

Export of Chinese Animated Film: A Case Study on “Nezha”

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Abstract: The box office of Chinese films is growing, and domestic films have made a great contribution. Chinese films has also becoming an important component of Chinese cultural exportation. Animated films have advantage of having wider audience, which can convey national values more gently and shape the national image imperceptibly. This paper took the animated film "Nezha", which was a dark horse at the domestic box office, as an example to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of Chinese animation film in cross-cultural communication. The study found that although technique and animation visual effects received good comments from the overseas audience, the cultural barriers and the lack of commercial publicity was still a constaint for Chinese animated films.

1. Introduction

2019 is another bumper year for Chinese films-the film market maintains a growing momentum, with a national box office of 64.266 billion yuan, of which the share of domestic films is 64.07%, and the total box office of domestic films is 41.175 billion yuan. Among them, the animated film "Nezha" became a dark horse at the box office, with a box office revenue of 5.001 billion yuan to become the box office champion. Generally speaking, the film market shows a relatively prosperous situation.

Despite the prosperity of the domestic market, there are still many difficulties in the foreign exchange of Chinese films. In terms of international cooperation, although China has held a variety of international film and television exchange activities, there are not many projects that have reached real co-production at home and abroad, especially with countries with developed film industry and active film market. These films are usually of mediocre quality and contribute little to the box office. The export of domestic films also presents a completely different situation from the domestic market. In 2019, the Chinese film industry released 17 films, including "wandering the Earth", "the birth of the Devil Child of Nezha" and "Ip Man 4" in 5 continents and 103 countries, with a total box office of US \$17 million (about 1.1 billion yuan) and 1.1 million viewers. "Ip Man 4" won the top spot at the overseas box office of Chinese-language films in 2019 with a score of more than \$10 million. On the whole, although the number of domestic films distributed overseas has increased, because the appeal of domestic "popular styles" is mainly limited to the Chinese circle, its dissemination and influence is very limited. Although "Nezha" has topped the Chinese box office in Australia and New Zealand for nearly a decade, it has grossed only about \$3.55 million in North America more than a month after its release in North America. The evaluation of

the media and audience is not satisfactory. The rotten tomato after its release was 80% fresh, but commentators from the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times gave only 60 and 40 points, respectively. Some viewers said that the special effects of the film are gorgeous, but the plot needs to be improved.

Compared with traditional feature films, animated films can convey national values more gently, imperceptibly shape the image of the country, and animated films have a wider audience. Studying the overseas communication of animated films can broaden the ways of cultural communication, enhance cross-cultural communication and reduce cultural friction. However, animated films have encountered some problems in the process of spreading to the outside world. One is why some domestic popular films are not so successful abroad, and the other is what lessons can be learned from internationally successful cartoons. Therefore, this paper will take "Nezha" as an example to study the success factors of animated films in cross-cultural communication under the background of cross-cultural communication.

2. Literature Review

Some scholars have studied Chinese films that have been successful in cross-cultural communication and gained the following experience. First of all, from the perspective of cultural themes, the films that earn high box office are basically martial arts films or action movies, and the stories are usually set in ancient China. The central idea conveyed in the film is mainly to punish evil and promote good, and to pursue a peaceful and beautiful social life, usually with a happy ending, such as the Shaolin Temple starring Jet Li. The core of this kind of film is Chinese kung fu, which is most familiar and recognized by foreign audiences. On the other hand, the Chinese films that have won awards at major foreign film festivals are of a completely different style. Most of them are literary films, usually tragedies, which mainly discuss human nature and social oppression, and are full of oriental philosophy. The film background is generally set in modern China, such as *Lust, Caution* and *Farewell My Concubine*. Whether they win important awards or high box office receipts, these films explain part of Chinese culture in film language from different aspects. It is the unique style of Chinese culture that distinguishes Chinese films from films from other countries and regions, and has become an important factor to attract audiences, especially commercial films with kung fu and martial arts feelings as selling points.

