

The Contemporary Value of the Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage Animation

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Abstract: The protection and inheritance development of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has seen the significant involvement of emerging media, playing a crucial role in promoting the widespread dissemination and fostering the protection and inheritance of ICH culture. Among various new media matrices, animated imagery has emerged as a formidable force in the past decade, playing a vital role in the protection and inheritance of ICH, showcasing the contemporary value of the development of ICH animation. Examining the current status of the development of ICH animation, there is a cultural, technological, and skillful integration between ICH and animation. This synergy generates a force for development, highlighting prominent characteristics in three aspects: content reconstruction, form reshaping, and the coexistence of values. However, after the processes of “reconstruction” and “reshaping,” a new issue arises in the rapid development of ICH animation—whether the original connotations of ICH culture can be accurately preserved.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Animated Imagery, Contemporary Value

1. Introduction

In 2005, the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China,” explicitly stating: “Various methods such as text, audio, video, and digital multimedia should be employed to authentically, systematically, and comprehensively document intangible cultural heritage.” In 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage,” proposing the work requirement to “intensify the dissemination and popularization of intangible cultural heritage, promote extensive communication, adapt to the trend of deep media integration, enrich communication methods, and expand communication channels.” As the national attention to Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereinafter referred to as “ICH”) continues to rise, the methods, means, and content forms of ICH protection and inheritance are constantly evolving.

We are currently in an era of flourishing integrated media communication, where video and audio communication play a crucial role in the matrix of integrated media. With the strong development of animation and audiovisual platforms in the second dimension, mobile applications, and the powerful advancement of short video creation and dissemination technologies, the creation and dissemination of animated imagery are flourishing. ICH is a vital component of China’s outstanding traditional

culture, and its “revitalized” inheritance has become an important mission for promoting cultural development and enhancing cultural confidence today. The development of ICH visualization through animation has become a significant path for the “revitalization” of ICH practices. Animation, with its unique visual communication characteristics, a youthful audience base, and the advantages of dynamic dissemination, demonstrates multiple values in the practical process of ICH dynamic inheritance: content reconstruction, form reshaping, and the coexistence of values. It provides essential practical and applied value for the contemporary protection and inheritance of ICH.

2. Content Reconstruction

The ancient methods of inheriting intangible cultural heritage (ICH) predominantly involve apprentice-style transmission through oral tradition and hands-on teaching, possessing a certain embodied nature. However, there are shortcomings such as a singular transmission method, low efficiency, and narrow coverage. In the era of rapid development of new media, utilizing new media technologies as accelerators has become a crucial means to expedite the fusion development of “technology, art, and science” in the contemporary strategies for the protection and inheritance of ICH.

This paper explores the connection between animated imagery and ICH, conducting research by deeply excavating the artistic aesthetics and historical connotations behind them. It involves the recreation of highly representative elements of ICH, such as patterns, colors, crafts, history, legends, and character images, based on the aesthetic demands of contemporary audiences. This approach has the potential to reignite people’s enthusiasm for ICH. However, animated imagery is a multimedia art form that draws inspiration from life and surpasses it. Transitioning from ICH to animated imagery requires undergoing content reconstruction, which is an inevitable aspect of cultural regeneration.

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction emphasizes that the development of social culture is a dynamic process involving the intertwined interaction of multiple factors. Regardless of the culture, continuous reproduction in terms of production structures and methods is necessary for its continued transmission, thereby ensuring the continuity of social development. From this perspective, the culture produced through interaction is a newly structured and recreated cultural form and type. As cultural producers, individuals’ subjective initiative and creativity are highlighted. Bourdieu’s emphasis on cultural reproduction not only reveals the distinctive features of contemporary society compared to traditional societies but also highlights its complex operational processes and strategic activities. [1] In the context of the development of ICH into animation, intervention in new media production forms inevitably requires content reconstruction to shape the form of “ICH animation.” Currently, this form primarily exhibits characteristics of subjectivity, nationalization, and thematic focus in terms of content reproduction.

2.1. Subjectivity

In fact, the integration of China’s outstanding ethnic folk culture with animated imagery has long been evident. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio produced a series of ethnic-themed animations. Examples include the colorful animation “Piggy Eats Watermelon” in 1958 and “Fisherman” in 1959, both employing traditional paper-cutting techniques as the primary creative method and featuring classic folk stories as the narrative basis. Animations like “Ginseng Baby” in 1961 and “Havoc in Heaven” in 1964 centered around classic folk tales, showcasing the characteristics of traditional ethnic folk culture in terms of color, scenery, and character design. The 1981 production “Nine-Colored Deer,” with the Dunhuang murals as the narrative basis, adopted the visual style of Dunhuang murals, forming a unique and enchanting aesthetic feature. The 1988 ink animation film “Feelings of Mountains and Waters” embraced traditional ink painting as its visual

style, incorporating the aesthetic thoughts of Chinese ancient qin art, such as “can observe the wind, teach the soul,” “can capture the heart and soul,” “can please thoughts and emotions,” and “can calm the mind and ponder,” thus creating a strong sense of nationality and folklore.

