

The Transformation of Chinese Animated Cultural Symbols within a Socio-political Context (1956–1989)

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Abstract

Between 1956 and 1989, China's socio-political environment underwent a transformation through three distinct phases: the exploration of national identity, the Cultural Revolution, and the Reform and Opening-up. This paper integrates Banks and Morphy's theory of visual representation, Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, and cultural identity theory to form an analytical framework. Through semi-structured interviews with ten experts, combined with an analysis of representative animated works, it explores the interactive relationship between the socio-political context and the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation.

The research reveals that Chinese animated cultural symbols are not static but, in response to contextual shifts, exhibit consistent phased transformations across three dimensions: symbolic content, semantic function and identity construction. The sources of these symbols shifted from traditional culture to revolutionary ideology and then to a coexistence of diverse elements; their semantic function evolved from aesthetic expression to political propaganda and subsequently to a pluralistic and open approach; and the imagination of identity transitioned from national cultural identity to class identity and finally to pluralistic identities. Taken together, these three dimensions demonstrate that changes in the socio-political context have simultaneously reshaped the content, functional positioning and identity references of cultural symbols.

This paper summarises this evolution as the historical logic of 'Ethnic Construction Revolutionary Reconstruction Diverse Regeneration', which not only clarifies the internal logic of the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation during this period, but also provides a new research perspective for visual anthropology in understanding cultural production within non-documentary visual media.

Keywords: Chinese animation; cultural symbols; visual anthropology; socio-political context; identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Visual anthropology has long focused on the interactive relationship between visual representations and their socio-cultural contexts. Relevant research suggests that visual images are not neutral or passive entities, but rather cultural products that are constructed, produced and imbued with meaning through specific practices, technologies and knowledge (Rose, 2016). The meanings conveyed by visual symbols are not fixed but are influenced by power relations, ideologies, cultural values and changes in the social environment (Traue et al., 2019). Consequently, research into visual symbols must not only focus on their formal characteristics but also examine the socio-cultural contexts underlying their creation and evolution.

As a visual medium that serves both artistic expression and cultural dissemination, animation can not only reflect social reality to a certain extent, but also participate in the construction and dissemination of cultural identity (Sun et al., 2024). The development of Chinese animation during this period particularly illustrates the close connection between visual culture and the social environment. From the advancement of the 'nationalisation' of animation in 1956, through the Cultural Revolution, to the

Reform and Opening-up, the historical contexts of different periods not only altered the policy environment for animation production but also profoundly influenced the cultural expressions within animated works. Throughout this process, cultural symbols in animation exhibited distinct phase-specific differences: during the period of exploration into nationalisation, there was a widespread incorporation of traditional art, folk art and historical and literary resources; during the Cultural Revolution, revolutionary heroes, images of workers, peasants and soldiers, and scenes of collective labour became the primary visual symbols; and following the Reform and Opening-up, a pluralistic expressive framework in which tradition and modernity coexist gradually took shape. These changes in cultural symbols within animation are closely linked to the socio-political contexts of specific historical periods.

In recent years, research on Chinese animation has primarily centred on topics such as the ‘Chinese School’, the path towards nationalisation, the evolution of artistic styles, and the development of animation history (Bobrowska, 2022; Du, 2019; Whyke et al., 2021), whilst some studies have also focused on the transmission and reinterpretation of traditional cultural elements in contemporary animation (Whyke et al., 2025). However, most existing research focuses on textual analysis of works or descriptions of historical development (Wei, 2024), whilst discussions on how cultural symbols are selected, reconstructed and imbued with meaning within different socio-political contexts remain relatively limited. At the same time, theoretical insights from visual anthropology concerning the relationship between visual representation and socio-cultural contexts have not yet been fully applied to the field of Chinese animation studies; in particular, there is a lack of empirical research combining expert knowledge with historical context.

Against this backdrop, this paper takes Chinese animation from 1956 to 1989 as its subject of study. It draws upon the periodisation framework for Chinese animation established by Sun(2021);the state's shift towards encouraging creators to explore a national style is generally marked by the release of *The Proud General* (1956), directed by Te Wei, as noted by Du (2019). Accordingly, this paper divides animation production during this period into three phases: the period of exploration of national character (1956–1965), the Cultural Revolution period (1966–1976), and the Reform and Opening-up period (1978–1989). This paper integrates Banks and Morphy’s theory of visual representation (Banks & Morphy, 1999), Hall’s (1980) theory of encoding and decoding, and Hall’s (1990) theory of cultural identity to form an analytical framework. Employing a combination of expert interviews and analysis of animated texts, it examines the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation across different historical periods and their interactive relationship with the socio-political context. The study focuses on two key questions: firstly, what evolutionary process cultural symbols in Chinese animation underwent between 1956 and 1989; and secondly, how the socio-political context influenced the selection, meaning-coding and identity construction of cultural symbols. Through a comparative analysis of these three historical phases, this paper aims to reveal the historical logic of ‘nationalisation revolutionary reconstruction diversification’ underlying the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation, and to further expand the application of visual anthropology in the field of animation studies.

