

A study of narrative traits and insight of Chinese animation films: From the Irish ethnic animation “wolf walkers”

Yuzhe Li^{1,a,*}, Gaofeng Mi¹

¹School of Design and Art, Shaanxi University of Science and Technology, Xi'an, 710021, China

^a1493030559@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Ethnic culture, with its high plurality and openness, offers an invaluable and heterogeneous resource for the animation creation. Irish animation transforms Celtic stories into artistic texts and exports animated films with cultural core to young people around the world. The animated film *Wolf Walker* created by Tom Moore takes the Celtic legend as its creation source, which strongly shows the aesthetic characteristics of nationalization and historization. This paper studies ethnic animation films based on the film *Wolf Walkers*, analyzes the visual elements and narrative material. Based on these, it summarizes the develop strategies and ways out of Chinese animation films: The rational use of traditional cultural resources combined with modern aesthetic concepts shows the rich forms of traditional stories after being retold in modern society and the modern identification of national culture.

Keywords: Animated film; Ethnic mythology; *Wolf Walkers*; Cultural communication; Visual narration

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of media technology, richly expressive multi-media texts are becoming increasingly widespread across various ethnic cultures. The study of multi-media narratives is increasingly central to the attention of scholars. At present, in addition to the US and Japan, having the complete animation system, the Irish animation industry has also taken advantage of the cross-media narrative to gain some market attention. Irish animation director Tom Moore has used the medium of animation to spread stories based on traditional Irish culture and Celtic legends around the world. In summary, studying the cross-media narrative characteristics of literary texts and animated films offers new perspectives on the cross-media transmission of literary classics.

Myths are at the same time the forerunners of human spiritual civilization in primitive societies and the cornerstone of human cultural development in modern societies. As time and technology developed, myths moved from their sacred context to new everyday communities and multi-media contexts, and received new functions and meanings. In the current Chinese film market, the most striking manifestation of the cross-media narrative in practice is the national animated film, which uses traditional mythology as the nucleus of its creation. Currently, the world of traditional myths, such as the "Western Voyage", the "White Serpent" and the "God of Feng", has taken shape as a cross-media narrative. However, the above-mentioned Chinese animated films are not yet well distributed in the international market. In the absence of a well-developed animation industry, Irish animation has been able to break through cultural barriers to produce an audio-visual interpretation of the mythology of the Celtic people. The reason why Tom Moore's work has been so well received on the international stage is the originality of his work and the individuality of his expressions based on national culture. It is therefore important to study the excellent mythological animation works of the Celtic people in order to develop the local animation industry and explore the cross-media narrative strategies of Chinese animation.

The *Wolf Walkers* is the latest installment in Cartoon Saloon's Irish Legends trilogy. Once it was released, it won the 93rd Academy Awards, the 48th Annie Awards and more than 60 international awards. It is an animated fantasy film about Robin, the daughter of a wolf hunter, who accidentally becomes a "Wolf Walker" in the forest and joins forces with Maeve, a girl who can also transform into a wolf, to save the pack. The film appears to be a story of courage and love, an adventure about the inner growth of the protagonist, but in reality, it is a visual narrative that recreates the ecological ethics, culture, art and history of the Celtic people through a nationalistic approach. This paper uses *Wolf Walkers* as a

specific object of analysis to explore how the story world in this cross-media narrative of animation achieves a sensory visual and storytelling core that touches on the common emotions of all human beings on multiple levels.

2. Visual identity: national reference for aesthetical artistic animation

An animated film with quality should be a comprehensive expression of visual art, a visual representation of the creator's aesthetic consciousness (which includes aesthetic emotion, aesthetic awareness and aesthetic perception, etc.). The overall art design is a visual narrative trade-off that presents the shape, color, scenery, shading and texture of a national animation film^[1]. The Wolf Walkers, the finale of the Legends of Ireland trilogy, draws on the decorative style of the clay and gold decorated codex. The film's ethnic codes are embedded in the visual work through visual imagery, and the time and space barriers are dissolved with the author's distinctive modern brushstrokes, continuing the decorative style of line, color and composition, strongly permeated with Tom Moore's sense of ethnic aesthetics in the creation of animated films.

