



A Narrative Study on Traditional Values of Chinese Youth Based on the Chinese Animated Film "I Am What I Am"

Wang Zhe^{1, 2*}, Hassan Alli¹ and Irwan Syah Md Yusoff³

1 Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, MALAYSIA

2 Department of Design Arts, Taiyuan Institute of Technology, No. 31, Xinlan Road, Jiancaoping District, Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, CHINA

3 Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, MALAYSIA

Email

**253119412@qq.com, halli@upm.edu.my, irwansyah@upm.edu.my*

** Correspondent author*

Abstract

In recent years, Chinese animated cinema has demonstrated a notable emergence of remarkable works, primarily centered on contemporary reinterpretations of traditional Chinese mythology, including narratives featuring iconic figures such as Sun Wukong, Nezha, and Jiang Ziya. Regardless of these trends, the thematic scope has remained relatively limited. However, the animated feature "I am what I am" represents a groundbreaking endeavor in the realm of realistic themes within Chinese animation. Set against the backdrop of contemporary societal challenges such as epidemics, natural disasters, strategic maneuvers, and shifting circumstances, the film not only mirrors the prevailing zeitgeist in China but also celebrates the temporal values and aesthetics inherent to Chinese culture. Drawing upon the cultural motif of traditional Chinese lion dance, the narrative intricately weaves a poignant tale of marginalized children endeavoring to pursue their dreams within the realm of lion dance. This narrative poignantly underscores the director's compassionate engagement with the plight of left-behind children and migrant workers, thereby elevating their struggles and destinies to the forefront. Within the context of modern Chinese society, this study aims to explore the innovative endeavor to convey and uphold traditional values and aesthetics of Chinese ethnic groups through exceptional animated films that refrain from deifying civilian heroes.

Keywords: Animated movies, Traditional Chinese customs, Era, Heroes, Values, Chinese youth

INTRODUCTION

Within a specific temporal context, domestic animated films possess the capacity to narrate China's developmental trajectory and depict the essence of its people, thereby shaping a favorable national identity through their portrayal of everyday lives. These cinematic creations serve as conduits for conveying the distinctive attributes of the era, while simultaneously elucidating the historical traditions and cultural legacy of the nation.



Furthermore, they delve into the profound spiritual aspirations inherent within the cultural tapestry of the Chinese populace, emphasizing the cultural soft power embedded within traditional Chinese ideology. It is imperative for such films to articulate the collective will of the Chinese populace and elucidate the imperatives for societal progress within the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Ding, 2018). This underscores the significant role of literary and artistic endeavors in guiding the public towards discerning value judgments and choices, thereby augmenting the influence of mainstream Chinese value aesthetics across ideological and societal strata. As Xu Jinlong and Ye Jiping (2012) pointed out in their paper "Returning to Folk Literature Tradition: Strategies to Break Through the Dilemma of Domestic Animation":

The current domestically produced anime has been deeply separated from the traditional cultural essence of the Chinese nation for thousands of years. They either abandon many historical memories of their own ethnic culture and lose their memory in vain, or they don't know how to convey the remaining memories in a fairy tale like manner and remain silent.

The narrative of "I am what I am" is deeply entrenched within the cultural ethos of China, serving as a poignant portrayal not only of the individual struggles of its characters but also as a canvas upon which the broader aspirations and challenges of the Chinese populace are vividly depicted. Positioned at the confluence of cinematic artistry and cultural expression, "I am what I am" stands out as a singular achievement in the landscape of contemporary Chinese animation, uniquely tailored to engage discerning adult audiences. Garnering an impressive rating of 8.3 on Douban Movie, as evidenced by the discerning appraisal of 503,319 viewers, it surpasses a significant majority of both animated blockbusters and theatrical productions, affirming its resonance and cultural significance within the zeitgeist (Douban, 2024). At its thematic core lies an unwavering focus on the lived experiences of the lower strata of society, with the motifs of youth and personal growth serving as narrative touchstones. Through the lens of relatable characters grappling with real-life anxieties and the pursuit of dreams, "I am what I am" deftly navigates the complexities of societal hierarchies and the quest for self-actualization amongst disenfranchised youth. Notably, the film eschews fantastical embellishments in favor of a grounded storytelling approach, weaving in elements of traditional folk culture to craft a nuanced portrayal of both rural and urban China. Employing metaphorical imagery as a vehicle for cultural expression, the film transcends mere entertainment to offer profound insights into the cultural fabric of contemporary Chinese society (Xu, 2023). Central to the film's resonance is the emphasis placed on the authenticity of character portrayals, with the director leveraging the screenplay to evoke a deep emotional connection with audiences. Set against the backdrop of rural Guangdong Province, China, "I am what I am" follows the journey of Ajuan, a left-behind child yearning for self-discovery and validation. Encouraged by her peers to explore the art of lion dance an emblem of Chinese cultural heritage. Ajuan embarks on a transformative odyssey under the tutelage of Master Xianyuqiang. Through perseverance and camaraderie, Ajuan and her companions navigate a myriad of obstacles, ultimately transcending their circumstances to emerge as



accomplished practitioners of the lion dance. At its heart, the narrative encapsulates a tale of personal growth and resilience, intertwining themes of familial separation, societal stratification, and the indomitable spirit of the human condition. Director Sun Haipeng of "I am what I am" mentioned in an interview (Zhang et al., 2022):

For the characterization and design of characters, in order to achieve aesthetic goals such as de beautification, de Japanese animation, de filtering, and de internet celebrity, the various proportions of the characters should be adjusted to be closer to real people, and then some animation style processing should be added.

