

## **Cultural differences in Chinese animation and Japanese anime**

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**Abstract:** As a form of visual representation animation is directly related to the advancement of technology, the changes in media practices, and the dynamics of cultural paradigms. The proliferation of digital entertainment environments over the past ten years has asserted the exceptional popularity of Japanese anime. According to an estimate [1] about 60 percent of the world's animated television production originates from Japan. Basic research established the considerable influence of Chinese animation over the works of Osamu Tezuka, the artist who set the standard for anime production. However, during the last two decades there has been a great demand for content, creative talent and artistic experience in Chinese animation industry, where box office animation hits remain few and far between. Presuming that the development of creative industry is influenced, among other factors, by culture, the article aims to establish the cultural differences related to artistic perception, audience expectations and production which have brought about noticeable differences in the evolution of Chinese animation and Japanese anime.

**Key words:** cultural differences, creative industry, animation, HaRiZu, second dimension culture, intercultural communication

### **Introduction**

The nature of intercultural communication has undergone some major changes since the publication of “The Silent Language”, however, the “Japan-as-unique” [2] concept has been reinforced through its creative industry products and cultural concepts. The global success of anime as a vehicle in/for intercultural communication correlates with the dynamics of collective feedback and crowd sourcing that have been accompanying anime from the very beginning. The unprecedented openness of copyright owners has stimulated collaborative creativity and generated enormous cultural and emotional impact. Through repeated exposure and product consumption, anime fans worldwide are developing their abilities to understand the different cultural references and appreciate the distinctive artistic technique. What is more, the constant flow of their creative energy is modifying anime into a very personal form of entertainment.

Anime's ubiquity can be empirically demonstrated by the multitude of fandom conventions and comic cons all over the world. Aniventure, for example, is a two-day event that has been actively promoting cultural exchange between anime, manga, comics, gaming and East Asian pop culture fans in Bulgaria since 2006. Focusing heavily on Japanese and local cultural practices such as cosplay, raves, screenings, special industry guests, talks and workshops, this annual convention is a unique example of how culture is created through interaction between like-minded people.

Fan practices similar to those of Aniventure prove that culture is an evolving entity which is comprised of numerous dynamic elements. In addition, a survey of the attendees of Aniventure shows that every participant belongs to more than one group and consequently

has several identities and respective loyalties. Hence, any discussion of culture and intercultural communication should be based on the assumption that culture is not a pattern of uniformity but a pliable substance that holds inherent differences together. [3] According to Spencer-Oatey [4] ‘Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour.’

The aim of the small-scale research presented in this paper is to establish the cultural differences related to artistic perception, audience expectations and production which have brought about noticeable differences in the evolution of Chinese animation and Japanese anime. The research methodology is based on qualitative methods including a brief historical overview, critical review of secondary data, comparative analysis, and discussion of topic-specific findings. Some emerging terms have been introduced in view of further research not only in participatory culture but in the field of transmedia storytelling as well. The conclusion reached proves that given the right circumstances cultural differences actually boost the development of creative industry.

### Onset

A century ago Japanese filmmakers started to experiment with animation techniques. The oldest surviving film “Namakura Gatana” [5], a 34-second animation by Junichi Kouchi, appeared in 1917.

In turn, Chinese animation dates back to the Wan Brothers (萬氏兄弟). Their first animated 12-minute short film “Uproar in the Studio” (1926) was the result of a few years work in advertising and the skillful adaptation of already existing animation techniques. Inspired by Disney’s “Snow White” (1939) the Wan Brothers created a full length animation “The Princess with the Iron Fan” in 1941. Based on the 16<sup>th</sup> century folk tale of the Monkey King that 76-minute long cartoon was the foremost inspiration for Japanese “god of manga” and “father of anime” Osamu Tezuka, who set the standard for anime production by introducing the limited animation technique, the artist who created the instantly recognizable visual elements of anime: big dazzling eyes (direct Disney influence) reflecting the emotions of the characters, huge heads with small mouths and barely noticeable noses, slim and slender figures, striking hairstyles and colour.

