

**Can universal values help Chinese mythological animation movies  
spread across cultures?**

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FMP Thesis Proposal

## **Abstract**

In the past decade, Chinese mythological animated films are developing rapidly, but they are unable to be spread across cultures around the world. Hayao Miyazaki's works are also non-English, with no Western cultural background; however, due to universal values, its works can spread across cultural boundaries, gaining popularity among people of different countries, different classes and different ages. Universal values are one of the main reasons why his works can endure in the world. If Chinese mythological animated movies are added by universal values, It is possible for them to be distributed across cultures.

## **Key Words**

Universal Values, Chinese Mythological Animation Movie, Cross-Culture, Chinese Traditional Mythology, Hayao Miyazaki, Japanese Animated Films

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## Introduction

Chinese mythology is the ancient Chinese people's artistic creation, which is an imagination and understanding of nature and culture, coming up with fantasizing stories with characters and plots, and becoming an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. Since Chinese mythology is a fictional art, which needs a suitable artistic carrier to convey the spirit of traditional Chinese culture and oriental aesthetic ideas. At the same time, animated film is a free approach of artistic creation that can deconstruct, adapt and innovate ancient mythology; therefore, it is gradually becoming the main artistic creation of Chinese mythology. Within the past decade, there has been a clear creative peak time for Chinese mythology animated films. During this time, *“Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child”* (Yang, 2019), which has been the most successful, earned \$719 million at the box office in China (Box Office Mojo by IMDBPro, 2023). However, according to Box Office Mojo by IMDBPro, this Chinese mythology animated movie has only grossed about \$6.5 million outside of China (Box Office Mojo by IMDBPro, 2023). *“Spirited Away”* (Miyazaki, 2001) also had the Eastern cultural background, but grossed about \$119 million outside of Japan (Box Office Mojo by IMDBPro, 2023), and won the 75th Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. This obvious box office comparison indicates that Chinese mythological animated movies have not been widely distributed outside of China. Therefore, this proposal analyzes how *“Spirited Away”* has been distributed cross-culturally in order to find possibilities that can help Chinese mythological animated films to be distributed cross-culturally.

## Literature Review

Ancient Chinese mythology is an important part of Chinese national culture. A New Interpretation of the Traditional Ethnic Rational Spirit Presented by Ancient Chinese Myths (Wang, 2022) illustrates that it is essential for the transmission of Chinese culture and the establishment of cultural confidence; therefore, it is necessary to effectively disseminate Chinese mythology. "A Study of the Inherited Relations between Classical Mythology and the Making of Chinese Animation Films" (Tang and Gong, 2021) describes how Chinese mythological animated films are mainly based on traditional Chinese mythological stories, such as *"Monkey King: Hero is Back"* (Tian, 2015) and *"Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child"* (Yang, 2019), which are taken from "Journey to the West" and "Investiture of the Gods". In "Export of Chinese Animated Film: A Case Study on Nezha" (Zhao, 2021), Siyun Zhao points out that even the highest grossing *"Nezha"* has not been widely disseminated outside of China due to cultural differences, indicates the current situation of Chinese mythological animated films. It shows that the problem of cross-cultural distribution is a rather obvious challenge for Chinese mythological animated movies. In addition, "Discussion on Some Common Problems in Current Creation of Chinese Animation" (Li, 2022) demonstrates that the characters of Chinese mythological animated movies can not communicate with audiences since they are stereotyped without personality. This kind of character design will impede the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese mythological animated films.

However, Hayao Miyazaki 's Japanese animated films, which also depict a great deal of traditional Japanese gods and monsters culture, take the world by storm. According to the "Representation of the Local and Global Community in the Works of

Hayao Miyazaki's *Chihiro*" (Bensalah and Ghita, 2022), the universal thinking of human beings is the crucial part of this animated film's story. These are universal values.

"Content Analysis of Universal Values in Popular Hollywood Animated Movies: A Study of Universal Values from 2010 To 2020" (Ameer, 2020) argues that universal values are values that can be accepted by societies from different cultural backgrounds, and investigates how Disney animated movies use universal values in their plots and characters. This study indicates that universal values have been widely used in animated films' stories and characters for communicating with people from different cultures.

