

Reasons for the Success of "Neon Genesis Evangelion" and Its Enlightenment to the Development of Chinese Animation

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Abstract: *Neon Genesis EVAngelion (EVA) is an animation produced by Japanese company GAINAX in 1995. Its TV version and old movie version were broadcast from 1995 to 1997. The emergence of EVA directly brought the biggest transform in the history of Japanese animation, and brought a new way out for Japanese animation, making "animation" a distinctive cultural phenomenon and even one of the cultural symbols of Japan. At the same time, EVA also gave birth to the emergence of otaku culture, showing the profitability of animation to the market. This paper will analyze why EVA was so successful from various aspects. And what the successful of EVA can bring to Chinese animation.*

Keywords: *EVA; Hideaki Anno; otaku culture; Japanese animation*

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

With the development of the world, animation is gradually becoming one of the important components of world culture. As one of the earliest countries in the world to make animation, China is facing greater competitive pressure from the international animation market now. As the saying goes, Deal with a man in the way he deals with you. Learning *EVA*, one of the most successful works in the history of animation, may inspire us a lot.

1.2. Motivations and Objectives

Today, more and more people are devoted to the production of animation. However, there are still few outstanding works in Chinese animation. Even many works are criticized. However, if we want to enhance our international cultural influence, the development of animation is an indispensable part. Therefore, it is necessary to learn the successful experience of *EVA*. We should not only make good works that satisfy the public, but also make them stand the test of time.

2. The Excellence of EVA

2.1. The background

In the 1990s, Japan was in the shadow of the bursting of the bubble economy and the pain of the Great Hanshin Earthquake. The radical behavior of Aum Shinrikyo and other cults further aroused people's uneasiness. Under such a tense social atmosphere, the relationship between people began to gradually become indifferent.

It was in this social atmosphere that Hideaki Anno created *EVA*, a thought-provoking work. The sense of eschatology in *EVA* coincided with Japanese society at that time. Shinji Ikari, the protagonist, was also a portrayal of many Japanese young people in 1990s. They were weak, lacked of sense of existence, had no ideals or beliefs. They couldn't perceive the mission imposed on themselves by their parents. What they did was only to constantly escape. The anti-hero and dystopia story reflected the crisis of Japanese national spirit and the fracture of collective memory between generations. Japanese people growing up under the bubble economy, aging population and disillusionment of liberalism had deep fear of others and extreme uncertainty about the future.

Exactly, the Japanese at that time had quite a sense of substitution for *EVA*. Keeping up with the times was one of the important elements for the success of this work.

2.2. Excellent production

EVA is made with great care. Its TV theme song *Cruel Angel's Thesis Series* is still one of the highest on-demand songs in Japanese KTV. Many frames and classic scenes of TV were paid tribute to or used for reference by many later cartoons. In fact, when *EVA* was made, the production team faced serious financial problems. However, they have skillfully saved money in many ways and still maintained the high quality of their works.

In contrast, once China's animation encounters insufficient funds, its production will have a great decline. Even with sufficient funds, many animation productions are very bad. In addition, the soundtrack of Chinese animation is mostly perfunctory, and there are few songs that can be loved by the public. Although there have been many excellent productions this year, we have to admit that there is still a gap between us and Japanese animation production.

2.3. Role Building

The shaping of every character in *EVA* is quite three-dimensional and comprehensive. A large number of stream-of-consciousness descriptions and profound dialogues are around the character in this work.

In traditional animation, the protagonists are usually brave, passionate and full of justice. However, Shinji Ikari, the protagonist of *EVA*, is a weak teenager who always wants to escape. The purpose of driving *eva* by Shinji Ikari was not to save mankind at first, but to get his father's approval. His character is the true portrayal of the Japanese youth at that time. Under the whole Japanese economic crisis, just as Shinji Ikari was forced by his father to drive *EVA*, Japanese youth were forced by their parents to take on the important task of saving the country. Shinji Ikari represents their voice—"why should I be responsible for others, why should I save others, why should I protect others, what is the significance of my life", and so on. Shinji Ikari accurately poked the hearts of that generation of Japanese young people, and almost everyone could find their own shadow in him. In the survey of Japanese people by TV stations in 2010, men over the age of 22 paid close attention to *EVA* in the plot and empathy.