In recent years, Chinese animated films have garnered substantial market recognition. However, amidst the emergence of groundbreaking works such as "I am what I am," this paper aims to delve into the film's artistic nuances, contextual underpinnings, and daring thematic explorations through the lenses of narrative style and narrative construction. Key focal points of analysis encompass the delineation of aesthetic paradigms and thematic selection within the narrative framework, the interplay of folk cultural influences, the evolving landscape of Chinese society, and the nuanced shifts in prevailing values and ideologies. Ultimately, utilizing "I am what I am" as a primary case study, this paper endeavors to elucidate the breadth and depth of thematic exploration within Chinese animated cinema, shedding light on the inherent aesthetic elements that enable these films to effectively convey the rich tapestry of Chinese narratives and advance the noble ethos of the Chinese nation.

TRADITIONAL VALUES OF CHINESE YOUTH FROM REALISTIC THEMES

The So-Called Realistic Animated Film in China

From the 1920s to the 1980s, Chinese art films experienced a flourishing era marked by development and growth. However, within this landscape, the realm of Chinese animation embarked on its own evolutionary trajectory, albeit with a distinct absence of realistic themes in animated feature-length productions. The inception of the first animated feature film in China, "Princess Iron Fan," draws its narrative roots from the revered Chinese literary masterpiece, "Journey to the West," thereby infusing the cinematic canvas with a potent blend of ethnic and theological motifs. Through the portrayal of Sun Wukong's triumphant battle against the Bull Demon King, the Wan brothers, as directors, deftly weave a narrative tapestry that not only exhorts the public to denounce traitorous conduct but also galvanizes a unified front against Japanese aggression, thereby echoing the zeitgeist of resistance and resilience. Similarly, "The Heavenly Palace," another seminal animated feature of the era, derives inspiration from the same literary opus, albeit against a different historical backdrop. Set amidst a period of triumphant opposition against feudal autocracy, the film serves as a poignant call-to-action, imploring the populace to safeguard and fortify the fruits of the Chinese revolution, whilst catalyzing a decisive confrontation against vestiges of feudal authority. This utilization of traditional Chinese mythology as a narrative prism to critique contemporary realities and unveil societal injustices underscores a quintessentially emblematic phenomenon within the annals of Chinese animated cinema.



Animation also serves as an auxiliary function for education and politics. As Mao once said:

We do not refuse to utilize past forms of art and literature, but in our hands, these old forms, filled with new content, have become revolutionary and serve the people... (Mao Tse Tung, 1962)

Critical realism, enveloped within the veil of mythology, emerged as the predominant paradigm driving the trajectory of Chinese animation during a significant epoch. Anchored in the ethos of critical realism, a cultural and artistic framework designed to unveil societal malaise and shadows, while concurrently exalting virtues of illumination and righteousness, this approach served as a potent vehicle for mobilizing the populace. As articulated by Wang (2013), critical realism epitomizes a cultural dissemination and artistic creation ethos, harnessed to spotlight social injustices, and illuminate paths towards collective moral rectitude. The adoption of this animation creation style finds its roots in China's rich tapestry of mythological literature, intertwined with the socio-political undercurrents of revolutionary fervor and the imperatives of socialist development. Inextricably linked with the imperatives of serving revolution and politics, Chinese animation, steeped in critical realism, assumed the mantle of a venerated educator and propagator, guiding the masses while wielding the power of imagery and narrative to shape ideological consciousness.

As the 21st century dawned, the trajectory of Chinese animation underwent a transformative phase, catalyzed by the transition from a planned economy to a market-driven paradigm. Amidst this transition, the quest for an identity congruent with the esteemed echelons of American and Japanese animation cultures beckoned, yet Chinese animation remained tethered to the discourse of mythological critical realism. However, this steadfast adherence to tradition encountered a formidable challenge in the face of the rapid economic expansion and the confluence of Eastern and Western cultural forces. The audience's affinity towards traditional Chinese mythological narratives struggled to seamlessly integrate into the evolving landscape of Chinese animation, grappling with the complexities wrought by cultural collision. A palpable hesitancy pervaded the artistic sphere, as animation luminaries hesitated to broach the realm of realistic criticism within Chinese mythological themes, unsure of the narrative trajectories capable of resonating with popular culture. It wasn't until recent years that a glimmer of change emerged, with select animated films delving into mythological themes, under the nuanced influence of youth, educational imperatives, and political currents. Yet, amidst this nascent shift, a profound realization dawned upon the creators of Chinese animation: that the pursuit of contemporary themes need not entail a forfeiture of artistic legitimacy, but rather, it beckoned towards a reimagining of narratives through the prism of socialist realism (SFR Arch., 1952). In contrast to the fantastical allure of historical mythological realms, the impression of realism transcends mere stylistic flourishes or expressions, finding resonance through avenues of "progressive thinking," "character authenticity," "action," and even the artist's introspective "shyness" (Sitkiewicz, 2022).



