

## **Aesthetic Evolution of Female Characters in Animated Films**

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**Abstract: Human aesthetic ideas on beauty are the result of long-time sexual selection. These aesthetic ideas are not only determined by human instinctive preferences, but also by social factors. The social, cultural, and historical differences between China and the United States lead to the differences in female characters portrayed in animated films. By examining the female characters presented in animated films in China and the United States since, this paper reveals the aesthetic evolution of female characters in Chinese and American animated films from the perspective of feminism, and discusses the social, cultural, and historical reasons. Our findings suggest that although both China and America tended to categorize their female animated figures simply into “demon” or “angel” groups before 1990, the improvement of women’s social, economic and political status has made female characters more diverse and dominant in the films. In comparison, American animated films is universal and adopts a stronger feminist approach, presenting us female characters of diverse races and ethnicities.**

**Keywords: Aesthetic Evolution; Feminism; Animated Film**

### **1. Introduction**

Human aesthetic ideas on beauty are the result of long-time sexual selection. These aesthetic ideas are not only determined by human instinctive preferences but also by other factors, such as history, culture, and geographical environment. As countries with very different cultures and histories, the female characters presented in Chinese and American animated films are certainly different. By examining the female characters shown in animated films of China and the United States over the past hundred years, this paper reveals the aesthetic

evolution of female characters in Chinese and American animated films from the perspective of feminism and discusses the social, cultural and historical reasons behind these differences. American animation has developed for more than 110 years since its first animated film appeared in 1906. Nowadays, American animation is a movie category for all ages with rich forms and content. Makers such as Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks have long been household names. The first Chinese animated film was born in 1926. Through the development of nearly one hundred years covering a process of imitation, the rise of Chinese national animation, and industrialization, Chinese animated films are in the middle of a popularity boom. The female character, undoubtedly, is an important perspective to observe the evolution of animation in the past century. By comparing the number, image, and status of female characters in Chinese and American animated films in different periods, one can easily see the aesthetic evolution of female characters in these films. This paper will examine the female characters in three periods: before 1990, 1990-2010, and after 2010.

### **2. Good or Evil – the Stereotype of Female Characters before 1990**

Between 1926 and 1990, China produced five animated features: *The Princess of Iron Fan* (1941), *The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven* (1964), *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979), *Secrets of the Heavenly Book* (1983), and *Golden Monkey Subdued the Evil* (1985). Most of the animated films of this period are adapted from historical myths and legends, and the characters in these films have a strong Chinese national style. In these animated features, women are either "invisible" or "evil". They are either absent from the film or portrayed as beautiful but evil women who deceive and lure men with their sexual

attractiveness. Under the influence of thousands of years of Confucianist teachings that women should be obedient to men, female characters take a very minor position in the films. For example, in *The Princess of Iron Fan*, the only animated feature named after a woman, the Princess is portrayed as a woman who tries her best to please her husband. When her husband, Bull Demon King, returns home from his concubine, she does not show any anger but uses food, singing, and dancing to entertain her husband, hoping she can win his heart back. Although she knows martial arts herself, she can do nothing when facing enemies but has to turn to her husband for help. Generally speaking, before the 1990s, female characters are still depicted from the perspective of males. In a man-dominated society, women are the secondary sex who should put men and family first. Otherwise, they are evil women with low morality.

Relatively speaking, among the more than twenty animated features produced in the United States before the 1990s, female characters appeared much more than in Chinese animated features. The most typical animated features of this time are *Snow White* (1931), *Fairy Tale* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). However, in America, men still dominated the whole society then. In the films, female characters are still simply categorized into two groups. One is angel-like characters, such as Snow White and Cinderella. They are pure, beautiful, and gentle and can remain kind despite misfortunes. They have no consciousness or the ability to change their destiny. When facing the mistreatment of others, they can do nothing but passively wait for the prince's rescue. These female characters are usually beautiful, with slim and graceful bodies, big eyes, and good at singing and dancing, the ideal model of women from men's perspective. Another is demon-like characters, such as queens, stepmothers, and witches. They are selfish, vicious, jealous and full of vanity and desires. To angelize those women who are obedient to men and demonize those who are against men's will, men can strengthen their rights and status in society with the popularity of these characters.