During this period, domestically produced animated imagery displayed a strong “ethnic” characteristic. However, at that time, the concept of “ICH animation” did not exist. Subsequently, domestic animation experienced a brief downturn until the early 21st century when the genre of “ICH animation” gradually solidified. In 2015, the animated film “Monkey King: Hero is Back” made a significant impact, followed by the critically acclaimed 2016 animated film “Big Fish & Begonia,” and the well-received “Chang An” in 2023. Concurrently, there has been a rise in various forms of ICH animation, including short videos, interactive H5 content, ICH-themed games, and more. Overall, ICH has shifted from a supporting role to a central position in animated films, with works and products featuring ICH projects and elements emerging as the main narrative subjects in animation.

2.2. Nationalization

“National” refers to China’s indigenous culture, products, and brands in contrast to the West, expressing the local culture under the trend of globalization. The cultural sources contributing to nationalization include material cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage, time-honored Chinese brands, and the core content of Chinese local brands. “Chao” refers to trends and tendencies, possessing a dynamic sense of era alternation, as well as the characteristics of vibrancy and constant renewal. [2] It can be observed that nationalization has two typical features: first, themes rooted in Chinese traditional culture, and second, innovative expressions formed by combining the aesthetic preferences of today’s youth. When intangible cultural heritage, animated imagery, and the aesthetic preferences of the youth audience intersect, collide, and integrate, it gives rise to a contemporary and popular culture. In 2014, “Mr. Sea,” an animated work with traditional porcelain as its visual feature, was created by an artist born in the 1980s. All characters and backgrounds in the animation are made of porcelain, combined with stop-motion animation techniques and digital technology, making it exceptionally sophisticated. Similarly, the creative team behind the 2020 animation “Xi Xiang Ji” consists of contemporary young individuals. This work incorporates the non-heritage brick carving technique as a visual element, uses segments from the folk literature “Tale of the Western Chamber” as the story basis, and merges brick carving, traditional opera, and other non-heritage elements with stop-motion animation techniques, creating the world’s first brick carving stop-motion animation. From the perspective of contemporary non-heritage animation creation, these works cannot simply replicate existing cultural symbols in terms of artistic techniques. Instead, they must find resonance with the current audience, especially the youth, combine with the unique characteristics of animated art, and create a resonance among the work, the audience, and the era. [3] When the youth, with their unique aesthetics and technology, join the process of protecting and inheriting non-heritage, a distinctive nationalization style is imprinted on the non-heritage, revitalizing it with new vitality.

2.3. Thematization

Regarding the classification of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), researchers hold different viewpoints. Using the “Three-Category System,” ICH is categorized into dynamic arts (oral traditions and performing arts), static arts (crafts and skills), and spatiotemporal arts (festivals and ceremonies). On the other hand, the “Ten-Category System” proposes that when establishing regional ICH databases, China adopts the “Ten-Category System,” classifying projects into folk literature, traditional music, traditional dance, traditional drama, traditional storytelling, traditional sports, games and acrobatics, traditional fine arts, traditional skills, traditional medicine, and folk customs. [4] In recent years, animated films drawing inspiration from ICH often employ a strategy of eclectic

sourcing. For instance, in “Big Fish & Begonia,” elements such as Fujian tulou and the color scheme of red and black are creatively incorporated. In “Chang An,” Tang Dynasty poetry, attire, and architecture are blended with various ICH elements, creating a visually rich “full-screen ICH” experience. Short, fast-paced animated content, such as animated short films and interactive animations, frequently focus on a specific form of ICH. For example, the animated short film “Dao Xi” centers on the inheritance of the Dong ethnic group’s weaving technique (Dong brocade). “Tu Hao” highlights the restoration technique of rabbit hair-decorated tea bowls. “Nuo • Yi” centers on the ICH project of Nuo opera. “Mr. Sea” revolves around traditional folk stories. “San Yi” focuses on the production technique of oil-paper umbrellas. “Song of Eternal Regret” draws inspiration from stories in classical literature. In the current era, under the strategic direction of cultural innovation and development, the flourishing development of new media technologies has led to a growing trend where animated imagery narratives directly draw from specific ICH projects. This trend gradually shapes the momentum of themed development in the animation of ICH, emphasizing the thematization of ICH animation.