Secondly, the use of film technology and film art has also made a great contribution to the overseas development of Chinese films, mainly in the use of special effects scenes and actors' costumes, props, as well as editing techniques in line with oriental narrative habits. Many directors pay a high cost to create an ideal film world. For example, Ang Lee copied a whole old street in Shanghai in order to shoot *Lust, Caution*. The changes in the costumes and makeup of the film characters correspond to the psychological changes of the characters. Some directors even deal with characters simply and instead pursue forms of expression: beautiful pictures, gorgeous movements, beautiful colors and so on[1]. The most typical representative is Zhang Yimou's middle and later works such as *Hero* and *Ambush* on all sides. Although this kind of film has achieved good results and reviews overseas, it has aroused great criticism in China. To some extent, this phenomenon also reflects the differences in Chinese and foreign understanding of Chinese culture. In the narrative way of the film, Chinese directors will use editing techniques to match the soundtrack, so that the expression of the film contains oriental implication, full of hints and blank aesthetic taste[2]. Chinese films have won several international awards in film music and film technology. For example, Chinese composer Tan Dun has won Academy Awards and Grammy Awards. It can be said that Chinese films have no fatal shortcomings in technology and art, and even play a helpful role in cross-cultural communication.

Finally, there is the experience of business operation. No matter how well a film is made, if it is not appreciated by the audience, the audience will not be able to judge the quality of the film, and the film will not receive feedback and evaluation. Unfortunately, there are only a small number of films shown overseas, and a large part of these works are Hong Kong films, and the number of mainland films shown overseas is very limited, which leads to many excellent works that cannot be appreciated by overseas audiences. Even if some films are successfully released overseas, not every film has been well publicized. Films that are fully planned to promote public relations usually do better at the box office. "the Great Wall" is the highest-grossing Chinese-language film at the overseas box office in recent years, and it is also one of the Chinese-language films that work most closely with overseas distributors. Although many audiences criticize the plot of the Great Wall as stale, they all affirm its visual effects[3]. "the Great Wall" is not the best visual film released overseas in China in recent years, but it has garnered the highest overseas box office, and the publicity team has played a big role in it. In addition, the overseas reputation and box office appeal of directors or actors will also affect the cross-cultural spread of the film. For example, Ang Lee, Zhang Yimou, Jackie Chan and Jet Li are well known overseas, which to a certain extent affects the willingness of some viewers to pay. In addition, some films, such as the Great Wall, have been aimed at a particular market since their inception. This kind of film will unconsciously or even deliberately cater to the target market in the choice of theme and narrative expression, so it is easier for such films to be accepted in cross-cultural communication.

3. Analysis

Compared with Chinese live-action movies, the overseas spread of Chinese animated films is more tortuous and difficult. Of all the animated films released overseas, "Nezha" has won the highest overseas box office and rating of domestic animated films so far. The North American box office is close to \$3.7 million, with a media rating of 87% for rotten tomatoes and an audience score of 98% (out of 100%), IMDB score of 7.7 out of 10, making it the highest domestic animated film in recent years. However, compared with Japan, which is famous for its cultural output, there is a lot of room for improvement in the influence and box office revenue of Chinese animated films. The Japanese animated film "Spirited Away" not only won the Golden Bear and Academy Awards, but also grossed more than \$250 million at the global box office, more than \$5 million in the United States alone. Below, the author will analyze the advantages and disadvantages of Nezha from the perspectives of culture, technology and commerce, and analyze the impact of these characteristics on the film's cross-cultural communication.

3.1. Cultural Barrier

First of all, Nezha has a rich cultural background. Nezha is based on ancient Chinese myths and legends. Regarded by the people as the protector of saving the world and protecting the people, Nezha is a well-known artistic image in China, which has been widely worshipped and believed by the Chinese, and its status can be equated with that of saints in Catholic and Christian culture. This kind of character setting is naturally attractive to the Chinese community, which makes it easy for the Chinese community to look forward to and like the film, while the non-Chinese group will lose a lot of interest when watching the movie because of the lack of cultural background, even confused about some film settings and plots, thus affecting the viewing experience.

