

Article

Research on animation design of woodblock print characters based on audience aesthetic differences

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Abstract: Traditional woodblock prints are a kind of Chinese folk traditional painting art, with a long history and unique artistic style. It has a long history and unique artistic style. The richness of its themes and wide range of applications cover many aspects such as New Year festivals, wedding banquets and birthday celebrations, religious rituals and lanterns and toys. The wide range of themes and wide range of applications of woodblock prints creates a rich and colourful connotation, especially traditional stories and character images, which constitute an important part of the woodblock prints, there are very rich story resources and character resources in the woodblock prints for animation creators to refer to, different creators of woodblock prints have different understandings and re-designs, and the audience has mixed feelings about the effect of character design. With the development of modern animation production technology and the increasing attention to traditional culture, more and more practitioners have begun to explore the animation of story characters in the non-heritage culture, and this paper aims to explore the feasible path of animation of the elements in woodblock prints under the aesthetic differences.

Keywords: aesthetic differences, woodblock prints, digitisation, character animation

1. Introduction

Woodblock prints are a traditional folk art form in China with a history of more than a thousand years. At present, there are dozens of woodblock prints in China, mainly concentrated in Tianjin, Shandong, Henan and Anhui, etc. Woodblock prints in different regions have their own characteristics. The content of woodblock prints usually depicts traditional culture, folk customs, historical figures, etc., and contains a wealth of characters, scenes and storylines, which provides good materials for animation production.

On 7 June 2008, woodblock prints were approved by the State Council for inclusion in the second batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. (1) In November 2019, woodblock prints were included in the list of national intangible cultural heritage representative project protection units. (2) Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism on the Announcement of the List of Protection Units of Representative Items of National Intangible Cultural Heritage.

2. The current situation of the combination of woodblock prints and animation

Regarding the combination of woodblock prints and animation, animation creators have been trying. From the period of Shanghai Meifang Studio to the present, there are works being launched continuously. However, with the great improvement of people's material living standard, the spiritual pursuit of the public has changed, and the intangible cultural heritage has great difficulties in the process of inheritance, protection and dissemination. (3) In addition, in recent years, the emergence of Chinese animation works such as "Return of the Great Sage of Journey to the West", "Reincarnation of Nezha's Devil

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Boy", "Lion Boy", etc. reflects that the audience has aesthetic differences in animation characters combining intangible cultural heritage, and that aesthetics, although affected by age, education, upbringing, etc., are in line with the mainstream aesthetics of the general public and tend to be loved by everyone. The author collects and organises some representative woodblock prints on the Chinese Internet in recent years, which can be classified into the following categories according to their story and character features, and summarises the audience's aesthetic reflections:

2.1. Animation of traditional stories and characters

"Liu Hai Plays the Golden Cicada" is a 2D animation based on the woodblock prints of Zhuxian Town, the story and characters are taken from the woodblock prints, the whole film has smooth movements, rich shots, full storyline and simplified roles (Fig. 1), which has been well received and loved by everyone. Although the characters were designed with the production needs of animation in mind, the highlights were insufficient. Moreover, the production cost of traditional 2D animation is high, and the film lacked follow-up works after its production. For the shortcomings of this film, practitioners can refer to the more successful animation series "Peking Opera Cats", which is a modification of traditional culture. The story's characters and content are taken from Peking Opera, a well-produced domestic animation. Peking Opera faces and shapes are very complex, and the characters of the animation of the Peking Opera characters are totaled and simplified (Fig. 2) from the line and colour scheme are more in line with the production of animation and the aesthetics of the current audience, the story is set to meet the current people's appreciation of the habit of heroic portrayal of the characters, the story is more complete and huge, the character portrayal is more fulfilling, and it is screened in many parts of the world to great acclaim, it is a relatively successful It is a relatively successful case of adapting traditional non-heritage characters into animation.



Figure 1. Screenshot of animation of Liu Hai Playing Golden Cicada.



Figure 2. Character design of Peking Opera Cat.

2.2. Integration of traditional stories and characters into modern language

China Crafts Network, in conjunction with the Intangible Cultural Heritage Research Centre of Sichuan University, produces the New Year's animation "New Year's Paintings Return to Chinese New Year" series, in which all the characters are from woodblock prints, the movements are made with MG animation effects, and the storyline breaks away from the traditional storyline and combines with modern shopping, high-speed railways, and motorbikes. Innovations were also made in the design of character behaviour, for example, Wen Kui Jun's black hat was turned into a modern duck-tongue hat (Fig. 3), the God of Wealth used mobile phones to send out red envelopes, and Zhong Kui rode a motorbike. It gives people a refreshing feeling and has a high click rate on the Internet. However, simple action and single shot are also some of the shortcomings of the film.