3. Form Reconstruction

In the present era, people’s thoughts and aesthetic perspectives are shifting from a singular to a more diverse approach. The way individuals receive information and perceive things has also inclined from static to dynamic, with dynamic visual media gradually becoming the mainstream method for information dissemination and reception. In response to the trends of the times, the conservation and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) have progressively adapted by employing dynamic visual media. However, what sets ICH animation apart from other dynamic visual media lies primarily in its amusement and simulation characteristics. Observing the current status of ICH animation development, two prominent features emerge in the process of reshaping its form: skill simulation and diversified presentation.

3.1. Skill Simulation

Among numerous intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects, there is a category that falls under static arts, primarily encompassing folk crafts and technical cultural items. Due to the intricate and complex craftsmanship involved in these projects, traditional apprenticeship has long been the predominant method of transmission before the use of imagery as an archival tool. This method has limitations such as low efficiency, long duration, and closed transmission systems. With the advent of visual media, the transmission of technical skills has undergone a profound transformation from the “real” to the “virtual,” breaking the boundaries of temporal and spatial communication. The elaborate crafting techniques can now be transformed into animated imagery and archived, providing a resource for learners to repeatedly observe and study. Moreover, this approach enables extensive dissemination, reaching a broader audience curious about such practices. For certain intangible cultural heritage (ICH) projects, animated visuals can offer a more vivid and engaging presentation. Moreover, they can address the limitations of other visual mediums affected by constraints in time, space, and geographical factors. For instance, in museums, animated depictions commonly showcase the construction process of dwellings in primitive tribes, providing a lively, illustrative, interesting, and straightforward demonstration of the architectural practices of human ancestors thousands of years ago. Similar historical materials, when captured through traditional filming methods, might be impractical due to limitations imposed by temporal and spatial constraints. Similarly, in large-scale cultural television programs like “China in Intangible Cultural Heritage,” there is an episode featuring the ancient technique of well-digging for brine extraction. Through animated imagery, this technique is faithfully reproduced, presenting the process of digging wells and extracting salt in a visually

compelling and easily understandable manner. The simulation of techniques is a distinctive feature of animated imagery in the protection and transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

3.2. Diverse Presentation

In recent years, a plethora of ICH animated films and products have emerged, showcasing a diversified approach in terms of visual expression strategies to meet the diverse demands of the audience for animated imagery. From the current technological forms, it is evident that various visual types such as 2D, 3D, stop-motion, interactive animation, AR/VR, etc., are extensively disseminated on video platforms, mobile clients, and other media terminals, presenting a myriad of formats. On the other hand, the term “diverse” also refers to the temporal dimension of animated imagery. Works such as “Big Fish & Begonia” and “Chang An” are long-form animations, while “Mr. Sea,” “Xi Xiang Ji,” and “Yao - Chinese Folktales” are short-form animations or a series of short-form animations. The varying lengths reflect the multi-layered demands of the audience. The diverse forms of visual expression in ICH animated imagery reflect the current trend in the development of ICH animation.

4. Mutual Value Creation

The theory of cultural symbiosis posits that cultural symbiosis, as a form where diverse cultures coexist and thrive, is a prerequisite for constructing a cultural community. People adjust to their current life circumstances by making new cultural adjustments, selectively extracting elements from past cultural heritage for reorganization, thereby forming a new cultural structure and expressive form. Thus, culture and actual life can truly interweave and fit together seamlessly, avoiding ruptures, gaps, and misalignments between culture and life. [5] The directional tendency of ICH animated imagery has already taken shape. From its technical and traditional aspects to the final animated presentation, the intermediate process constitutes a cultural regeneration. The extraction of ICH elements, the reconstruction of characters and narrative structures by animated imagery, represents the primary regeneration. Moreover, according to the theory of cultural symbiosis, the involvement and creative role of the audience should not be overlooked. The development logic of the new ICH culture continues to evolve within the framework of nested connections. Under this development trend, the cultural value of ICH is redefined and reinterpreted, manifested as the further enhancement of cultural confidence, the increased sense of national pride, and the emotional resonance stimulated in daily life.