2. RESEARCH SUBJECT AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Subject

This study primarily utilises expert interview data as its subject matter, supplemented by animated text materials for cross-validation and analysis. The research focuses on the historical evolution of Chinese animated cultural symbols from 1956 to 1989, as well as their interactive relationship with the socio-political context.

Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling; a total of ten experts with long-standing experience in Chinese animation production, education and theoretical research were invited to participate in the interviews. The number of interviewees was determined in accordance with the principle of information saturation: as the interviews progressed, the number of new thematic

categories emerging from the additional interview content gradually decreased. Upon completion of the interview with the tenth expert, the researcher judged that information saturation had essentially been achieved and therefore ceased further recruitment. The interviewees included animation creators, university lecturers, animation scholars and postdoctoral researchers. Expert interviews were chosen as the primary source of data, chiefly because this study focuses not only on which cultural symbols appear in animated works, but also on why these symbols are selected, how they are imbued with specific meanings, and the socio-cultural logic underlying them. Compared to simple textual analysis, expert interviews can provide richer historical explanations and professional interpretations (Döringer, 2020).

2.2 Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The interviews were conducted in stages throughout 2025, spanning a period of approximately six months, and were all carried out via online video conferencing, with each interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. The interview guidelines centred on topics such as the origins of cultural symbols, their cultural significance, historical evolution, and the influence of the socio-political environment on animation production. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded in full and transcribed into written form; once transcription was complete, the transcripts were returned to the interviewees for verification and confirmation to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the research data.

In addition to the interview data, this study also utilised Chinese animated works mentioned by the interviewees during the interviews as supplementary analytical material. The works listed in Table 2 are all animations mentioned by two or more interviewees, thereby ensuring the representativeness of the case studies. The animated texts were primarily used to support and validate the interview findings, and to further examine the visual presentation of cultural symbols within specific works. The relevant animated works, their respective periods and the main points of analysis are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Animated Films Mentioned by Interviewees and Their Analytical Focus

Film	Year	Interview Evidence	Main Analytical Focus
The Conceited General	1956	I04, I07, I08	National style origin, Peking Opera facial types, early stylistic experiment
Little Tadpoles Looking for Mama	1960	I01, I02, I03, I04, I06, I08, I09, I10	Ink-wash animation, Qi Baishi style, traditional Chinese painting
Havoc in Heaven	1961–1964	I01, I02, I03, I04, I05, I06, I07, I09, I10	Mythology, Peking Opera, national style
The Cowherd's Flute	1963	I01, I02, I06	Daoist aesthetics, artistic conception, ink-wash expression
Heroic Sisters of the Grassland	1965	I04, I06, I09, I10	Heroic narrative, ethnic imagery
Little Eighth Route Army Soldier	1973	I01, I02, I06, I08	Revolutionary narrative
The Little Sentinel of the East China Sea	1973	I02, I03, I10	Collectivism, national defence, ideological expression
Maiden Voyage	1976	I02, I04, I07	Industrial development, political propaganda

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Nezha Conquers the Dragon King	1979	I01, I02, I03, I04, I05, I07, I08, I09, I10	Myth reconstruction, traditional culture
The Story of Afanti	1979	I01, I02, I04	Ethnic culture, regional identity
Three Monks	1980	I01, I02, I03, I06, I08	Zen philosophy, minimalist visual language
Feeling from Mountain and Water	1988	I06, I07, I09	Ink-wash aesthetics, artistic freedom, spiritual conception (yijing)

Note. Films listed above were mentioned by two or more interviewees during the interview process.

2.3 Data Analysis

This study employs thematic analysis to process and analyse the interview data. Following the thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the interview data were first transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly; subsequently, open coding was conducted to tag and categorise the interviewees' comments on cultural symbols, the social environment, ideology and creative practices; subsequently, research themes were formed through continuous comparison and induction; finally, cross-validation was carried out in conjunction with animation text materials to enhance the reliability of the research findings.

The thematic coding was carried out independently by the researcher. To enhance the reliability of the coding results, the researcher repeatedly read and compared the interview data after the initial coding, verifying the degree of alignment between the coding categories and the original data, and conducted cross-validation in conjunction with animation text materials to minimise the subjective bias that might arise from a single coder.

Through coding and thematic induction, this study ultimately identified three core analytical themes: the evolution of the spectrum of cultural symbols; the evolution of the ways in which cultural symbols are encoded for meaning; and the evolution of the logic underpinning the construction of cultural identity. These three themes constitute the primary analytical framework for the subsequent findings and discussion sections.

Table 3. Thematic Analysis Results

Core Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Interviewees
Evolution of Cultural Symbol System	Traditional Cultural Symbols	I01, I04, I09, I10
	Revolutionary Ideological Symbols	I05, I07, I08, I10
	Plural Cultural Symbols	I03, I04, I07, I09, I10
Evolution of Meaning Encoding of Cultural Symbols	Aesthetic Expression	I01, I06, I09, I10
	Political Function	I02, I05, I07, I08
	Pluralistic Openness	I03, I04, I09
Evolution of Cultural Identity Construction	Cultural Identity	I01, I04, I10
	Class Identity	I02, I05, I07, I08
	Plural Identity	I03, I04, I09, I10

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three theoretical frameworks: Banks and Morphy's theory of visual representation, Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, and Hall's theory of cultural identity. These correspond respectively to the three core analytical dimensions of this paper the genealogy of cultural symbols, modes of meaning encoding, and the logic of identity construction.

