

**How can Chinese mythological animated films use universal values to spread  
across cultures?**

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## **Abstract**

Chinese mythology, based on the ancient Chinese people's imagination, understanding and artistic creation of nature and culture, is full of the Chinese nation's cultural spirit and educational values. In order to better spread the abundant Chinese mythology, animation is an effective medium of communication. But the inability of cross-cultural communication is one of the main difficulties of Chinese mythology animation. This thesis mainly analyzes and studies how "Spirited Away" and "The Breadwinner" use universal values to spread different cultures under the background of Japanese mythology and Islamic mythology, in order to explore whether universal values alleviating the negative impact of cultural differences can promote the cross-cultural communication of Chinese mythological animation. Meanwhile, Chinese mythological animation should not abuse the universal values and ignore the controversy of these values for pursuit of cultural identity.

## **Key Word:**

Chinese Myth Animation, Universal value, Chinese Traditional Myth, Cross-cultural communication, Spirited Away, The Breadwinner, Japanese Mythological Animation

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## Introduction

Chinese mythology is the understanding and imagination of ancient culture and nature by ancient Chinese people, including a series of fantasy stories with characters, plots and humanistic values. Chinese mythology is an important part of Chinese history and traditional culture because it contains the spirit and core values of the Chinese nation. As Chinese mythology is a fictional art, the spirit of Oriental aesthetic thoughts and Chinese traditional culture needs an art carrier to be conveyed. Besides books, TV series and movies, animations have gradually become the main artistic means of spreading Chinese myths. In these media, animation can freely adapt, deconstruct and innovate Chinese mythology; therefore, it is a crucial art creation of Chinese myth. In the past decade, Chinese mythological animated films have had an obvious creative peak. Among these animations, the box office of "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" (Yang, 2019) was \$719 million in China (IMDBPro's box office Mojo, 2023), becoming the most successful Chinese mythology animation of the past decade in China. Outside of China, this animated film only grossed \$6.5 million (IMDBPro's box office Mojo, 2023). However, although "Spirited Away" (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001) came from oriental culture, it earned \$119 million out of Japan (IMDBPro's Box Office Mojo, 2023), and was the winner of Best Animated Feature of the 75th Academy Awards. There is a clear gap between the two animated movies' box office sales outside of their countries. This stark contrast shows that Chinese mythological animated films have not spread widely abroad. This paper will analyze the reasons for the success of the cross-cultural communication of Spirited Away (2001), with a view to contributing to the cross-cultural communication of Chinese mythic animated films.

## Literature Review

### 1. What is Chinese mythology? What is its value?

"The World of Chinese Mythology: An Introduction 1" (Yang, 2011 p.25-29) specifically indicates the content of Chinese mythology, including ancient Chinese art, religion, geography, philosophy and history. "A New Interpretation of the Traditional Ethnic Rational Spirit Presented by Ancient Chinese Myths" (Wang, 2022 p.313) puts forward that most Chinese mythological stories mainly want to convey to people the spirit of daring to struggle with nature and difficulties, and the bravery to contribute themselves. In addition, "Mythology and Its Applicability in Education: Studying Kalidas' Abhigyanashakuntalam and Kumarsambhava" (Adhikari and Saha, 2023 p.64-65) argues that mythology is an important part of education; at the same time, Adhikari and Saha also emphasizes that myths can help children learn about history and society, and form their own values. Depending on these studies, it's possible to predict that Chinese myths also have educational value. In "A Probe into the Value of Chinese Ancient Mythology in Children's Education" (He, 2016 p.28-29), He demonstrates that Chinese education needs Chinese mythology to teach children to establish moral values and develop imagination. Therefore, because of the national spirit and educational value of Chinese mythology, it is necessary to spread Chinese mythology to the world. Meanwhile, according to Yang's illustration (Yang, 2011 p.26), Chinese mythology has not been systematically recorded and handed down; as a result, recording and spreading is imperative for preserving Chinese myths.

