

Highlighting the Role of Traditional Spirituality in Independent Chinese

Animation: *Big Fish and Begonia*

by

Chenxi Wang

Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2019

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Pacific and Asian Studies

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University of Victoria

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, Chinese independent animation has attracted much attention. The rise of Chinese independent animation is not only reflected in the expansion of its audience, but also in the depth and richness of its content. As a way of artistic expression, animated films not only carry the unique thinking of the authors themselves, but also realize the effective communication of the message, building a bridge between the creators and the audience across time, regions, and cultures. As a controversial and phenomenal work of Chinese independent animation, Big Fish and Begonia embodies the modern art creators' understanding of traditional Chinese aesthetics and religious beliefs through symbolic imagery. This thesis will uncover the interpretations and themes of Confucianism and Daoism in the context of modern China through analysis of the film's music, setting, characters, and plots. Through this film, directors Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun attempt to convey the profound significance of Confucianism and Daoism to modern Chinese society.

Keywords

Animated film, Confucianism, Daoism, Aesthetics, Spirituality

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Dedication

To my loving mother and father, who, no matter what I decide to do, where I decide to go, or who I decide to be, has always given me the support to do so.

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Introduction

1.1 What is the central argument?

This thesis is about individuality, spirituality, and community, and seeks to address the continuing necessity of building and maintaining connections between individual and traditional religious beliefs. Taking the Chinese animated film *Big Fish and Begonia* as its main subject matter, and critically discussing how Chinese independent animation fits within the cultural ecology in the context of socialism with Chinese characteristics (中国特色社会主义), this thesis engages in the field of Chinese independent animation from spiritual, aesthetic, narrative, and semiotic angles. *Big Fish and Begonia*, through the symbolic embodiment of Confucian and Daoist ideas, presents visual scenes with very eastern aesthetic characteristics. *Big Fish and Begonia* argues for the continuing necessity of engagement with traditional Chinese spirituality to help young Chinese people construct ‘complete’ identities.

As Tze-yue G. Hu mentions in the book *Animating the Spirited*, research on animation in recent years has been oriented towards explaining the function of nationalistic and propagandist background in art creation. And his research showed the common shortcoming of ignoring the “finer and more sensitive aspects of the creators’ inner spiritual nuances of animating, and indeed, the greater Chinese and other non-Chinese audiences’ appreciation of the animated art form” (117). Noting this research gap, this thesis is rooted in the animated film itself, which it regards as a pure, ideal art form. This thesis will trace back to the aesthetic essence of animation, while inquiring about its cultural identity in the context of contemporary China, and attempting to articulate it within traditional Chinese beliefs and

philosophy.

The Chinese independent animated film *Big Fish and Begonia* (Liang and Zhang 2016), through its use of Chinese mythology, symbolism, and extensive reference to traditional Chinese spirituality and religion, represents the continuing importance of Chinese spirituality in the character formation of contemporary youth. This argument will be demonstrated by firstly outlining the development of Chinese animation, then exploring the influence of socio-political conditions, particularly cultural censorship and government control, in the audience's reception of animation. Thirdly, to provide a sufficient cultural and ideological background, this thesis will establish the rich context of Chinese traditional ideology, including religious traditions, which the film utilizes to make its message. Taking *Big Fish and Begonia* as a specific case and centring on the concepts of identity, agency, and community embodied in the film, this thesis will analyse the foundational role of traditional religious beliefs in the enrichment of individual personality and community construction. Lastly, situating *Big Fish and Begonia* in a broader cultural context, this thesis will compare this film with Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* in an attempt to explore the modernity of traditional ideas embodied in animation.

1.2 Conceptualizing Independent Animation

The term 'independent animation' first began to be used in the United States in the 1960s. To some extent, independent animation can also be understood as artistic animation, which is often done by individuals or very small teams, with a broad selection of subjects, a prominent authorial personality, and a modern sense of artistic conception, which does not need to cater

to popular aesthetics but simply expresses the artist's aesthetic interests. In developed countries, governments have developed preferential policies to independent animation. In France, for instance, independent animation has even become a cultural phenomenon. When discussing the economic support for the development of French animation films, Neupert mentions that: “Economically, French animation continues to rely upon the generous financial aid opportunities granted by the CNC (Aides aux Cinémas du Monde) and other European, national, and regional incentives” (162). With its unique style and significance, independent animation has become an important component in the animation industry, compensating to a certain extent for the lack of artistic value in commercial animation.

Independent animation in the context of modern China has more complex connotations. There have been two main stages of Chinese animation development: ‘bringing in’, and ‘going out’. ‘Katong’ (卡通) is the earliest term that refers to the idea of animated film when it was introduced to China in the late 1910s. As Macdonald indicates, this term “signals a western-oriented medium of representation” (48). After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), this term was replaced by ‘Mei Shu Pian’ (美术片), which symbolized the indigenization of Chinese animated films. The term ‘Meishu’ (美术) clarifies the nature of animated films in the context of contemporary China, as a form of artistic expression based on fine art. In recent years, the word ‘Dong Hua’ (动画) is more frequently used in academia, which points out the globally admitted connotation of animation: artistic images in continuous motion. This change reflects the developmental direction of Chinese animation, as it gradually moves towards the world stage after the process of indigenization, and the general trend of artistic exchange and integration.