Firstly, Banks and Morphy conceive of images as representations of a social nature, rather than

replicas of reality; this theory also holds that the core of visual anthropology lies in analysing cross-cultural representational processes, and how images generate meaning through their production, circulation and interpretation (Banks & Morphy, 1999). Consequently, in animation production, the formation and transformation of visual symbols are influenced not only by the creator's personal experiences, but also by socio-political contexts and cultural values.

Secondly, this study adopts Hall's (1980) theory of encoding and decoding to examine the evolution of the 'modes of encoding meaning' in cultural symbols. This theory emphasises that meaning is not passively fixed during the communication process, but rather constitutes an active process whereby producers 'encode' content within specific social contexts; the degree to which encoding rules are open or closed reflects the power structures of a particular historical period and determines the scope and manner in which symbolic meaning is generated. This perspective helps to explain why the cultural symbols discussed in this paper have been imbued with different political and cultural meanings at different historical stages.

Thirdly, regarding the question of how cultural symbols participate in identity construction, this study adopts the theory of cultural identity proposed by Hall (1990). This theory posits that cultural identity is not a fixed, unchanging essence, but rather a process of continuous construction and re-articulation within specific historical and cultural contexts; the formation of identity is always embedded within power relations and historical narratives. This perspective provides theoretical support for this paper's analysis of the identities embodied by animated characters and narrative subjects, namely the historical process by which identity gradually shifts from ethnic-cultural identity to class identity, and further evolves into multiple identities.

Based on this theoretical perspective, this paper regards cultural symbols in animation as visual carriers of socio-cultural meaning, focusing in particular on how socio-political contexts in different historical periods influence the selection of cultural symbols, the encoding of meaning and the construction of identity. Through an analysis of the evolution of cultural symbols, it seeks to reveal the interactive relationship between Chinese animation and socio-cultural change. The correspondence between the three theoretical resources and the three core analytical themes of this paper is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Theoretical Framework and Corresponding Analytical Themes

Theoretical Resource	Core Argument	Corresponding Analytical Theme
Banks & Morphy (1999), Visual Representation Theory	Images are socially constructed representations rather than reflections of reality; meaning is generated through production, circulation, and interpretation	Evolution of Cultural Symbol System (Section 3.1)
Hall (1980), Encoding/Decoding Theory	Meaning is actively encoded by producers within specific contexts and decoded by receivers; the openness or closure of encoding rules reflects power structures	Evolution of Meaning Encoding of Cultural Symbols (Section 3.2)
Hall (1990), Cultural Identity Theory	Identity is not a fixed essence but a process continuously constructed and re-articulated within specific historical and cultural contexts	Evolution of Cultural Identity Construction (Section 3.3)

3. RESULTS

3.1 The Evolution of Cultural Symbols

The interview findings reveal that the characteristics of cultural symbols in Chinese animation underwent significant changes between 1956 and 1989. The experts interviewed generally agreed that changes in the socio-political environment during different historical periods directly influenced the origins and types of cultural symbols, as well as the manner in which they were presented in animation. From a historical perspective, cultural symbols in Chinese animation underwent a process of transition: from the pursuit and expression of traditional cultural symbols, to the prominence of revolutionary ideological symbols, and finally to the co-development of diverse cultural symbols.

During the period of exploration towards nationalisation, traditional cultural resources served as the most important source of symbols for animation creation. Interviewees generally pointed out that the state's cultural policies at the time encouraged creators to seek forms of artistic expression with Chinese characteristics from traditional culture. One interviewee noted:

“Creators at the time had already realised that Chinese animation required not only technical development but, more importantly, the establishment of an artistic language with national characteristics; consequently, they began to actively explore visual expressions in the style of Chinese culture.” (I04)

Another interviewee also mentioned:

“Traditional art forms such as ink wash painting, paper-cutting and puppetry gradually evolved into the most representative symbolic language of Chinese animation.” (I09)

Interview data indicates that during this period, animation production drew extensively upon traditional arts, folk arts, historical literature, and ethnic and regional cultural resources. Cultural elements such as ink-wash painting, traditional opera, paper-cutting and myths and legends did not merely appear as visual embellishments; rather, they were integrated into animation production as complete cultural systems. Consequently, the selection of cultural symbols exhibited a distinct national orientation, with resources such as ink wash painting, traditional opera, paper-cutting and myths and legends collectively forming a visual symbolic system with Chinese characteristics.