Romanticism in Historical Mythology to Realistic Spectacle in Rural Society

In the realm of animation research, the notion of wonders has long been a subject of fascination and scrutiny. Neil's assertion of "a system of particular concern... to display the visibility of visible things" (Neale, "Triumph of the Will" 66) underscores the enduring challenge of encapsulating visual marvels within the confines of cultural specificity, resisting the temptation of ethnocentrism. Such visual wonders, imbued with a "peculiar characteristic" of cultural sensitivity (Simon, 2014), persist as resilient bastions against singular interpretations. In recent years, a watershed moment in the market-driven metamorphosis of Chinese mythological animated films emerged with the release of "Monkey King: Hero Is Back" in 2015. Subsequent cinematic endeavors such as "White Snake," "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child," "Legend of Certification," and "New Gods: Nezha Reborn" vividly epitomize Chinese animation's evolution towards a contemporary narrative ethos rooted in myths and legends. The burgeoning call for the creation of a "mythological universe" in China reflects a burgeoning confluence of aesthetic and artistic perspectives, ranging from postmodernism to deconstructionism and post-humanism (Diao, 2021), against the backdrop of a global paradigm shift. While diverging from the frivolous caricatures and jests typical of Disney animations, these works maintain a dignified aesthetic portrayal of protagonist characters drawn from Chinese mythological lore. From a commercial standpoint, the romanticism inherent in these mythological sagas resonates deeply within the collective memory of the Chinese populace, rendering them fertile ground for cultural exploration and animated adaptation. Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that such fictional animated narratives often render Chinese cinema animation devoid of a nuanced humanistic touch. "I am what I am," a pioneering endeavor, disrupts traditional creative paradigms within cinema animation by infusing realistic characterizations, documentary-style performances, and credible storytelling into its animated tapestry. This groundbreaking approach not only introduces a palpable sense of realism into animated texts but also transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, crafting immersive and emotionally resonant animated spectacles that captivate audiences (Li & Yu, 2022).

The emergence of "I am what I am" heralds a departure from the opulent grandeur and fantastical vistas typified by recent mythological adaptations, transcending the confines of fictional narrative spaces inhabited by historical mythological characters. Instead, it immerses viewers in the kaleidoscope of real-life intricacies, wherein every blade of grass and every tree depicted on screen evokes a profound sense of empathy. The film meticulously reconstructs the authentic folk customs of its protagonists, leveraging the transformative capabilities of animated forms and harnessing the prowess of cutting-edge CG technology to craft a mesmerizing tableau that straddles the fine line between familiarity and novelty. From the film's outset, a series of meticulously crafted shots trace the protagonist Ajuan's brisk strides through a quaint townscape brimming with distinctive Guangdong regional characteristics. The canvas unfurls to reveal orderly yet bustling narrow streets teeming with the vibrancy of small-town fairs and the vivacity of street life, punctuated by the whimsical dance of birds and the playful antics of dogs. Suddenly, the



scene transitions to tranquil rural pathways, where the interplay of light and shadow casts an ethereal glow upon the idyllic countryside. Rich in nuanced details, from the gently sloping walls of village shops to the dreamlike interplay of light and shadow across expansive fields, the imagery conjures a tapestry of unfashionable yet resplendent landscapes. The infusion of realism into the fabric of animation creation heralds a renaissance in the realm of animated scenes, summoning forth a panoply of diverse wonders. This convergence of artistry and technological innovation underscores the evolving trajectory of domestic animated films, wherein the exploration of romantic hues within traditional Chinese mythology coalesces with an earnest exploration of the multifaceted themes embedded within ordinary local narratives (Tian, 2023).

Unyielding and Struggle in Social Darwinism

The term "Social Darwinism" traces its origins to a pamphlet titled with the same name, penned by the French radical (then anarchist) writer Emile Gautier in 1880. Since its inception, Social Darwinism has served as a contentious label, often associated with deleterious phenomena. It has been invoked to denounce a spectrum of issues ranging from unchecked competition and imperialism to militarism, eugenics, racism, and even Nazism. Indeed, various scholarly inquiries, including studies by Bellomy (1984), underscore the pejorative connotations inherently intertwined with the term. Philosophically, Social Darwinism epitomizes the application of evolutionary principles governing species in the biological realm to the social sphere, ostensibly equating the laws of social development with those of biological evolution. This conflation, as elucidated by Him (2016), blurs the distinction between the two domains, facilitating indiscriminate applications of Darwinian principles. However, it is imperative to recognize the inherent limitations of applying the doctrine of "survival of the fittest" and natural selection from the realm of flora and fauna to human society. While these principles may govern the animal and plant kingdoms, their wholesale application to human society engenders a host of negative consequences within the social fabric. Manifestations such as resource inequality, the consolidation of power, and hierarchical discrimination are but a few of the deleterious outcomes precipitated by the erosion of societal values in the pursuit of absolute dominance and weakness.

As a testament to its commitment to realism, "I am what I am" deftly navigates the harsh propositions inherent in Social Darwinism, encapsulating them in both facial and symbolic forms that resonate deeply with audiences' individual experiences. Within the film's narrative tapestry, the protagonist Ajuan grapples with the influence of Social Darwinism throughout his formative years. However, Ajuan and his lion dance team emerge as beacons of resilience and optimism, leveraging their actions to construct a narrative of positive value judgments and societal trends. In doing so, they cultivate a milieu of positive spiritual civilization, countering the prevailing narrative of Social Darwinism with a more uplifting ethos. Indeed, from an individual vantage point, Ajuan and his compatriots epitomize the embodiment of "civilian heroes," aligning themselves with a unique era orientation and symbol that amplifies a more affirmative Chinese voice. Through their



actions and resilience, they not only challenge the entrenched norms propagated by Social Darwinism but also usher in a paradigm shift towards a more compassionate and inclusive societal ethos. In this way, "I am what I am" transcends mere cinematic representation, serving as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of individual agency in reshaping collective narratives and fostering positive social change.