4.1. Further Enhancement of Cultural Confidence

Domestic animation had its inception in the early 20th century and entered a flourishing period in the late 1950s to early 1960s. During this period, China produced an average of over 10 finished animations per year, featuring diverse visual styles such as paper-cutting, puppetry, ink wash painting, and more. Chinese animation excelled globally in terms of quantity, quality, depth, and breadth, earning widespread acclaim. The ink wash animation short film “The Little tadpole Looking for Mom” won six awards worldwide between 1961 and 1981, and the color animation feature film “Havoc in Heaven,” released in 1961, received six international awards. During this period, domestic animation and ICH culture had already encountered and merged. The remarkable achievements of the predecessors in Chinese animation hinted at the development path for contemporary ICH animation, suggesting that domestic animation can only produce truly internationally recognized masterpieces by following the path of national development. The current thriving development of domestic animation is precisely on the path of revitalizing outstanding traditional culture. Drawing inspiration from ICH culture, combining it with new media technology, and aligning with the preferences of subcultures among young people, domestic animation is exploring and innovating through integration. Exemplary works like the porcelain animation “Mr. Sea,” the stop-motion animation “Xi Xiang Ji,”

and the short film series “Yao - Chinese Folktales” represent unprecedented forms of expression, significantly elevating people’s awareness, aesthetic abilities, and cultural confidence in ICH culture.

4.2. Further Enhancement of National Pride

The nation is part of the world, and China’s intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has accumulated over thousands of years, creating a rich treasure trove of cultural arts. Through the utilization of new media imaging technology and modern communication channels, ICH animation allows the world to witness the beauty of Chinese animation and the beauty of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. According to the “2023 Outlook Report on the Overseas Development of Chinese Animation,” data indicates that 2019 marked a period of increased overseas expansion for Chinese animation, with 2023 witnessing an outbreak. During this time, the animated film “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child,” released overseas, achieved box office revenues at the tens of millions level, “Legend Of Deification” was screened in North America, generating approximately \$210,000 at the box office, and animated series such as “Fox Spirit Matchmaker,” “Mo Dao Zu Shi,” and “Tian Guan Zhou Fu” successively premiered on Japanese and American video platforms. [6] The narrative themes and visual styles of these outstanding animations originate from the treasury of intangible cultural heritage. With the overall increase in the overseas influence of Chinese popular culture, led by film and television, games, and the improved quality of Chinese animation itself, there is a significant rise in the demand for high-quality Chinese animation in the international market. The proactive attitude of overseas video platforms will create more possibilities for the global expansion of Chinese-style animation. Consequently, while exporting ICH animation, it effectively enhances the sense of national pride among the Chinese people.

4.3. Emotional Resonance Stimulated in Daily Life

The main audience for animated imagery consists of three groups: children, teenagers, and all age groups, with teenagers being the core audience. The widespread use of animation by teenagers as a medium for acquiring knowledge and information has become a common phenomenon. The flourishing development of ICH animation and its innovative expression methods can profoundly influence the cognitive, understanding, and liking levels of teenagers toward intangible cultural heritage. Simultaneously, when the younger generation actively participates in the overall dissemination of intangible cultural heritage, it becomes easier for ICH culture to evolve into a national trend. The logos, cultural and creative products, and peripheral products associated with intangible cultural heritage that are widely favored by teenagers often originate from ICH animations. Together, they constitute an ecosystem for the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. When the younger generation is keen on engaging with and consuming a new type of culture, that culture becomes part of their daily lives. The deeper its integration into daily life, the stronger the audience’s dependence on it, leading to a higher level of self-awareness for its protection and inheritance. From the perspective of emotional communication, “compared to other types of media, the emotions triggered by images will ferment and continue until the next encounter (new images), accumulating into emotional energy—resonance.” [7] The process of teenagers transitioning from enjoying ICH animations and consuming ICH cultural products to forming preference circles, and then participating in the dissemination of ICH, establishes a dynamic ritual chain. This process stimulates a series of emotional resonances, such as a sense of behavioral dependence, shared existence, participation and attention, emotional spread, and understanding and communication, within the group.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of intangible cultural heritage into imagery has entered a period of vigorous development, reaching a certain scale in terms of quantity and achieving a considerable level of quality. ICH animated imagery is an important branch in the development landscape of imagery. Animated imagery possesses distinct dynamic visual characteristics such as being interesting, figurative, interactive, and two-dimensional, playing a crucial role in the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. By combining the rules of animated imagery production with ICH culture as the source of creative content, through methods such as theme extraction, element extraction, narrative reorganization, and presentation using new media technology, closely integrating with the subculture preference of teenagers for “national trendiness,” ICH animation has won the favor of the core teenage audience. It satisfies the multi-sensory experiences, primarily visual, of this age group, enhancing the infectious power of culture comprehensively. ICH animation has established cultural confidence and national pride among teenagers, playing a role in propelling the flourishing development of intangible cultural heritage. However, at the same time, we must remain vigilant. The uniqueness of animated imagery poses risks of distorting the original ecological culture during the processes of content reconstruction and form reshaping. New contradictions may emerge between protection and inheritance, adherence and innovation. Effectively addressing this contradiction will be a topic that needs further attention and discussion in the future development of intangible cultural heritage imagery, especially animated imagery.

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