Independent animation in general has the distinct characteristic of being “personal and unofficial” (Zhou 11). While Chinese animation is constantly dealing with the tension between “hegemonic political and historical constraints” (Zhou 39), Zhou adds that in China, independent animators are unable to obtain ‘complete’ freedom of expression (10). Chinese independent animation needs to reflect both the individual views of its animators in its artistic expression and a compromise to a certain extent with the political atmosphere of society. In other words, animators need to use a relatively subtle and moderate approach when making an artistic presentation of their views. As an artistic mode of expression, Chinese independent animation not only reflects individuality, but also subtly responds and negotiates with post-socialist ecology. On the one hand, the current trend of animation creation in China is diversified; on the other, the animation works promoted by the Chinese government on official television channels are still relatively homogeneous and show a more obvious post-socialist character. On the official website of the National Radio and Television Administration, the main themes of the animated works recommended by the Chinese government are primarily focused on serving the country, moral education, and the history of the Communist Party. Examples include *Junior Mencius* (少年孟子) by Xuke (2020), *Turn the Page* (翻开这一页) by Hunan Golden Eagle Cartoon Cooperation (2014), and *Tip of the Sword* (刀尖) by Zoland Animation Cooperation (2018).

The dispersion and relative marginalization of Chinese independent animation is mainly due to its involvement in sensitive topics and the deviation of the audience from commercial animation. After 1970, television gradually became the most influential form of media. This change in the mode of mass entertainment led to a trend of ‘de-juvenilization’ of the target

audience of animation. That is, the age boundaries of Chinese animation target audiences gradually blurred and the target audience of Chinese animation "became decentralized, diversified, and elusive" (Du 186). Excellent animated television series were produced by Shanghai Fine Arts Studio (SFAS) such as *The Stories of Afanti* (*Afanti de gushi*, 15 episodes, 1979–1988), *The Wandering Life of the Three-Haired Boy* (*Sanmao liulang ji*, five episodes, 1984), *Police Chief Black Cat* (*Heimao jingzhang*, five episodes, 1986–1987), and *The Canabash Brothers* (*Hulu xiongdi*, 13 episodes, 1986–1987). These animated series involve the discussion of topics such as social development and personal morality in the form of fables. They are designed to meet children's viewing needs and deepen the cultural connotation of the programme in terms of content. However, in the post-socialist economic and social environment, the monopoly position of SFAS gradually disintegrated. In order to meet the market demand, the focus of animation creators changed from being content-oriented to market-oriented, and the content of the films gradually leaned towards the viewing needs of children.

Chinese commercial animation such as *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* (*Xi Yangyang Yu Hui Tailang*, 喜羊羊与灰太狼) by Huang Weiming in 2005 and *Boonie Bears* (*Xiong Chu Mo*, 熊出没) by Ding Liang and Xing Xuhui in 2012 are mainly aimed at young children and teenagers. Their artistic style and plot design deliberately cater to the preferences and cognitive levels of children. This narrowing of the audience's age group requires that Chinese animated works must have simple plots and limited references to profound themes or social issues, which greatly limits the space for artistic exploration and industrial vitality

(Guangming Net 2021).¹ The rapid development of the country's overall economy and the relative postponement of policy support for the animation industry contributed to the dilemma of Chinese animation development at the end of the twentieth century. Chinese adult-oriented and all-ages-oriented animation started relatively late, and the whole industry is still in the early stages of its development. In 1999, with the rise of Flash animation software, the Flash animation platform Flash Empire (闪客帝国) was established, and the word 'Flash' began to spread in China. This platform also housed the only group of independent animation creators in China at that time, including the director of *Kuang Kuang Diary* (框框日记), and the initiator of China Independent Animation Film Conference, Pi San, the director of the CCTV animation *Happy Station* (快乐驿站), An Xu, and Chen Lianhua. Wang (96) holds that, on the one hand, the policies related to the animation industry have not yet reversed the long-term inclination towards children's animation. On the other hand, although the domestic-animation audience's positioning is expanding to cater for adults, it has not yet formed a scale (Tian and Gui 87). The Chinese animation industry lacks a mature training mechanism, and the overall quality of practitioners needs to be improved, which means the emergence of good work has a certain degree of occasionality.