In the realm of animation, discriminatory epithets such as "sick cat," "useless wood," "skinny monkey," and "salted fish" serve as visceral reminders of the ideological alienation perpetuated by the dogmas of "might makes right" and the glorification of heroism. These verbal barbs, coupled with symbolic treatments, gradually weave a subtle yet insidious chain of contempt, relegating the weak to the sidelines while empowering the strong. In the film's narrative arc, the black lion team, led by Zhuang Cheng, capitalizes on their physical prowess to align themselves with like-minded individuals, perpetrating acts of bullying against Ajuan and her lion dance troupe. From the callous theft of Ajuan's Chinese New Year red envelope to the desecration of her lion head, their actions underscore the unyielding cruelty of reality, shrouded in the laughter of victory yet devoid of empathy. Faced with such adversity, the temptation to shed her original self and relinquish her emotions as a means of escape looms large for Ajuan. Yet, steadfast in her resolve, she embarks on a journey of self-transcendence and resistance against injustice. The pivotal moment arrives during a game with almost no suspense, wherein Ajuan, spurred by unwavering determination and with the support of her teammates, dares to challenge the unattainable Optimus Prime. This momentous "leap" symbolizes the culmination of Ajuan's arduous journey, an outpouring of accumulated emotions fueled by her indomitable spirit. As the invincible Black Lion team undergoes a transformation, shedding their previous bullying stance to rally behind Ajuan's quest for self-transcendence, a profound realization dawns: respect is not bestowed by virtue of victory alone, but rather earned through perseverance and resilience. Through the film's design, it becomes evident that Ajuan's journey transcends mere victory; it embodies the low-key yet resolute qualities of "unyielding" and "unwavering" in the face of adversity. From being discriminated against and bullied to receiving fair and equal respect, Ajuan's evolution reverberates beyond the confines of the screen, challenging biases and reshaping societal perceptions. Ultimately, the film's narrative serves as a poignant condemnation and disintegration of Social Darwinism, advocating for values of empathy, resilience, and inclusivity. It underscores the transformative power of individual agency in effecting positive social change, offering a beacon of hope in an otherwise unforgiving world.

The theme of "I am what I am," while grounded in realism, serves as a poignant reflection of certain social Darwinian phenomena. However, its narrative deployment of "civilian heroes," imbued with a positive value orientation and fostering a sense of positive social consensus, emerges as a pivotal force in guiding and constructing the fundamental common values of humanity. This paradigm shift represents a notable breakthrough within the landscape of Chinese animated films, particularly against the backdrop of unprecedented societal transformations spanning a century. Moreover, this profound



aesthetic quest underscores a novel endeavor to authentically narrate Chinese tales while elucidating the deepest artistic expressions inherent within the cultural fabric of the Chinese nation. By delving into the reservoir of Chinese cultural genes, this narrative exploration not only seeks to articulate the essence of Chinese stories but also to illuminate the diverse artistic forms intrinsic to the nation's cultural heritage.

TRADITIONAL VALUES OF CHINESE YOUTH FROM FOLK CULTURE

Lion Dance and Animated Movies

In the era of digital advancement and growing interdisciplinary exchanges, certain scholars in the realm of folklore studies have come to recognize the intrinsic value of folk elements in enriching national and ethnic cultural identity within the domain of film and television production and presentation. This realization has led to endeavors aimed at investigating the role and significance of folklore within the realm of animation creation (Liu, 2023). Zhang has introduced the scholarly notion of "film and television folk customs," positing that these customs represent a phenomenon resulting from the interaction between traditional folk customs and cinematic expressions. They manifest as emergent cultural practices embedded within cinematic productions, wherein the medium of film and television is employed to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional customs, thereby generating imaginative cultural expressions transcending temporal and spatial confines (Zhang, 2005). Concurrently, other scholars have underscored the historical demarcation between folk culture and the realm of technology. Nevertheless, the contemporary convergence of folk culture with technological domains has blurred the traditional boundaries between folk and popular culture, a process characterized by a significant infiltration of folk traditions into technological platforms, leading to an increasingly nuanced interplay between the two realms (Hermann, 2014, P: 6-11). "I am what I am" serves as a narrative lens into the rich tapestry of Chinese cultural heritage, spotlighting the allure encapsulated within the lion dance a revered symbol of China's intangible cultural legacy. In an interview with director Sun Haipeng, he also made positive comments on the relationship between "lion dance and national values":

When it comes to lion dance, it is also a somewhat declining cultural symbol. The last time it appeared in the film was in the 1990s when Huang Feihong's "Once Upon a Time in China" changed the fate of himself and even the nation through lion dance.

