The Female Character in Chinese Animated Films: Gender and Negotiating Identity in the Context of Reform and Opening-up of the Chinese Economy

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines female characters in Chinese animated films to explore gender and identity negotiation within the context of China's economic reform. The study focuses on: (1) the social and cultural history of Chinese women and animated films, emphasizing the interplay between women and female characters; (2) gender perspectives in Chinese animated films during economic reform; (3) the negotiation of identity through female representation; and (4) analyzing the "Fox Woman" character as a unit of analysis. The findings reveal that prior to economic reform, gender concepts in China were deeply rooted in traditional feudal ideologies, including male dominance, restrictive family and marriage systems, and unequal access to education. However, reform and opening up introduced foreign cultural influences and evolving audience aesthetics, fostering negotiations among the state, creators, and audiences about identity and gender representation. The government encouraged creators to align female characters with contemporary values, while audiences progressively internalized these gendered transformations, reshaping social and moral values. Key insights include: (1) Female characters in Chinese animated films act as mediators of new social relationships among the state, creators, and audiences, fostering multi-layered social interactions. (2) These characters serve as cultural ambassadors, breaking away from traditional stereotypes to portray independent and complex female identities. (3) Gender representation in animation has evolved, reflecting a shift from male-dominated norms to diverse and modern portrayals of women. (4) Female consciousness in animated characters mirrors broader societal changes, moving from subjugation to empowerment. (5) The intersection of traditional culture with modern aesthetics offers innovative frameworks for female character development. This research highlights the evolving gender culture in contemporary Chinese society and the transformative role of media, offering theoretical and practical insights into gender analysis and identity negotiation.

Keywords: *Female characters in Chinese animated films, Gender identity, Negotiation, China's economic reform and opening up.*

Introduction

Female role is a gender role that exists in the social construction of a country or region, reflecting social expectations and values, to showcase the gender defined by social culture and the process of constructing national female identity.

In different countries and regions, the construction of female roles has profound cultural roots and unique manifestations at the gender level, and this phenomenon is widespread globally. The series of common problems and experiences faced by the construction of national female roles are usually deeply rooted in tradition, culture, and social structural order, but the situation varies in different regions.

In China, the identity of Chinese women has long existed through factors such as family, education system, government, and media. The media plays a key role in this identity negotiation process, creating vibrant Chinese female characters by shaping cultural myths that appear to be "realistic", which is reflected in movies and animations. They not only embody specific social and cultural values, but also reveal the complexity and diversity of gender roles in society.

The text of this study is female characters in Chinese animated films. Fictional female characters are often associated with or attributed to the temperament and characteristics of Chinese women. Chinese animated film female characters do not pursue the restoration of the real world, but rather artists directly use visual

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symbols and artistic rhetoric to convey ideas, concepts, and emotions, thereby influencing people's consciousness.

The correlation between Chinese women and women in Chinese animated films is a primary concern for researchers. The history of changes in Chinese women is accompanied by the past and present development of Chinese society. Men and women in social reality continue to serve as material for animated films, documenting the changes in Chinese society. What roles do women play in different periods of China? In any society or ethnicity, there is a universal expectation that men and women will play different roles and play different roles. The evolution of Chinese women's screen images, as a reflection of society, projects gender imaginations of men and women in different eras(Peng , 1989).

Gender is constructed by specific social and cultural factors (Butler, 1990), and the gender temperament that men and women should exhibit is formed by the social structure and power dynamics of gender relations in society and culture. (Connell,1987). Gender roles are often influenced by various factors, including cultural norms, religious beliefs, and historical traditions. However, they are not fixed or universal, and may vary greatly in different societies and cultures.

In ancient China, women were the leaders of the entire society, and crowds gathered around them. The bond of blood was established through the maternal line, reflecting the form of a matrilineal society. In ancient Chinese mythology and legends, the creation of humans by N ü wa reflects the important role of women in human reproduction. N ü wa's feminine temperament is portrayed in movies as a goddess of "matriarchy", revealing the important and even dominant social roles played by women in matrilineal societies. However, due to the physical advantage of men, they often make outstanding contributions in production, war, and other aspects, leading to the transformation from a matrilineal society to a patrilineal society later on. The status of men tends to rise, while the status of women tends to decline.