During the Cultural Revolution, the logic governing the selection and use of cultural symbols underwent a shift. The experts interviewed generally agreed that ideology became a significant factor influencing animation production. At the same time, traditional cultural symbols were subject to varying degrees of restriction. One interviewee noted:

“During the Cultural Revolution, themes related to traditional culture were deemed incompatible with the prevailing ideology; the protagonists of animated works shifted to workers, peasants and soldiers, whilst themes involving deities, demons, and romantic heroes and heroines were banned.” (I07)

During the Cultural Revolution, the criteria for selecting cultural symbols shifted from cultural representativeness to the expression of political and ideological stances. Ideological symbols such as revolutionary heroes and the images of workers, peasants and soldiers gradually became the primary visual elements in animation; works such as *Little Eighth Route Army Soldier** and *The Little Sentinel of the East China Sea* are typical representatives of this period (I08), whilst the traditional cultural symbols of the preceding phase receded from mainstream animation production.

The Reform and Opening-up period saw the emergence of new trends. As the social environment gradually opened up, the sources of cultural symbols began to expand once more. One interviewee noted:

“After the Reform and Opening-up, animation production began to emphasise individual expression and self-awareness, and traditional cultural symbols were also reinterpreted within the new social

context.” (I10)

Some interviewees also mentioned that traditional culture underwent further development following the Reform and Opening-up:

“The core values of traditional cultural symbols have not changed, but as the social environment has evolved, their modes of dissemination and cultural significance have continually expanded.” (I09)

Another interviewee added:

“After the Cultural Revolution, society gradually became more vibrant, and the choice of themes became more diverse.” (I07)

Consequently, the interview data reveals that traditional cultural symbols made a comeback in animation during this period; works such as *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Three Monks* exemplify a rediscovery of traditional cultural resources. By the late 1980s, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* further demonstrated the deepened application of ink-wash symbols within a context of liberalised artistic expression (I07). Another interviewee also noted:

“Little Tadpoles Looking for Mama and *Feeling from Mountain and Water* remain classics to this day and retain their cultural relevance even today.” (I09)

At the same time, the pursuit of individuality and new social experiences gradually found their way into the realm of animation. Cultural symbols were no longer governed by a single value system, but instead presented a developmental pattern in which traditional and modern cultures coexisted.

A synthesis of the interview data reveals that the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation between 1956 and 1989 was not merely a shift in artistic style, but was closely linked to changes in the socio-political context of different historical periods. The evolutionary process from traditional cultural symbols to symbols of revolutionary ideology, and on to the coexistence of diverse cultural symbols reflects the systematic reorganisation of the origins and composition of cultural symbols across different historical stages.

3.2 The Evolution of the Semantic Coding of Cultural Symbols

In addition to changes in the spectrum of cultural symbols, the interview data also reveals that the semantic coding of cultural symbols in Chinese animation between 1956 and 1989 underwent a significant transformation. The experts interviewed generally agreed that the understanding and use of cultural symbols in animation production differed across various historical periods, reflecting shifts in the socio-political environment, cultural policies and creative philosophies. Based on the interview data, it is evident that the methods of encoding the meanings of cultural symbols in animation during this period underwent a process of transition from being dominated by aesthetic expression, to being dominated by political function, and then towards a more diverse and open approach.

During the period of exploration into national character, cultural symbols primarily served the functions of aesthetic expression and cultural representation. Several interviewees believed that, during this period, creators focused more on artistic exploration and innovation in national forms, with the use of cultural symbols serving, first and foremost, aesthetic pursuits. One interviewee noted:

“Chinese animation began to consciously emphasise national characteristics and actively explore an artistic language imbued with Chinese cultural style; this gradually gave rise to artistic forms with distinctive national characteristics, such as ink-wash animation, paper-cut animation and puppet animation.” (I06)

When discussing the creative characteristics of this period, the interviewee further stated:

“Through policy guidance and artistic innovation, traditional art forms such as ink-wash painting were transformed into animated imagery... *Little Tadpoles Looking for Mama* successfully realised

the visual expression of traditional artistic resources.” (I06)

Many interviewees mentioned the continuation of traditional Chinese aesthetics and philosophy in animation:

“The aesthetic concept of ‘negative space’ in ink-wash animation derives from traditional Chinese painting; ‘negative space’ embodies the Daoist aesthetic pursuit of ‘the interdependence of the tangible and the intangible’.” (I01)

Another interviewee also pointed out:

“The stylised figures of the early 1960s were exquisite, meticulously crafted and possessed a particularly strong artistic sensibility. Take Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven*, for example: his design incorporated elements of New Year’s paintings, his performance style drew on traditional opera, and the work was rich in detail.” (I10)

These views indicate that cultural symbols during the period of exploration into national identity not only served a narrative function but, more importantly, showcased the aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese art through unique visual forms. The use of negative space in ink-wash animation, the stylised movements in opera-inspired animation, and the decorative forms found in New Year’s paintings all reflect the emphasis placed on artistic expressiveness in animation production during that period. It is evident, therefore, that cultural symbols in this phase were primarily imbued with aesthetic value and cultural symbolism, and their expression was relatively open.