2.1 Delicate and intricate decorative lines.

The film is based on European Celtic mythology and is similar to the two other films in the series, *Song of the Sea* and *The Secret of the Kells*, in that it also retains the hand-drawn lines of the drafts and adopts a strong linear decorative style. The figures make full use of the various symbolic elements of point, line and surface, and through the unique and bold distortion of proportions, they form a strongly contrasting and harmoniously animated figure^[2]. The use of a gathering and dynamic, extremely complex and delicate curved form gives a soft, light and fluid feel, symbolizing the freedom and peace that the Irish people dream of. For example, in order to maximize the natural flavor of Ireland, the creators have used seemingly fluffy and random lines, and have added a variation of color outside the lines to give the animation a sense of ethnic woodblock prints. The use of hard, strong and upright lines expresses a feeling of indifference, coercion and stereotype, symbolizing the longstanding oppression and suffering of the Irish people. In addition, the director's use of bold, irregular geometric scenes of natural forms, with subtle and intricate ornamental textures, shows the vitality and vigor of nature, such as the densely arranged curly blades of grass, the curling natural branches of the forest, the intricate ornamental patterns on buildings, and so on. These decorative lines create a powerful and recognizable image, and the simplicity and exaggerated style of the images bring a lot of tension to the film. In short, the abstract geometric generalizations and subtle decorative dark motifs in the film are "a weave of the heart and spirit".

2.2 A metaphorically rich color palette.

Besides arranging lines and shapes, color is also the most intuitive way to present information in a movie. As an important wing of the film, color is a symbolic aid, restoring the real colors of the real world, while abstractly expressing the subjective feelings and hidden meanings of the characters and the creator, rendering a specific environment and atmosphere, and creating a symbolic meaning to the work. The color scheme of the film is colorful and ethnic, which makes the images visually expressive. Appeal The most striking characteristics of this film are red and red-red. The most striking aspect of the film is the extensive coloring of red and black, with red representing bloody killing and burning fire, and black signifying the violence of power and contempt for life. The scenes' color scheme, with its Irish decorative touch, is visually compelling and makes the film an exciting experience for audiences from all cultures. In different sections of the film, different primary colors are used according to the needs of the subject matter, which serves to enhance the atmosphere, express the characters' state of mind and create a unique national style and flavor. The film's ecology also breaks down the barriers of multicultural perception, with lush forests, warm yellow grass, deep blue sky and brilliant moon light. In different sections of the film, different primary colors are used to convey the nature of Ireland realistically and dreamily, according to the needs of the theme, creating a unique national style and flavor.

2.3 Contrasting spatial shaping.

As a two-dimensional animated film, the director relies on the visual symbols of a highly hieroglyphic character to create a seemingly random yet highly interesting image. In particular, the flat conception of space relations underlines the medieval Celtic style of painting. Ornamental patterns pervade every detail

of the animation, as if you were looking through a book written by hand. The director uses the contrast between the urban pattern and the forested space in the composition to show the film's anti-colonial consciousness and sense of national self-identity. In natural scenes such as forests and meadows, the creators use circular compositions representing reincarnation and symbols of figurative national motifs such as circles and spirals. These symbols express the closeness of the characters to nature and their unrestrained nature, and they also have a multiplier effect on the theme of growth expressed in the film. In humanistic spaces such as cities and rooms, the use of square and triangular compositions gives the viewer a sense of oppression and confinement. Such treatment is not just a sensory consideration, but also draws on colonial maps, which are divided into small square grids, the spatial reality of the Irish territory after the conquest. The film's weakened spatial perspective composition also gives the film a slight resemblance to traditional Chinese ink painting. Chinese painting is about 'writing the spirit with the form', and the artist seeks to create a personal sense of 'the subtlety between likeness and unlikeness'. By 'squeezing' this sense of space, the picture reveals an extended state of visual art. In most of the scenes, the contrasting colors and shades of color are designed to create a deep visual relationship in the space of the painting. In particular, the beams and spots of light create an unusually realistic effect of light and shadow, giving the otherwise flat shots a different depth of field and a sense of three-dimensionality.

In its artistic expression of composition, character modeling and tonal treatment, the animated film *The Wolf Walkers* exudes a strong Ireland decorative visual mood favored by the people. This is, of course, actually the Medieval Handwritten. The art style of the scriptures is an innovation and an experiment in modern digital animation video narratives. Even viewers who do not know this classic of religious art can be captivated by the beautiful decorative style of the film, which has an invisible effect on the dissemination of Irish national culture and art.