Ancient China experienced more than 2000 years of feudal class rule, and feudal society demanded that women's ideals emphasize obedience, chastity, and humility. These characteristics are considered necessary conditions for maintaining social order and preserving traditional gender roles. Polygamy "and" male superiority and female inferiority "were the main gender relations during the feudal society of China. The social gender order of" Three Obediences and Four Virtues "and" Three Obediences and Five Virtues "was a shackle that bound women. Social and cultural factors are reflected in the feminine temperament of early animated films, manifested as dignified wives who obey their husbands, humble concubines who depend on men, beautiful princesses waiting to be rescued, and fairies who are "invisible" like ornaments.

The downfall of the Qing Dynasty marked the end of China's super stable feudal society and the beginning of the turbulent and ever-changing modern Chinese society, triggering the largest ideological and value system change in Chinese society's history. At the end of the 19th century, a social atmosphere was created for women to reshape their roles through two aspects: avoiding foot binding and promoting women's education. (Jiang, 2020) They are constructing their feminine qualities, and society's perception of them also comes from the physical practices they exhibit. The limited group of knowledgeable women has not yet had a clear consciousness and sufficient ability to independently guide female characters to return to the subject of "human" rather than "man", which runs through the main line of "male characteristics". Women's fashion and men's clothing have become a unique scenery in the early 20th century. (Jiang, 2020)

The May 4th New Culture Movement [The May 4th New Culture Movement: The May 4th Movement was a patriotic movement that took place in Beijing on May 4, 1919, mainly involving young students, with the participation of the masses, citizens, business people and other sectors, through demonstrations, petitions, strikes, violence against the government and other forms, and was a thorough patriotic movement of the Chinese people against imperialism and feudalism.] In the new historical and cultural context, women in this period not only found that women are equal to men and women - "the discovery of human beings", but also gradually realized that women and men are different people - "the discovery of women". (Jiang, 2020) Chinese women have undergone a modern transformation in their economic and educational roles, mainly from the perspectives of new role expectations and new role-playing, in order to discover their own role change process and a diverse coexistence of role change patterns. It can be seen that they no longer

eliminate themselves, no longer imitate men, but use the qualifications of women, because women are also the qualifications of "people", to seek liberation from male power, politics, professions, etc. (Biyao, 1935) This is the historical period of the initial construction of modern female role models. But there are also limitations shared by transitional societies. Only a portion of women, mainly educated women, truly possess the concept of female personality, and the self-liberation consciousness of female and rural women still needs to be developed.

During the period of China's economic reform and opening up, the vast majority of women in both urban and rural areas played dual roles in both family and society. With the acceleration of social progress, the demand for more subtle and complex female roles continues to grow, and the media's portrayal of female roles has evolved over time. These female roles are not only defined by gender or their relationship with male roles. Not all individuals identified as female exhibit feminine traits, nor do all individuals identified as male exhibit masculine traits. There are also female characters in movies who dare to challenge their fate. For example, Mulan, who joined the army for her father, Liang Hongyu, who beat the drum to retreat the Jin army, and Mu Guiying, who led the expedition; In terms of relationships between men and women, Zhu Yingtai, who pretends to be a man studying, his wild girlfriend Hong Tailang, and the bold pursuit of love by Bai Niangzi, among others.

In the process of establishing a modern nation-state in Chinese society, the artistic creation of new media has ushered in its modern transformation. The creators of modern intellectuals have begun to re-examine the past social and cultural changes in China with a modern perspective on history, humanity, and values. Animated movies are very different from live action movies because the emotional expression of animated characters is not their own. They are manifested by the people who give them life. On the other hand, the decisions regarding how these characters express emotions and what they express are not arbitrary（Garza, 2019）.

As can be seen from the above, since the founding of the People's Republic of China, especially after the reform and opening up, the country has successively introduced a series of policies on social and women's construction, greatly promoting the development of China's view on women. China's implementation of the reform and opening-up policy is part of the process of world modernization and globalization. Modernization and globalization both embody a concept of 'progress'. The first and foremost step in deepening reform is to liberate the mind. (Bi, 2018) Since the reform and opening up, we have seen the rapid development of China's economy, the increasing improvement of countrymen's living standards and people, and the penetration of modern lifestyles and values into all levels of society, which have greatly changed the situation of social strata. The status of Chinese women has been improved in many ways. These changes and the reform and opening up policy have contributed a lot. Therefore, the author chooses the Chinese economic reform and opening up as the context for studying female characters in Chinese animation.