The Cultural Revolution period, however, presented distinctly different characteristics. Interview data indicates that the semantic coding of cultural symbols in animation during this period gradually shifted from aesthetic expression to political function. One interviewee noted:

“When political control was strict, symbolic expression became more utilitarian; for example, the symbols of workers, peasants and soldiers in Cultural Revolution-era animation emphasised struggle, whilst artistic merit was relegated to a secondary position.” (I07)

Another interviewee also mentioned:

“In those days, political correctness and political propaganda were undoubtedly the most important objectives.” (I02)

A further interviewee pointed out:

“Works such as *Maiden Voyage* served a political propaganda function through an accessible animated format; during this period, animation became a key medium for the dissemination of ideology.” (I07)

One interviewee highlighted this from the perspective of subject matter:

“From the mid-to-late 1960s onwards, political elements were gradually incorporated into animation production, with themes shifting towards revolutionary narratives such as *The Little Eighth Route Army Soldier and The Little Sentinel of the East China Sea* to reflect the spirit of the ‘red political era’ at the time.” (I08)

At the same time, interviewees mentioned that the visual presentation of symbols in animation also underwent changes:

“The animation style of that era was relatively simple, with a limited colour palette, and characters were depicted with thick lines and square faces.” (I05)

From the interviewees’ descriptions, it is evident that the primary function of cultural symbols during this period was to convey clear political stances and values. The meanings of cultural symbols were highly standardised and simplified; their coding served explicit political propaganda objectives and no longer permitted ambiguous aesthetic interpretations. In contrast to the previous period’s

emphasis on aesthetic exploration, cultural symbols at this time primarily served functions of political propaganda and social education.

During the Reform and Opening-up period, the way in which cultural symbols were encoded once again underwent a transformation. As the social environment gradually opened up, creators gained greater scope for expression, and cultural symbols no longer served solely political functions. One interviewee pointed out:

“When political restrictions were relaxed, the artistic expression of animated symbols became freer; for example, the ink-wash symbols in *Feeling from Mountain and Water* emphasised artistic aesthetics and conveyed a spiritual realm.” (I03)

Another interviewee elaborated further from an aesthetic perspective:

“The spiritual interaction between Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi in *Feeling from Mountain and Water* constitutes an expression that is freehand, somewhat abstract and spiritually oriented; the Chinese value ‘negative space’ and do not spell everything out in full.” (I09)

This interviewee went on to state:

“Through the use of negative space, abstract expression and spiritual resonance, *Landscape Affection* accurately conveys the aesthetic of traditional Chinese culture.” (I09)

Another interviewee opined:

“Many of the character designs in 1980s animations with their rounded, lively forms and rich colours—were all tailored to children’s aesthetic sensibilities.” (I04)

These views indicate that cultural symbols regained a significant degree of interpretative freedom during the Reform and Opening-up period. Creators were no longer confined to singular political expressions but began to focus on multiple dimensions, including children’s aesthetics, cultural heritage and artistic exploration. The meanings of cultural symbols took on more open and diverse characteristics, with a single symbol often capable of conveying multi-layered meanings aesthetic, cultural and emotional.

A synthesis of the interview data reveals that, between 1956 and 1989, the coding of meaning in cultural symbols within Chinese animation underwent a developmental process: from being dominated by aesthetic expression, to being dominated by political function, and finally towards a more diverse and open approach. This shift not only reflects adjustments in animation creation philosophies but also mirrors the profound influence of the socio-political environment of different periods on modes of visual representation. The meanings conveyed by cultural symbols are not static but are constantly reconstructed and reinterpreted within specific historical contexts.

3.3 The Evolution of the Logic of Cultural Identity Construction

Interview data indicate that changes in Chinese animation’s cultural symbols between 1956 and 1989 were not only reflected in the types of symbols and the expression of their meanings, but also, at a deeper level, in the ongoing adjustment of the logic of identity construction. The experts interviewed generally agreed that the cultural symbols in animation during different historical periods actually corresponded to different conceptions of social identity. Overall, Chinese animation underwent a developmental process from the construction of cultural identity, to the construction of class identity, and finally to the construction of pluralistic identities.

During the period of exploration into ‘nationalisation’, cultural symbols in animation primarily served to construct national cultural identity. Interviewees believed that one of the key objectives of animation production during this period was to explore artistic forms of expression with Chinese characteristics and to shape the nation’s cultural image through traditional cultural resources. One interviewee noted:

“The choice of traditional mythology, ink wash painting and paper-cutting in the early 1960s reflected the prevailing ideology of ‘delving into national culture and fostering cultural confidence’.” (I01)

Another interviewee also stated:

“From the central to the local levels, efforts to promote ‘ethnisation’ began, with the aim of drawing nourishment from our own ethnic soil.” (I04)

The experts interviewed generally agreed that the reason works such as *Havoc in Heaven*, *Little Tadpoles Looking for Mama* and *The Cowherd's Flute* made extensive use of elements from traditional art, folk art and mythological legends was not only a necessity for artistic innovation, but also a means of answering the question “What is Chinese culture?” through visual forms. Cultural symbols such as ink wash painting, traditional opera, paper-cutting and mythical heroes collectively constitute a visual expression of ‘Chineseness’, making animation an important medium for showcasing national cultural identity.

