

Traditional Color Language and its Importance in Cultural Identity in Chinese Animation

Si Jizhong¹, MD Nagib Padil^{1*}, Liu Chunxia¹

¹ College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: nagib746@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract: *Chinese animation has gradually become an important carrier for conveying Chinese cultural values, and its unique color language has played a key role in enhancing cultural identity. This paper takes domestic animations such as "Nezha", "Big Fish and Begonia", and "Chang An" as research objects, and adopts Edmund Feldman's four-step method of description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation to explore the role of traditional color language in animation narrative and cultural communication. The study found that these works use the philosophy of the five elements and five colors as a framework, combining the traditional color spectrum of blue, red, yellow, white, and black with modern digital rendering technology, incorporating profound cultural images and emotional expressions into the color language, and fully strengthening the cultural attributes of animation. These color symbols convey core values such as freedom, courage, and responsibility through metaphorical narratives, construct a dialogue mechanism between traditional aesthetic genes and modern visual grammar, effectively activate the cultural memory and identity of the audience group, and show the profound connotation and modern vitality of Chinese culture. Using color as a medium, Chinese animation has constructed an aesthetic system that has both national characteristics and international communication capabilities, and has become an important cultural carrier for promoting cultural confidence and value transmission.*

Keywords: Chinese animation, traditional color, cultural identity

1. Introduction

As a non-verbal symbol system, color not only shapes the aesthetic style in animation visual design, but also carries and conveys the symbolic meaning and emotional experience in different cultural systems with its unique cultural attributes. The traditional Chinese color system is based on the "five elements and five colors" (blue, red, yellow, white and black), and has gradually formed a unique color concept, which is applied to painting, clothing, architecture and opera art, and also endowed with symbolic meanings such as social hierarchy and religious beliefs. Color has been both a distinct challenge as well as a space for exploration for animators throughout animation's History (Cutting, 2014). In "Havoc in Heaven" (1964), Sun Wukong's face is processed with red and white contrasting colors, successfully constructing an image of resistance to authority. "Nezha" (2019) uses highly saturated red and black contrasting colors to shape the character's personality, and "Chang An" (2023) uses the traditional green landscape style to reproduce the visual imagery of the Tang Dynasty, forming a "national style" creation paradigm with local recognition. These works not only draw heavily on traditional Chinese culture in terms of story content, but also deeply explore the traditional

Chinese five elements and five colors system in terms of visual style, becoming a visual medium for building national cultural identity.

Color can be said to be one of the most prominent visual features in animated films, even in the earliest animation works (Cutting, 2014). The lighting and composition of animated videos are often carefully designed to convey a story or message (Kennedy, 2014). This study focuses on the use of color language in domestic animation and its evolution path, aiming to explore how color plays a role in the construction of cultural identity. The study adopts the research method of visual analysis to systematically sort out how domestic animation uses the traditional color system to shape cultural identity and form a unique visual expression paradigm in the contemporary context. On this basis, this study will deeply analyze the function of color in animation narrative, explore its symbolic meaning and its impact on the audience's emotional experience, and then reveal the role of traditional colors in helping domestic animation build a visual system with local characteristics.

This study aims to systematically deepen the academic discussion of the color language of domestic animation and provide theoretical support for animation creation practice to promote the innovative development of the animation industry. By analyzing the role of color language in the construction of cultural identity, revealing the function and influence of color in animation narrative, audience emotional resonance and cultural communication, further exploring the construction of a color system with both national characteristics and international communication power, enhancing the recognition and influence of domestic animation in global cultural competition, and helping the Chinese animation industry to enhance cultural confidence and identity in international competition.

2. Literature Review

China's color culture has a profound historical background, mainly derived from the Five Elements Theory and Yin-Yang Theory. The Five Elements color system (gold-white, wood-green, water-black, fire-red, earth-yellow) is not only used in painting and clothing, but also plays an important role in traditional opera, architecture, religion, etc (Liu, 2021). The symbolic meaning of color in Chinese culture makes it an important symbol of national identity. In traditional artistic expression, color is not only a visual element, but also a part of cultural narrative, providing a rich source of inspiration for later animation art (Qu, 2020).