Objectives

This study focuses on Chinese women and female animated characters, exploring the changes in female characters and the changes in female animated characters. Based on the changes in Chinese society, especially before and after the reform and opening up, this paper explores the gender and identity negotiation of female characters in Chinese animated films, and attempts to explore contemporary women and gender issues from a cross media and interdisciplinary perspective, outlining the changes and internal structure of gender relations and social systems in the process of Chinese society. This research will be an interesting academic question.

It indicates that "gender" as a study of the identity construction of female characters in Chinese animated films outlines the changes and internal structures of gender relations and gender systems in the process of Chinese society. The author will use Judith Butler's (1990) "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" and Prof Raewyn Connell's book "Gender in World Perspective" by Professor Cornell is used to analyze and elaborate on gender from a global perspective; As a negotiation and expression in the

construction of gender socialization of female characters in Chinese animated films, "identity negotiation" will be analyzed by combining Ting Toomey's identity negotiation theory with Susie Scott's "Negotiating Identity: Symbolic Inter-activist Approaches to Social Identity" and Susie Scott's "Identity Negotiation: A Social Identity Method of Symbolic Inter-activism".

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine female characters in Chinese animated films and their role in gender and identity negotiation within the context of China's economic reform. The methodology integrates historical, textual, and interpretive approaches to explore the evolution of gender representation and identity construction.

1. Historical Analysis: The study begins with an in-depth historical analysis of the social and cultural history of Chinese women and the development of Chinese animated films. This step identifies the interplay between gender ideologies, economic reforms, and their influence on animated media. Archival materials, historical records, and relevant literature are analyzed to contextualize the evolution of gender concepts and female representation.

2. Textual Analysis: A purposive sampling of Chinese animated films from different periods is conducted, focusing on key female characters, particularly the "Fox Woman" archetype. The textual analysis examines visual representations, character narratives, and thematic elements from a gender perspective. This analysis identifies shifts in character portrayal and gender discourse across pre- and post-economic reform periods.

3. Thematic Coding and Interpretation: The study employs thematic coding to analyze recurring patterns in gender representation and identity negotiation in animated films. Themes such as the evolution of female consciousness, the negotiation of traditional and modern values, and the portrayal of female empowerment are explored.

4. Unit of Analysis: "Fox Woman" Character: The "Fox Woman" character is analyzed as a representative unit of female identity in Chinese animated films. This analysis evaluates how the character embodies traditional gender stereotypes while reflecting broader societal transformations in gender consciousness and aesthetics.

5. Triangulation: Data from historical analysis, film texts, and secondary literature are triangulated to ensure validity and reliability.

This multi-faceted methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of how animated films serve as a medium for gender discourse and identity negotiation in contemporary China.

Conceptual Framework

This section discusses the social and cultural history related to Chinese women in the development process of Chinese society and the history of Chinese animated films. Study how the changes in the social and cultural history of Chinese women have influenced and reflected the portrayal of female characters in Chinese animated films. Mainly including: 1) Overview of the social and cultural history of Chinese women, studying the traits and characteristics of Chinese women in four stages; 2) Summarize the changing characteristics of female characters from the development process of Chinese animated films; 3) Analysis of the correlation factors between female characters in Chinese animated films and Chinese women. It paves the way for research on gender relations, female role construction, and identity negotiation. On this basis, researchers can comprehensively and deeply explore the gender issues of female characters in Chinese animated films.

The moving images we see on the screen are a medium, a reproduction, in which each image or series of images is produced by people for a specific economic or cultural purpose, and they are also interpreted in a specific way. These images represent ideas, methods of observation and thinking, behaviors and feelings.

They represent culture, but not real objective existence. They are produced, distributed and accepted. They are both works of imagination and economic means. (Robert Corker, 2004) Corker's statement also applies to the portrayal of images in animated films. The female characters in animated films are artistic creations created by artists within the framework of national cultural policies, based on their personal understanding and social experience. The character designs are created by animators, but are constructed by multiple factors.
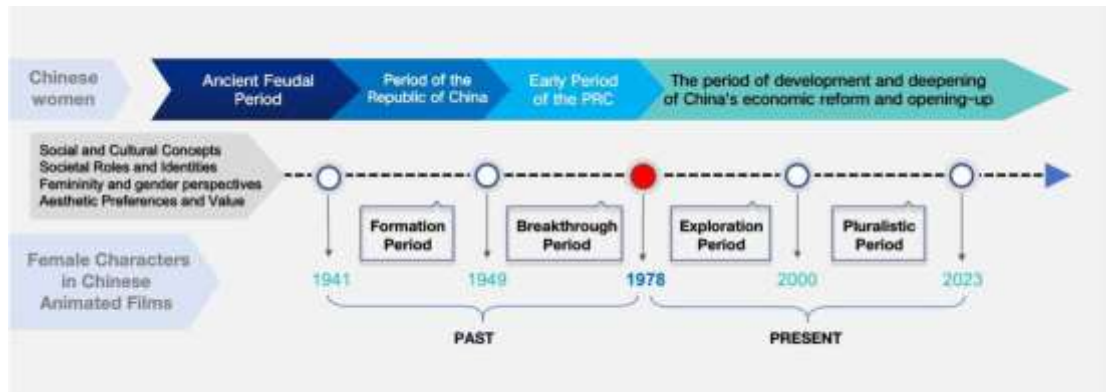