*Alice in Wonderland* seems to show us something different. In this surrealistic film, the traditional ideal image of Victorian women and girls is toppled. Alice, a girl full of curiosity

and imagination, chases a rabbit and falls into a topsy-turvy world. In this world, animals talk, flowers and plants sing, and everybody is insane. However, thenonsensical story also reveals how men perceived women then. Every time Alice eats or drinks something, her size changes and becomes twisted. In Auerbach's opinion, the twisted body is the sign of a fallen woman<sup>[1]</sup>. Alice is tortured by her self-destructive behaviors. From the men's perspective at that time, women with too much lust could only bring themselves pain and suffering, just as Alice does.

In a word, before the 1990s, female characters were often simply categorized into two groups: "good women" or "bad women" in both Chinese and American animated films. Patriarchy was still the mainstream ideology at that time. Men depict the "ideal female figures" from their perspective. Women are expected to be nurturing mothers and obedient wives, taking family and men as the center of their lives. Otherwise, they will be regarded as "demons", the source of all evil. However, compared with China, in America, which has witnessed two rounds of feminist movements, female characters enjoy a much more prominent position in animated films. In contrast to the nearly "invisible" position of female characters in Chinese animated films, women have been protagonists in many American animated films<sup>[2]</sup>.

### **3. Independent and Diverse – Female Characters with Self-Consciousness (1990-2010)**

The 1990s was a turning point for Chinese animation. In 1993, China gave up its policy of unified purchase and sale of art films and encouraged animation makers to explore their own markets. Under the influence of commercialized Japanese and American animation popular at that time and with the help of modern techniques for producing animation, China produced a large number of animated films during this period, such as *Lotus Lantern* (1999), *Mcdull Kungfu Ding Ding Dong* (2009), and *The Story of Little Zhuo Ma* (2009), etc. Animated films were broadcast in cinemas, on TV, on computers, and on the Internet. The most famous animated series during this period were *The Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf*.

*Lotus Lantern* is the first commercial animated

feature produced in China that wins big success. However, women are still in a marginalized position in the film. Sanshengmu, a goddess and the mother of Chenxiang, the leading character, has no say in her love and destiny. After being imprisoned under Mount Hua for marrying a mortal, she can do nothing but wait for the rescue of her son. Sanshengmu appears only a few minutes in the film. However, from the image of Ga, the daughter of a tribal leader who has been taken hostage by God Erlangshen since young, the audience can identify the spirit of a modern woman. After releasing by Erlangshen from heaven when her father is dead, she does not yield to the divine power of Erlangshen but stands with Chenxiang to fight against him. Different from the gentle and powerless female image in former films, Ga is stubborn and tough-minded.

Two leading female characters are portrayed in *The Story of Little Zhuo Ma*. One is *Zhuo Ma*, a smart and intelligent girl who fights bravely to protect the antelopes; another is the spider demon, a greedy, shameless, and poisonous woman who sells her soul to gain benefits. Still the “good” and “evil” pattern as it seems, the female character, *Zhuo Ma*, is much more active than the female characters before the 1990s. She is brave and confident and has the ability to unite her friends to defeat the attack of bad guys to protect the antelopes.

Things became quite different in 2007 when *Mcdull Kungfu Ding Ding Dong* was released. The leading character in this film, Mrs. McDull, conveys to the audience a realistic color. To raise her son McDull, a boy slightly mentally retarded and doing everything slowly, Mrs. McDull tries her every effort. She works hard to earn money. As every mother who hopes for their kids to be the best, she sends McDull to various training courses. One of the most touching scenarios in the film is when Mrs. McDull promises in secret that if her son can become the best in the class, she will stop eating her favorite roast chicken. She does not know that her son also makes the same promise if Mrs. McDull does not worry for him anymore. When the mother finds out the reason why both of them refuse to eat roast chicken, she vows she will never let anything deprive of happiness between them. Unlike previous animated films that are generally adapted from Chinese myths and legends, *Mcdull Kungfu Ding Ding Dong* presents the audience with a

common figure that can be seen in our daily lives<sup>[3]</sup>. Mrs. McDull’s life is tough, full of difficulties and setbacks. She is not clever. She tries many things but does not achieve any significant success. However, no matter how hard the life is, Mrs. McDull never gives up. It is just this common figure who is imperfect but kind and resolute that touches the hearts of the audience.