## 2. Chinese mythological animations cannot be spread across cultures.

In order to effectively record and spread Chinese mythology, animation has become one of the main media. "A Study of the Inherited Relations between Classical Mythology and the Making of Chinese Animation Films" (Tang and Gong, 2021 p.415-416) indicates that the traditional Chinese mythological stories are the main source of Chinese mythological animation. In "Export of Chinese Animated Film: A Case Study on Nezha" (Zhao, 2021 p.30-31), Zhao demonstrates that Chinese mythological animations have not been widely distributed abroad due to cultural differences. On the contrary, European and American animation companies often use elements of Chinese mythology in their animations, which are popular among people from different cultures, especially "Kung Fu Panda" (Reiff and Voris, 2008). "Research on application of Chinese culture in animated movie KungFu Panda" (Wang, 2016 p.421) points out that "Kung Fu Panda" (2008) uses many classic and iconic Chinese elements, especially the dragon because it represents authority in Chinese mythology and has the responsibility to protect the people; as a result, dragon is suitable for the representation of justice in this animation. But "The Image of Dragon in The Bai Nationality's Folk Culture" (Li, 2021 p.1-2) shows that dragon has a variety of images and meanings in Chinese mythology, and is not limited to justice and authority; therefore, the use of Chinese mythological elements is stereotyped in the Chinese-style animation produced by European and American animation companies. In order to spread abundant and correct Chinese myths, Chinese native animation needs to break the restrictions of cultural differences.

3. How does “Spirited Away” and “The Breadwinner” use universal values to spread across cultures?

In contrast, Hayao Miyazaki's Japanese mythological animations not only describe a large number of monsters and spirits from traditional Japanese mythology, but also spread across cultures. “Hayao Miyazaki's Mythic Poetics: Experiencing the Narrative Persuasions in Spirited Away, Howl's Moving Castle and Ponyo” (Wu, 2016 p.198) points out that “Spirited Away” (2001) resonates with various cultures' audiences because it contains universal human behavior and reflects real life. This study analyzes the reason why Spirited Away can be spread across cultures is that the story and character design uses universal values which are shared by different cultures. “Content Analysis of Universal Values in Popular Hollywood Animated Movies: A Study of Universal Values from 2010 To 2020” (Ameer, 2020 p.99-100) believes that the values accepted by societies from different cultural backgrounds are universal values. “Spirited Away” (2001) uses universal values to eliminate communication barriers between different cultures, and can attract more audiences from distinct backgrounds to display the charm of Japanese mythological animation.

In addition to Spirited Away, “The Breadwinner” (Twomey, 2017) with Islamic mythology have also spread widely across different cultures. In "The Breadwinner: Ethnic Animation Style and Cultural Expression" (Chen, 2019 p.34-35), Chen Yishhui specifically analyzes that the Islamic mythology is the source of an Afghan girl's courage to survive under the pressure of the Taliban, which promotes the universal value of the story. "Woman As Major Earners In The Breadwinner Movie (2017) Directed By Nora Twomey" (Fatarani and Candraningrum, 2023 p.2-3) argues that the

representation of women characters in the movie successfully illustrates the bravery and strength of women under difficulties and oppression in society. Therefore, universal values can help non-European and American animations establish communication with audiences from different cultures.

#### 4. What is the universal value? Can it promote cross-cultural communication?

Through analyzing the cross-cultural communication of “Spirited Away” (2001) and “the Breadwinner” (2017), Chinese mythological animations can explore whether universal values are also applicable to their own cross-cultural communication. Ameer argues that common human values that are accepted by most societies can become universal values and often exist in people's behavior (Ameer, 2020 p.99-100).

Meanwhile, “Shared Values for a Troubled World” (Kidder, 1994 Chapter 7) summarizes eight common human values that are accepted by most societies through interviews with people from all cultures and fields; therefore, universal values are universal and common among different cultures. In “Study on the Convergence and the Homogenization of the Development of Human Culture by Analyzing Animation Movies” (Chen, 2015 p.39-40), Chen Siwen argues that universal values can promote cross-cultural communication among different cultures because it can avoid cross-cultural misinterpretation and conflicts. This study provides a feasible method for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese mythological animation to alleviate the negative impact of cultural differences.