Figure 1: Examining the Characteristics of Changes between China's Economic Reform and Opening Up as a Time Node

Source: Deng, 2024

The picture shows that China's economic reform and opening up is an important node in this study. The development of the Chinese economy drives the progress of social and cultural development, bringing about more cultural exchanges and artistic innovation. At the same time, it is also an important node for people to liberate their minds and for the development of Chinese women.

Results

Changes in Social and Cultural Concepts

In traditional cultural contexts, women are often seen as appendages or subordinates to men, lacking independent social status. However, China's reform and opening-up policies have led to changes in traditional beliefs and the elevation of women's status, driving Chinese society towards a more equal and inclusive direction.

Chinese society has been exposed to more cultural and ideological concepts from the West and other regions. These external cultural elements have directly influenced the portrayal of female images by animation film creators, leading to the emergence of new and more contemporary female images that engage in dialogue and exchange with traditional Chinese cultural concepts.

For example, changes in the appearance, clothing, behavior, and actions of the character:In some early animated films, female characters may present traditional Chinese costumes and hairstyles, such as costumes and qipao, reflecting respect and inheritance of Chinese traditional culture. In terms of behavior and actions, it conforms to traditional concepts and cognition of gender roles, such as traditional beauties being expected to walk slowly and elegantly, demonstrating a calm and composed temperament. Old ladies are usually depicted with slightly curved backs, but this does not affect their composure and calmness when walking.

After the reform and opening up, some female characters' appearance and clothing were influenced by modern fashion, presenting a more fashionable and modern image, such as Western style clothing, fashionable hairstyles, makeup, etc. This modern element reflects the pursuit of fashion and personalization in modern Chinese society.

Cui Di, the producer of "White Snake 2: Rise of the Green Snake," talked about in an interview that the protagonist of Baoqing Workshop is a very mysterious character in the first part. On one hand, she is the image of a 12-year-old girl, and on the other hand, she is a thousand-year old fox demon. It is a very important role and position in the film, and is very popular among young audiences. On July 27, 2021, Tencent Video Movie Channel's official account conducted a movie review interview

This indicates that after China's economic reform and opening up, the cultural environment of Chinese society gradually opened up and diversified, and the introduction of Western and foreign cultures injected new vitality and elements into Chinese culture. This cultural exchange and collision not only promotes the integration and transformation of Chinese culture, but also leaves a profound imprint on the design of animated characters. Modern animation character design is becoming increasingly diverse and avant-garde. At the same time, commercial animation works and IP image marketing have also driven the popularity and imitation trend of animated characters, making these characters an important element in consumer culture.

Identity cognition of social roles

There is a certain connection or mutual influence between female characters and female identity in Chinese animated films. Specifically, this association can be seen as how the portrayal of female characters in animated films reflects or influences women's recognition and identification with their own identity in reality. Female characters in animated movies are often an artistic representation of real-life female images. The personalities, behaviors, and values displayed by these characters will to some extent affect the audience's perception and understanding of female identity. For example, a brave and independent female character may inspire the audience's recognition and respect for the power of women; A gentle and kind female character may make the audience cherish and appreciate women's tenderness and delicacy even more.

The classic images that are well-known to the public include "Lady Yin" (Nezha's mother) and "Three Holy Mothers" (agarwood's mother), who possess the traditional Chinese "feminine virtue" qualities and expressions. However, due to the limitations of social culture and the times, these women almost do not have their own independent thoughts and are idealized as "male protagonists and female followers" in society; There is also a typical family structure of "male lead outside and female lead inside" in "Big Head Son and Small Head Dad". The mother of the eldest son doesn't have a real name and has been appearing under the code name "apron mother". The female role representing the image of a virtuous wife and mother is the most ideal female state in the minds of Chinese men.