## **Methodology**

### **Case Study**

Case study is a research method used to generate in-depth, multifaceted understanding of specific cases in issues and investigations (Tellis, 1997). In this research, this method is used to study how to add universal thinking and use universal values to the storytelling and character design of "*Spirited Away*". The analyzed outcome would suggest the possibilities for helping Chinese mythological animation films to be disseminated across cultures.

### **Secondary Research**

Secondary Research is a research method that uses the survey analysis and data collected by others (Chong and Plonsky, 2023). This approach can define cross-cultural communication as one of the existing challenges of Chinese mythological

animation movies, and also investigates the use of universal values in animation films from distinct cultural backgrounds.

## **Contextual Analysis**

### **1. What is the Chinese mythological animated film?**

Chinese mythology is a collection of traditional culture, religion and history of ancient China, including various gods and goddesses, demons and monsters, Buddhas and deified heroes, etc. It is also the ancient people's perception and artistic imagination of heaven and earth, the universe, human origins, natural phenomena, tribal wars and labor life. In this way, Chinese myths have played an indispensable role in the formation and development of the Chinese nation's ideology, literature, art, and national spirit due to its philosophical and humanistic ideas which inspire people's spirit and courage to pursue a better life (Wang, 2022). Most of the Chinese mythological stories were passed down through books, or by word of mouth. However, not only has the development of various modern communication media effectively promoted the widespread dissemination of Chinese mythological stories, but people also have made many artistic creations based on these stories. Animated movies are often created on the basis of Chinese mythological topics, and combined with modern thoughts and feelings in order to make the mysterious Chinese myths more tangible and visualized (Tang and Gong, 2021).

### **2. What kind of problems do Chinese mythological animated films have? Why can't it be spread across cultures?**

In the past decade, due to the popularity of the Chinese mythology animated films, there are many Chinese classic mythology and legends which have been continuously adapted and created by animated films, and have become the mainstream of Chinese animated movies. But Chinese mythology animated films have not attracted many people who are not from Chinese cultural background. For example, “*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*” illustrated a growing story that a boy was born as a demon but struggled to fight against his fate and strive for good. When this movie was released in countries outside of China, many non-Chinese viewers expressed a lack of understanding of the plot and lines of this Chinese mythology animated movie (Zhao, 2021). If audiences do not have the knowledge base of the local Chinese culture, they are unable to understand the meanings of Chinese culture in the plots and lines, such as poems, songs or local dialects, which is the basic reason why Chinese mythology animation films cannot be spread across cultures.

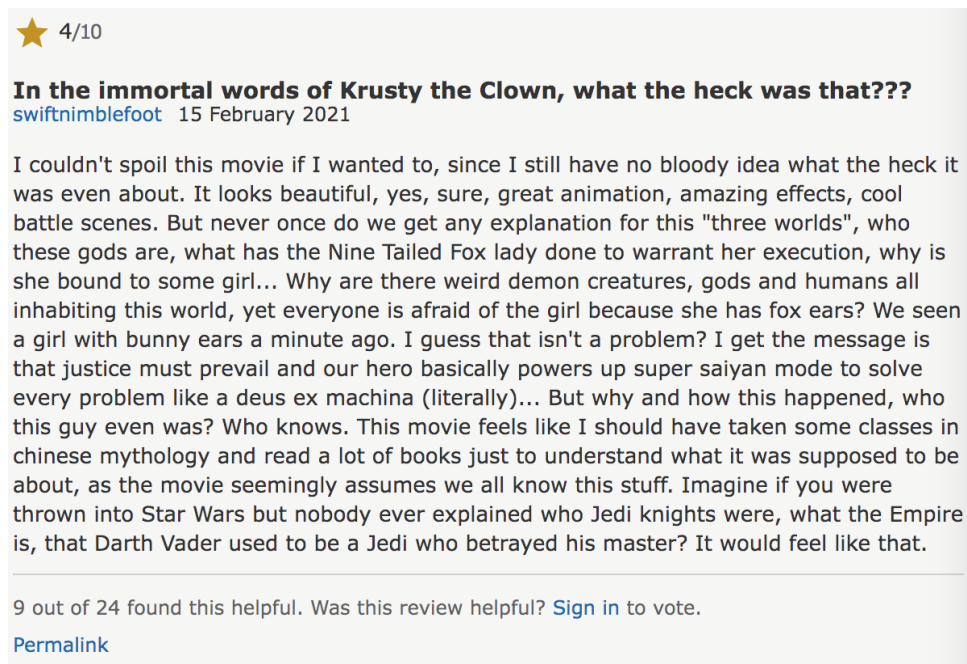


Fig. 1 User Reviews of Jiang Ziya, IMDB (2023)