In the 20th century, Chinese animation made many attempts at national expression, especially the development of Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio between 1949 and 1966, which laid the foundation for the "Chinese School" animation (Tao, 2021). Animation works of this period, such as *Havoc in Heaven* (1961), borrowed traditional Chinese painting techniques in color, such as gongbi painting and green landscape, giving the animation a distinct national style (Li, 2015). In addition, the rise of forms such as paper-cut animation and ink-and-wash animation also demonstrated the in-depth exploration of Chinese animation in the nationalization of color. For example, *The Proud General* (1956) expressed the character's personality through red and white faces, which echoed the colors of Peking Opera masks (Qu, 2020).

After entering the 21st century, Chinese animation has made new innovative attempts in the application of color. For example, *Big Fish and Begonia* (2016) uses the five-element color system to present a fantasy world with Chinese charm through the contrast of red and blue (Liu, 2021). *"Nezha"* (2019) uses bright red elements in character creation, echoing the traditional image of Nezha, while incorporating modern light and shadow technology to make the color

more impactful (Jia, 2022). These works enhance the audience's cultural identity through color design, allowing modern animation to show a unique Chinese style on the international stage. Color is not just a visual language, it also plays a key role in animation narrative and emotion shaping. For example, the development of 3D animation technology enables color to convey character emotions and story atmosphere more accurately (Zhao, 2023). Studies have shown that the combination of warm and cold tones in animation can affect the audience's emotions. For example, red is often used to express passion and anger, while blue is used to create a melancholy and thoughtful atmosphere (Kennedy, 2014). In addition, the influence of color in animation scene design has also been systematically studied. The results show that color can not only affect character shaping, but also guide the audience's understanding of the plot (Wu et al., 2016).

Although the application of color language in domestic animation has become an important direction of animation aesthetics research, there is still room for research on its relationship with the construction of cultural identity. Previous studies have mainly focused on how domestic animation draws on traditional color styles, or explored the role of color in narrative and visual expression, while relatively ignoring the specific application of traditional color systems in animation and their evolution process, especially how to shape national cultural identity through color. This study aims to systematically analyze the application characteristics of traditional Chinese color language in animation works in different historical stages, and explore its role in animation aesthetics, visual narrative and cultural communication, filling the gap in the study of the evolution of domestic animation color system and the construction of cultural identity. The research results can not only provide theoretical support for the color design of domestic animation, but also help promote the shaping of local characteristics of Chinese animation in global cultural exchanges, thereby enhancing the cultural influence and market competitiveness of domestic animation.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts the method of visual analysis to explore the application of color language in Chinese animation and how it affects the construction of cultural identity. The goal of the study is to analyze how domestic animation uses traditional color systems in different stages of development, and how these colors shape national cultural characteristics and enhance the audience's cultural identity. Through visual analysis, the differences in color styles of domestic animation in different historical periods, as well as the expression of traditional color elements in different animation works, and how they evolve with the development of the times are studied.

This study selected five domestic animation works from different periods and conducted a systematic analysis based on the color characteristics of domestic animations to systematically explore the evolution of color language in animation (Table 1). The study adopted Edmund Feldman's four-level structural criticism method (1993), which specifically includes the following four steps: describing the color language of the selected domestic animation works in detail; analyzing and studying the relationship between the visual elements of the animation works, studying the structure and composition of the works and how they affect the audience's visual experience; interpreting the symbolic meaning, metaphor, cultural background and artist's intention of the works; and evaluating the artistic value, influence and role of color aesthetics in cultural communication.

Table 1: The basic data of animation used for this study

Film name	Film source	Publication year
Havoc in Heaven	http://www.bilibili.com	1961
Monkey King: Hero Is Back	http://www.bilibili.com	2015
Big Fish & Begonia	http://www.bilibili.com	2016
Ne Zha	http://www.bilibili.com	2019
Chang An	http://www.bilibili.com	2023

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Sample 1: Havoc in Heaven



Figure 1: Havoc in Heaven

Description: The above pictures are taken from the classic Chinese animation work "Havoc in Heaven". The film is based on traditional Chinese aesthetics and expresses a strong mythological atmosphere and dramatic plot through bright color language. The film focuses on the struggle between Sun Wukong and the Heavenly Palace, conveying the spirit of heroism and resistance. The picture uses five traditional colors of blue, red, yellow, white and black, combined with natural background, character costumes and scene design, vividly showing the aesthetic style and cultural connotation of the Chinese nation, giving the narrative a strong mythological and dramatic tension.