Searching for a new form of expression to reflect the traditional aesthetics in animation, the Wan brothers created the water-and-ink, an entirely Chinese style of animation, based on the meticulous works of painter Qi Baishi (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Qi Baishi’s Shrimps

The first water-and-ink animated film was “Little Tadpole Looking for Mummy”, 1960. [6] The visuals of this film are often described as nothing short of stunning. The simplicity of the plot contrasts with the incredible artistry of its production. The image of the translucent shrimp (see Fig. 2) was created using the water-and-ink technique and the animation of two of them smoothly at 24 frames a second without varying the weight of the inks displays a degree of technical virtuosity. [7]



Fig. 2. Image of the shrimp from “Little Tadpole Looking for Mummy”

A major achievement of Chinese animation was the proclamation of the uniqueness of the minzu animation style (the national style) in 1957. Intrinsicly connected to the cultural traditions of classic Chinese poetics and aesthetics, it is a blend of water-and-ink painting technique, cut-paper animation, and performative arts narrative style. The zenith of the minzu animation style is the creation of “Uproar in Heaven” [8] aka “Havoc in Heaven” (大闹天宫), created by the Wan brothers and the Shanghai studio in 1964, and rated as China’s most famous and successful animation (see Fig.3).



Fig. 3. “Uproar in Heaven”, The Monkey King

Although the style of the animated characters is quite close to a simplified Disney, the magic and beauty of a world inhabited by celestial beings and anthropomorphic creatures from Chinese mythology comes to life. “Uproar in Heaven” was a daring project which took 5 years and 70,000 colour drawings to complete. The result was an instant success, a vibrant re-imagining of a familiar legend that captures modern audiences. [9] Technically, it is a masterpiece, brilliantly integrating cinema with opera elements in a manner rarely achieved on screen in China before.

The 1960’s were pivotal for animation not only in China. Although not the first anime to be produced in Japan, “Tetsuwan Atomu” [10] aka “Astro Boy” (1963), is their paragon.

The 193-episode anime was created by Osamu Tezuka and his Mushi Production animation company (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. “Tetsuwan Atomu” aka “Astro Boy”

“Astro Boy” defined a local creative industry product which evolved into a global phenomenon in a few decades. Anime, hand-drawn, computer-generated, or a mixture of the two, are celluloid based manga-inspired adaptations produced with the limited-animation technique. Also known as Tezuka animation, this time and labour saving technique relies on fewer frames to create the illusion of full motion, setting the standard of 1500-1800 drawings per episode, and the specific use of camera effects such as panning, zooming, angle shots. [11]

Because of their serial character (one storyline usually develops in 50 episodes, each with a duration of 25 minutes) the adaptations take different forms and the degree of intertextuality in relation to the source (original manga) varies. Thus, anime narrations shy away from the three-act Aristotelian structure, providing audiences with a certain hyper-linked video-game experience, in which the source becomes the center of a multimedia universe with plenty of user-generated content.

The synergy which was established with the migration of characters and storylines from media to media (manga to anime), together with the commercial success and impressive overseas distribution of “Astro Boy”, “Doraemon”, “Kimba The White Lion” and “Jungle Emperor” contributed to the start of the global expansion of anime and anime fandom at the beginning of the 1980’s.

### **Conquest**

The low cost of production and the speed of the process as well as the serial nature and the appealing style of the products attested to the feasibility of anime for TV broadcast. The right mixture of cultural specifics, iconic characters, and universal themes brought about firm commitment to their consumption and creation, which transformed anime into a vehicle of intercultural communication through the use of technology as a catalyst.

China Central TV started broadcasting anime at the beginning of the 1980’s. The attraction of the imaginary worlds and the fascinating characters of “Kimba The White Lion” and

“Doraemon” (see Fig. 5) gave rise to a whole new culture – the **second-dimension culture**, or simply 2D culture. The term is used to define a system of beliefs, values, knowledge, collective practices, desires and social behaviour of millions of Chinese who consume anime and all the products of the Japanese creative industry [12] (manga, TV shows, videogames, movies, music, fashion). Anime did not only entertain several generations of Chinese, but also intensified the process of socialization, namely the realization of their intercultural communication competences. Anime have been proclaimed a major element of youth culture. They are perceived as belonging to or stemming from Japan but at the same time they are experienced as a culture of choice. In other words, anime prove their unique multifaceted cultural status as a global phenomenon and a highly personal form of entertainment.