Upon entering the Cultural Revolution period, the logic of identity construction in animation underwent a marked shift. Interviewees pointed out that cultural identity gradually gave way to class identity, with character portrayals and cultural symbols increasingly centred on revolutionary narratives. One interviewee stated:

“During the Cultural Revolution, the political orientation centred on class struggle, and themes related to traditional culture were deemed incompatible with the ideology of the time; consequently, the creation of protagonists shifted towards workers, peasants and soldiers.” (I07)

Another interviewee pointed out:

“The change in the identity of the protagonists in animation from People’s Liberation Army soldiers to militia members, and later to the peasant Xiao Tiezhu is in fact a reflection of the changes in the ideology and social environment underlying the animations.” (I05)

At the same time, interviewees also mentioned:

“Traditional mythological symbols became less common; instead, there was a greater focus on the images of workers, peasants and soldiers, scenes of labour, and revolutionary stories.” (I02)

These views indicate that, during this period, the ideal subject portrayed in animation was no longer a mythological hero or an heir to cultural traditions, but rather a revolutionary participant firmly anchored within a class camp, whose identity derived its legitimacy from political stance rather than cultural heritage. The core criterion for identity shifted from cultural affiliation to political affiliation, with cultural symbols playing a vital role in reinforcing class identity and political allegiance during this process.

During the period of Reform and Opening-up, the logic of identity construction underwent further change. As the social environment gradually opened up, animation began to break free from a singular identity framework, presenting a more diverse range of identity expressions. One interviewee noted:

“In the 1980s, the selection of traditional symbols combined with modern elements reflected the spirit of Reform and Opening-up, the liberation of thought, and an inclusive mindset.” (I03)

Regarding the evolution of classic characters, another interviewee further noted:

“By the 1980s, the symbol of Sun Wukong had returned, but its significance had changed; it was no longer solely about ‘rebellion’, but had taken on more down-to-earth and humanised qualities.” (I09)

The experts interviewed generally agreed that, during this period, animated characters began to move away from a singular political identity, with an increasing number of children, ordinary people, characters from the streets, and roles with distinct individual traits. Cultural symbols not only served the functions of cultural transmission and the expression of values, but also began to focus on

individual experiences, emotional expression and everyday life. This meant that the construction of identity became more diverse, no longer confined to a single cultural or class identity.

A synthesis of the interview data reveals that cultural symbols in Chinese animation from 1956 to 1989 actually became important vehicles for the construction of identity across different historical periods. The period of exploration into national identity emphasised the construction of national cultural identity through traditional cultural resources; the Cultural Revolution period emphasised the construction of political identity through revolutionary narratives and class positions; whilst the Reform and Opening-up period gradually gave rise to a pluralistic identity landscape in which cultural, social and individual identities coexisted. This shift indicates that cultural symbols in animation not only reflect social reality but also participate in the shaping and dissemination of identity during specific historical periods.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 The Shaping of Cultural Symbol Selection by the Socio-Political Context

The findings indicate that the changes in cultural symbols in Chinese animation between 1956 and 1989 were not merely adjustments in artistic style, but rather the result of the socio-political context's continuous influence on cultural production. In line with the perspective of visual anthropology, visual representations are not cultural content that exists independently of the social environment, but rather systems of meaning formed and developed under specific historical conditions (Banks & Morphy, 1999; Pavlova, 2022).

During the period of exploration into 'nationalisation', cultural policy largely shaped which traditional resources could be produced, circulated, and established as representative imagery of national culture. This corroborates existing research on the animation 'nationalisation' movement in the early years of the People's Republic of China (Du, 2019): the pursuit of 'national forms' was, in essence, a state-led project to construct cultural autonomy, rather than merely the artistic consciousness of individual creators.

During the Cultural Revolution, the production and circulation of symbols were incorporated into the state's ideological propaganda system, and the symbols permitted for public circulation were strictly limited. This finding is consistent with existing research on the strict ideological regulation of visual culture during the Cultural Revolution (Bobrowska, 2022; King et al., 2010; Wei, 2024).

During the Reform and Opening-up period, the autonomy of creative organisations expanded, and the agents of symbol production gradually shifted from state institutions to individual creators, allowing cultural symbols to regain space for diverse circulation and interpretation. This corroborates existing research on the 'depoliticisation' shift in Chinese cultural policy from the late 1970s to the early 1980s (Pang, 2012).

It is thus evident that the evolution of cultural symbols is essentially the result of continuous adjustments in the power relations governing their production and circulation; this adjustment spans three historical phases, providing a complementary mechanistic explanatory perspective to existing text-analytical approaches.