The critical role that independent animation plays in the Chinese contemporary animation industry cannot be ignored. Independent animations such as *Da Hu Fa* (2017) and *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) are rich in terms of character personalities and artistic style. These two phenomenal, animated films have significant differences in art style. *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) uses both 2D and 3D animation techniques, and the story is based

¹ Guangming Net is the official website of Guangming Daily. It is the only central key official news website in the field of ideology and theory, and assumes the responsibility of guiding public opinion on the Internet.

on the traditional Chinese mythological character Monkey King (孙悟空). *Da Hu Fa* (2017), on the other hand, uses traditional Chinese landscape painting in its art style, and contains political allegories in its content. These animated films not only add elements of traditional art forms, but also reflect on traditional moral ethics and belief systems in the construction of fictional world outlooks. As Yantong Zhu, the artistic director of Feinaki Animation Week² mentions, independent animation works are a direct projection of the author's inner spiritual world. Compared to film, animation is more imaginative and creative. In independent animation, you can see all kinds of expressions and creative techniques that can no longer be found in commercial animation, such as wax painting, stop-motion, paper cutting, and ink painting. Their existence is convincing proof that animation is not just for children, because their works are often full of self-examination, exploration, observations of society, and reflections on the world. Independent animated films that have adults as their target audience, such as *Have a Nice Day* (2018), *Da Hu Fa* (2017) and *Mr. Miao* (2020), reveal the directors' reflections on the tension between politics and freedom, and the darker side of human nature, such as greed and selfishness, through the design of characters and storylines (Guangming Net 2021).



Fig 1 From left to right: *Have a Nice Day*, *Da Hu Fa*, *Mr. Miao*

² Feinaki Beijing Animation Week is an animation-screening program organized by Chinese animation artists, educators, and curators who frequently attend and share their works and ideas at international animation festivals.

Independent animation's nature of artistry brings the common presupposition that it stands in opposition to commerce, but this is not the case. With the expansion of the animation market and its target audience, greater expectations are placed by its audience on the vanguard and cultural attributes of animated films, which endow independent animation with the potential to gain more attention. In this sense, independent animation serves as a source, continuously stimulating and providing new and creative elements to the whole animation industry.

Moreover, an interesting paradox pointed out by Zhou is that the Chinese independent animated film is "often enthusiastically welcomed overseas by different international film festivals, but remains nameless or even censored by the authorities in mainland China" (4). In short, Chinese independent animation can provide a unique angle for exploring the relationship between artistic creation and social politics in China. As the potential audience is positioned as adult, the entertaining and educational attributes of independent animation are diluted. From the artistic expression of the animation, the interaction between politics, art, and religious beliefs in modern Chinese society can be examined from a new perspective. As Zhou suggests, Chinese independent animation creators are gradually diversifying their aesthetic styles and their art creation is gradually being freed from the constraint of hegemony (10). With these positive trends, Chinese independent animation has great potential to achieve more in-depth cultural expression.

In a nutshell, the close connection with post-socialist ecology is the main characteristic of Chinese independent animation. In terms of content, it is richer than market-oriented

children's animation, involving both the self-expression of the artist and the implicit discussion of social issues and political allegories. This does not mean that there is a clear separation between independent animation and commercial animation. As the art style and audio-visual language of independent animators have commercial potential, the return of independent animation to a wide audience in recent years demonstrates the vitality of original animation, and essentially shows the dynamic balance between creativity and tradition in modern Chinese animation. Independent animation is gradually emerging from its isolation and gaining a more solid audience base nationwide. According to box-office statistics provided by China Movie Database (2022), the all-ages animated film *Ne Zha* (2019) grossed \$5.07 billion, *Big Fish and Begonia* \$566 million, and *Da Hu Fa*, which targets adults, also grossed \$87.02 million. Chinese independent animation is gradually coming out of the woods and appearing on the wider audience's horizon.

1.3 Methodology

Big Fish and Begonia argues for the continuing necessity of traditional spiritual beliefs. This section will demonstrate the function of close reading by situating the film in the context of religious ideology. It starts by defining the ideas of identity, agency, and community, and then defines the parts of the film that build its main arguments. It finally lands on the methods of analysis that work with each part of the film.

Before we go into the details of *Big Fish and Begonia*, we first need to carefully understand the three starting points that I have employed in analysing the film: *identity*, *agency*, and *community*. *Big Fish and Begonia* is trying to convey the idea that to build a

‘positive self’—a confident, valued, and healthy self – people need exposure to traditional Chinese spiritual beliefs. *Big Fish and Begonia* makes a culturally specific argument about the nature of identity, agency, and community in the Chinese context. Coulmas Florian has provided a comprehensive overview of the development of the concept of identity in Western academia, a concept that is ubiquitous in Western philosophy. He writes that, closely related to the idea of identity, is the question of ‘who am I?’, which is not only an inquiry into the existence of the self, but also a reflection on the nature of human existence. René Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), and Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) played an important role in the development of rationalism (Florian 29). *Identity* was intimately related to the ‘uniqueness of individual’. Reason, personal memory, and consciousness became central to the discussion of the individual self. Since it is too broad and vague to define ‘identity’ as an individual essence, the idea of identity can be perceived as a set of traits, capacities, and attitudes that an individual normally retains over a considerable period of time, and that normally distinguishes this individual from other individuals (Dr. Tim email 2020).