5. How can universal values promote the spread of Chinese mythological animation in other cultures?

Since different cultures can accept universal values, it is worth discussing whether Chinese mythology can also accept universal values. Adhikari and Saha also argue that mythological cultures around the world are diverse, but all contain universal values (Adhikari and Saha, 2023 p.64-65). Wang analyzes the core ideas of Chinese mythology are peace, love, loyalty, filial piety and perseverance which are all typical universal values (Wang, 2022 p.313); as a result, Chinese mythology contains universal values and can be used to communicate with the public. Whether the original universal value of Chinese mythology can promote the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese mythology animation needs to be discussed. "Discuss The Value of Mythology in Chinese Animation" (Hou, 2012 p.1) points out that most of the characters in Chinese mythology animation are stereotypical and traditional, and lack ordinary human emotions and desires. In "Discussion on Some Common Problems in Current Creation of Chinese Animation" (Yang, 2022 p.19), Yang analyzes how the protagonist of "Jiang Ziya" (Teng and Wei, 2020) is detached from universal human emotions and unable to connect with the audience. This setting is completely different from Jiang Ziya, who is sentient and righteous in the original book of "Investiture of the Gods" (Xu, 16th-century); therefore, Chinese mythology animation should not ignore the original universal value of Chinese mythology for creation which will make the audience misunderstand.

Moreover, it is the thought and cognition of ancient Chinese people that constitute Chinese mythology, and can not be unified with modern thought in some

aspects. Hou also proposes that Chinese animation needs to adapt the theme of Chinese myths properly, and also to go into the vision of other cultures through the common values of mankind (Hou, 2012 p.1). This idea coincides with that of director Wuershan. In "The Modern Narration of Epic: An Interview with Wu Ershan, Director of Creation of The Gods" (Wu, Chen and Li, 2023 p.79-80), Wuershan believes that the adaptation of mythological themes should not only respect the original work, but also cover the common values of the nation and mankind in order to make movies more authentic and credible, and arouse the resonance of the audience. However, the adaptation of mythological themes in Chinese animation is not similar with the ideas of Wuershan and Hou Song Zhongxia. In Yang's analysis (Yang, 2022 p.19), the animation still keeps the stereotyped images of mythological supporting characters which are unable to promote the story and attract the audience. "Creating Unforgettable Characters" (Seger, 1990 p.202-207) discusses how authentic and believable characters cannot be defined by the context of their identity, but rather by their behavior. According to this study, the stories and characters of Chinese mythology animation make other cultures' audiences unable to understand as they follow their identity to create their sense of reality and credibility rather than behaviors which can show universal values. Therefore, for communicating with audiences from different cultures, it is worth thinking and trying to integrate universal values into Chinese mythological animation.

6. Universal values is not an idealized approach of cross-cultural communication.

But universal values have always been controversial. Since "Constructing Universal Values? A Practical Approach" (Lang, 2020 p.267-269) suggests that universal values are constructed by specific culture and ethnic backgrounds, rather than idealized ones. This point questions the universality and commonality of universal values and will have a negative impact on the cultural uniqueness of Chinese mythological animation. Meanwhile, "The use and abuse of 'universal values' in the Danish cartoon controversy" (Rostboll, 2010 p.401-403) demonstrates that the abuse of universal values will not only fail to achieve cross-cultural communication, but also be rejected. "Wish Dragon" (Appelhans, 2021) making a Chinese dragon become a Chinese version of the lamp of Aladdin is a convincing example of this point. Combining these two points, Chinese mythological animation needs to find suitable universal values and use them reasonably before it can be spread across cultures.

## **Methodology**

### **1. Case Study**

Case study can be a research method for specific cases to develop a multifaceted and in-depth study in different questions and investigations (Priya, 2020). In this study, it is necessary to take "Kung Fu Panda" (2008) as a case to analyze the stereotypical use of Chinese mythological elements in European and American animations, and explore that Chinese myth still needs Chinese local mythological animations to promote cross-cultural transmission. The use of universal values in character design and story of "Spirited Away" (2001) and "The Breadwinner" (2017) also need this approach for propose the possibility of helping the cross-cultural transmission

of Chinese mythological animation. Meanwhile, analyzing “Jiang Ziya” (2020) and “Monkey King: Hero is Back” (Tian, 2015) can study the general status and problems of Chinese mythological animation, and lacking universal values will hinder cross-cultural communication. However, as universal value is not an ideal approach, it is essential to analyze “Wish Dragon” (2021) to prove that the abuse of universal value will lead to the loss of cultural uniqueness of Chinese mythological animation.