Analysis: The film uses the traditional Chinese "Five Elements and Five Colors" (blue, red, yellow, white and black) color system, showing a strong national aesthetic characteristics. In the picture, blue (natural background, clouds) symbolizes tranquility and vitality, red (character costumes, battle scenes) expresses strength and passion, yellow (palace, decoration) represents dignity and authority, white (clouds) implies sacredness and purity, and black (shadows, contrast) adds depth and dramatic tension to the picture. The use of these color languages not only creates a harmonious sense of hierarchy in the composition of the picture, but also gives the narrative a deeper cultural implication through symbolic meaning.

Explanation: The color characteristics of the film are influenced by the philosophical thought of "five elements and five colors" in traditional Chinese culture. The art style of "Havoc in Heaven" inherits the artistic characteristics of traditional Chinese paintings, Dunhuang murals and folk New Year paintings, focusing on color contrast and the decorativeness of the overall picture, which enhances the visual effect of the narrative. Red and yellow have symbolic meanings of auspiciousness and authority in traditional Chinese culture, while blue and green are associated with the sacredness of heaven and the remoteness of nature, emphasizing the mythological background of the story. The creators constructed a visual expression system with traditional cultural connotations through color language in the film, successfully combining

mythological narrative with national aesthetics, and giving the animation a unique cultural identity.

Evaluation: "Havoc in Heaven" shows a high degree of artistry and national characteristics in the use of color, and has become a classic in the history of Chinese animation. The film uses traditional color language to create a distinct character personality and narrative atmosphere, while deepening cultural connotations and emotional expression. Its color system not only has a strong visual impact, but also enhances the audience's sense of identity with Chinese traditional culture, injecting deep cultural value into the animation narrative. "Havoc in Heaven" is not only a successful practice of Chinese traditional culture in animation art, but also an important carrier to show Chinese aesthetics and cultural values. Through the unique use of color language, the film has achieved the dissemination of national aesthetics on the international stage and demonstrated the charm and influence of Chinese traditional culture.

4.2 Sample 2: Monkey King: Hero Is Back



Figure 2. Monkey King: Hero Is Back

Description: This set of pictures is from the domestic animated film "Monkey King: Hero Is Back". The film revolves around the growth process of Sun Wukong from silence to revival. Through the highly tense picture language and color application, it presents the emotional fluctuations of the characters and the grandeur of the mythological narrative. The picture uses the "five elements and five colors" (blue, red, yellow, white, and black) as the color tone, showing the strong contrast and layering of the character modeling (Sun Wukong, Jiang Liuer, villain image, etc.) and environmental details (flame, battle scenes, forests and night scenes). The overall color expression is rich and full of tension, which enhances the emotional depth and cultural connotation of the film's narrative.

Analysis: This set of pictures uses the "five elements and five colors" (blue, red, yellow, white, and black) of the traditional Chinese color system to deepen the expression of characters and plots through the symbolic meaning of color symbols. Red is mostly used in the battle scenes of Sun Wukong, symbolizing strength and anger; yellow expresses the hope and brilliance of the background, giving the picture a warm tone; cyan shows nature and tranquility in the forest and night scene, balancing the tense plot; white is used for hostile characters and special lighting effects, suggesting coldness and detachment; black emphasizes the depth and sense of crisis of the background, enhancing dramatic conflict. This use of colors, through contrast and layered design, makes the picture both visually impactful and deeply reflects the character's emotions and narrative atmosphere.

Explanation: The color design of the film is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese thought, giving the characters and scenes distinct cultural characteristics. The sharp contrast between red and blue reflects conflict and turning point, symbolizing the inner journey of Sun Wukong

from loneliness to awakening. The use of yellow inherits the noble qualities of the heroic image in traditional culture, while the combination of white and black further enriches the layering of the picture and enhances the visual expression. The choice of this color language not only comes from a tribute to traditional culture, but also responds to the aesthetic needs of modern audiences. Through strong color contrast, the film achieves a deep integration of traditional culture and modern narrative.

