this movie is Po and his fellows' Kung Fu. Not only those difficult and flexible movements, but also the inner serenity possessed by Grand Master Oogway is also the essence of Chinese Kung Fu. From a pair of chopsticks to the exquisite mandarin jacket, from a delicate china bowl to the Chinese character "Shou", from a small boat to the magnificent Phoenix Town, the producer spares no effort to integrate American animations with Chinese culture.(Wang, 2012) Only with its tenacious pursuit of refinement and perfection can animations producer truly put themselves in audience's shoes and welcome the acceptance and understanding of Chinese people.

3.3 Themes--- Common and Generally Accepted

In American animations, the most popular subjects are to eulogize the common values of humanity. Because these values are shared by people all over the world, it will be easy to raise audience's resonance after watching the animations. In most situations, the themes of American animations are simple, direct, and easy to understand which always transmit the positive power to the audience. That's also the reason why people would rather escape from the reality and heavy workload to

engage in animations for clear two hours. The themes are serious; however, the narrative elements are humorous and attractive via fast speed speaker, humorous tone, rich body language, and wonderful dialogues.

There are mainly two types of motifs expressed under specific views. One is eulogizing the love, including friendship (love between friends), kinship (love between family members), and affection (love between lovers). It's the love manifested in American world that warms the iron world and presents the purity, innocence, and goodness to the world. Love is the origin of any morals which are generally accepted by people, responsibility, confidence, courage, tolerance, and honesty.

In *Rio*, tropical birds fell in love with a pet bird that even can't fly. In *Kung Fu Panda*, the duck father fear that his adopted panda baby Po would be hungry, and he keeps feeding him buns regardless of the cost. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince's kiss saves the princess from endless sleep. Thus, these animations touch the audience's nerve regardless of their nationalities.

The other is waving the flag of individual heroism which means that ordinary people can become a big hero after tempered and tortured. This motif endows the audience who are mostly the ordinary people a chance to dream. We absorb cheering passion and inspiring encouragement from them. As the slogan of American president Barack Obama goes, "Yes, we can." Only if we truly desire for it, the dream shall come true. In *Kung Fu Panda*, at first, Po even can't climb up to the top of the mountain, not mention competing with the tigress, but he becomes an extraordinary

hero with highly skilled martial arts. In *Lion King*, Simba is just a baby lion wandering around all day, but later he became the King of the African Plain because of perseverance and struggles. In *Big Hero 6*, Baymax is just a doctor robot to diagnose the body condition of his owner, but later he became the big hero even saving the world with the newly developed chip. Even all of them have the same dream to become a hero, their personalities are distinctive. After being a hero, they are still yearning for living a relaxing ordinary life, but stand up whenever there's danger. Everyone has a dream, thus, it fits for people at all ages not only limit to the function of entertaining children. The audiences are inspired. With the motifs of love and individual heroism, American animations can both touch and inspire people in an amusing narrative way. Thus, Chinese audience is willing to pay the bill and time on them.

3.4 Below the Line Promotions

Except for the quality of the American animations, various ways of below the line promotion are also a necessary reason for them to win Chinese people's hearts. Film-making companies usually utilize several methods simultaneously. Before the local cinema release the animation to the public, there are press conferences where directors, film stars, dubbing speakers may present along with an attractive preview to arouse audience desire for the animation. After the releasing in cinema, some resources can be found on the internet for more audience. And related cartoon

products, such as, toys, stationary, and clothes will further strengthen its influence. Thus, not only the animations themselves, but also other measures are necessary. Only through comprehensive designing and advocating, can the animation truly be accepted by the local audience.

Chapter 2 Analysis of Chinese Animations

The Advantages of Chinese Animations

One of the Successful Animations in China--- Havoc in Heaven

In 1960s, there's a widely known Chinese animation---Havoc in Heaven. It received warm welcome and applauses from the American audiences. Like the success of American animations, it is not a success by chance, but with some specific reasons. This animation is excerpted from a class Chinese mythology Journey to the West. This animation is totally in Chinese style. The flat peach, the Chinese style robe, the traditional Chinese Kung Fu, and the magnificent heavenly palaces are all painted in traditional Chinese style---Wash painting. Even the background music is Peking Opera. When considering the reaction and acceptance of American audience, Chinese producers choose to emphasize on the common beliefs shared by both countries: pursuit of freedom, belief in individual heroism, and impulse to fight against the oppression. Although the techniques of expression are quite different, these common values helped this animation to gain tremendous resonance from American audience.

Abundant Cultural Resources

The Financial and Policy Support of the Government

The Domestic and International Accumulated Experiences

A Broad Market with Great Demand and Bright Prospect

The Limitations of Chinese Animation

Deficiency of Technology Support

Gap of Animation Supply

Limitation of Scripts

Unprofessional Dubbing and Background Music

Limitations of Character Images

Infringements Phenomenon

Conclusion

The success of American animation is by chance. With the contribution of creative character images, professional dubbing and background music, advanced technology, American animation industry produced the animations of highest quality. With the combination of local cultural elements, international subjects and topics, and common values, the American animations industry further establishes its worldwide fame.

At the same time, we shall not forget the achievements of our own animations in the 1960s and 1970s represented by those wash painting style cartoons like *Havoc in Heaven*. The list of the advantages and limitations of the Chinese animation industry also presents prime directions for further developments and diffusion.

The similarities in the ways of diffusing the animations also represent the cultural identity of the people from both countries. The spreading of animations is also a representative of cross-cultural communications, with the above-mentioned analysis, we learn about the specific and efficient ways to integrate into the world, absorb the essence of other cultures and accept the international culture with a tolerant attitude.

In the process of blending with diverse cultures, China is also improving its overall national strength. By cross-cultural communication, Chinese people have established long-lasting friendship with American people, and facilitate a more harmonious and virtuous development of the international culture.

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