## 2. Secondary Research

Using survey data and analysis collected by others is secondary research (Chong and Plonsky, 2023). The definition and values of Chinese myths need to be supported by persuasive secondary research. Not only can this method analyze that Chinese mythological animation has challenges of cross-cultural communication, but also study the application of universal values in different cultures' animations. At the same time, the secondary research can study and define universal values, and explore that universal values can promote communication between different cultures and alleviate misunderstandings caused by cultural differences, which can be a feasible way to promote the cross-cultural transmission of Chinese mythological animation.

## **Themed topic chapters**

### **Chapter 1. Chinese mythological animated films**

#### 1.1 What is Chinese mythology?

Chinese mythology is a special collection of the primitive traditional culture of ancient China, which highly summarizes the art, religion, geography, philosophy and

history of that period (Yang and An, 2011 p.25-29). The rich and diverse content of Chinese mythology is the imagination and perception of natural phenomena, the universe, the origin of human beings and the earth by ancient Chinese people. The mythological stories describe different kinds of spirits, monsters, gods, Buddhas and heroes. Familiar fairy tales are mainly recorded in some ancient books, such as the “Investiture of the Gods” and “Classic of Mountains and Seas”.

## 1.2 What is the value of Chinese myths? Why is it worth spreading?

Chinese mythology is the source and core of Chinese culture. Chinese mythological stories mainly convey the spirit that human beings in primitive society dare to confront and struggle with difficulties in nature and society, and have the courage to dedicate themselves at the same time (Wang, 2022 p.313). In ancient times, human beings lived in a harsh natural environment, which inspired humans’ spirit of indomitable struggle. In addition, mythology is an important part of education as it is a crucial approach to communicate knowledge and thinking (Adhikari and Saha, 2023 p.64-65). Children can learn about history and social development through myths, while forming their own identity and values. Chinese myths are often used as children's stories to help them develop imagination, stimulate interest in learning and establish morality and values (He, 2016 p.28-29); therefore, the educational values of Chinese mythology are indispensable in Chinese education.

Although there are some ancient books recording Chinese myths, each of China's 56 ethnic groups has its own unique mythological stories which were handed down by ancient people through scattered and fragmented recording forms in books or

through oral transmission. As a result, Chinese mythology has not been systematically and completely recorded (Yang, 2011 p.26). In order not to forget Chinese myths, people need more intuitive and efficient approaches to record and disseminate these myths. Nowadays, various modern media methods have become the main media of Chinese mythology, such as movies, short videos and animations etc.

### 1.3 Chinese mythological animation has not been effectively spread across cultures.

In the past decade, many Chinese animated films often combine Chinese mythological themes with modern people's thoughts and emotions to make mythology more concrete and tangible (Tang and Gong, 2021 p.415-416). Chinese culture is actually popular in societies of other cultures (Zhao, 2021 p.30-31). However, although Chinese myth is also a crucial part of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese mythology animation does not have a loyal audience in non-Chinese areas. "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" (2019) demonstrates a boy's struggle with his fate and striving for good although he was born as a devil. But other cultures' audiences could not understand this Chinese mythological animations' lines and plots (Zhao, 2021 p.30-31). Because they have a lack of the local Chinese culture's basic knowledge, it's difficult for them to understand the meaning of some lines and plots in some Chinese culture, such as some local dialects and poems. This is the main reason why cross-cultures communication is a challenge for Chinese mythological animation.

### 1.4 The elements of Chinese mythology in Chinese mythology animations produced by European and American animation companies are ragescent.