The Guangdong lion dance, representing the southern variant of the traditional Chinese lion dance, has long been established as a folk entertainment activity imbued with a sporting essence. Typically showcased amidst the resounding beats of drum music, the lion dance performance predominantly graces festivals and significant celebratory occasions. Executed by two adept performers, meticulously trained to synchronize their movements, the dance meticulously emulates the spirit, movements, and habitual demeanor of a lion through a repertoire of choreographed sequences. Adorned with intricate attire and embellishments, the performers collectively craft a strikingly lifelike portrayal of the majestic creature. Within the cultural milieu of southern China, the lion dance harbors



multifaceted significance, with three prevalent interpretations prevailing. Firstly, it is perceived as Nian Beasts offering aid to alleviate the populace from adversities and hardships. Secondly, it symbolizes lions dispelling Nian Beasts during the auspicious occasion of the Chinese New Year. Lastly, it serves as a cultural expression of resistance against the governance of the Qing dynasty (Hu, 2012). Historical records trace the origins of lion dance back to the Han Dynasty (202 BC - 220 AD), wherein accounts within the Book of Han document the portrayal of dancers assuming the guise of lions, notably within the Caizha opera (Gu, 1962, P:1075). In the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), the "Five Directions Lion Dance" mentioned in the Old Book of Tang provided a specific description of its shape:

Tai Ping Le, also known as the Five Directions Master Dance. Dressed in hair, living in it, like its reclining and gentle demeanor. The two of them held ropes and brushed, as Xi Nong had done. The five masters each stood with their own colors, and a hundred and forty people sang the music of Tai Ping. They danced with their feet, and those who held ropes dressed like Kunlun elephants (Liu, 1975, P:1059).

By the time of the Song and Yuan dynasties (960-1368 AD), the lion dance transitioned from its origins as an exclusive form of entertainment for the elite court society to a cherished folk activity embraced by the general populace. Meng Yuanlao, a scholar of the Song Dynasty, documented a notable occurrence in the Baojin Tower, where both commoners and members of the imperial family congregated to witness the inaugural performance of "Lion and Leopard," one of the many spectacles featured in the "various armies presenting a hundred plays" tradition (Meng, 2001, P: 73-74). Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912 AD), lion dance rituals had proliferated extensively among the common people. Influenced by a myriad of factors encompassing societal progression, political dynamics, economic circumstances, and environmental factors, distinct regional variations in lion dance styles emerged, notably in the northern and southern regions. The "South Lion" tradition predominantly exhibited an evolution characterized by a fluid and expressive approach, intertwining elements of martial arts as an integral component of the performance, concurrently with the burgeoning development of Chinese martial arts (Gu, 1962). Zhang Xintai, a Qing Dynasty scholar, once described the lion dance scene in Chaozhou New Year as follows:

According to tradition, it is said that the lion is the teacher. When the villagers have nothing to do at a young age, they learn martial arts and will follow their teacher's instructions, borrowing the name of lion play (Zhang, 1975, P: 1075).

In essence, viewed through the lens of the "South Lion" tradition as a contemporary folk sport, it amalgamates various folk art disciplines including acrobatics, dance, drum music, and martial arts. This fusion not only encapsulates the essence of martial arts within the realm of competitive sports but also serves as a conduit for bestowing blessings and prayers within the realm of folk entertainment. The depiction of the protagonist "Ajuan" in



the film embodies an individualistic narrative and ideology epitomized through the medium of competitive sports. This portrayal can be interpreted as a manifestation of life politics orchestrated by the state through the conduit of folk customs, enabling individuals to undergo personal transformation via engagement in folk activities and sports.

Traditional Lion Dance and Modernity Urban

In "I am what I am," the director delineates a dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Modernity encapsulates a fusion of distinct social paradigms and worldviews, thereby supplanting or even eclipsing an alternative amalgamation of societal norms and perspectives, referred to as the old order. However, divergent reactions emerge in response to these novel realities and paradigms (Sui, 2022). While some individuals, like Ah Juan, the urban-raised female character in the film, express enthusiasm, others express opposition. Meanwhile, individuals like the protagonist, Ah Juan, who hails from a rural background, grapple with feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence. According to Soja, according to Marshall Berman, he defined modernity as:

"The pattern of life experience" is a collective sharing of special feelings about "oneself and others", "the possibility and danger of life". In this definition, we consider and experience time and space, history and geography, sequence and simultaneity, events and places, the direct period and region of our lives, all have a special place. Therefore, modernity is composed of context and context. It can be understood as the particularity of being alive at a specific time and place in this world, An important sense of contemporary individual and collective. Therefore, the experience of modernity captures a broad emotional network, reflecting the concrete and constantly changing meanings of the three most fundamental and formative dimensions of human existence: space, time, and existence (1989, P: 24-25).

The modernization theory posits that the convergence between less developed nations and their more developed counterparts during the process of successful modernization primarily revolves around fundamental social structures, thereby encompassing only a fraction of societal phenomena (Volker, 2010). Nonetheless, the director adeptly captures this narrow segment of societal dynamics. Skillfully intertwining the folk tradition of lion dance with the palpable urban milieu, the director portrays a narrative of isolation and opposition, particularly highlighting the plight of marginalized demographics such as left-behind children, urban grassroots farmers, and laborers, alongside the precarious state of intangible cultural heritage and folk customs. As previously discussed, the folk practice of "South Lion," constituting an integral part of intangible cultural heritage, traditionally serves as a conduit for invoking blessings. Over time, lion dance has served as a reflection of societal customs and indigenous wisdom within specific temporal and regional contexts. However, the relentless march of urban modernization, coupled with shifting political, economic, and policy landscapes concerning folk cultural activities, poses a formidable challenge to preserving intangible cultural heritage while ensuring livelihood sustainability. Within the film, lion dance rituals predominantly occur within specific rural villages, a stark



contrast to the festive and competitive nature of urban-hosted competitions. This incongruity between the traditional practice of lion dance and the modernity of urban life is akin to Ajuan's father perched atop the towering edifices they constructed, gazing down upon the urban village. In this moment, the dichotomy between urban modernity and rural ethnicity finds manifestation within the city's grassroots farmers and laborers.