3. Narrative material: deep excavation of ethnic folk tales

Henry James King has suggested that "a Cross-Media story unfolds across different media platforms, each of which has a new text that makes a differentiated and valuable contribution to the overall story^[3]. Each medium excels in its way, each doing its part." Folk tales have been a museum of the sources of national animation from the beginning, as well as a path to greater international artistic competitiveness. Animation director Tom Moore is adept at drawing artistic inspiration from Irish folk tales to bring to life the underpinnings of Celtic national culture through cross-media narratives. The animated film *Wolf Walkers* perfectly recreates folklore and national culture through mythology and shows the national spirit, humanistic connotations and ethnicity to the fullest.

3.1 The Ecological Ethics of Man and Animals.

The original narrative text of *The Wolf Walkers* is derived from the mythological legends of man and animal in Celtic or Irish mythology^[4]. These stories are based on the idea that humans or gods can be transformed into animals and tell stories about ecology and philosophical ethics. Firstly, there is a stark dichotomy between humans and animals in the film. The wolves appear to have long faces and sharp teeth and are extremely vicious, while the humans have sharp weapons and will destroy the homes of the wolves, capturing the alpha wolves and force them to leave their natural homes. Through a very different audio-visual language, the director incorporates his emotions into the shaping of the two living spaces, namely the vibrant natural space and the cold and closed urban environment. Secondly, in this narrative context, Robyn's dual identity as a hunter and a 'Wolf Walker' is at first extremely ambivalent. Her identities shift as she sleeps, as she is both the object of the hunters' combined efforts and the object of the wolves' defenses. The untamed form of the "wolf" rescues her from the tedious chores of life and allows her to experience nature and survival in the form of an animal^[5]. In a sense, the protagonist's release in the natural world contrasts sharply with her repression under the patriarchal system. In short, as a special guardian of the forest, *Wolf Walkers* not only can shape-shift between human and canine forms, but can also talk to wolves through telepathy, thus enabling them to avoid human traps and attacks or to rescue humans injured by wolf attacks through mysterious powers, thus resolving the antagonistic relationship between humans and wolves. The animated film "*Wolf Walkers*" combines the ecological ethics of the Irish nation in its images and interweaves them with the growth of the main characters, once again illustrating the unique appeal of the ecological ethics of Irish culture.

3.2 The presentation of national traditions and culture.

European animated films tend to use individual forms of artistic narrative and expression, which are

related to the traditions and customs of different cultures^[6]. This is one of the reasons why animation has won so many awards for its outstanding work. Based on the background and premise of Ireland's history, its culture is inevitably melodramatic, but more than that, it is extremely inclusive, open and diverse. Tom Moore's animated works invariably show the uniqueness and spirituality of the nation's culture. His painting style is heavily influenced by early primitive religious iconography and medieval frescoes (Christian art), and these rich elements of national culture bring endless artistic inspiration to the creation of the animation. The film also makes extensive use of intricately interwoven dots and lines to abstractly express the magical and spiritual flavor of the totems. The detailing of the different types of ethnic decorative elements (swirling patterns and threaded Celtic knots interspersed in a rotating circular pattern) is densely woven and interspersed, adding to the theme of the film. Each frame has a distinctive artistic impact, and the scenes are unrestrained yet orderly (balanced symmetrical compositions with abstract and distorted decorative elements), unfolding like a scroll of watercolor paintings that are both classically beautiful and stylishly modern. Throughout Tom Moore's animations, Celtic myths and legends, cute elves, mysterious religious symbols, geometric shapes, etc., together with the ethereal and beautiful music of Ireland, the artistic symbols are everywhere a tangible expression of the national culture.