Yangzhou's non-heritage cultural project "Nianhua Guangling" is an animation that combines two-dimensional and stop-motion technology, with characters taken from woodblock prints. There are not many character movements, mainly simple movements such as panning and waving, but the story incorporates current topics such as epidemics and live broadcasts, which are closely related to the character setting of the God of the Door, "the country is at peace, and the weather is good", and the voice-overs use local dialects and Internet terms, which increase the interest of the story. However, there are too many animation techniques used to draw the characters and backgrounds of the film, and the drawing style is not very uniform. (Fig. 4.)



Figure 3. Screenshot of the animation "New Year's Paintings Return to Chinese New Year".



Figure 4. Screenshot of the animation "New Year's Words in Guangling".

2.3. Experimental works of storyline and characterisation

Students in colleges and universities are less influenced by the outside world, and their designs are wild and bold, and many of them are full of creativity. In the design process, students are more willing to try to combine woodblock prints with all kinds of digital technology and different styles, but the final effect is also uncertain.

Lv Chuyuan and Huang Shengde's design work "Foshan Woodblock Prints VR Virtual Game 3D Animation Design" combines 2D and 3D animation effects to create a VR virtual interactive mini game. The design is novel and the game is rich in interaction, which is an innovative experiment on the content of woodblock prints (Fig. 5). However,

the work is more about character details and dynamic restoration, less about the difficulty of the character in animation movements, mostly static or simple movements, the actual changes are not big, and the difference in the audience's perception is not big.

Wu Bingyu's design work, "IP Design of "Your God of Door" in Zhuxian Town Woodblock Prints", redesigns the God of Door in Zhuxian Town Woodblock Prints in three dimensions, which makes the traditional character more modern and makes the traditional character "trendy" (Fig. 6). The character design is very creative, in line with the current audience's favourite national trend style, and brings a refreshing feeling, but it is more popular among young people, while the middle-aged and old-aged groups are more conservative in their acceptance of character innovation.



Figure 5. "Foshan Woodblock Prints VR Virtual Game 3D Animation Design" Fig.



Figure 6. "Your Door God" IP Design of Zhuxian Town Woodblock Prints".

2.4. Design sources drawn from the woodblock print section

In the field of traditional animation, animators have drawn rich inspiration and materials from woodblock prints. The image of the general in "The Proud General" draws on the woodblock prints for its design. The general in the animation refers to the atmospheric and bold character movement characteristics of the common door god in traditional woodblock prints, and simplifies the shape of the door god, which is conducive to the character's movements. The animation of the general has obvious "door god" characteristics, precisely because of the capture of the "door god" character movement characteristics, the work is very well-known, by the audience unanimously praised.

Shangmei Factory produces the animation "Over the Monkey Mountain", which is based on the story and image of the traditional woodblock print "Monkey Robbing the Straw Hat", the story is light and lively, and it is known as: "The only pure farce film in China". (Fig.7.8) But through the animation works and traditional woodblock prints comparison, both the shape and colour scheme are different from the traditional woodblock prints, jumping out of the traditional woodblock prints design style of the characters, more in line with the laws of animation movement, the storyline is vivid and interesting, is a combination of animation and woodblock prints story is very successful works.



Figure 7. Weifang woodblock print "Monkey grabbing straw hat".



Figure 8. Screenshot of animation of "Crossing the Monkey Mountain".

In addition, the scenes and character images in animated films such as *Journey to the West*, *The Legend of the White Snake*, and *The Palace of Heaven and Earth* have also made reference to woodblock prints. In recent years, some short-film animation productions have also begun to adopt elements of woodblock prints. These animation works are closely related to traditional woodblock prints in form and content, and have made a certain contribution to the digitisation of woodblock prints.

Through the above case, it can be seen that the rich character elements contained in woodblock prints can be used as a source of material for animation production. Through the reference and innovation of woodblock prints, unique animation works can be created, combining traditional culture with modern art on the basis of conforming to the public aesthetics, and bringing a new visual experience to the audience.

3. Classification of available materials for animation in woodblock prints

Woodblock prints are one of the traditional folk art forms in China, and their contents cover a variety of traditional cultures, folk customs and historical figures, which can provide a large amount of materials and creative inspirations for animation production. According to the common contents of woodblock prints, they can be categorised in terms of characters and stories for reference and use in animation creation.