Evaluation: "Monkey King: Hero Is Back" embodies a high degree of artistry and narrative ability in color language and visual expression. Through strong color contrast and dynamic light and shadow design, the film combines the traditional "five elements and five colors" system with modern digital technology to construct a mythological world that embodies both oriental aesthetics and dramatic tension. This innovative color design not only enhances the cultural recognition and international communication power of the film, but also gives new vitality to traditional culture through the modern interpretation of color symbols, demonstrating the great potential and value of Chinese animation in artistic expression and cultural communication.

4.3 Sample 3: Big Fish & Begonia



Figure 3: Big Fish & Begonia

Description: This set of pictures is from the domestic animated film "Big Fish and Begonia". The film uses Chinese traditional mythology as the narrative background and tells the story of the harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and man and life. The picture is based on strong traditional colors, showing the high unity of characters, environment and emotions, and conveying profound cultural connotations. The overall color design is mainly based on soft warm tones (such as orange and red), supplemented by cool tones (such as blue and green) for contrast. The background elements are rich and diverse, including traditional buildings, oceans and skies. The picture reflects a strong oriental charm and emotional expression.

Analysis: The film makes full use of the "five elements and five colors" in the traditional Chinese color system, and has high artistic value in terms of emotional transmission and cultural image creation. Cyan (bamboo forest and natural landscape) symbolizes vitality and tranquility, adding poetry and tranquility to the picture; red (red fish, lanterns, character costumes) represents passion and power, highlighting the emotional tension of the fantasy world; yellow (sunlight, lights) creates an atmosphere of warmth and hope; white (snow scene and brilliance) symbolizes purity and sacredness, sublimating the emotional level of the film; black (night scene background) enhances mystery and visual contrast. Through clever matching and symbolic meaning, these colors not only form a harmonious visual level in the composition of the picture, construct a rich visual level, but also deepen the cultural expression of the characters and narratives, and enhance the audience's emotional resonance and cultural identity.

Explanation: The color system of "Big Fish and Begonia" is deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese philosophy of "five elements and five colors". The use of color not only reflects the film's profound interpretation of the theme of reincarnation and harmony between man and nature, but also strengthens the audience's identification with the artistic conception of Chinese traditional culture through visual language. The creators incorporate traditional cultural symbols (such as circular buildings, lanterns and Kunpeng images) into the narrative system, and combine them with symbolic color language to form a multi-level cultural expression structure. This design strategy not only conveys the traditional aesthetic spirit, but also realizes innovative visual presentation through modern animation technology, evoking the audience's deep resonance with Chinese traditional culture.

Evaluation: "Big Fish and Begonia" shows a high degree of artistry and cultural connotation in the use of color, successfully integrating the traditional Chinese "five elements and five colors" with modern digital animation technology, bringing strong visual impact and emotional resonance to the audience. Through the contrast of warm and cold tones, the film emphasizes the interaction and emotional integration between characters and the environment, and constructs a poetic fantasy world. From an academic perspective, the film uses visual symbols as a carrier to closely combine traditional aesthetics with modern narrative, which not only enhances the recognition of Chinese culture, but also demonstrates its unique cultural charm and artistic value in the international animation market, becoming an important example of Chinese animation in promoting cultural communication.

4.4 Sample 4: Ne Zha



Figure 4: Ne Zha

Description: This set of pictures is from the domestic animated film "Ne Zha", which is a work that combines Chinese traditional culture with modern animation technology. It tells the story of Nezha's growth from rebellion to self-redemption. The pictures use strong warm tones (such as red and orange) and cold tones (such as blue and green) alternately, forming a sharp emotional contrast and strong visual impact, while reflecting the plot twists and emotional conflicts. The overall color design strengthens the expressiveness of the character image and storyline, showing a unique national aesthetic.

Analysis: The colors of this set of pictures are based on the "five elements and five colors" (cyan, red, yellow, white and black) of the traditional Chinese color system, and convey the plot and emotions through the symbolism of color. Red runs through the awakening and fire scenes of the characters, symbolizing power, passion and resistance; yellow is used in villages and heavenly palaces, representing warmth, authority and glory, strengthening the cultural background of the narrative; cyan appears in natural scenes and water flows, showing vitality and tranquility; white clouds and lights convey purity and hope; black enhances the contrast effect, injecting mystery and tension into the picture. This use of color not only shapes the

narrative level, but also deepens the expression of Chinese traditional culture, bringing visual shock and cultural identity to the audience.