On the contrary, some European and American animation production companies have used many classic Chinese elements to produce Chinese-style animation, which has become popular around the world, such as “Mulan” (Cook and Bancroft, 1998) and “Kung Fu Panda” (2008) from Disney and Dreamworks. Not only does “Kung Fu Panda” (2008) have the classic element of Chinese kung fu, but it also incorporates the most representative elements of Chinese mythology in the perspective of European and American culture, especially the dragon (Wang, 2016). “Kung Fu Panda” (2008) grossed \$600 million outside China (IMDBPro's Box Office Mojo, 2023), but “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child” (2019) only made \$6.5 million outside China. There is a staggering gap between these two Chinese mythological animated movies in the box office. Therefore, Chinese-style animations produced by European and American studios are the common choice for people from other cultures if they want to understand Chinese mythological elements through animation.

“Kung Fu Panda” (2008) creates a unique Chinese mythological story by combining the dragon, kung fu and panda together, the most iconic Chinese symbols in the perspective of European and American culture. The main character named Po, a clumsy panda, is chosen to be the Dragon Warrior who has the responsibility to protect the people from Tai Lung . In the animation, the person with the responsibility to protect people is named Dragon Warrior since the dragon in Chinese mythology has the mission and authority to protect humans (Wang, 2016 p.421). But dragons have different images and meanings in Chinese mythology, especially in the mythology of ethnic minorities. In the mythology of the Bai nationality, dragons can be divided into white, black, red, green and pink categories, and represent different meanings. Black

dragon has always been a vicious and tyrannical image in mythology, and accompanied by the disaster (Li, 2021 p.1-2). In the classic Chinese myth of “Nezha Conquers the Dragon King” from “Investiture of the Gods” (Xu, 16th-century), although Ao Guang, the dragon king of the East China Sea, was a dragon god, he used the lives of all the people of Qiantang Pass to force Nezha to commit suicide in order to avenge his son. The dragon in this myth is a tyrannical figure. Thus it can be seen that viewers from non-Chinese backgrounds only can know the righteous image of the Chinese dragon from Kung Fu Panda, but not only does the dragon in Chinese mythology represent propitious omen, but also has many other images and meanings. From the Chinese-style animations produced by these European and American studios, audiences with non-Chinese background can not have access to abundant and various Chinese mythology; therefore, Chinese native mythology animations need to explore effective approaches of cross-cultural communication.

## **Chapter 2. Some animations do not have European and American background, but they can be effectively spread across cultures around the world.**

### **2.1 Why are Miyazaki's works popular around the world?**

In the face of strong European and American animation companies, Miyazaki's Japanese-style two-dimensional animated films broke the mainstream animation market of 3D animated films, and were widely welcomed in non-Japanese regions, especially “Spirited Away” (2001), reached around \$119 million out of Japan (box office Mojo by IMDBPro, 2023). This animation illustrates an ordinary girl's story about Chihiro Ogino entering a magical trans-dimensional world through a mysterious tunnel. In this world,



she tried her best to apprentice in the bathhouse, serve the stink god, and fight monsters in order to save her parents. In this process of growth, she learned to face difficulties, release her potential, and finally get out of troubles. The story of this animation uses the experience of real life and universal human behavior as media to arouse sympathy among audiences from other cultural backgrounds, since it reflects most people's lives of growth(Wu, 2016 p.198). Although Chihiro's story in the tunnel is not real life, her personality and morality is real, including selflessness, self-reliance, and challenges to difficulties of growth. This makes the audience believe that desired results can be achieved by holding firm to the goal in the face of setbacks, learning to withstand pressure, and bravely accepting their responsibilities.

In addition to the setting of the story, the character design of this animation also contains many universal traits and thoughts which are common among people from different cultures. Chihiro is a simple, kind and brave little girl. Haku is a tough young man. Kamaji is a serious old grandpa, but his heart is warm and kind. These are representatives of universal values that are accepted by most societies, such as benevolence, kindness, honesty, and charity (Ameer, 2020 p.99-100). Universal values embody that universality exists between people from other cultures, and break the boundaries of nations. Because of using universal values in character and story, not only let audiences from other countries experience an amazing world of Japanese mythology, but also strike a chord with them to feel spiritual comfort.