Except Shinji Ikari, every character in *EVA* has unique charm. The role of Ayanami Rei has been firmly ranked first in the popular vote of Japanese anime characters for many years, and even regarded as the goddess of otaku. Asuka and Kaworu Nagisa also have high popularity. It is precisely because of the comprehensive and unique description of each character that each character has a bright spot to attract the audience.

Successful role-building is one of the important reasons for *EVA*'s success. In contrast, many cartoon characters in China are designed too simply and casually, which makes it difficult to arouse the audience's sympathy and affection. We should pay attention to this point

2.4. Novel settings

EVA's story setting is still very novel. Those various Angels, either the huge humanoid robot *EVA* driven by the protagonists or the enemy of human beings, all made a deep impression on the audience. And there are many "professional" combat terms and academic terms in this work, which can make people feel immersive. One of the most famous things, the "HUMAN AID PROJECT", although according to Hideaki Anno himself, is the product of rushing to work. But it has become one of the most familiar contents of *EVA*. The setting of *EVA* has also influenced many future works. Such as *Pacific Rim*, *Darling In The Flanxx*, etc. They all use the setting that humans operate giant machines to fight against giant enemies.

2.5. Mysterious plot

There are many mysteries and connotations in *EVA*'s story. And there are many things in the whole work that are not clearly told to the audience. Viewers often need to guess according to pictures and plots. Just as "There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes". everyone can have their own unique understanding of *eva*. This aroused the interest of the audience, and also increased the audience's thinking about *eva*, so that the status of *EVA* in the hearts of the audience was improved

Besides that, many other things in *EVA* are also full of religious mystery. The enemy of mankind "angel", the names of the characters in the play, the name and logo of the mysterious organization Seele, the Dead Sea document, or the *EVA* name itself, all have a strong connection with the Bible. These mysterious nouns with religious elements increase the mystery of *EVA*, which not only stimulates the curiosity of the audience, but also makes them guess and think further

In addition, there are often some seemingly inexplicable pictures in *EVA*, such as passing shots, sudden stillness and frequent strange symbols. All these will make the audience think about the deep meaning behind it. Therefore, many cartoons now show a tribute to *EVA*, and introduce a lot of religious metaphors like it

Although full of mystery, it is undeniable that the story of *EVA* is thought-provoking, and it is full of psychological and philosophical analysis and thinking. These contents can be reminiscent of one's own life in reality. Nowadays, the number of such relatively "profound" works is decreasing.

3. Business Operation

3.1. Development of series works

In Japan, if an animated disc sells more than 15,000 sets, it can be regarded as a popular work. If it exceeds 40,000 sets, it can be regarded as a social phenomenon. The TV version of *EVA* has sold as many as 200,000 sets, which is unprecedented in history of animation. In addition to the brilliant sales of animation ontology, the sales of TV version of original background music and theme song albums reached 2.5 billion yen (data as of 2006)

Although the TV version has been finished, Hideaki Anno is still very active in developing the whole series of *EVA* works. After the TV version was finished in 1996, he announced that the real ending of *EVA* would be broadcast in the form of theater version. Therefore, two theatrical versions of *death & rebirth* and *Air & The End Of Evangelion* were released in March and July 1997 respectively. These two works won 1.87 billion yen and 2.47 billion yen respectively. In 1999, Sadamoto Yoshiyuki, *EVA*'s painting supervisor, resumed the serialization of *EVA* comic version, and the sales of comic volumes 1-12 in Japan reached 10.505 billion yen (data as of 2006)

Generally speaking, the end of a work means its complete end. But *EVA* didn't. After the reset clear TV was launched in 2003, Hideaki Anno launched the *EVA* new theater series in 2007. Four films in the new theater edition were released in 2007, 2009, 2013 and 2021 respectively. In 2007, *The Rebuild of Evangelion 1.0: You Are (Not) Alone (Per Face)* won 2 billion yen, in 2009, *The Rebuild of Evangelion 2.0: Breaking Up* won 4 billion yen, and in 2013, *The Rebuild of Evangelion 3.0: Q* won 5.26 billion yen. *The Rebuild of Evangelion 4.0: Final*, which was released in 2021, has reached 7.625 billion yen at the box office as of the day when the paper was finished. The release of the new theater edition not only brought in box office revenue, but also made many people understand and become fans of *EVA*.