3.3 The reproduction of a sense of national resistance.

Historically, Ireland was in a period of multicultural fusion and collision. Set in the 17th century during the British colonial period, *Wolf Walkers* is a euphemism for the artistic writing of that period of history. Ireland was under the rule of England from the Tudors onwards, and the film uses hand-drawn lines to recreate Kilkenny: the center of the town is bordered by the river, with the English and Irish living on either side, and the St George's Cross, representing England, hangs everywhere in the town, except in the square, where the St Andrew's Cross, representing Scotland, and the Golden Harp Green Flag, then representing Ireland, hang. The relationship between "man" and "wolf" alludes to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, and the behavior of the wolves defending their forest home symbolizes the brave Irish people defending their country and nation, reflecting the film's strong anti-colonial overtones. The tyrannical, profit-oriented image of the Lord Protector creates a sense of disgust among the audience and represents the profit-minded colonizers. As the subject of the film, Robin's transformation of identity and the process of identification expresses the cultural identity of the Irish people in the face of assimilationist policies and their constant search for their own identity and culture. The process of Robin's identity transformation and self-identification is a clear manifestation of the Irish people's gradually awakening national and anti-colonial consciousness. Irish literature, under the colonial influence of the state, bears the marks of the country's hegemonic death. Some scholars of Irish literature have argued that for Britain, the conquest of Ireland was a process of conquest between civilization and barbarism. However, Ireland maintained and perpetuated its civilization throughout the process of domination, so Britain was not able to achieve the hegemonic status it had hoped for from the beginning.

4. Insights from *Wolf Walkers*: the development strategy of Chinese animation films

Marx has mentioned that "any myth is a conquest of the forces of nature, a domination of the forces of nature by imagination and employing imagination, a visualization of the forces of nature, a processing of nature and society itself already through the fancy of the people in an unconscious artistic way." This statement reveals the essence of mythology and shows that the essence of myths and legends is the power of human artistic fantasy, which originates from nature and society more enriched with more beautiful and strange imaginations^[7]. From the plot of animation to the set of characters and scenes to the post-production dubbing, myths and legends provide a wealth of subject matter and artistic elements for the creation of ethnic animation.

The narrative approach of Tom Moore's directorial works cannot be discussed in isolation from the local ethnic culture. This shows that ethnicity is still strategically important to the creation of modern animation. The film *Wolf Walkers* uses bold imagery and creative techniques to integrate ancient ethnic plots and cultural traits into a two-dimensional animated narrative with visual symbolic metaphors. While preserving and respecting the spiritual aesthetic and entertainment that characterizes animation, it also incorporates and disseminates the European concept of national culture. The result is a display of the immortal spiritual heritage of mankind and pure solace for the soul. The *Prince of Egypt*, which also focuses on decorative artwork, is also a serious religious and religious subject that is transformed into an educational and entertaining animated film, with its graphic landscape design and character shapes that are simple and exaggerated. The composition and colors, in particular, have a distinctly Egyptian

painterly and decorative quality. The exaggerated and distorted visual effects (silhouettes), the two-dimensional scenes (frescoes) and the simple and strongly formal backgrounds (pharaohs' palaces, castles, etc.) all reflect an artistic tracing of Egyptian civilization. The dramatic scenes are spectacular and reflect a distinctive regional and contemporary character. The use of Middle Eastern folk music and the touching lyrics full of faith and willpower are embellished to burn with a power that shakes the heart. In summary, both share the same vision of promoting good and spreading the truth, but the visual effect is different depending on the time and place. The first can tend to be more refined and elegant, while the last is somewhat more atmospheric.