The brilliant part of "Spirited Away" (2001) is to let audiences from different cultures experience a magical cross-dimensional world which covers many elements of Japanese mythology, such as Japanese monster culture, Onsen culture and Kotodama

culture. Miyazaki skillfully incorporates these elements of native Japanese mythology into the story of an ordinary girl growing up since not only are the gods and monsters supernatural characters in the animation, their interaction, challenge and cooperation with the main character Chihiro driving the story. In the movie, Yubaba asked Chihiro to serve a dirty, smelly, but honorable river god to have a bath in the hot spring as this river god absorbed countless different kinds of humans' garbage that polluted the river, and made it become dirty and smelly. In this plot, Miyazaki integrates universal values into the Japanese monster culture and Onsen culture. Not only does the river god having a bath mean cleaning the pollution caused by humans in the river, but the river god also wants to keep the heart and purify itself when affected by external filth. This is a kind and selfless spirit. Combining the essence of mythological culture with universal values can make it easier for non-Japanese audiences to understand Japanese culture and mythology in animation, and arouse their interest in learning about these cultures at the same time. Through the analysis, it can be concluded that using universal values to break the obstacles between various cultures and different contexts help "Spirited Away" (2001) to spread across cultures.

## 2.2 Why can "The Breadwinner" spread across cultures?

In addition to Miyazaki's animated movies, "The Breadwinner" (2017), an animated film set in Islam and Afghanistan, won the Best Animated Feature of Annie Award in 2018, and was nominated for Best Animated Feature of Oscar. Compared with the mainstream European and American three-dimensional animation movies, this two-dimensional animation with features of Islam is a unique existence because the

creators use paper-cut animation to incorporate a heroic figure from Islamic mythology into a realistic female hero story in the setting of Afghanistan. The Islamic mythological story of a boy taming the elephant king and saving the villagers gives Parvana the courage and strength to dress as a boy to face the pressure and rule of the Taliban's patriarchal society, and firmly complete the mission of supporting her family and saving her father (Chen, 2019 p.34-35). Because being brave and strong in the face of suffering is the universal value that people of all cultures accept, the Islamic mythological story has effectively promoted the story of animation to produce universal values. This animation successfully illustrates the courage and wisdom of the women who struggle to survive under the oppression and difficulties in the society (Fatarani and Candraningrum, 2023 p.2-3). Through the universal values of the Islamic culture in the story, audiences of all cultures can feel the violence inflicted on women by the Taliban regime, and empathize with the brave and strong Afghan women while appreciating Islamic mythology.

Therefore, while adding universal values to animated stories, combining local myths with universal values is the main reason why “Spirited Away” (2001) and “the Breadwinner” (2017), which are set in non-European and non-American cultures, can be effectively spread across different cultures.

### **Chapter 3. Universal Values**

#### **3.1 What are Universal Values?**

Universal values are humans' common values that are universally accepted by most societies, and exist in their patterns of behavior and attitudes, such as

benevolence, self-direction, spirituality, power and hedonism (Ameer, 2020 p.99-100).

Universal values are universal and common. In "Shared Values for a Troubled World,"

Kidder interviewed thinkers, artists, writers, businessmen, and political leaders with

distinct cultures to illustrate their essential moral principles, and list eight common

human values that can be shared by most cultures, including benevolence, tolerance,

love, responsibility, freedom, truthfulness, fairness, unity, etc (Kidder, 1994 Chapter 7).

Universal values are a value system based on the common moral values of all mankind,

and can transcend nations, races, national boundaries, and beliefs.

### 3.2 Can universal values promote cross-cultural communication?

Cross-cultural communication explores the differences and commonalities between different cultures in order to promote interaction, communication, understanding and integration across different regions, nationalities and languages. In order to facilitate cross-cultural communication in diverse cultures, exploring the universal values that can be shared among different cultures is extremely crucial for cross-cultural communication because they can effectively avoid misunderstandings and conflicts between cultures (Chen, 2015 p.39-40). Trans-cultural communication should persevere in showing cultures' uniqueness which is possible to cause conflicts and antagonisms between cultures, but universal values can help different cultures achieve harmony and diversity in communication; therefore, universal values are essential for cross-cultural communication when they can exist in distinct forms and media to build a bridge of communication between different cultures. If Chinese mythological animation wants to break cross-cultural communication's barriers caused

by cultural differences, combining universal values into stories is a feasible measure as the cultural uniqueness of animation can be understood and fond of other cultures' audiences through universal values.