The Development of Female Characteristics and Gender Perspectives

In traditional gender norms, men are often seen as representatives of masculinity and bravery, while women are endowed with more feminine and introverted traits. This concept is also reflected in animated films, such as early female characters often appearing as auxiliary and complementary images to male characters.

With the diversification of culture and the awakening of female consciousness, people's understanding of gender roles has also changed, and women have begun to pursue the realization of self-worth and independent lifestyles. This change is reflected in film and television dramas, which makes the portrayal of female images more focused on showcasing women's independence, confidence, and strength, rather than just a single stereotype. (Liu & Huang, 2022) Gradually, with the popularization and deepening of gender equality concepts, animated films have also begun to break traditional gender stereotypes. Female characters in modern animated films not only possess abilities and intelligence comparable to male characters, but also play indispensable roles in the story. This change not only reflects the progress and openness of society, but also reflects the audience's acceptance and recognition of more equal and diverse gender concepts.

For example, in "White Snake 2: Rise of the Green Snake" (2021), the main character Xiao Qing's different understandings of love and survival are portrayed. When director Huang Jiakang talked about how to express emotions from a female perspective in the creative process, he said, "Actually, at the beginning of making the film, the team discussed women's ideas almost every day, analyzing the thoughts and cognition

of modern women. As an animator, I often like to observe how female friends around me think. Although I am a male director, I am more emotional and good at expressing emotions. In addition, from the first film" White Snake: Origin "(2019), it is more fairy tale and ancient style, just like many viewers feedback on White Snake. The story is a bit unrealistic and unbelievable. Indeed, at the beginning, we pursued a romantic fairy tale story, but in the second part, we hope to go to another extreme and discuss some real-life emotions and challenges from a female perspective. Director Interview on July 27, 2021 The complexity and diversity of female roles in the changes of social and cultural history. Therefore, ancient Chinese women were constrained by feudal ethics such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" in traditional culture, and their family and social status were marginalized. However, with the introduction of modern Western ideas and the advancement of social change, female roles began to awaken, gradually stepping out of the family, participating in social activities, and fighting for their own rights. Contemporary female roles are more diverse and autonomous, becoming important drivers of social development. Throughout the field of animated films, the evolution of female characters also reflects changes in social cognition. From early stereotypes and symbolic representations to gradually becoming fuller and more three-dimensional, female characters in animated films have undergone a transition from the periphery to the center. This transformation not only reflects the re-examination and shaping of female characters by animation creators, but also reflects the gradual comprehensive and in-depth understanding of female characters in society.

There is a certain connection and mutual influence between female characters in animated movies and those in real society. The female characters in animated films often reflect or refract the female characters in real society. They reveal the uniqueness and complexity of female characters in animated films, and provide important basis for further research on the relationship between gender roles and social culture, the construction of female identity, and the process of identity negotiation.

Female Characters in Chinese Animated Films from a Gender Perspective

This chapter mainly studies the subject shaping of female characters in Chinese animated films from the perspective of gender, outlines the gender expression of female characters in animated films under the background of China's economic reform and opening up, and the gender performance in character construction.

From the late 18th century to the 1960s, academic research on gender issues was named "feminism" because during that period, whether in social practice or theory, scholars and social activists aimed to solve the problem of achieving equal social status for women. Then, starting from the 1960s and 1970s, scholars focused on the issue of distinguishing between biological sex and social sex (gender), with the former being considered a natural feature of the body and the latter being considered a social and cultural feature. The discussion on gender has evolved from a "female" perspective to a more open one. In other words, the transition from women's issues to gender studies can also be seen as the logical process of the evolution of gender issues themselves.

If the traditional three schools of thought are macro level, then Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is a micro level argument for the transition from female (physiological sex) to feminine temperament (social sex), believing that physiological sex determines social sex and also determines the social hierarchy of the sexes. From a psychological perspective, men are always "active," while women are "passive." In social civilization, "women are also always morally marginalized, because they are inherently" lacking "(male sexual characteristics) women (Freud, 2000).