It is worth noting that *identity* possesses the characteristic of ‘flexibility’, which implies that it can be changed or affected by both environmental (e.g., societal, interpersonal relationships, educational) and natural (e.g., genetic and body-cell organizational) components. Florian specifically points to the social influence on individual identity, arguing that "our personal identity, is to a considerable degree moulded by the people we interact with" (32), highlighting the inevitability of change and development of personal identity. In the case of this thesis, the functions of tradition, nature, and spirituality in shaping an

individual's identity will be emphasized, by analysing how the character actively creates and maintains a personal identity, and how the character's traits, capacities, and attitudes are established through interacting with the fictitious world that the artist constructs. The significance of tradition, nature, and spirituality will be expressively embodied. In the subsequent chapters, through an analysis of the choices and sacrifices of Chun and Qiu, the main characters in *Big Fish and Begonia*, this thesis will discuss the ways in which Confucian and Daoist concepts exert a profound influence in terms of character growth and personality development. Taking the analysis of the characters' identities as a starting point, we are able to thoroughly understand the specific character as an individual, and further explore the connection between agency and community.

The idea of existentialism as a theoretical basis plays a critical role in articulating identity and agency. In order to be a subjective person, someone aware of his or her identity, we have to act, use our *agency*, the condition of being an 'agent'; this means we have to do things, based on our conscious decisions. But, because we think and then act, we are responsible for what we do: our subjective initiative motivates us to choose, and then act in a certain way, since this process is with no compulsion; thus, we are responsible for our actions. To have an identity, we must act as we choose, but we must also accept responsibility for those actions. This responsibility is a fundamental part of our identities. The conflict between personal will and responsibility appears frequently in *Big Fish and Begonia*. This conflict is not limited to the conflict between the individual and the community, but also between the individual and the self. In the intensification and resolution of different conflicts, the traditional Chinese religious concept plays the role of restraint and guidance. The strongly

religious social construction in *Big Fish and Begonia* ties individuals, communities, and ideologies together.

Although the previous two concepts emphasize individuality, we need to be aware that the idea of ‘personal’ here does not mean being independent or neglectful of others. Rather, the best personal action inspires action in others. This in turn creates a cooperative, supportive *community*. Linking identity to the concepts of environment and society, we can safely reach a conclusion that the behaviour of individuals is not solely determined by objective rationality but is “also by shared cultural values reflected in common cultural or political identities” (Sinisa 17). Given the extreme premise that an individual is absolutely autonomous, the individual is most likely to experience a great sense of alienation, which is due to the cut-off between an individual and his or her surroundings, the past, present, future, and the social and natural communities. From a classical sociological³ perspective, the concept of ‘collective identity’ can be understood as “the ‘we-ness’ of a group, stressing the similarities or shared values, attributes, and ideologies around which group members coalesce” (Cerulo 386). Cerulo further asserts that “collective agency includes a conscious sense of group as agent” (393). Therefore, the nature of a community is largely determined by the characteristics, behaviours, and attributes of the individuals who make up that community. Identity is personal, the personal exists within a context, and this context is social or communal, which suggests that it can be expanded to a nation standing on a foundation of history. This historical foundation has multiple components that relate to the psychological dimensions of identity; to be more specific, language, ideology, or assumptions about

³ Durkheim’s ‘collective conscience’, Marx’s ‘class consciousness’, Weber’s *Verstehen*, and Tonnies’ *Gemeinschaft*.

‘propriety’ such as tradition and religious beliefs. In the case of the individual, the essence of ‘relationship’ is a process of self-construction. This process, to a large extent, is affected by cognition. The thoughts and experiences that come from the interaction between individual, the natural world, and the spiritual world, transform into part of an individual's self-cognition and identity. Meanwhile, we also internalize this part of cognition into the way we treat ourselves, until it finally becomes part of us. The ‘positive self’ that is formed through a long-term, stable relationship is generally warm, supportive, and strong. To conclude, the three elements of identity, agency, and community are intimately related. *Big Fish and Begonia* is effective in conveying its core themes because it depicts the story in a way that fits with the Chinese national identity. In the case of this essay, we are going to explore how this triadic interrelationship is represented in *Big Fish and Begonia*'s worldview formation and is perceived by its audience.

While closely reading and analysing the film, that is, seeing the changes of characters through specific scenes and filming techniques, it is worthwhile to ‘step back’ – to explore the identity of the film from a macroscopic perspective. The identity of a work of art does not exist only within the film's characters or settings; the film itself has an ‘identity’, and this comes from its internal components. But unlike with people, the identity of a film comes from an artist imposing himself or herself on the work, that is to say, the film exists to fulfil specific purposes; we do not define our own identity through agency or subjectivity. As a medium, animated films can tangibly present the relationship between individual identity, collective identity, and ideology. An exploration of the identity of animated film allows us to assess its characteristics as an art form in terms of the messages it conveys. The animators

and the audience provide 'identities' to animated films through the acts of creation and interpretation. Therefore, the audience's successful reception of the message conveyed by the film is crucial to the construction of a complete film identity. Gregory Currie's arguments on the essence of the film in his well-known book, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (1995), which mainly discusses the essence of cinema and links film to the modes of representation, storytelling, reality, and the audience. As Currie suggests, cinema trades essentially in pictorial representations. It is fundamentally a visual medium, and the movement of film images is vivid (7), which stresses the fundamental role of image in film analysis. Currie's emphasis on the importance of images in film provides the intellectual basis for the analysis of specific scenes and religious symbols in subsequent chapters, allowing us to read thematically relevant information through a series of related images.