3.1. Classification of common characters in woodblock prints

Through the research, we summarise the examples of woodblock prints that contain a large number of characters, which can be divided into three types according to their characteristics: mythological characters, real characters and animals: (1) Mythological Characters: Mythological characters are a common type of woodblock prints, and there are two categories of mythological characters and traditional festival characters: Mythological Characters: Ancient Chinese myths and legends involve many roles, for example, Jiangya, Nezha, etc. in "The Enchantment of Gods", and Sun Wukong and Piggy Ring in "Journey to the West". For example, there are many characters in ancient Chinese myths

and legends, such as Jiang Ziya and Nezha in "The Feudal Art of the Gods", White Snake and Green Snake in "Liaozhai Zhiyi", and Sun Wukong and Piggy's Eight Rings in "Journey to the West". These characters are full-bodied and in different forms, and are very popular among the public, providing a wealth of material and creative inspiration for animation production. Traditional Festival Characters: Woodblock prints also depict many characters related to traditional festivals, such as the God of Wealth in the Spring Festival, lanterns in the Lantern Festival and dragon boats in the Dragon Boat Festival. These characters occupy an important position in Chinese traditional culture and are suitable for animation creation. (2) Real Characters: Real historical characters are also a type of woodblock prints that express more, classified into two categories: historical characters and ordinary people's characters: historical characters: various historical characters often appear in woodblock prints, such as Confucius, Guan Yu, Cao Cao, etc. These characters are distinctive, with obvious features and personalities, and are suitable for animation character creation. Common People Characters: Characters are the richest and most diversified types of characters in woodblock prints, including officials, scholars, women, children and so on. Characters with different forms and identities can also enrich the creation of animation characters. (3) Animals: Animal characters are a common type of characters in woodblock prints, but the classification also has its own specificity, there are auspicious animals and real animals in two categories, auspicious animals: most of them are sacred beasts, which are one of the important images in traditional Chinese culture, such as dragons, phoenixes, unicorns, lions, etc., which are often depicted as gorgeous and magnificent images, representing good luck and happiness. Real animals: lions, dogs, cats, birds, etc. These common animals in woodblock prints represent authority and majesty, loyalty and wisdom, freedom and beauty, and other people's beautiful visions of life.

In general, different types of characters have different characteristics and symbolic meanings in woodblock prints, which reflect the spiritual connotations and aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese culture, and are also an important part of Chinese folk culture and art. As a traditional Chinese art form, woodblock prints contain a large number of characters, which are rich in image, distinctive personality and creativity, and are the high-quality materials and sources of creative inspiration needed for animation production. At the same time, woodblock prints have natural advantages such as bright colours and clear lines, which are similar to the expression of animation and provide better adaptability and creative space for animation production.

3.2. *Types of stories in woodblock prints*

As a traditional Chinese folk art form, woodblock prints often depict stories and scenes with traditional cultural backgrounds. The following are a few typical types: (1) Myths and legends stories: This type of woodblock prints often depict some scenes and characters from myths and legends, such as The Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden and Fishing with Jiang Taigong. These stories are full of rich mystery and imagination, allowing people to immerse themselves in the world of myths in the process of appreciation. (2) Folklore Stories: This type of woodblock prints usually depicts some folklore stories with local characteristics and cultural connotations, such as "Liu Yi Passing the Book" and "Meng Po Soup". These stories reflect the richness and diversity of Chinese folk culture and allow people to better understand traditional and local Chinese culture. (3) Life Scene Stories: This type of woodblock prints usually depicts scenes and characters from daily life, such as "New Year's Fair" and "Wedding Celebration". These stories reflect the cultural atmosphere of traditional Chinese life and people's daily habits, allowing people to better appreciate the charm of traditional Chinese culture in the process of appreciation. (4) Historical Stories: This type of woodblock prints usually depict some historical events and characters, such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Water Margin, etc. These stories

reflect the development of Chinese history. These stories reflect the development and evolution of Chinese history, allowing people to better understand the heritage of Chinese history and culture in the process of appreciation.

The different types of stories in woodblock prints reflect the richness and diversity of traditional Chinese culture, and also show the charm and flavour of Chinese folk art, which can provide a constant source of inspiration for creators in animation creation.

4. the innovative design development direction of modern woodblock prints

The innovation of woodblock prints is closely related to the aesthetics of the audience, and the innovative design content of modern woodblock prints includes novel themes and subjects, innovative artistic expression methods, combining modern life elements and diversified product design. These innovative design contents make it more contemporary and modern, and also promote the development and innovation of traditional Chinese culture and art, making certain innovative design on the basis of tradition, and injecting new elements and styles. And the main audience group of animation is young people, with high acceptance of new things, which also promotes the innovation of woodblock prints in the following aspects:

(1) Novel themes and subjects: Modern woodblock prints are no longer confined to traditional stories and scenes, but have been innovatively designed according to the background of the times and the needs of the society with many novel themes and subjects, such as industrial and agricultural production, scientific and technological development, and social progress.

(2) Innovative artistic expression: Modern woodblock prints have also carried out some innovative designs in artistic expression, such as the use of richer colours and more delicate line expression, making the works more three-dimensional and artistic aesthetics.

(3) Combining elements of modern life: On the basis of inheriting the tradition, modern woodblock prints have also combined elements of modern life, such as films, pop music, fashion, etc., so that the works are more in line with the aesthetic needs of contemporary young people.