Max Weber posits that the genesis of capitalism, and by extension, modern society, can be traced back to Protestant ethics, which espoused a proactive approach to progress as an inherent human destiny, promising rewards for such behavior. This ideology catalyzed the formation of modern society, thereby heralding the advent of Western modernity. However, for Asian countries within the third world, modernity resembles an unfamiliar plant transplanted into local traditions, sweeping in like a tempest, altering the external landscape while leaving a temporal dissonance within the conceptual realm of its inhabitants (1989, P: 35). Symbols of class and identity prove particularly resistant to change amidst the tumult of modernization, akin to the enduring stratification between rural and urban domains. In the film, the former lion king, Xianyuqiang, relinquishes his passion for survival, transitioning to managing his own shop prior to encountering Ajuan. Ajuan, compelled by familial obligations to tend to her injured father, ventures into the modern urban landscape. Despite forsaking lion dance, her longing for the lion dance culture persists, leading her to endeavor to join a lion dance club in the city. This internal struggle of self-identity abandonment, choice, and hesitance epitomizes the dichotomy between upholding folk culture and seeking modernity for sustenance and advancement. Furthermore, the juxtaposition between Ajuan with the lion head on and Ajuan without serves as a potent symbol within the discourse of modern power, representing a switch between self-awareness and cultural identity. This duality serves as a thematic motif within the film, challenging the entrenched class divisions underscored by modernity. Through the experiences of these young characters, the film poignantly reflects and portrays the intersection of traditional and modern cultures, as well as the juxtaposition between rural China and its modern counterpart.

TRADITIONAL VALUES OF CHINESE YOUTH FROM SELF-SPIRITUAL WORLD Characters Break Free from the Shackles of Deification

The term "hero" finds its roots in the Greek heroes, representing a fusion of humanity and the divine, transcending mortal limitations and the mundane realm (Boon, 2005). Across various mythologies, diverse ethnic groups venerate distinct mythological heroes, embodying cultural archetypes passed down through generations. This mythological hero sentiment has engendered a prototype deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness, shaping the public's expectations for future generations, and evolving into an abstract cultural aspiration. Consequently, it furnishes fertile creative fodder for diverse forms of artistic expression today, constituting an unconscious art form and an indispensable facet of romantic animation themes. Recent years have witnessed the prominence of domestic animated films, which owe much to the influence of mythological heroes. Despite the portrayal of characters like Sun Wukong in "Monkey King: Hero Is Back," depicting a waning



and solitary "imperfect" mythological hero, or Ne Zha in "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child," characterized by an exaggerated personal heroism, drawing from the sentiment of national mythological heroes to articulate evolving postmodern cultural identities, and even "New Gods: Yang Jian," which embraces an Eastern punk aesthetic to cater to contemporary youth aesthetics while grounding its heroes in traditional mythological imagery, successful cases underscore the enduring relevance of mythological heroes in modern animation. However, amidst the ongoing deconstruction of mythological heroes in contemporary animation creation, "I am what I am" presents a nuanced portrayal of a modest "everyday hero" imbued with humanistic and ethical values. While such phenomenon-level heroes may eschew the overt influence of traditional mythological heroes, they nevertheless inherit timeless values from their characters' spiritual legacies.

In the contemporary understanding of heroes, detached from the realm of mythology, research indicates that the concept of heroes can activate fundamental characteristics, offering a relatively impartial and implicit means to advocate for heroes associated with thought, behavior, and emotions (Zeroing, 2015). This archetype of heroism has been prominently manifested within the social fabric of China in recent years, finding exemplary portrayal in works such as "I am what I am." For the Chinese populace, amidst an unprecedented century of upheaval, these heroes navigate through life-and-death scenarios during pandemics and exhibit remarkable valor in the face of catastrophic floods, embodying unwavering convictions, profound national sentiments, and the Chinese Dream. Their endeavors are poised to etch an indelible imprint upon the annals of history. In this era, the depiction of "civilian hero" Ajuan in "I am what I am" resonates with her pursuit of national spirit, offering a platform to construct a novel hero archetype rooted in core socialist values, devoid of divine attributes, yet grounded in pragmatism. This narrative aligns with the prevailing theme of Chinese aesthetics within a specific epoch and represents a new frontier for exploration within animated filmmaking. Such heroes embody both the strengths and vulnerabilities of ordinary individuals, exhibiting independence and resilience while embracing the mundane aspects of life amidst the daily grind. These "People's heroes" embody the heroic narrative of contemporary China, rooted in the collective consciousness of the Chinese people.