Depending on the reviews of “*Jiang ZiYa*” (Cheng and Li, 2020) on IMDB, some viewers reflect that the story of this Chinese mythology animation film is complicated and difficult to understand since it assumes that audiences know the background of Chinese mythology (IMDB, 2023). According to the reflection, it’s obvious that the story design of Chinese mythological animated films is not inclusive for audiences from other cultures. In addition, in Chinese mythology animated movies, the design of most characters always follows the traditional setting of Chinese mythology, and is simple and stereotyped without the personality and emotions of ordinary humans; therefore, they are unable to have any resonance with audiences (Li, 2022). Besides stories, this kind of character design also has difficulty communicating with audiences from distinct cultures. As a result, stories and character design is one of the reasons that hinder the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese mythological animated films.

### **3. Why can Hayao Miyazaki's works be spread across cultures?**

On the contrary, the Japanese animation works of Miyazaki Hayao also have an oriental cultural background and cover many Japanese mythological elements, but they can be popular in various countries, especially the “*Spirited Away*” (Miyazaki, 2001), which was released in 22 countries other than Japan and may have made about \$119 million at the box office (Box Office Mojo by IMDBPro, 2023). The film tells the story of Chihiro Ogino, an ordinary girl who learns to face difficulties and unleash her potential in order to save her parents, and eventually get out of trouble. Meanwhile, in the tunnel, there is an interdimensional world which shows Japanese monster culture, Onsen culture and Kotodama culture. These cultures are skillfully blended into the story of an

ordinary girl growing up. Audiences from different countries can resonate with the animation because its story contains universal human thinking (Bensalah and Ghita, 2022). Chihiro's experience in the tunnel is a myth, but her self-reliance, selflessness and challenge to the difficulties of growing up are real. This kind of story can strike a chord with audiences from different cultures since it reflects the lives of most people. At the same time, the character design of this animation also contains the universal traits and thinking of human beings, including kindness, resilience and simplicity. These are representatives of the universal values which are values that can be generally accepted by most societies, such as benevolence, self-direction, spirituality, power and hedonism (Ameer, 2020). They emphasize the existence of universality among people of different cultural backgrounds, and can transcend national boundaries. Due to universal values' use in stories and character design, not only does this animation let people from different cultures enter a magical interdimensional world, but they also can feel spiritual comfort and real emotions. Using universal values to break down the barriers between different backgrounds and cultures is the reason that "Spirited Away" can be spread across cultures.

#### **4. Are Universal values widely used in animated films?**

In addition to Japanese animation movies, North American animated films are also adept in depicting diverse cultures, and they are also popular in Asia, especially Disney animated films since their cross-cultural communication is also influenced by universal values. According to Amna Ameer's analysis of universal values in nine Disney animated films' stories and characters, universal values are the common and

essential elements in the stories of animated films in order to depict various cultures because people from different cultural backgrounds share the same views on universal human values (Ameer, 2020). Therefore, it is evident that universal values are the crucial humanistic value in animated movies, and can help audiences from different cultures to understand distinct cultures in animated movies.

## **Discussion & Findings**

Through investigation and analysis, universal values already have been widely used in animated films from different cultures for cross-cultural communication. When designing the plot, universal values can incorporate some traditional cultures into the storyline. For example, in *"Spirited Away"*, the plot of signing the contract with Yubaba will let people forget their name is kotodama culture in Japanese mythology. Meanwhile, universal values can also design the prototypes of non-human characters to have humans' universal qualities and emotions, such as Baymax in *"Big Hero 6"* (Hall and Williams, 2014) is a kindhearted and loving robot. These uses of universal values in animated movies could be a possible direction for Chinese mythological animated films to follow to simplify their complex stories and character designs, striking a chord with more audiences.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is possible that cultural differences would hinder the cross-cultural communication of Chinese mythological animation films, but if universal values can be applied skillfully in animation films, it is possible for them to be distributed

cross-culturally while adhering to the characteristics of Chinese traditional mythological culture. Further exploration will be about if universal values can help the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese mythological animated films.

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## **Webside**

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