Secondly, even if the film is regarded as an original animation, there are other cultural barriers in cross-cultural communication, the most important of which is language. "Nezha" was released in North America in the form of retaining Chinese dubbing and adding English subtitles. Some foreign audiences commented that the characters of the film spoke so fast that they did not have time to

read the full contents of the subtitles, affecting their understanding of the film. Secondly, the audience responded that he did not know why other Chinese audiences were amused by certain plots of the film. From the English translation, he could not accept the joke[4]. For example, in the movies 00:19:26 and 1:00:56, Nezha read several limericks with witty rhymes while watching the scenery on the fence and in detention, reflecting the rebellious and unruly character of the characters. Although the English translation retains the neatness of phonology, it does not reflect the interest of the original verse, or even changes the original intention of the poem, which will undoubtedly affect the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the film. In addition, the Chinese dubbing of the film has been added to the Sichuan dialect. Sichuan dialect makes people laugh unconsciously because of its special intonation and use of words, which is a kind of humor that only Chinese can understand, and the meaning of dialect is very difficult to convey to foreign audiences through translation.

Another problem is that Chinese and foreign audiences grew up in different cultural environments. The film pays homage to Stephen Chow's classic movies in some scenes, such as "the self-cultivation of Immortals" seen by Taiyi Zhenren pays homage to "the self-cultivation of actors". These are all cultural elements that can resonate in the Chinese cultural circle, while non-Chinese audiences are almost insulated from these Easter eggs. Although these Easter eggs do not affect the understanding of the film, knowing the origin of these Easter eggs will undoubtedly increase the sense of cultural identity. These cultural factors have affected the spread of "Nezha" overseas.

However, there are also factors that are friendly to cross-cultural communication. The film adds modern elements, such as Taiyi using passwords and fingerprints to unlock, adapting traditional myths to make them more in line with current values and easier to understand. Although these modern elements and adaptations are regarded by a small number of Chinese audiences as the destruction of traditional stories, this adaptation can resonate with non-Chinese audiences and is undoubtedly more conducive to the international spread of the film.

3.2. Technology and Art

Unlike the plot and translation discussed due to cultural barriers, Naha's production technology has been unanimously appreciated by overseas audiences. Through the statistics of overseas audience comments, the good evaluation rate of animation visual effects is more than 95%[4]. although China's 3D animation technology is still some way from the top level in the world, the finished product is by no means rough. Using computer technology combined with traditional hand-painting, the "Nezha" team created an amazing scene. For example, in the film, many city towers, mountains and rivers and other geographical scenes are with the help of traditional art techniques.

Meanwhile, art design is also one of the attractions of the film "Nezha". Unlike spoken and written words, intuitive pictures can cross cultural boundaries and trigger a touch in a wider range of groups, just as the Chinese will admire the delicacy of Raphael's painting. Nezha uses a lot of traditional Chinese elements, which, of course, has something to do with the setting of the story in ancient China. In the film, we can see that the building combines the architectural style of the Qin and Han dynasties in China, and the costumes of the characters also have their own characteristics. For example, the general wears narrow sleeves to facilitate movement, the sleeves of the immortals are wider and more elegant, and even the hair ornaments of the female characters in the film are not the same. The picture of mountains, rivers and harvests is the place where Nezha learns magic. The scenery inside this album is in line with the Zen meaning of "one flower, one world" in Buddhism, and the bright and saturated colors are similar to a map of thousands of miles of rivers and mountains. One of the best designs is that the two immortal beasts guarding Nezha use the shape of Sanxingdui bronze masks. These two immortal beasts were brought by Tai Yi Zhenren, the master

of Naha. According to legend, Tai Yi Zhenren practiced in Sichuan, and Sanxingdui was discovered by archaeologists in Sichuan. Overseas audiences may not know the origin of these design elements, but after seeing these elements for a long time, they will associate these elements with traditional Chinese culture, which will help overseas audiences to build a more complete system of Chinese culture. Let the audience know that China is not only about kung fu. There are also some misunderstandings caused by cultural differences. For example, Nezha's childhood image of wearing a double bun led some viewers to mistakenly think that Nezha was a girl, so they were confused about the male image of Nezha who grew up in the later period of the film.

The film soundtrack of "Nezha" also creates a good atmosphere and arouses the mood of the audience. The soundtrack of the film matches different scenes, choosing traditional Chinese instruments including erhu, suona and Xiao, as well as Western instruments and modern bands such as brass, strings and even rock bands. In the scene of joy and fierce fighting, the loud and penetrating sound of suona can be obviously heard, and when Nezha kicks the shuttlecock with Aobin, the film uses soothing strings with warm yellow sunset to create a warm and relaxed atmosphere.