## **Chapter 4. Can universal values help Chinese mythological animation spread across cultures?**

### **4.1 Chinese mythology itself contains universal value.**

Although various mythological systems have their own diversities, each of them still contains universal human values (Adhikari and Saha, 2023 p.64-65). The distinctive Chinese mythology can also transmit universal values to people as the core spirit of Chinese myth including peace, love, loyalty, filial piety and perseverance (Wang, 2022 p.313). For example, Yu devotes himself to harnessing the flood is a common and typical universal value. Universal values have also helped Chinese myths spread up to now, resonate with the public, and become an essential part of education; therefore, Chinese mythology animation can refer to and study the universal values of Chinese mythology and establish resonance with audiences from other cultures.

### **4.2 How to integrate universal values in Chinese mythological animation?**

In the last decade, since the development of 3D animation technology is rapid in China, Chinese animation companies have produced many visually stunning animated films about Chinese mythology, such as “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child” (2019), “New Gods: Yang Jian” (Zhao, 2022), “Monkey King: Hero is Back” (2015) and “Jiang Ziya” (2020). There is no denying that Chinese mythological animation is creating some

new artistic concepts, such as “New Gods: Yang Jian” (2022), which combines the style of classical Chinese Fairy with steampunk to create an innovative modern animation art style. However, Chinese mythological animation has a habit of portraying characters to be perfect, and detached from real life, without freshness (Hou, 2012 p.1). In Chinese mythological animations, most character designs always follow the simple and traditional and stereotypical images of Chinese gods who don’t have the personality and emotions of ordinary people. In “Jiang Ziya” (2020), the setting of the protagonist Jiang Ziya is full of divine radiance without universal human emotions and desires; as a result, the audience cannot relate to any of his actions and encounters (Yang, 2022 p.19). However, in the original book of “Investiture of the Gods” (Xu, 16th-century), Jiang Ziya respects teachers, has feelings of helping the world, and is a person with emotions, righteousness, loyalty and benevolence; as a result, the image of Jiang Ziya in the animation runs counter to the original book, and does not have the original universal value. When the main character of an animation loses its universal value, not only will the development of the story not be promoted, but it also will cause the audience to fail to understand the content of the animation; therefore, when Chinese animation uses Chinese mythology as the theme, it can retain the original universal value of Chinese mythology in order to establish communication with audiences.

Moreover, Chinese mythology is still different from modern people's thoughts in some aspects because it is derived from the thoughts and perceptions of ancient Chinese people. In order to obtain more effective cross-cultural communication, Chinese mythological animation should neither copy the original works blindly, nor abandon the historical and cultural fabrications; at the same time, Chinese mythological

animation also needs to blend the common values of mankind for entering the international vision (Hou, 2012 p.1). In “Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms” (Wu, 2023), director Wuershan believes that the adaptation of mythological themes should not only respect the original works, but also need to contain the most essential values of human beings and nations, such as Ji Chang enduring the humiliation and pain brought by the villain for protecting his son Ji Fa, rather than keeping the cunning image from the original mythology (Wu, Chen and Li, 2023 p.79-80). Adding universal values can not only support characters to be molded more complete and authentic, but also show the Chinese national culture’s core values of respecting family affection and the power of goodness. However, when Chinese animations adapt Chinese mythology, most of them focus more on how to innovate on the basis of mythological stories, and do not pay attention to how to make each character more complete, real and credible. In “Monkey King: Hero is Back” (2015), the design of supporting characters with mythological elements can not advance the plot as their images are simple and stereotypical. Pigsy is still the image of greed and incompetence; meanwhile, the White Dragon is only the representative of Chinese mythological auspicious signs (Yang, 2022 p.19). Since this kind of using Chinese mythological elements is stereotypical and lacking in novelty, this approach will make the audience feel bored and uninterested, and will not let audiences from other cultures understand the meaning of such supporting characters in the story. Character design should be defined by their actions rather than gender or ethnic background (Seeger, 1990 p.202-207). In “Spirited Away” (2001), although the river god is a deity in Japanese monster mythology, he purifies the river, helps Chihiro grow, and brings wonderful things to humans. In other culture’s