Fig. 5. “Doraemon” and “Kimba The White Lion”

The diversification of visual formats and their distribution, and the omnipresence of digital technology affected a long-term cultural identity in China. Audience preferences and expectations changed due to the influx of screens and the highly-integrated and evolving e-commerce platforms, where spin-off products like toys, clothes, games and books are sold. It is estimated that there are 828.51 million internet users in China and 26.8% of them are under 30. [13] The process of cultural consumption, and especially the new models of active consumption (streaming platforms such as Netflix and Crunchyroll), and fan practices like cosplay shaped the generation of **HaRiZu**. The word is used as a term to define the growing number of Chinese youth with Japanese taste, who have declared anime “the golden standard” of animation and perceive the consumption of anime as cultural behavior. [14] To the HaRiZu Chinese animation is a futile copy of the technique, style and content of anime, and its watching is a vulgar and mundane activity. It seems that in a relatively short time the cultural consumption has greatly influenced the cultural behaviour of active consumers of creative industries in China in terms of beliefs, perceptions, and aesthetics.

The influence of anime, both subtle and strong, on the taste and habits of fans and artists,

indicates a high degree of vulnerability as far as their self-identification is concerned. On the one hand, Chinese animation, which has inspired and influenced Tezuka's pioneer works, has significantly changed. Chinese animators mimic the drawing technique, genres and style of anime. Their production is often considered disappointing because in a way it devalues Chinese traditions and established animation techniques such as brushstroke and colouring. On the other hand, Chinese consumers keep integrating beliefs, values and worldview from anime into contemporary Chinese culture. Such practices were deemed menacing to the cohesion of society and undermining traditional beliefs and values. Therefore, in 2004 SARFT (state administration of radio, film and TV) enforced regulation on the amount and type of broadcast anime (60% or more must be domestic), and a ban on foreign anime during prime time (18.00-20.00). [15] This type of protectionism suggests that at the time there was very little understanding of the huge, diverse and changing creative industry and no real appreciation of the moneymaking potential in creating, licensing or buying intellectual property, including animation. The next step in the government's policy to establish protective broadcasting system was to invest heavily in domestic animation, increase TV air time (from 82 300 minutes in 2006 to 134 000 in 2015), encourage and support cooperative projects between Chinese animation studios and global entertainment entities [16] (e.g. "Boonie Bears: The Big Shrink" (2018), is co-produced by Fantawild Animation, China and Coloroom Pictures, a Canadian TV company; "Kung Fu Panda 3" (2016), a Rocen Digital China-DreamWorks and USA collaboration).

### **Rebranding**

It might come as a surprise, but the rebranding of Chinese animation does not relate to its aesthetics or visual experience. It is all about turning animation into a consumer product of the CGI-driven contexts.

Despite the industrial and technological development in the last two decades, Chinese box office hits for animation remain few and far between. Although staff at animation studios have well-developed technical skills as they have been producing for the global animation industry for decades, there is great demand for content, creative talent and artistic experience. To establish the reasons for the relatively small number of animation box office hits, the following facts need to be considered [17]:

- Animation as an art form and creative industry has rather low status in Chinese society because it's viewed as hard work, long hours, cheap labour, and tough schedules;
- In 1961 the First Chinese Animation Pre-conference officially defined animation as the didactic paradigm to "serve" children;
- There are no clear standards, practices or set of codes; in addition, dubious content appears quite often e.g. violence in "Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf";
- Collaboration with international studios is perceived as Chinese packaging for foreign stories and characters;
- Financing and its uncertainty affects scriptwriting as writers go to live action films;
- Shortage of storytelling/creative talent can be explained with a culture specific conduct of the Chinese – to wait for instructions;
- Studios rarely consider how to increase the value of their product by cross-media exploitation and cross-sector collaboration with other industries;

- China Central TV has monopoly over the whole structure of the TV broadcasting system;
- The uneven development and distribution of production resources which sparks strong regional competition;
- The unpredictable subsidy policy for content producers;
- The censorship which breeds poor quality of creative vision as a trade-off for a chance of broadcasting the product and not going bankrupt;
- The practice of outsourcing large portions of production (studios able to do only limited amount of work);
- The oversupply of content leads to low prices of product that can't cover production costs;
- The very nature of the viewing culture of Chinese children, which is compacted. They watch several rather than only one episode per day/per week as compared to the Japanese flexible model of producing animation content based on a weekly watching convention.