Finally, the Hollywood-style narrative style of "Nezha" also makes it easier for overseas audiences to understand the development of the story. The traditional narrative style of Chinese film is similar to the implicit, suggestive and metaphorical style of Chinese literature, and many Chinese films that have won international awards, such as *Farewell my Concubine*, continue this introverted style. But *Nezha* uses a more direct way of telling the story, so that the film is no longer obscure, compact and easy to understand.

3.3. Commercial Marketing

Cultural barriers cannot be broken for the time being, and Chinese animated films are not poorly skilled, in this case, the commercial operation of films is very important, which is what domestic animated films lack.

Firstly, many filmmakers have no incentive to explore overseas markets. China's domestic market is large enough and growing, as long as the film is successful at home, it will be enough to recover costs and make high profits. Overseas release of the film means not only higher costs, but also the risk of loss. The production budget of animated films is limited, and compared with the appeal of directors and actors, animated films can only rely on the quality of the film itself. In this case, the producers usually focus only on the domestic market, and after success at home, they try to release it overseas. When "Nezha" was released in China, it did not even have official English subtitles, and the director himself did not think that the film would earn such a high box office, so naturally he did not consider working with overseas distributors.

Secondly, the overseas marketing investment of animated films is low, and the main target groups are overseas Chinese. Although the overall production budget of animated films is usually lower than that of feature films, films that can be released overseas have earned a high box office in the domestic market. In spite of this, animated films like "Nezha" have not been promoted too much overseas. In addition, *Nezha* has a wide range of distribution, but it is shown in few cinemas and is not released on streaming platforms. The overseas release of the film is more like satisfying overseas Chinese and students who are concerned about domestic developments, rather than opening up markets and spreading culture. As for other films that have earned high box office overseas in recent years, they are either co-productions that cater to the target market for profit, or action films with kung fu elements.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, Chinese animated films actually have many advantages. First of all, the topic selection of Chinese animated films is unique. Most of the themes of the film come from Chinese mythology or classical literature, which forms the unique cultural style of Chinese animation. Secondly, the rapid development of Chinese animation technology has become a solid backing for the imagination of animation creators. The application of traditional art in animation makes the painting style of Chinese animation with a high degree of recognition. In the soundtrack and art design, Chinese animated films combine Chinese traditional musical instruments with western musical instruments and modern electronic music to create new music that is more in line with the aesthetic appreciation of modern audiences. These advantages are not only the characteristics of Chinese animated films, but also help to promote the spread of animated films around the world.

Chinese animated films also have a lot of room for improvement. On the one hand, the protagonists of the film are usually Chinese mythological figures, which are well-known in the Chinese cultural circle, but the non-Chinese groups do not understand them, coupled with the language barrier, which limits the appreciation of the film content by non-Chinese audiences. On the other hand, Chinese films do not pay attention to overseas promotion and marketing, and even only pay attention to the domestic market, so that overseas audiences do not have enough ways to understand and watch Chinese animated films. These shortcomings undoubtedly limit the development of Chinese animated films.

To expand the influence of Chinese animated films, the most fundamental way is to improve China's cultural status in the world, enhance China's cultural discourse and cultural influence in the world, and let more people understand Chinese culture. However, this is not a goal that can be achieved in the short term. In order to expand the scope of communication, at the cultural level, we can avoid too obscure themes, take a modern society closer to life as the background of the story, and take the more universal values of family, fraternity, and equality as the core idea. And translate the movie lines more accurately and restore the meaning of Chinese lines as much as possible. In addition, it is necessary to establish aesthetic habits and systems that belong to China. On the basis of maintaining the existing level, domestic animation can focus on the shaping of style, and the creation of unique style will help to increase the degree of recognition in cross-cultural communication. Finally, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation and contact with overseas distributors and formulate overseas publicity strategies purposefully and pertinently. The government can even reward films that successfully achieve cross-cultural communication to encourage producers to promote domestic animation abroad.

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