4.2 Power, Visual Representation and Meaning Production

This study finds that the process of transformation in Chinese animation's cultural symbols exhibits distinct characteristics of power intervention; this process can also be understood through Hall's (1980) theory of encoding and decoding. Within specific socio-political contexts, animation creators 'encode' cultural symbols, embedding particular ideological stances or aesthetic orientations into visual texts. The degree of openness or closure of the encoding rules determines the range of meanings that symbols can convey during a specific historical period. The more closed the encoding rules, the more singular and unambiguous the meaning of the symbols tends to be; the more open the encoding

rules, the richer the range of meanings the symbols can convey. During the period of exploration towards nationalisation, the state encouraged the incorporation of traditional cultural resources into animation production through cultural policies; the encoding approach was relatively open, with aesthetic expression taking the lead. This is consistent with existing research on Chinese animation during the 'Seventeen-Year Period', which argues that it possessed dual artistic and political attributes, with artistic exploration predominating during this phase (Sun et al., 2024).

During the Cultural Revolution, ideology imposed strict requirements on visual expression; the rules governing the encoding of symbols were highly standardised, leaving very limited scope for interpretative negotiation. This is consistent with existing research on the strict ideological censorship of visual culture during the Cultural Revolution (Bobrowska, 2022; King et al., 2010).

Following the Reform and Opening-up, as cultural management practices were adjusted, creators gained greater autonomy, and the encoding of symbolic meaning became more diverse and open, enabling diverse interpretations by audiences. This resonates with existing research on the reactivation and ongoing reinterpretation of the 'national style' discourse during the same period (Whyke et al., 2021).

This process illustrates that cultural symbols in animation are visual representations that are continually selected, encoded and reconstructed under the influence of power relations. The socio-political environments of different historical periods not only influence the content of cultural symbols but also shape the specific ways in which their meanings are produced and disseminated.

4.3 The Construction and Reshaping of Identity

This study also found that cultural symbols in Chinese animation are not only vehicles for cultural content and meaning, but also continuously participate in the process of identity construction. Drawing on Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity provides a clearer understanding of this process: identity is not a pre-given, fixed essence, but rather the result of constant construction, reorganisation and re-articulation within specific historical contexts; this process is consistently shaped by power relations and historical narratives.

During the period of exploration into 'nationalisation', animation constructed a national cultural identity centred on 'Chineseness' by extensively drawing upon cultural resources such as traditional mythology, ink-wash painting and Chinese opera, thereby responding to the state's call for cultural autonomy. Existing research similarly points out that the construction of 'Chineseness' during this period was itself a dynamic process of integration, rather than a simple affirmation of essentialised national characteristics (Du, 2019).

During the Cultural Revolution, the logic underpinning the construction of identity underwent a fundamental shift. Cultural affiliation gave way to political affiliation, and the ideal subject in animation was redefined as a revolutionary participant with a clear class stance. Character portrayals, labour scenes and revolutionary narratives collectively reinforced the legitimacy of class identity, which is consistent with existing research on how visual culture during the Cultural Revolution reshaped subject identity through class narratives (Bobrowska, 2022; King et al., 2010).

During the Reform and Opening-up period, as the social context reopened, expressions of identity in animation broke free from the constraints of a single framework, with a proliferation of children, ordinary people and characters possessing individual characteristics; with cultural, social and individual identities beginning to coexist, forming a more diverse and fluid landscape of identity. This resonates with existing research on the 'depoliticisation' of Chinese culture from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, during which expressions of identity regained a pluralistic space (Pang, 2012).

This process of transformation corroborates Hall's (1990) central argument: identity is not static, but is constantly rearticulated in response to shifts in the historical context. The three transformations of identity in Chinese animation are, in essence, concrete manifestations of changes in the socio-political

context at the level of subject construction.

4.4 The Historical Logic of the Evolution of Cultural Symbols in Chinese Animation

Through a comparative analysis of three historical phases, this paper summarises the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation as a historical logic of ‘Ethnic Construction Revolutionary Reconstruction Diverse Regeneration’. This logic both echoes and builds upon the periodisation proposed in existing research. This paper partially overlaps with Sun (2021) in terms of macro-level periodization both take the period around 1956 as the starting point for the exploration of nationalisation; however, this paper further subdivides the ‘Socialist Period’ (1949–1977) which Sun defined in broad terms into two distinct phases: the exploration of nationalisation and the Cultural Revolution. This subdivision is made possible by expert interview data, which captures the qualitative shifts in symbolic meaning occurring within these phases—shifts that are easily overlooked from a macro-level industry history perspective. Bobrowska, meanwhile, begins by examining the ideological production of Chinese animation from the 1940s to the 1970s through the concept of the ‘puppet’ (2022), before extending her analysis to the traditions, innovations and cross-cultural transformations of ‘national’ discourse during the Reform and Opening-up period from 1978 to 1992 (2023); the findings in this paper regarding the ‘coexistence of tradition and innovation’ during the Reform and Opening-up period are corroborated by Bobrowska’s (2023) conclusions drawn from textual analysis of the same period, indicating that this phenomenon is not an isolated observation but rather a stable pattern that can be cross-validated through two distinct research methods: textual analysis and expert interviews. A further contribution of this paper lies in its systematic revelation, through expert interview data, of the interdependent relationship between criteria for symbolic selection, modes of meaning encoding, and the logic of identity construction these three strands do not evolve independently but are adjusted synchronously under the impetus of shifts in the same socio-political context, an aspect not yet systematically presented in existing research.