The major factors in rebranding Chinese animation include close collaboration between VR (virtual reality) entertainment experiences and animation studios on the one hand, and the smart gadget owners who open up a new segment for Chinese creative industry on the other. Top priorities in the process of rebranding Chinese animation industry involve the utilization of cutting-edge technology, the introduction of fresh perspectives and original ideas, the preservation of cultural values, and the acceleration of animation industry.

Accordingly, as of 2009, animation film production in China is officially listed in the national project "Five One", i.e. animation is deemed a strategic sector in the development of Chinese economy. [18] In other words, animation has been repositioned as part of the creative economy and a new source of GDP. Massive investment in animation from the government has led to the creation of huge animation industrial parks, which might indicate that quality and creativity are not much sought after.

On the other hand, there is the ambition to invest in content and create world class Chinese hallmark products. The big investors here are: - Wanda Group - \$9 billion film studio and theme park a la Disney; - Gary Wang's (founder of Tudou) animation studio "Light Chaser", hoping to be the equivalent of Pixar it created first CG animated movies "Little Door Guards" and "Kung Fu Panda"<sup>3</sup>; - China Media Capital (joint venture with DreamWorks Animation SKG named Oriental DreamWorks).

Because the broadcasting systems for animated features and TV series in China are different animated features have better marketing and branding opportunities, and most importantly better investment returns. Industrial strategies applied so far include co-production with overseas partners to co-develop original ideas that can be easily adapted for the Chinese market and/or hiring talent to create original content that will succeed both locally and globally (e.g. Nanjing's Golden Oaks Pictures hired Dan Smith, an Emmy award winning producer).

Although there is massive financial support a few obstacles remain, among which the fact that most of the Chinese animation companies are managed like industrial entities [19] (no creative people sit on the boards and employees are treated like machines); also, there is constant censorship, therefore, no real passion for animation can thrive and no real talent is headhunted; and finally, there is the culture specific setback demonstrated in the

unwillingness of Chinese to move for the job.

Based on the analysis of the data, other issues with which the animation industry should come to terms are: the pursuit of balance between the act of creation and the act of spectatorship, various problems concerning collective remembering and forgetting (the history of Sino-Japanese relations), overcoming cultural obstacles in co-production arising from the differences in the general narrative formula - the Chinese tend to overcomplicate the storylines, rarely getting close to the clear-cut beginning, middle, and ending of a fluid storytelling structure.

### **Sino-Japanese film cooperation**

While 2018 was celebrated as the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China, it also marked the 40th anniversary of the start of official Sino-Japanese film cooperation. [20]

Promising at first, China held the first Japanese film week when the treaty was signed in 1978, the bilateral film cooperation mainly stayed at the import-export level. However, the past few years have witnessed the release of more Chinese remakes of Japanese works as 64

well as Sino-Japanese co-produced films and ACG (animation, comic and game) works. The “Legend of the Demon Cat” and Sino-Japanese animated TV series “Cheating Craft” (see Fig. 6) are good examples.



Fig. 6. “Cheating Craft”

Together with “Flavors of Youth” (see Fig. 7) (Japanese 詩季織々 Shikioriori, Chinese 肆式青春 Si Shi Qing Chun), the three movies are the first set of commercialized Sino-Japanese co-productions, which thanks to the efforts of the Japan-China Cultural Industry Exchange Association (JCCIEA), established in March 2018 in Tokyo by renowned

cultural platforms and companies from both countries including Japan's NHK and China's Maoyan, will become more diverse and co-creation will be established as a major trend in animation.