Furthermore, through the use of layout, symbols, and conventions, the animator's ideas about the world and society are represented. And through the process of making meaning in images, the audience is able to construct and reflect ideological beliefs and values. From an ideological perspective, in their book *China's Cinema of Class: Audiences and Narratives*, David S. G. Goodman and Nicole Talmacs view the issues related to film studies from a socio-political angle and narrow the field of research to Chinese cinema. In deciphering the connection between the Chinese audience and the cinema of class, the critical role of narrative is addressed. The 'resolution', or the clarity of the narrative, indicates the moral lesson that the filmmaker is trying to convey (17). Besides, in relating the audience's representation of the film with the current Chinese social and political structure, they point out "the extent to which China's class society has become a normalized fixture in China's

everyday life, as well as the cultural imagining that validates the necessity and inevitability of China's class society in its efforts to modernize" (18). The social class structure of *Big Fish and Begonia* largely aligns with the social structure in modern China, with the traditional Confucian concept of the family and the order of the young and the old. This allows the audience to understand more clearly the expectations and suggestions for social development that the film tries to convey.

Since the subjective thoughts and experiences of the individual cannot be transmitted directly in straightforward declarative arguments, the animated film, as a medium, can express them in a visible, artistic way. Also, the symbolic characteristic of animation makes it more cross-culturally identifiable, which contributes to its global circulation (Keyue Wang 2014). How can we then understand the connotation of the animated film more accurately and thoroughly, and how can we effectively resonate with it? Film analysis is one of the main approaches, which comprises seven components: characters, plot, setting, images, themes, interpretation, and meaning. These elements help the artists to build their argument and package it in a persuasive, effective way; also, these elements provide us with a practical theoretical framework, which leads us to look at the animated works from a logical perspective. For example, the particular inflection the artist puts on the character dialogue, the unique metaphorical connections the artist makes in the plot design, the shape of the narrations the artist produces, and the combination of film elements the artist deploys together carry more readily the mark of the creator.

1.4 The History of the Chinese Animation Industry

The creation of Chinese animated films in recent years has ushered in a small peak of productivity and creativity. Chinese animated films, especially work released in the last ten years, on the one hand embody the flexibility, integration, and adaptability of religion; on the other hand, they show the tension between Chinese folk religion and social structure. Scholars who are working on Chinese animation, such as Ding Haiyang, Yao Guiping,⁴ Daisy Yan Du,⁵ Lent A. John, and Xu Ying,⁶ have employed an historical approach in their analysis of Chinese animation; these scholars share the perspective that China should not be neglected in the animation industry. As Lent and Xu suggest, animated films from the United States, Japan, and possibly France are commonly used to examine the world of animation. This is partially correct, however China is absent from the list (2013, 19). Also, Guangchao Fu in his journal article ‘Chinese Animation History 01: Chinese Animation Pioneers other than Wan Brothers’ (2021) draws a picture of the embryonic period of the Chinese animation industry. With meticulous textual research on the earliest Chinese animators such as Zuotao Yang, Wennong Huang, Lifan Qin, and Xuechou Mei, this article points out that although the Sino-foreign cultural exchanges in the twentieth century had a lot of ups and downs, Chinese animation has never been derailed from global animation development. Chinese animation pioneers, on the one hand, maintain independent creative ideas and confident aesthetic expression; on the other hand, they are devoted to observing the trends of the international animation industry under limited conditions then reflecting them, giving responses through

⁴ Ding and Yao, *Conception of Chinese Animation*. 2005.

⁵ Du, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation*. 2019.

⁶ Lent A. John and Xu Ying, *Chinese Animation: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis*. 2013.

creative practice. This is not only determined by the trend of the times but is also inseparable from the spirit of introspection and sense of distress of Chinese animation artists (Fu Guangchao 2021).

With the release of such films as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (Tian 2015), *White Snake* (Huang and Zhang 2019), and *Jiang Ziya* (Cheng and Li 2020), it is not difficult to see that Chinese animation gradually shows distinct cultural characteristics. To be more specific, Chinese animation no longer solely borrows or refers to the artistic style of Disney or Japanese animation but generates a fairly recognizable ‘Chinese style’. This is attributed to the in-depth exploration of Chinese aesthetics and cultural connotations by Chinese animation artists such as Bu Sifan, Zhu Yantong and Shen Jie, and independent animation studios such as Octmedia and Light Chaser Animation. *Big Fish and Begonia*, as a link between the preceding and the following, is well worth seeing. The explosive development of Chinese animation also leads us to think about the fusion of tradition and modernity (Tian and Gui 83). The animated film, as a window, provides us with an intuitive way of peering at changes in social form and the progress of national thought.