Besides the box office revenue, the sales volume of discs in the new theater series is even more amazing. Once the discs of each work in the new theater edition are released, they will rank first in the current sales volume. As of May 2013, the sales volume of the first three BD & DVDs in the new theater version has exceeded 1.955 million. Moreover, the new theatrical version of the disc has been released in many different versions. Take the Blu-ray disc of the new theater version in 2009 as an example, it has released three different versions. The first version is numbered 2.0, the second version is numbered 2.2, and the third version is numbered 2.22. Each edition adds some new contents, such as tidbits or some new shots, to the previous edition. However, fans buy these seemingly insignificant new contents, and every version of Blu-ray Disc will become the sales champion once it is launched. Therefore, movies can also obtain long-term income through the distribution of discs.

3.2. Peripheral product

EVA is also extremely active in the development of peripheral products. *EVA*'s peripheral products are extremely numerous, which often surprises fans. Therefore, *EVA* is also known as the "king of the periphery". In addition to games, toy models and cards and postcards derived from animation itself, *EVA* has even authorized many commodity types that have never been out of the periphery, such as umbrellas, chopsticks, chargers and so on. Even if it is done by hand, *EVA* is not limited to the introduction of characters' images, and many characters' images by hand have never even appeared in animation. These hands-on programs bring many surprises to fans.

Moreover, in the peripheral development of *EVA*, great attention is paid to the development of different genders, not only for the different roles that men and women like, but also for the different types of goods that men and women like. In recent years, *EVA* has actively participated in launching co-branded or limited products with major brands. For example, *Uniqlo* and *New Balance* launched limited clothing, *G-shock* launched limited watches, *Zippo* launched limited lighters, and even *U-Treasure* launched co-branded jewelry. The range of co-branded products is extremely wide, and covers low, medium and high-end brands.

In addition, *EVA* is also actively linked with many games, such as *Monster Strike* and *Honkai Impact 3*, allowing *EVA* characters to appear in the game and participate in the players' play

On the one hand, these linkages satisfy the old fans, at the same time, they further enhance the popularity of *EVA*, attract many new fans, and make the fan base expand constantly.

3.3. Official account operation

EVA's official account and website operation are also quite strategic. *EVA* has accounts on key social platforms at home and abroad, such as Weibo and Twitter, which are different from the general official accounts. Besides pushing advertisements and news, *EVA* officials will launch some new activities from time to time, and invite many painters to draw some characteristic pictures for *EVA*'s characters. These pictures will attract fans and stimulate their desire to keep them. This will make fans have the desire to pay attention to the official account for a long time and increase the official influence.

4. Conclusion

With the continuous development of China's animation industry, how to produce truly outstanding works is still a test for animators. *EVA* is a milestone in animation history, and its experience in content, production and commercial operation is worth learning and reference. In fact, from the 1920s to the 1980s, Chinese animation produced many excellent works, which won numerous international awards and received wide acclaim. Among them, "Princess Iron Fan", the first animated feature film in China released in 1941, even influenced Osamu Tezuka, the father of Japanese animation. However, after 1990s, Chinese animation began to appear some problems, such as crude production and childish content. At the same time, China introduced a large number of foreign excellent animation, which greatly reduced the living environment of domestic animation. Although domestic animation has shown signs of recovery in recent years, none of its works has ever become a national animation. And the international influence of Chinese animation is still far less than before.

At present, there are four main problems in Chinese animation. First, domestic animation lacks innovation, and even plagiarism often occurs. Only a few works can really attract the public. Second, compared with foreign animation, many animation productions in China are relatively rough, and the picture fineness and fluency are relatively poor. Third, there are few real commercialized animation in China, lacking the complete animation commercialization system in Japan, and the profit mode of animation is relatively single. Fourth, many people in China have a narrow understanding of animation, and think that animation is only for children.

In a word, Chinese animators still have a long way to go before they want to have *EVA* as a milestone. The works produced should not only conform to the background of the times, but also have a relatively deep plot. It is necessary to have both attractive and innovative settings and resonating roles. At the same time, besides the works themselves, there should be a perfect commercialization system to make the works have diversified profit ways.

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