Judith Butler's gender theory emerged and grew within the postmodern movement, starting from the dilemma brought about by the binary structure of biological gender/social gender and calling it gender trouble. In Butler's theory, "gender is not a noun, nor is it a set of freely flowing attributes. Gender is an action that constructs the identity it implies, rather than just a representation exercised by the subject that existed before it." Her definition of the concept of gender in her book "The Troubles of Gender: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" undoubtedly subverts the previous concept of gender. In Butler's definition, gender is formed through "performance". This theory provides a new perspective for us to understand gender identity and gender relations.

Butler did not provide a clear conceptual definition for performance, but gradually presented the appearance of performance through continuous deconstruction of social and physiological gender. Butler herself believes that it is difficult to explain what "performativity" really is, simply because my own views on what "performativity" may mean have changed over time... "(Butler, 2009) She once said," Gender is not a singular act, but a repetition, a ritual... "(Butler, 2009) At the same time, she herself also said," My theory is somewhat wavering. Sometimes I understand performativity as linguistic, and sometimes I set it as dramatic (Butler, 2009) Therefore, in Butler's words and lines, this information is revealed: as a behavior, performance has three dimensions, namely language dimension, drama dimension, and ritual dimension.

The development and influence of gender theory will prompt people to re-examine and adjust their gender perspectives. On the other hand, individual and societal gender perspectives can also influence the understanding and acceptance of gender theory, by emphasizing gender diversity and mobility, promoting greater tolerance and acceptance of different expressions and identities of gender.

Chinese animated films, as a unique cultural medium, play a significant role in character development and reflecting social gender concepts. It is not only the crystallization of artistic creation, but also a mirror of social culture. Through delicate animated characters and imaginative stories, Chinese animated films deeply reveal the diversity and complexity of gender roles, while also carrying specific social and cultural backgrounds and values. It can be said that in the unique cultural medium of Chinese animated films, the social shaping and characteristics of gender are vividly and profoundly presented.

On August 19, 2018, an animated film from China called "Female" was screened at the National Convention Center in Beijing as the only invited Chinese film at the 24th World Philosophy Congress, where it interacted with top philosophers from around the world. This work has been nominated for Best Animated Feature at the 21st Shanghai International Film Festival, selected for the New Talent section at the 24th Paris Bizarre Film Festival, and nominated for the Annual Animated Feature at the 13th Chinese Youth Film Forum, among nearly 30 domestic and international film festivals and exhibitions.

The film portrays female themes and explores gender, power struggles, and bodily metaphors in a unique way. Director Zhou Shengwei himself mentioned in an interview that a large area of darkness can highlight a faint light in the world, and there are two lights in the film. The first one is "instinct": the mother's protection of the child is an instinct for the continuation of life, which is not a part of humanism, but a pure energy of life. The second part is "civilized education": in the film, the high-heeled mother sees herself in the mirror, which is a awakening of self-awareness. Society regulates human behavior, body, gender, and rights.

Gender roles refer to a set of behavioral norms that individuals acquire through imitation and learning in the process of socialization, corresponding to their gender, reflecting different expectations and norms of male or female behavior in the social and cultural system. This includes the different attitudes, emotions, personality traits, and social behavior patterns held by men and women. Gender roles are a series of behavioral patterns that conform to social norms formed in postnatal social life based on innate biological gender, influenced by postnatal environment and self-concept.

The human body is an important field for showcasing the social and cultural aspects of a specific historical period, especially gender culture. Gender is not only innate, but also constructed by social and cultural factors. It can be seen as a representation, and the body is a mirror that promotes the representation of gender. Through the different presentation of the bodies of the two sexes, people can not only see the natural physiological differences between men and women, but also glimpse the close connection between gender identity and social ideology. （Bryan S. Turner，2000）

On December 31, 2014, the movie version of "One Hundred Thousand Cold Jokes" directed by Lu Hengyu and Li Shujie was released. In the film, the director created an image of Nezha that subverted all previous versions, making countless viewers doubt Nezha's gender.

In the character of Nezha, we see a subversive combination of physical characteristics and gender roles. This strong visual contrast breaks the traditional boundaries of gender roles and reveals that the body is not the only determining factor of gender.