The portrayal of Mrs. McDull is a major shift in the production of Chinese animation, which means that producers are trying to depict more real female figures that can be seen in daily lives. The *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* confirms this producing philosophy. In these animated series released from 2005, the audience can easily identify the image of modern Chinese women. Wolnie, one of the primary antagonists in the series, is a female wolf who wears a golden crown and a red vest. She often loses her temper at her husband, Wolffy, another primary antagonist, hitting him with a frying pan for inevitably failing to capture the goats for them to eat. However, under her domineering appearance, Wolnie has a gentle heart, like any Chinese woman who loves her family. Despite her tendency to get mad at him, she genuinely cares for her husband.

With feminism becoming more popular around the world at the end of the twentieth century, the image of female characters in American animated films has also changed dramatically. In *The Little Mermaid*, an animated film released in 1989, the heroine Ariel is portrayed as an independent, bold, and somewhat rebellious girl, an image that is quite different from the weak princess in traditional Disney movies. Instead of passively waiting for the prince to come, she takes the initiative to pursue her own love at any cost. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the female protagonist, Belle, is depicted as a book-loving girl who yearns to abandon her predictable village life in return for adventure. As a more proactive character in the film, Belle refuses the proposal of Gaston, a hypermasculine villain who is physically handsome but arrogant and vain. To save her father Maurice out of the enchanted castle, Belle offers her own freedom in exchange for her father's. She gradually falls in love with the Beast despite his outward appearance.

The popularity of multiculturalism in the United States makes white women no longer

the only leading figures in animated films. Female characters of different races and ethnicities are created. Jasmine, the Arabian princess in *Aladdin* (1992), Pocahontas, the Indian princess in *Pocahontas* (1995), Esmeralda, the gypsy dancer in *Clocktower* (1996), Mulan, the Chinese folk heroine in *Mulan* (1998), and Tiana, the black princess in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), are all the typical representatives.

Although of diverse races and ethnicities, these heroines have something in common: they are independent, courageous, and have all the skills to fight injustice. In *Aladdin*, Jasmine has a good leadership spirit, a quality rarely shown in previous animated films. Pocahontas, the daughter of Chief Powhatan, is a girl with a free-spirited personality. By being friends with English settler John Smith, she finally fosters peace between English colonists and Native Americans. Mulan, the heroine from China, breaks the rule that women are traditionally excluded from the battlefield. She impersonates a man to take her father's place during general conscription and finally brings honor to her family. Esmeralda, a gypsy girl, is depicted as a cunning, independent character. For her witchcraft, she is often the target of arrest. But she knows her worth. She never sacrifices her freedom for the sake of Minister Frollo's suppression and even manages to protect the deformed bellringer, Quasimodo, from the oppression of Frollo.

The commercialization of Chinese animation in the twentieth century led to the diversification of female characters. Compared with the period before the 1990s, the number of female characters appearing in the films has significantly increased. They are no longer "invisible" or "evil" in the films. Instead, they are portrayed as independent, courageous, and real figures. Along with China conducting reform and opening up policy, a boom in its economy has been observed. The Chinese government offers women more rights to be educated and participate in political and economic life. In modern China, women have taken on more family responsibilities and, therefore, have much higher family and social status than before. The appearance of female characters such as Mrs. McDull and Wolnie is just such a reflection of the social changes. These female characters are strong, self-sufficient, and courageous. They may have

various shortcomings, but they never surrender to their hard lives. However, since Chinese animated films are still regarded as tools to implement moral education for kids during this time, characters in the films tend to be simple. In contrast, American animation put more feminist elements in its films. It creates female characters of diverse races and ethnicities, making it more representative of the world we live in. These characters are no longer the victims of ruthless society. They are brave, self-sufficient, and no longer the supporting gender of men. Instead, they have unfettered themselves from the constraint of patriarchal norms and begun to pursue their dreams.