(4) Diversified product design: The product design of modern woodblock prints has also been innovated, and in addition to traditional New Year's paintings, books, greeting cards, hand-painted postcards and other forms of products have been introduced, expanding their markets and audience groups.

In recent years, the graphic design industry on the innovation of woodblock prints have many successful cases: "YuYouji" is China's Henan Province to appreciate the Yu Culture and Creativity Co., Ltd. of the brand, the company on the door god, wake up the lion, the unicorn, and other woodblock prints such as the traditional character of the New Year's paintings to do the re-creation of a wide range of furniture products, and get the majority of consumer recognition. In addition, the "God of the Gate" is a cartoon design in recent years more successful woodblock print character, such as the "God of the Gate" derived from a lot of graphic design works such as curtains, mouse pads, refrigerator stickers, hand-do and so on loved by consumers. On the Internet, there are also many designers designing a variety of national trend of couplets and door god is also on the Internet sales boom, get the young people's favourite.

5. The main points of animation design of woodblock print characters under the aesthetic difference

Traditional woodblock prints are usually characterised by rich details and complex lines, which are not suitable for use in modern animation, which needs to simplify and reduce the details in order to maintain visual clarity and coherence in the animation. In order to simplify the characters of traditional woodblock prints to match the task characteristics of animation characters, with reference to some successful cases in the direction

of animation and graphic design, the following aspects can be considered to improve the existing woodblock print characters:

5.1. Role rationalisation and simplification

Characters in traditional woodblock prints are usually overly complex, characterised by being cumbersome, detailed and decorative, which is not well suited for animation. In order to make traditional characters suitable for animation, attempts can be made to simplify their features in order to make them easier to animate and draw after animation. Thus, try simplifying the head, body and limbs to make the character cleaner and more crisp. And remove details, such as patterns or tattoos on clothing, to make them more suitable for animation. Alternatively one can enhance key character features so that they stand out more in the animation. For example, facial features such as a character's eyes, nose and mouth can be enhanced to make them more recognisable to the audience.

5.2. Traditional Colours Reinvented

The colours in traditional woodblock prints are usually gaudy with strong colours and patterns, but in animation production, more saturated and bright colours are needed to represent the characters. In order to adapt the colour design in animation, the colours in traditional woodblock prints can be extracted and then re-optimised to design the characters' colours as needed. Doing so helps to ensure that the animated characters are consistent with the traditional characters, while also having a modern feel. Specific practices include extracting the colours through methods such as colour balance, and then combining them with modern colour theories to redesign the character's colours. Making them more consistent with animation.

5.3. Adding interest to the story

Characters in traditional woodblock prints often have rich cultural connotations and historical backgrounds, so it is possible to make the subsequent animation more interesting and convenient to inject more personality and depth into the animated characters by selecting some particularly storytelling characters, such as those with unique experiences, legends or distinctive features. Such characters in animation production can not only show the characteristics of traditional culture, but also enable the audience to better understand the storyline and characterisation. Specific practices include the selection of representative characters, legends and historical stories behind the characters, etc. This character selection also includes not only historical celebrities, but also in recent years, many marginalised minor characters have also been enjoyed for some of their special stories, more realistic character emotions and other characteristics.

5.4. Designing for role innovation

Designed with modern elements, in order to make the characters in traditional woodblock prints more suitable for modern animation production, they can be designed with modern elements. For example, new costumes and equipment can be added, and the character's personality can be increased. Combining modern elements, add fashionable clothes, modern hairstyles and personalised accessories for the female characters in traditional woodblock prints, so as to make them more suitable for modern people's aesthetic concepts.

Add personality traits, traditional characters are usually static, in order to make them adapt to animation, you can try to add some dynamic characteristics, you can design some specific movements, poses, expressions and actions for the characters to make them more expressive. References: Ultraman's summoning, Naruto's gesture movements, etc. Character appearance animation in Peking Opera Cat.

Add magical elements, traditional characters are usually realistic, in order to make them more attractive, you can try to add some magical elements, for example, design the character with two forms, character state and elf demon state, in order to make them more fantasy.

6. Conclusion

Through the discussion of this paper, it can be seen that the animation of woodblock prints can not only better show the characteristics and value of traditional culture, but also provide more ideas and references for character design for animation production. In the creative ideas can refer to the current transformation of the more successful direction of graphic design, character redesign needs to be in line with the current aesthetic, in the story design should also learn from the successful IP experience, the animation to create continuity. In the future, we have to continue to explore the techniques and methods of character animation and story transformation in traditional woodblock prints, which can not only better show the characteristics and value of traditional culture, but also provide more character design ideas and references for animation production, and improve the value of the application of digital animation in traditional culture.

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