Explanation: The color design of the film is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture and the philosophy of "five elements and five colors", and has a distinct cultural identity and narrative tension. Red and orange, as symbols of justice and passion in traditional Chinese culture, cleverly echo Nezha's indomitable personality. At the same time, the film also draws on traditional Chinese art forms such as shadow puppetry, murals and opera. This innovation not only visually strengthens the cultural characteristics, but also reflects the integration of national aesthetics and modern visual technology.

Evaluation: "Ne Zha" shows a high degree of artistry and narrative ability in the use of color. Compared with classic hand-painted animations (such as "Havoc in Heaven"), the film greatly enhances the visual expression and immersion through the fine processing of light and shadow and dynamic colors with modern digital technology. At the same time, through the symbolic use of color contrast, the film presents the theme of rebellion and redemption of traditional heroic characters in a more modern and universal way, successfully arousing the audience's emotional identification and cultural confidence in traditional culture.

4.5 Sample 5: Chang An



Figure 5: Chang An

Description: The above pictures are from the Chinese animated film "Chang An", which is set in the Tang Dynasty. Through the life stories of Li Bai and Gao Shi, the film shows the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty and the complex emotions of the poets. The color design of the film is based on the traditional Chinese "five elements and five colors" (blue, red, yellow, white, and black) system, combining historical narratives and cultural images to create a grand and delicate visual effect. The picture presents the interweaving of war, natural scenery, the palace and the poet's emotions, showing the profound cultural connotation and aesthetic value.

Analysis: The film vividly displays the poetic and historical atmosphere of the Tang Dynasty by using the traditional color system of "five elements and five colors". Red (flames, sunset) symbolizes passion and war, and sets off turmoil and emotional tension; cyan (nature, rivers) shows vitality and vastness, conveys tranquility and poetry; yellow (lights, palaces) represents glory and authority, and highlights the grand momentum of the heyday of the Tang Dynasty; white (snow scenes, flying birds) symbolizes purity and freedom, and echoes the romantic mood of poetry; black (night scenes, shadows) enhances the depth of the picture and the heavy sense of history. The alternation and contrast of these colors not only depicts the magnificent natural and cultural landscapes, but also deepens the visual expression of Tang Dynasty culture through the language of color, and highlights the emotional hierarchy and narrative depth.

Explanation: The color design of the film is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture and aesthetics. The "five elements and five colors" run through the narrative structure and

visual expression. Cyan represents nature and vitality, showing the poet's yearning for freedom and ideals; red and black convey the cruel reality of war and social unrest through strong contrast. This color language not only conveys the emotional theme of the story, but also enhances the audience's sense of identity with history and culture. The film draws on the color layout of Chinese landscape paintings, and through the contrast between light and strong, it shows the cultural charm of the Tang Dynasty and the diversity of the poet's emotions.

Evaluation: "Chang An" embodies a high degree of artistry and cultural connotation in the expression of color language. Through the use of the "five elements and five colors", the film presents a rich visual level from the poetic green nature to the cruelty of the red and yellow war, to the splendor of the court and the loneliness of the characters. It not only reproduces the historical picture of the heyday of the Tang Dynasty, but also reveals the complexity of the poet's heart and the heaviness of the times. The film combines traditional color language with modern animation technology, successfully integrating historical culture into the narrative, and enhancing the audience's cultural identity and emotional resonance.

5. Conclusion

In the use and evolution of color language, Chinese animation has successfully combined traditional culture with modern technology, constructed a visual expression system with unique national characteristics, and provided an important carrier for the shaping of cultural identity. The traditional Chinese color system with "five elements and five colors" as the core carries a profound cultural connotation. It is both a visual element and a cultural symbol, which can be continued and innovated through animation works. In the early "Havoc in Heaven", traditional colors were combined with opera elements to establish the national style of "Chinese School" animation; in "Big Fish and Begonia" and "Ne Zha", modern light and shadow technology was used to deepen the emotional expression and narrative function of traditional colors, and then to the rich color language of "Chang An", constantly exploring new paths for "national style" animation.

The evolution of color language in Chinese animation has enhanced the expressiveness of visual narrative, integrated traditional color culture into modern design, and successfully created an aesthetic system that has both local characteristics and international communication capabilities. This not only improves the recognition of domestic animation in the global market, but also provides important support for building cultural confidence and cultural identity, laying a solid foundation for the future development of Chinese animation.

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