The portrayal of Ajuan in "I am what I am" diverges from the typical trajectory of mythological heroes, instead emphasizing an artistic rendering grounded in realism. While discussions surrounding mythological heroes persist in works like "Monkey King: Hero Is Back" and "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child," focusing on how to sustain the success of mythological epics, the emergence of the inspirational "civilian hero" in Ajuan marks a departure from the traditional artistic frameworks epitomized by Sun Wukong, Nezha, and Yang Jian. These traditional frameworks rely on leveraging established cultural identities to engage audiences, enhance character recognition, and employ narrative styles derived from both Eastern and Western mythological traditions, such as themes of individual heroism, salvation, and the rebellious nature of mythological heroes. While such narratives offer a fresh cognitive experience for mythological heroes within traditional paradigms, the



thematic exploration of character plight is not novel on a global scale yet represents a pioneering endeavor within the realm of Chinese animated films. In contrast, Ajuan's heroic narrative in "I am what I am" embraces a creative approach firmly rooted in the Chinese ethos. Through delineating the protagonist's journey and surroundings, the film delves into the collective psyche of the masses, anchoring itself in the essence of the people and extolling their virtues. This portrayal of a non-divine, grounded hero introduces a revolutionary framework, essential for effectively conveying Chinese narratives through animated cinema.

Returning to the Mainstream Rational Values of China in the New Era

Kant, in "What is Enlightenment," advocates for the courageous use of reason by the masses to emancipate themselves from individual immaturity (Gasparyan, 2016). Similarly, Descartes' rationalism emphasizes the importance of rationality in guiding individuals to resolve disputes and problems, thus preventing blind adherence to prevailing opinions (Diller, 2013). In contrast, traditional Eastern rationality, exemplified by the concept of the "unity of heaven and humanity," seeks internal harmony between individuals, society, nature, and the state, reflecting a profound concern for life, nature, and the cosmos. This notion finds resonance in the development of Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty, where the movement sought to curtail royal authority and subject it to moral constraints, representing a quest within Confucianism to derive value from within. Utilizing "goodness" as a rational normative principle embodies ethical, moral, and legal considerations within human society (Chi, 2014), aligning with Kant's emphasis on rationality and the values promoted in contemporary Chinese society. In the present era, characterized by unprecedented global changes and power struggles, rational mainstream values have reemerged as a focal point of social discourse. In this context, the emergence of "I am what I am" symbolizes the resurgence of mainstream Chinese values imbued with rational and benevolent significance, with the portrayal of the protagonist Ajuan epitomizing the values and aspirations of the masses in the new era.

In "I am what I am," Ajuan's circumstances mirror those of individuals navigating the complexities of real-world society, where no amount of audacity can circumvent the inexorable logic of life. In contrast to the defiant declarations of self-determination seen in "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" and the rebellious antics of the protagonist in "Monkey King: Hero Is Back," Ajuan adopts a more subdued and patient demeanor. Lacking the extraordinary abilities to reshape the world or the extreme personal heroism that commands attention, Ajuan harbors a pragmatic, resigned, yet unwaveringly determined attitude towards life. Despite hailing from a rural background and being left behind by her parents, Ajuan's longing for familial connection remains palpable. Upon learning of her parents' return, she eagerly rushes home, only to discover her father's incapacitation due to a work-related accident. Confronted with this harsh reality, Ajuan steadfastly shoulders the responsibility of providing for her family, setting aside her dreams of donning the lion head to embark on a resolute journey to seek employment in the bustling city. It is this individual's burgeoning rational prowess that propels Ajuan to confront the harshness of



reality with pragmatism and reason. Moreover, the ethical undercurrents reflected in Ajuan's actions serve as a source of solace for viewers navigating their own challenges in urban anonymity. Ajuan's pragmatic and rational approach to her circumstances resonates as a call to action for individuals amidst the unique challenges of this era.

Secondly, the rationality imbued with the "good" meaning in "I am what I am" reflects a response to the contemporary societal phenomenon of "value erosion," aiming to evoke humanistic concern for the mainstream values of the Chinese nation in the new era. This sentiment echoes Sun Yat-sen's advocacy for the reinstatement of the Eight Virtues, which called for the abandonment of feudalistic ideologies and the cultivation of virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, faithfulness, and peace. In the film, Ajuan's unwavering filial piety and sense of responsibility amidst familial upheaval are deeply rooted in traditional ethical family bonds, exemplified by her declaration, "I'm here to support the family." Moreover, the exchange between "Xianyuqiang" and his wife poignantly illustrates the juxtaposition of personal sacrifice and regret, resonating with Ajuan's own experiences with reality. This attention to detail underscores the film's call for a revival of "love," infusing warmth into the narrative. Furthermore, Ajuan's discovery that her lion dance team comrades, "Ah Mao," "Ah Gou," and their masters, have provided financial support to her family underscores themes of benevolence and righteousness. This portrayal subtly highlights the altruistic aspects of the contemporary era while enriching character emotional depth. Despite facing harsh adversities, the characters in the film prioritize hard work over emotional expression, reinforcing a sense of rationality. While the film endeavors to portray a brighter side of life, it also skillfully captures a sense of resilience and endurance amidst adversity.