In emphasizing the religious symbols shown in *Big Fish and Begonia*, which explicitly or implicitly embodies the auteur’s attitudes towards the relationship between religion and community and examines the tension between independent animation creation and Chinese censorship requirements, we not only evaluate Chinese animated films in the dimension of art appreciation but also examine the modern adaptability of religious beliefs. In the following chapter, I discuss three sub-points:

- i) The representation of Daoist and Confucian ideas and ideals in *Big Fish and*

Begonia. This section draws a line between Daoist and Confucian ideas practised by the individual in Chinese societies, and their representations in animated films, which leads the potential audience to focus on the director's interpretations and reflections of these religious concepts. Aiming at narrowing the broad concepts in Daoism and Confucianism by articulating specific films, it also responds to the assumption that there is a demonstrable connection between religion and popular culture.

- ii) The depiction of *agency* or the way that human beings and deities act in the context of the traditional Chinese value system. How does this animated film articulate the agency of humans and spiritual entities, and the collective agency of nature in stressing the continuing necessity of Daoism and Confucianism? This question is raised to continue the discussion in the first sub-point in a more detailed way.

Responding to the supposition, an individual must be exposed to religion as a step towards fulfilling agency. In other words, religion plays a role in guiding individuals to act and react with a more thorough awareness and recognition of themselves. By asking this question, we are anchored to the depiction of actions and reactions of human and spiritual entities with various agencies. Also, we are looking at the way that these films depict the difference between humans and deities.

- iii) How do the concepts stated in the first sub-point contribute to supporting community formation? When we bring the ideas of identity, agency, and community together, this question examines the function of narrative techniques, imagery designs, and dialogues in representing Daoist and Confucian ideas as conducive to

community formation.

This thesis will present its argument in three chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the intellectual and cultural context and will be split into two sub-sections. The first section will be centred on the discussion of film censorship in contemporary China, and the development of Chinese animation under the impact of governmental control. The second section will revolve around the big picture of Daoism and Confucianism, which together form the worldview of the characters in *Big Fish and Begonia*. This chapter brings the two traditional Chinese ideologies in terms of both historical and cultural discourse, including the changes of connotations of Daoism and Confucianism over time, leading to contemporary China. The evaluation of the previous studies will focus on the main argument of the scholar, the approach that the scholar employs, and the interrelationship between different authors in different publications.

Chapter 2 will begin the film analysis, and anchors on addressing the way that *Big Fish and Begonia* presents the ideas of identity and agency. Chapter 3 will switch topic to the practical role of religious beliefs in collective life, and brings in the idea of community. It will query how religious ideas and ideals contribute to supportive community formation, and then uncover the animator's intention in integrating Chinese religious beliefs with animated scenes. Further, to help situate the argument that *Big Fish and Begonia* makes regarding the role of traditional spirituality in identity, I will compare the ways in which it makes use of traditional spirituality with the techniques which Hayao Miyazaki uses to create a very similar argument in the context of Japan. Through this comparison, we will see how different political systems may support artists in the expression of their ideas.

To sum up, my research will focus on the representation of religious symbols in the contemporary Chinese independent animated film *Big Fish and Begonia*. Regarding the fact that a large number of scholars have solely employed a historical approach, this research will be conducted from the aspect of identity, agency, and community depiction, and employ discourse analysis, which takes the social and political condition of China into account.

Chapter 1. Intellectual and Cultural Context

1.1 Discussion on the Idea of Religion

Before digging into the issues related to the idea of religion, it is more important to construct a fundamental and critical understanding of religion than to define it. Wilfred Cantwell Smith made a provocative contribution to the field of comparative religion in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion: A new approach to the religious traditions of mankind*. In it, Smith refuses to define religion through the perspective of essentialism and examines the concept of ‘religion’ “as systematic religious entity, conceptually identifiable and characterizing a distinct community” (119). He points out that the term ‘religion’ is unique because it is intimately associated with Western civilization, and does not correspond to civilizations in other regions, such as East Asia.

Masuzawa has provided pioneering work in the field of religious studies, especially in criticizing the classical theories of religion. In her book *In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion* (1993), inspired by Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, she challenges the conventional understanding of four major theories raised by Durkheim,⁷ Müller, Eliade, and Freud.⁸ With the presupposition that the classical theories of religion have focused on the search for the historical origins of religion, she argues that the modern study of religion is ambivalent toward the question of origin, which would lead to questioning the idea of ‘origin’ itself (5). In her later book *The Invention of World Religions*,

⁷ See Durkheim, Emile: *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961).

⁸ See Freud, Sigmund: *Totem and Taboo* (2001).

rather than continuing to employ Derridean deconstructionism as her primary approach, she switches her research target from ‘religion’ to the idea of ‘world religions’. It shares the same aim as her previous book, which is to criticize the established research perspectives and theories of religious studies. She argues that the invention and broad use of the term ‘world religion’ in academia is problematic.