It should be noted that ‘Ethnic Construction Revolutionary Reconstruction Diverse Regeneration’ does not constitute a strictly linear relationship of replacement: the pluralistic expressions of the Reform and Opening-up period were, in fact, a reactivation of traditional symbolic resources from the era of ethnicisation, rather than the creation of an entirely new symbolic system. This reflects the complexity of cultural symbolic change, in which discontinuity and continuity coexist.

The Transformation of Chinese Animated Cultural Symbols within a Socio-political Context (1956–1989)

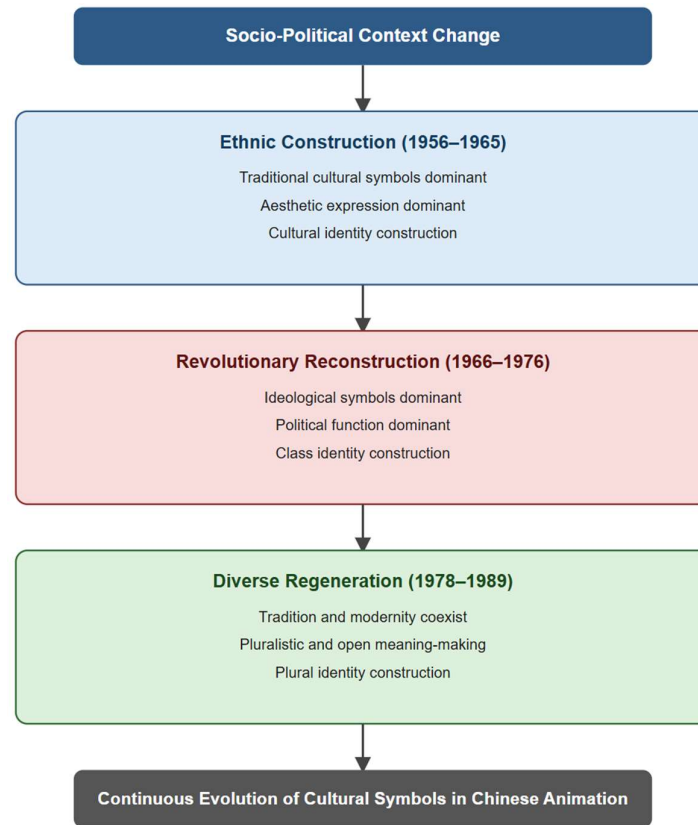


Figure 1. Historical Evolution of Cultural Symbols in Chinese Animation (1956–1989)

5 CONCLUSION

This paper takes Chinese animation from 1956 to 1989 as its subject of study. Integrating Banks and Morphy's theory of visual representation, Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, and cultural identity theory as an analytical framework, it explores the interactive relationship between the socio-political context and the evolution of cultural symbols in Chinese animation through thematic analysis of interview data from ten experts, supplemented by verification using representative animated texts. The study found that cultural symbols in Chinese animation are not static cultural elements, but rather visual representations that are continually selected, reconstructed and imbued with meaning under specific historical conditions.

At the level of the cultural symbol spectrum, Chinese animation has undergone a developmental process from being dominated by traditional cultural symbols, to being dominated by revolutionary ideological symbols, and finally to the coexistence of diverse cultural symbols; at the level of the semantic encoding of cultural symbols, it has exhibited a trend of change from being dominated by aesthetic expression, to being dominated by political function, and then towards a diverse and open development; at the level of identity construction, it has undergone a developmental process from the construction of cultural identity, to the construction of class identity, and finally to the construction of plural identities. These three strands collectively reveal a historical logic of 'Ethnic Construction—Revolutionary Reconstruction—Diverse Regeneration'. The formation of this logic stems fundamentally from the continuous shaping of cultural symbol selection, meaning production and identity construction by the socio-political context.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in integrating representational theory from visual anthropology with encoding and decoding theories and cultural identity theories from the field of cultural studies. It constructs an analytical framework that takes into account the three dimensions of symbolic content, meaning production and identity construction. Through expert interview data, it

reveals the socio-historical mechanisms underlying cultural symbols, thereby expanding the application of these theories within the field of Chinese animation studies. At the same time, the study provides a new analytical perspective for understanding the historical evolution of cultural expression in Chinese animation and its cultural value.

This study nevertheless has certain limitations. Firstly, the interviewees were primarily contemporary experts, scholars and practitioners; their perspectives are to some extent retrospective in nature and may be subject to recall bias. Secondly, animated texts were used primarily as supplementary material in this study. Future research could further expand the scope of the text sample and incorporate audience reception studies to examine the processes of production, dissemination and reception of cultural symbols in animation more comprehensively. Furthermore, the thematic coding for this study was carried out independently by a single researcher. Although the credibility of the analysis was enhanced through repeated comparisons and cross-validation of the texts, future research might consider introducing a multi-coder mechanism to further strengthen the reliability of the results. Moreover, comparative studies of animation cultural symbols across different countries are also worthy of further exploration to deepen our understanding of the relationship between animation and cultural identity.

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