#### **4. Masculine and Feminine – the Appearance of Strong Female Characters (2010-present)**

Since 2010, Chinese animation has seen a boom in the industry. A large number of animated features with excellent quality have been released, such as *Kuiba* (2011), *Dragon Nest: Warriors' Dawn* (2014), *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), *A Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes 2* (2017), *Da Hufa* (2017), *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), *White Snake* (2019), and *Green Snake* (2021). Under the influence of postmodern feminism, the image of female characters in these films has become more modern and diversified.

The short-tempered Athena and Nuwa doing yoga with a face mask in *A Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes 2*, the capable elf archer Liya and Argenta, a typical American woman wearing a red cape in *Dragon Nest: Warriors' Dawn*, Chun, the protagonist in *Big Fish & Begonia*, who has short and black haircut and wears a red top and a long black skirt, and Verta, the protagonist in *Green Snake*, who wears high ponytail and rides a motorcycle, are all images of modern women. By blending the Japanese, European, and American animation styles with traditional Chinese elements in the design of characters, Chinese animated films present the audience with female characters that are more appealing to today's aesthetic ideas. Nevertheless, the male gaze is still obvious in the films. Female characters are sometimes depicted as sexual with attractive body shapes and wearing revealing clothing, serving as visually pleasing objects for men and objects of male voyeurism.



In terms of their personality, these female characters display a mixture of masculine and feminine characteristics. For example, in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Lady Yin, Nezha's mother, presents a more domineering gesture in the film compared with her invisible position in former versions. When she appears first in the film, she takes a chicken leg in one hand and a fish in the other, threatening to tear down the temple if she cannot give birth to the baby smoothly. She is no longer a submissive woman anymore. Rather, she is a strong chieftess who governs Chentangguan with her husband together. She fights in the battle and kills demons to protect the people. However, she is also a mother that can do everything for her son. When Taiyi Zhenren, a Daoist deity in Chinese religion, is about to kill Nezha, she holds Nezha in her arms and begs Taiyi to spare his life. Nezha is confined in his house for his demonic nature. To make his son happy, Lady Yin, the mother who has countless administering affairs to deal with every day, is willing to spare every minute to play with her son.

In *Big Fish & Begonia*, Chun is depicted as a girl who can call up the collective power of plants and flowers. To revive Kun, the young human lad who dies for freeing her from a net, she disobeys the rules of her clan. When she finds her act upends Nature and brings vicious hurricanes and blizzards pummeling her entire community out of season, she sacrifices herself by turning into a giant begonia tree to plug the hole in the sky.

*Green Snake* is the sequel to 2019's *White Snake*. In these two female-led films, women are transformed into the leading role. In *Green Snake*, for example, men are placed in a supporting position. Verta, the green snake, used to think that her snake-demon sister, Blanca, should find a powerful man to protect her instead of the weak and useless Xu Xian. In Asuraville, a place that imprisons creatures from many different eras, she meets Simon, a man who leads the Raksha army, and falls in love with him. However, when Verta tries to help a man who gets stuck when they are escaping from the evil spirits, Simon abandons them. Verta finally realizes, "How can I count my happiness on others? Whether strong or weak, any man can hurt you. All you can do is make yourself strong enough." Verta decides to stop relying on men and focuses on getting

stronger herself. With her strong determination, she enters the Black Wind Tunnel and battles Fahai for 20 years until she kills him and destroys the Pagoda, thus ensuring Blanca's freedom in the human world. In the process of facing difficulties squarely and independently, Verta establishes her confidence as a woman and realizes her self-worth.

The American animated films produced after 2010 further break the gender stereotypes. Women's power is more celebrated in these films. *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), *The Croods* (2013), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) are both female-led animated features. In these films, love is no longer the main plot. Instead, these films focus more on how to present the independent and courageous image of women, how these women defy the patriarchal rules, and how they pursue their esteem, personal growth, and self-worth.

In *Brave*, Merida is the young princess of the clan Dunbroch. With a free-spirited heart, she refuses to follow her father's wishes to be betrothed to the son of one of her father's allies. She bests all her suitors in an archery contest and wins the right to decide her own marriage. When her mother falls victim to a beastly curse and turns into a bear, she sets off to find the key that can save her mother and the kingdom.

In *The Croods*, Eep is the teenage daughter of a cave family called the Croods. Different from her stubborn patriarchal father, who believes "New is always bad. Never not be afraid," she hates the rules and longs to explore new things. She has a muscular body and displays great strength in hunting animals, a far cry from the tender and slim female characters depicted by American animated films in the past. In some way, her appearance on the screen is a feminist victory.