In Adversity, Symbols Shape Beliefs

Since ancient times, although the Chinese nation has not been historically characterized as a martial society, there is an undeniable vein of resilience and fortitude running through the collective consciousness of the Chinese people. As elucidated in "Sun Tzu's Art of War: The First Strategy Chapter," war is recognized as a pivotal event, a matter of life and death, and an imperative for survival that cannot be overlooked. While the Chinese people have traditionally espoused benevolence and avoided unnecessary conflicts, they have demonstrated exceptional courage and determination in the face of existential threats. Indeed, adversity has served to embolden the Chinese populace, fostering a deep-rooted sense of faith and heroism. Drawing from philosophical texts such as the Taoist classic "Zhuangzi," which extols the eternal nature of saints and the persistence of great thieves, and historical accounts like Chen Sheng and Wu Guang's rallying cry in "Records of the Grand Historian," the Chinese nation's indomitable spirit shines through (Ding, 2020). Moreover, modern China continues to uphold these venerable traditions, finding solace and strength amidst myriad disasters and fluctuating international circumstances. Throughout the tumult of the pandemic, the ravages of natural disasters, and the challenges posed by geopolitical tensions, the Chinese people have exhibited unwavering faith and resilience, standing as beacons of courage and determination in the face of adversity.



The thematic essence and aesthetic presentation delineated in "I am what I am" resonate harmoniously with the prevailing ethos of the Chinese populace, emblematic of the collective spirit requisite during challenging epochs. The cinematic portrayal of the central character, Ajuan, epitomizes her unwavering allegiance to her aspirations and convictions, mirroring the zeitgeist of contemporary existence. Notably, the film deftly employs symbolic imagery to substantiate Ajuan's abstract ideologies, rendering them tangible and comprehensible to the audience, while consistently accentuating them throughout the narrative. For instance, a pivotal dialogue wherein Ajuan remarks, "You are the man who was hit by the hero flower (kapok)," epitomizes the weight of Ajuan's spiritual calling. This exchange marks the inception of her journey towards actualizing her beliefs. The climactic scene, wherein Ajuan leaps towards the elusive Optimus Prime in a bid to transcend her limitations, is punctuated by the recurrent imagery of the Hero Flower, serving as a palpable manifestation of her unwavering faith. Subsequently, the existential negation and dialectical encounters encountered by Ajuan metamorphose into a transcendent spiritual sustenance. The Heroic Flower, serving as a tangible "symbol," embodies Ajuan's steadfast conviction. Notably, the symbolic motif of the red lion head assumes multifaceted connotations, including that of a protective barrier or an emblem of isolation. Encased within the lion's visage, Ajuan grapples with the vicissitudes of life, concealing her inner turmoil. Yet, adorned with the lion's guise, she undergoes a metamorphosis into a resolute and vibrant persona. Ultimately, it is this symbolic barricade that imbues Ajuan with the fortitude of faith, empowering her to manifest as a true lion and stand before the towering Buddha statue. From its inception, the red lion head emerges as an unwavering bastion and wellspring of faith, symbolizing the transformative journey embarked upon by the protagonist under the guidance of the female Ajuan.

The thematic underpinnings and aesthetic qualities depicted in "I am what I am" resonate with the core beliefs of the Chinese populace, particularly amid adversities, warranting celebration. Through the portrayal of the protagonist Ajuan, the film articulates a steadfast commitment to personal aspirations and convictions, reflective of contemporary existential realities. Employing symbolic imagery deftly, the narrative imbues Ajuan's abstract beliefs with palpable significance, ensuring their resonance with the audience throughout. A poignant exchange between the characters underscores Ajuan's spiritual calling, marking the inception of her journey towards actualization. In the climactic scene, as Ajuan leaps towards the unattainable Optimus Prime, the recurring imagery of the Hero Flower serves as a tangible manifestation of her unwavering faith. The ensuing dialectical encounters and self-negation coalesce into a transcendent spiritual nourishment for Ajuan. Acting as a tangible emblem, the heroic flower encapsulates Ajuan's resolute beliefs. Similarly, the symbolic motif of the red lion head assumes diverse connotations, representing both a protective barrier and a conduit for personal transformation. Ultimately, it is through the symbolic barrier of the lion's guise that Ajuan harnesses the power of faith, transforming into a figure of resilience and vitality. From its introduction in the opening credits, the red lion head emerges as an enduring symbol of faith and fortitude under the guidance of the female Ajuan.



CONCLUSION

In the contemporary landscape, the spectrum of public aesthetic values is notably diverse, rendering any assessment of animated films susceptible to nuanced perspectives rather than rigid binary oppositions. Embracing and validating the existence of animated films with varied themes and stylistic approaches serves as a testament to societal progress and aesthetic inclusivity in this era of transformative growth. Nonetheless, the preservation and exploration of China's indigenous cultural narratives remain intrinsic to the mission of Chinese animated cinema. "I am What I am" departs from the conventional narrative tropes of Chinese mythology, instead delving into realistic themes under the influence of new technological advancements, thereby offering a multifaceted interpretation of traditional Chinese values. Notably, the representation of Chinese youth's value systems in animated works necessitates a departure from mere mythological reimaginings, urging a simultaneous adherence to tradition and adaptation to contemporary contexts. This endeavor bears significant implications for the authentic portrayal of Chinese narratives, societal ethos, and socialist core values within domestic animated productions. Conversely, a substantial portion of literary works succumb to the deluge of "aesthetic value erosion" driven by rampant commercialization, characterized by metaphorical moral decline, materialism, erosion of faith, hedonism, and individualism. Such works fail to align with, let alone reflect, the distinctive humanistic aesthetic heritage and enduring spirit of the Chinese nation, rooted in the current societal milieu. Therefore, exercising discretion in the portrayal of animated characters and the directional orientation of hero depiction in animated films, while diversifying interpretive approaches, stands as a potent vehicle for showcasing national confidence and advancing the realization of the Chinese Dream.

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