Throughout the history of Chinese animation, it is easy to find that making full use of traditional decorative painting features, take classical themes as the theme and draw on traditional art and modeling language. For example, the popular *Journey to the West* was used to create *Princess Tie Fan* and *The Greatest Show in Heaven*, and the *Legend of the Demon* was used to create *Tian Shu Qi Tan*, which are still regarded as classics in the world's animation pantheon. Throughout recent years, there have been new works of animation created on the theme of Chinese mythology, such as the 3D animation "*White Snake—The Origin*" and "*White Snake 2: The Green Snake Robbery*" through the "*Legend of the White Snake*", the adaptation of "*Shan Hai Jing*", "*Shan Hai Jing's Goodbye to the Divine Beast*" and the new series of animated movies of the *New Gods* and so on. Although they have achieved some success at the box office and are technically and artistically mature, there is still a lack of animation works that showcase themes related to the special charm of the "East". This can be explained by the fact that the weakness of Chinese animation is the narrative strategy of the story. As an animated film that also explores the spiritual growth of a character with a mythological theme, the reason why '*Jiang Zi Ya*' has not received unanimous acclaim compared to '*Nezha's Demon Boy Comes to Life*' is because of the narrative and plot development. It is because of the lack of narrative and plot development, which makes it difficult to summarize the spiritual growth of the protagonist, the empathy of the characters and the reflection of consciousness in a nutshell. The film's *Jiang Ziya* does not display the hot-blooded heroic personality of *Nezha*, and *Shen Gongpao*, also a classic character in *The Legend of the Gods*, gives audiences a more contrasting experience than the *Shen Gongpao* in *Nezha's Demon Boy Comes to Life*, both in terms of characterization and character. As far as the context of the conflict is concerned, the conflict between *Jiang Ziya* and the evil nine-tailed fox is not in sight; the real conflict is between *Jiang Ziya* and *Yuan Shi Tianzun*. The real conflict is between *Jiang Ziya* and *Yuan Shi Tianzun*, but the treacherous and unorthodox *Tianzun* has very little role to play, apart from sitting on the divine throne and announcing only a few words of the decree, almost relegating him to a behind-the-scenes role. As a result, the logic of this conflict is too far-fetched and obscure for audiences to understand, which prevents *Jiang Ziyang's* eventual outburst of rebellion against his master from bringing audiences together in righteous indignation. The end of *Nezha Demon Boy's Advent* gives the public an unexpected but justifiable sentiment, and is not too deep, which makes it psychologically easier to accept. When the narrative process of pictorial symbolic language leads to an ending that contrasts too much with the audience's inner expectations, and is the opposite of what they expect, then the film as a whole will ultimately be underrated.

If animation, as an integral part of China's cultural industry, is to be widely recognized by audiences, not only does the visual and audio language of the work's surface need to be constantly polished, but also the deeper aspects of traditional culture and national spirit need to be constantly dug deeper. Neither the exterior form nor the interior soul can be understood independently and unilaterally. Our animated creation should also explore and innovate in traditional national culture and art forms, and integrate modern expressions and aesthetic consciousness to make it more contemporary and ornamental!

5. Conclusion

The aesthetic tradition and the coherent innovation of culture and art have allowed the animated film *Wolf Walkers* to retain both its typical national characteristics and its fresh and unconventional artistic temperament. The fantastic stages and exquisite artistic expressions are mesmerizing. The film's ecological expression of ethnicity and the narrative core of national defiance can still break through geographical and creative constraints and move audiences from different cultural backgrounds around the world.

Traditional cultural resources, which provide story material and artistic images that have been bathed and baptized by the modern aesthetics of a universal audience, are more likely to be recognized and accepted by a general audience. Bringing to the world the precious cultural heritage of each people is a systematic project that requires the application of creative wisdom. In the form of traditional two-

dimensional animation, *Wolf Walkers* invariably calls for the world to understand and regenerate the essence of outstanding national culture, and also calls for more animation creators to return to their ideas. Disney has said on a number of occasions that we should return to tradition and advance the spirit of truth, kindness and beauty in animated films.

References

- [1] Zhang Min. *On the innovative images of the hand-drawn animation Wolf Walkers* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2022(18): 146-148.
- [2] Li Yunru. *The construction of Irish national identity in Tom Moore's animated film trilogy* [D]. Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2022. DOI:10.26962/d.cnki.gbjwu.2022.000168.
- [3] Li Ziyang, Li Haochen. *The Aesthetic Value and Aesthetic Characteristics of Tom Moore's Wolf Walkers* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2022(10):151-155.
- [4] Wheatley Kim. *Romantic Periodicals in the Twenty-First Century: Eleven Case Studies from "Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine" ed. by Nicholas Mason and Tom Mole (review)* [J]. *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 2022, 70.
- [5] Wang Churan. *The ecological narrative and aesthetic presentation of The Wolf Walkers*[J]. *Film Literature*, 2022(06):145-147.
- [6] Zhao Shilin. *An exploration of the audiovisual presentation and ethnic style of The Wolf Walkers*[J]. *The Arts*, 2021(06):66-70.
- [7] Lawrence Lindsay. *Romantic Periodicals in the Twenty-First Century: Eleven Case Studies from Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine ed. by Nicholas Mason and Tom Mole (review)*[J]. *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 2021, 54(2).