The usage of ‘world religion’ bears the problem of obscurity. That is to say, the term ‘world religion’ “makes its appearance without ceremony, without explanation, and seemingly without a history” (Masuzawa 13). When engaging in a discussion of Chinese belief systems, it should be noted that the development of religious belief in China is closely linked to historical changes in social patterns. As such, its doctrines and core ideas need to be analysed in the context of a particular historical discourse. The same content was interpreted very differently under different political and social formations, and guided the masses in very different ways. For example, the ‘three principles and five virtues’ (San Gang Wu Chang, 三纲五常) advocated by Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, emphasized two aspects: firstly, the obedience of the people to the ruler, the obedience of younger generations to their elders, and the obedience of females to males. Secondly, the moral standards centred on benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and honesty. In socialist China, as Mou suggests, the first aspect associated with the feudal hierarchy is removed, and this traditional philosophy can be interpreted as being patriotic, with great dedication to one’s duty and being trustworthy and kind (350). As discourse analysis becomes a regular component in any discipline in the human sciences, it is also necessary apply this to the study of Chinese religious beliefs (Masuzawa 13).

By bringing in the idea of discourse, this thesis explores how meanings or ideas are established, challenged, and changed over time and in ordinary life. Discourse analysis enables us to address the implications that are hidden behind the words, and allows us to interpret and respond to the relevant issues based on the specific context. In the study of Chinese independent animation, the application of discourse analysis is with considerable necessity due to the tension between artistic expression and the Chinese socio-political context. That is, the notion of Chinese independent animation is distinct because it is situated within the official and mainstream discourse in China. Compared to animation in other countries, Chinese animated films are more constrained by political factors and Chinese censorship. To illustrate this, the opposite interpretation of artistically similar animated works in different political contexts is a convincing example. From the aspect of aesthetics and technology, both *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* (1960) and *The Herd Boy's Flute* (1963) are ink paintings (Shui Mo Dong Hua). The first film was “praised, celebrated, and considered a perfect representation of the national style and a source of pride” (Du 138), while the *Herd Boy's Flute* (1963) bore wide criticism and was then banned in the context of the Cultural Revolution, as the ink painting symbolized the ‘bourgeois’ rather than ‘folk art’ (Whyke et al. 2019). Therefore, regarding the sensitivity and particularity of Chinese animation’s artistic expression, it is worth noting that the interpretation of a specific animated film varied considerably as the social and political context in China changed.

Rather than conceptualizing the idea of religion in the context of Western civilization, Jonathan Z. Smith discusses the different connotations of religion in different historical

periods and occasions. He holds that it is more useful to understand the different ideas of religion from historical and national aspects (281). For my thesis in particular, it is necessary to distinguish the concept of ‘religion’ in contemporary China from the Western concept of ‘religion’ seen in Abrahamic faiths.

This section is anchored in Daoism and Confucianism’s role in offering social guidance, doctrine, or indoctrination. Daoism and Confucianism are generally considered as belief systems within China throughout its long history. The section will explain the core elements of Daoism and Confucianism that repeatedly show up in *Big Fish and Begonia*. In order to demonstrate these elements, I will decipher their connotations in the context of both Chinese history and contemporary Chinese society to provide this thesis with a solid cultural and theoretical framework. Given the complexity of the context of Daoism and Confucianism, I cannot hope to provide a comprehensive analysis of how each idea or ideal plays a role in this specific animated work.⁹ Rather than employ a historical, sociological, or psychological approach, which either overlooks the nexus between religion and popular culture, or solely focuses on Daoism and Confucianism as a religion, or the social condition, what I propose instead is to examine *Big Fish and Begonia* and its use of Daoist and Confucian symbols to articulate a vision of human agency and collective life. In other words, how do Daoism and Confucianism make an impact on individuals' way of acting, and how is a harmonious community of humans, nature, and spiritual beings depicted in *Big Fish and Begonia*?

⁹ In this thesis, I will not take a close look at the history of Daoism and Confucianism, which would be a challenging and exciting research topic for further study. It is worth mentioning that the issues presented in the films are drawn from real life but are not only about real life. What I will be looking at is how animated film, as a specific genre, includes the animator’s reflection and interpretation of the continuing significance of Daoism and Confucianism.

1.2 The Relationship between Folk Beliefs and Religion in the Context of China

In his book *Studies on Chinese Folk Religion: Research and Discussion*, Qinghu Yang well explains the complicity of the concept of ‘religion’ in Chinese history. He points out that ‘folk beliefs’ contain various beliefs and rituals in the form of collective names. The concept of folk belief summarizes the unique culture of Chinese people; it also reflects the current condition of Chinese social beliefs in the East Asian civilization circle.

The research system of folk belief is complicated, and its construction is of great significance to the research of anthropology, sociology, religion, and other fields of research. Meanwhile, the study of folk beliefs can be regarded as a breakthrough for the in-depth understanding of traditional Chinese society. As Qinghu Yang’s comment on the research methods of folk belief, whether in terms of research content or methods, folk belief research is growing, from having multi-disciplinary participation to an interdisciplinary comprehensive application, and the relevant research methods have gradually formed a mature system. In short, the current research system on folk belief takes historical documents and field research as sources, religious theory and anthropological theory as the fundamental theoretical framework, and the analysis and integration of traditional Chinese culture as the core of the study (Yang 71). The study of folk belief provides the big picture of the Chinese religious system throughout the country’s history. Taking China as a specific case, rather than analysing the ideas and ideals in the context of Confucianism and Daoism separately, it is with more significance that we step back to see the bigger picture, and trace the inherent link between various religious beliefs.