Another well-known female character, Mulan, also found the phenomenon of "easy dressing" in the film. Wearing men's clothing is a practical bodily practice that creates a condition through the body to identify with gender roles.In addition, there are male leads Jing Tianming and Xiang Shaoyu in the story "Qin Dynasty Moon" (2014) set in the Qin Dynasty; The female character Pei Twelve in "Chang'an 30000 Miles" (2023) set in the Tang Dynasty. Judging from the response to the release of the film at that time, the scenes of Jing Tianming and Xiang Shaoyu's "men dressed in women's clothing" and Pei Twelve's "women dressed in men's clothing" were the most talked about and discussed by the audience. Some netizens even exclaimed 'stunning'. Gender is a bodily style formed through continuous stylization of the body, and such bodily behaviors are constantly repeated within a highly rigid regulatory framework. It means dramatizing and adapting the meaning construction made in response to historical contexts. Gender identity and recognition are constructed through repeated actions of stylization（Judith Butler, 2009）.

Negotiating Identity in the Construction of Female Characters in Chinese animated film in the Context of Reform and Opening-up of the Chinese Economy

 After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, with the establishment of government led film studios in local areas, the production of animated films gradually increased. Since the reform and opening up, China's national conditions and international situation have undergone fundamental changes. Especially with the progress of domestic economic reforms and social and cultural demands, the transformation of the national cultural industry in terms of content and form has been changed. Modern cultural industries such as film and animation have gradually emerged and rapidly developed, becoming an important part of the cultural industry. This has created realistic conditions for the portrayal of female characters in Chinese animation. This section will explain the changes in various aspects of female characters in Chinese animated films since the reform and opening up from the perspective of national identity negotiation. The changes in national policies, creators, and audiences will be the focus of this chapter. This chapter will discuss the national portrayal of female characters in Chinese animated films, identity negotiations between the government, creators, and audiences, as well as the relationship between female characters in Chinese animated films and the government.

Identity negotiation involves female characters in animated films, the creator community, and the audience community, all of which are closely linked to the Chinese government. Creators express their cultural and gender identity through the female characters they create, which is a common creative motivation. The audience may identify, understand, or reflect on their own understanding and gender identity through female characters in movies. The government may also be influenced by the portrayal of female characters in movies and their perception and positioning of gender roles in society. Their development is accompanied by the evolution of Chinese society.

These female characters are not only images in artistic works, but also a medium for artists to spread their social and cultural concepts. Female characters in some animated films are often used by the Chinese government to showcase the influence of their ideology on creators, as well as their unique interpretation of gender culture and women's culture. When the national government shapes the image of women in the country, visual works are not only displayed on various domestic social and cultural exchange platforms, but also represent the country's participation in international cross-cultural exchanges. Therefore, female characters in Chinese animated films are not only an artistic and cultural feature, but also a reflection of national ideology and social cultural influence, and have important representativeness and significance for the international community.

For example, the animated film "Adventures of Avantis", which was selected into the 2015 "Promotion of Socialist Core Values Animation Support Plan" project, responds to the national strategic national policy of "the the Belt and Road, culture first", and intends to positively spread the unique regional cultural core

of Kashgar and Xinjiang through Avantis, a well-known intellectual image. The film tells the story of the grape city where the male protagonist Avanti and the female protagonist Gulixian live. Suddenly, they encounter a landslide and water shortage crisis. In order to protect the people, Avanti and his companions embark on an adventure to find a water source.

In this interview, Director Ma introduced to us that the transition from anime to 3D animation in "The Adventures of Afanti" has greatly improved the refinement of each character. The character image continues the styling features of "The Story of Avanti" from 1979, including ethnic clothing styles, unique patterns, and accessories such as small cloth bags; In terms of character posture, Avanti and Bayi still maintain the classic combination of one thin and one fat, one tall and one short. We have made moderate improvements to the characters based on the aesthetic preferences of modern audiences. In order to make the character performance more vivid, Avanti's eyebrows have been modified to be more suitable for three-dimensional expression, making it easier to create more performances that fit the character's personality and reflect his wise characteristics. But while retaining the 'old flavor', 'new elements' have been added. For example, the appearance of the female lead "Miss Grape City" Gu Lixian adds new highlights to the film, making it more in line with current aesthetic needs and young people's viewing preferences, and making the overall film more enduring and full!

With the deepening of China's reform and opening up, the social structure and values have undergone profound changes. Chinese animated films have also ushered in opportunities for vigorous development. On the one hand, China constructs the national image of women and influences people's gender and gender perspectives through media, such as female characters in Chinese animated films. On the other hand, people gradually accept and identify with this national image of women in this media presentation, as well as the impact of the negotiation and interaction process on social concepts. Therefore, since the establishment of relationships between female characters in Chinese animated films as a medium of communication and within the country, the social relationships between individuals and other groups, including the Chinese government and local governments, creators, and audiences, have led to various forms of social interaction.