In *Frozen* (2013), Princess Elsa of Arendelle possesses magical powers since she was born. She can control ice and snow. Fearing that her subjects will discover her magic and fear her, she keeps distant from her sister and the public. After accidentally unleashing her powers before the court in her coronation ceremony, Elsa is branded a monster by the people. She flees to the North Mountain and wants to live a hermit life thereafter. Her sister, Anna, however, embarks on a dangerous voyage to find Elsa and finally helps her sister overcome fear and apprehension and come back to save the

kingdom as a hero. In *Frozen*, it is a sister's love that saves the kingdom rather than that of the suitor. At the end of the story, Elsa becomes a lady who is in full and exigent control of her power and autonomy and ready to partake in an active role in her life.

*Moana* also subverts the leading role of the male protagonists in former animated films. Moana, the daughter of an island chief, is a girl who wants to write her own story. When her island is put in jeopardy, she decides to set off alone to find Maui, a Demi-god, to convince him to restore the heart of TeFiti to save her island. In the process of defeating pirates, monsters and the devil Erka, Moana grows up quickly. As an extremely independent and determined woman, Moana is showing the world that she is not only capable of saving her people with her own powers but also able to sensitize and save the demigod Maui through her own bravery.

*Raya and the Last Dragon* takes a more progressive feminist direction. It successfully portrays a cluster of females with powerful and complex characters. Raya, the daughter of the Chief Benja of the Heart tribe, is a dark-skinned Southeast Asian princess with strength and determination. After she is betrayed by Namaari, princess of the Fang tribe, and loses her father and tribe, she sets off to find the only remaining dragon, Sisu and tries to reclaim the gem pieces to expel Druun and revive her tribe members. She makes many friends on the journey. As the Druun gains on her group in Fang, Raya decides to trust Namaari and hands over her gem piece to her. Others follow suit, and Namaari finally reassembles the gem. The magical power unleashed from the gem spreads throughout the whole kingdom, and everyone, including the dragons, is revived.

The women in *Raya and the Last Dragon* are depicted as complex characters, each with their own motives, beliefs, and flaws<sup>[4]</sup>. For the interest of her tribe, Namaari pretends to befriend Raya and gains her trust. After being shown the gem's chamber, Namaari betrays Raya and helps her tribe steal the gem. Namaari feels guilty after seeing the gem is broken, and the Heart tribe is petrified by Druun. However, when Raya and Sisu come to Fang, she decides to kill Sisu, fearing that her tribe will become the target of the whole kingdom after Druun is expelled. However,

Namaari is not depicted as the ultimate villain. Beneath her mean and vile exterior lies a heart that cares for her people and wants the best.

Obviously, with the influence of postmodern feminism and the rising of women's status in society since 2010, the archetype of female characters in former animated films has been transformed. The feminist side of the modern era is given more attention. These powerful, independent, and determined female characters are not in need of saving. Instead, they are princesses doing the saving. If we say that Chinese animated films still have the tendency to objectify women, American animated films, in contrast, have given up their patriarchal perspective and followed a more feminist direction. The female characters in American animated films have strong self-awareness, not hesitating to assert their goals and plowing through the obstacles in their way. In the films, love or marriage is no longer the leading plot. Women are more merited for their character rather than their beauty and ability to marry a strong prince since they are capable of writing their own future without the need to dehumanize themselves for a chance at love.

## 5. Conclusion

The aesthetic evolution of female characters in animated films demonstrates the transformation of social ideology. From "invisible" and "stereotyped" to the "diverse" and "dominant" characters in the film, both Chinese and American animated films have witnessed great changes in the portrayal of female characters. Behind these changes is the improvement of women's status, either economically, socially, politically, or culturally. As women participate more and more in society, it is expected that more female characters with independent personalities will appear in the films. However, compared with American animated films that have portrayed female characters of diverse races and ethnicities and complex emotions who are strong enough to protect their family and people, the female characters portrayed in Chinese animated films are still a little outdated. Therefore, Chinese animation makers should follow a more progressive feminist approach and sketch female characters in a more diversified and real way.

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