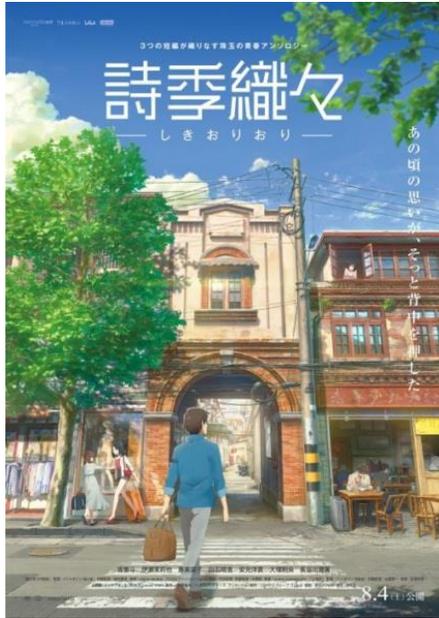


Fig. 7. “Flavours of Youth”

“Flavors of Youth” is the result of efficient and successful intercultural communication in creative industry. The impressive performance of 2017 co-production “Legend of the Demon Cat” attests to the huge market potential of Sino-Japanese co-creation. Both countries are bolstering efforts to realize it through incorporating culturally different perspectives. The Shanghai Film Distribution and Exhibition Association hosted a film festival in Tokyo in May 2018 to showcase Chinese films, while the Japan Foundation hosted the Japanese Film Festival in Chongqing, Guangzhou in the autumn.

### **By way of conclusion**

A summary of the cultural differences related to artistic perception, audience expectations and production which have brought about noticeable variations in the evolution of Chinese animation and Japanese anime is presented in the table below.

|                          | <b>Artistic perception and audience expectations</b>  | <b>Production</b>   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Chinese animation</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Low status in society</li> <li>2. Didactic purpose</li> <li>3. Audience – children, mostly Chinese</li> <li>4. Compacted viewing practice</li> </ol>                      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Feature length movies</li> <li>2. Slow and expensive production</li> <li>3. Poor quality of creative vision</li> <li>4. Mimicking anime technique</li> <li>5. Culture-specific themes and characters</li> <li>6. Strict censorship and government TV monopole</li> <li>7. No migration of characters</li> <li>8. No cross-media and cross-sector collaboration</li> <li>9. Unwillingness to co-produce</li> <li>10. Uncertain commercial success</li> <li>11. Limited overseas distribution</li> <li>12. No paraphernalia products</li> <li>13. No audience feedback</li> <li>14. No fan practices</li> </ol>   |
| <b>Japanese anime</b>    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Beloved by all age groups</li> <li>2. Didactic and entertainment purpose</li> <li>3. Audience – all ages, the world over</li> <li>4. Flexible viewing practice</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Serial character of episodes</li> <li>2. Speed and low cost of production</li> <li>3. Talented artists passionate about their product</li> <li>4. Limited animation technique, specific use of camera, instantly recognizable visual characteristics</li> <li>5. Universal themes and myriads of characters</li> <li>6. Limited censorship (age)</li> <li>7. Character migration from media to media</li> <li>8. Cross-media and cross-sector collaboration</li> <li>9. Increase of co-produced anime</li> <li>10. Great commercial success due to overseas contracts and transmedia storytelling</li> <li>11. Global distribution</li> <li>12. Heaps of anime merchandise</li> <li>13. Active audience feedback</li> <li>14. Worldwide fandom</li> </ol> |

**Table 1: Cultural differences in Chinese animation and Japanese anime**

The repositioning of animation as part of creative economy and a new source of GDP together with the creation of huge animation industrial parks, and the active search for new

opportunities to co-develop original ideas and co-produce box office hits indicate that given the right circumstances cultural differences actually boost the development of creative industry. Chinese animation is no longer at its low but has reached a stage of “adolescence”. [21] The ‘rejuvenation’ proves that Chinese animation industry is being transformed into a creative multi-billion-dollar industry. China has already produced a global animation brand in the “Boonie Bears” series, which together with the acclaim for “Monkey King: Hero is Back”, “Big Fish and Begonia”, “White Snake”, “Cheating Craft” and “Flavours of Youth” is a strong indication of the rapid evolution of China’s animation industry to appeal to global audiences.

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