In this context, female characters in Chinese animated films have been interesting used in the role of identity negotiation, named, identity negotiation. The government's identity negotiation is that Chinese animated film women are gradually breaking away from traditional stereotypes and are used to represent women's independent, autonomous, positive, and diverse new female images; Negotiating identity with other audiences or fields is that female characters in Chinese animated films can also serve as a medium for spreading the cultural identity of "Chinese national women" to China and various regions around the world.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of gender and identity negotiation in Chinese animated films, aligning with and extending insights from previous research.

First, the study by Zhao and Sheng (2017), which explored the portrayal of gender in Chinese media, highlighted how traditional gender roles in media have historically perpetuated patriarchal norms. Zhao and Sheng argued that while modern media reflects changing societal values, remnants of traditional ideologies persist, leading to a hybridized representation of gender roles. Similarly, this research finds that female characters in Chinese animated films have transitioned from demonized and overly feminized portrayals to more three-dimensional representations. However, the negotiation between traditional values and modern aesthetics remains central to their depiction, as seen in characters like the "Fox Woman," who balances traditional symbolism with contemporary narratives of empowerment.

Second, the study builds on Wang et al. (2020), which examined the impact of globalization on gender portrayals in Chinese cinema. Wang et al. identified that foreign cultural influences and audience preferences have driven filmmakers to create more diverse and independent female characters. This research corroborates those findings, emphasizing the role of China's reform and opening-up policy in fostering such transformations. It extends Wang et al.'s work by focusing specifically on animated films, showing how the government, creators, and audiences interact to redefine female identities. Animated characters

not only reflect societal shifts but also act as mediators, influencing public perceptions of gender and morality.

This study adds to the discourse by highlighting the socio-cultural functions of female characters as cultural ambassadors and negotiators of identity. It underscores the transformative role of Chinese animation in challenging traditional stereotypes and promoting modern, multi-dimensional representations of women, furthering the understanding of media's impact on gender culture in contemporary Chinese society.

Conclusion

Throughout the field of Chinese animated film research, the evolution of female characters in animated films has shifted from stereotypical symbols to full and three-dimensional forms, from the edges to the center, and from "invisible" to "visible". People's understanding of women has gradually become comprehensive and in-depth.As an important carrier of mass media culture and art, Chinese animated films play a crucial role in conveying cultural information, reflecting social changes, and constructing gender concepts.

Female characters in Chinese animated films not only satisfy the audience's pleasure needs, but also assume roles and responsibilities that satisfy multiple levels of psychological needs. This study reveals the new roles played by female characters in Chinese animated films in the context of reform and opening up - not only as carriers of entertainment, but also as links in new social relationships and the focus of cultural identity negotiation.

Firstly, in the context of reform and opening up, the role of female characters in Chinese animated films as a new social bond. Chinese film and cultural research expert Dai Jinhua pointed out that in the past, women were often placed in a state of being watched and gazed upon in mainstream commercial films, serving functions, values, or meanings related to men, lacking autonomy and subjectivity. She used Laura Mulvey's "gaze gaze" theory to emphasize that from a male perspective, female images are almost inevitably the object of male gaze. Gender inequality further leads to the objectification of female images on the screen, losing their depth and depth.

Secondly, female characters in Chinese animated films serve as cultural ambassadors and focal points for identity negotiations, showcasing the "image of Chinese national women" to the world. Consistent with the views of postmodern feminist scholars such as Li Yinhe. Li Yinhe emphasized the positive value of female differences in his works, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The female characters in Chinese animated films gradually break free from traditional stereotypes and present independent, autonomous, positive, and diverse new female images, which not only resonate widely in China, but also spread the unique cultural identity of "Chinese national female image" to the world. This process is not only the negotiation and construction of female identity at home and abroad, but also an important manifestation of the enhancement of China's cultural soft power. Sociologist Sharon Kinsella, who specializes in studying Japanese anime culture, believes that female characters in anime often play a role in mediating cultural identity, especially in rapidly developing social contexts.

In addition, this study further confirms the common understanding in the fields of culture and sociology that art works, as recorders and disseminators of social and cultural changes, have an undeniable social influence. The female characters in Chinese animated films, with their unique artistic expressions and profound social connotations, have become a bridge connecting the past and the future, the local and the world, and have contributed important forces to the cultural diversity and gender equality development of China and even the world.

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