audience's minds, he is a kind-hearted and selfless god who has humanity, and will warm human beings and bring wonderful things to the world. Adding definitions with universal values into characters with Chinese mythological elements will make different cultures' audiences feel real, credible and intimate; as a result, it is easier for them to understand and resonate with Chinese mythological culture.

The original universal values of Chinese mythology are valuable, and can skillfully help Chinese mythology animation to express the connotation of the story clearly; in the meantime, on the basis of the original Chinese mythology, adapting the original story of Chinese mythology by combining mythological elements and universal values is useful for audiences of other cultures to understand the connotation of Chinese mythology more effectively. Therefore, it is feasible that integrating universal values into stories can promote cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese mythological animation.

## **Chapter 5. Universal values can make Chinese mythological animation lose its cultural uniqueness**

### **5.1 Universal values are not the ideal approach for intercultural communication.**

Universal values originated from European and American culture. There have been some controversies, including whether universal values exist, and the content of specific universal values. The existence of universal values is not in platonic ideal form because they can be constructed by the specific culture and ethnic backgrounds (Lang, 2020 p.267-269). This kind of universal values will cater to the specific class' needs, and lose universality and commonness; therefore, it's possible that universal values will



make Chinese mythological animation lose the uniqueness of Chinese culture and the significance of cross-cultural communication.

Meanwhile, as universal values have exclusive features, the abuse of universal values will be excluded by people from different cultures (Rostboll, 2010 p.401-403). In “Wish Dragon” (2021), the dragon, a symbol of justice, authority and good fortune in Chinese mythology, has become the Chinese version of the lamp of Aladdin. In the story, the dragon sacrificed his life to save the protagonist Ding Siqu; at the same time, Ding Siqu also used his last wish to save his friend's father. Although the whole story tries to tell the audience about the universal values of sacrificing for righteousness, the cultural uniqueness of Chinese mythology is not fully reflected in the animation; as a result, the whole animation uses the images of Chinese mythology to tell a story which is similar to the lamp of Aladdin. This combination of Chinese mythology and universal values will fail to spread across cultures, and will also be difficult to attract local audiences. Therefore, if Chinese mythological animations don't properly use universal values for the pursuit of cultural commonality, they will lose Chinese mythological uniqueness.

## **Findings**

Since Chinese mythology is a charming and unique culture with universal values and educational significance, it is worthwhile and necessary to spread Chinese myths. Through the analysis of “Spirited Away” (2001) and “the Breadwinner” (2017), despite their oriental mythological cultural background, they still can be spread across cultures because of universal values. As universal values have universality and commonality,

they are accepted by most cultures and can help cross-cultural communication; therefore, universal values can also be used to promote cross-cultural communication of Chinese mythology animation. When Chinese animation adapts the theme of Chinese mythology, retaining the universal values of the original works can help audiences of different cultures understand the connotation of Chinese mythology; in the meantime, animation can combine Chinese mythological elements with universal values to attract the interest of audiences from more different cultures. However, because of the exclusiveness of universal values, Chinese mythological animation should not abuse the universal values for cultural commonality which will lead to the loss of cultural uniqueness of Chinese mythology.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Chinese mythology has universal values. If Chinese animation can properly retain the universal values of Chinese mythology, and skillfully combine the elements of Chinese mythology with the universal values, Chinese mythology animation can be effectively spread across cultures. However, because the focus of cross-cultural communication of Chinese mythological animation is to maintain and spread cultural uniqueness, overuse of universal values will not promote cross-cultural communication, and will make Chinese mythological animation lose the characteristics of Chinese culture.

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