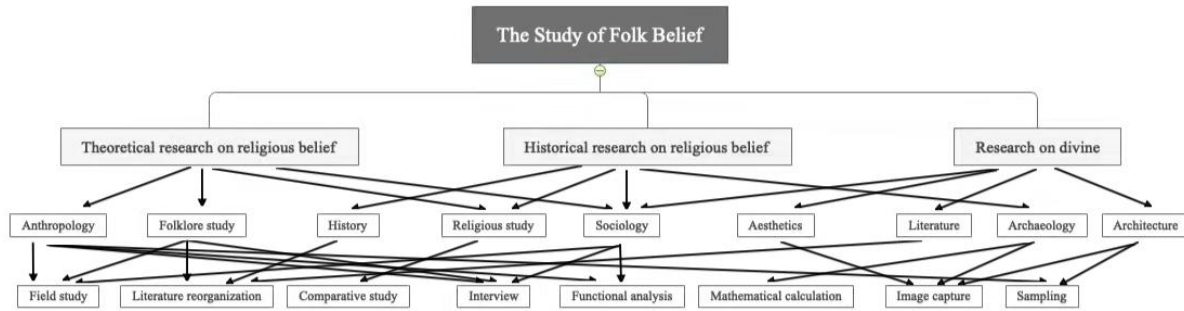


Fig 2 Research methodology relationship diagram¹⁰

Although folk belief is centred on the belief and worship of ghosts and gods, it cannot be defined as a religion because it does not fully possess the basic elements of one. Folk beliefs are broader in scope, encompassing not only folk belief practices that differ from orthodox structured religions, but also ideologies inherited from primitive religions and parts of structured religions that have been diffused and misinterpreted in the folklore. In distinguishing between religion and folk belief, religious scholars Jin and Qiu mainly emphasize the loose and popular nature of folk beliefs (172). Anthropologist Zhou supports Jin and Qiu's view. In discussing the subject of folk beliefs, Zhou suggests that folk beliefs have a profound mass base in rural China (132). The historian Wang Jian suggests that, compared to the institutional nature of religion, folk belief lacks leadership and organization; it is a form of belief closely related to daily operations (68).

The uniqueness of folk beliefs is reflected in three main aspects. Firstly, folk beliefs and relevant rituals are closely related to people's daily lives and have become a part of them. In contrast to religion, folk beliefs do not have a single founder or object of worship. Therefore, folk beliefs lack an independent organizational system and doctrine and are difficult to

¹⁰ The diagram is sorted based on Chen Bin's *Sociological Understanding of Folk Beliefs* (2013).

separate from secular life in terms of organizational structure (Zhu 68). The folk culture scholar Wu Bingan, who is representative in defining folk beliefs, describes them as "the phenomenon of widespread daily beliefs among the people" (280). In the context of folk beliefs, the objects of worship mainly include nature, spirits, and ghosts. Worship in nature includes belief in the land, mountains, water, fire, animals (including dragons, snakes, and foxes) and plants. The worship of spirits is mainly based on beliefs in ancestors and sages (Wu 283). Secondly, folk beliefs show distinct practicability. The objects, purposes, and rituals of folk beliefs are related to the practical needs of the people, such as a good harvest, prosperity, wealth, and longevity (Wu 284), and thirdly, folk beliefs have a prominent geopolitical character. The deities of folk beliefs are local protectors and function only in a specific area. This deity worship stems from the importance of shared customs, dialects, bloodlines, and mindset in the Chinese people's value system. Folk beliefs are therefore critical for creating intimate community relations and maintaining community stability (Zhu 71).

In short, folk beliefs are a set of concepts of deity worship, behavioural habits, and corresponding ritual systems and organizational practices developed by the general public on the basis of their primitive religious worship and the continuous integration of connotations from other forms of belief.

Folk beliefs have long been positioned as 'feudal superstition' (Feng Jian Mi Xin, 封建迷信) and have been discouraged by the Chinese government. Therefore, according to Zhu, folk beliefs are neglected, but nevertheless are the most important religious tradition in China (46). Academics tend to focus on the study of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, and

regard these three religious philosophies as the traditions of China, without realizing that the roots of all three religious philosophies lie in folk beliefs. Historically, the existence of folk beliefs has satisfied the beliefs of the vast majority of Chinese people. It was only through integration with folk beliefs that these religions were able to spread. The popularization of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism is a history of drawing closer to and interacting with folk beliefs. The influence of folk beliefs in China is no less than that of religion. It has not only penetrated into the daily lives of Chinese people, but has also made an impact on the emergence and development of Chinese religion. Wang Yanqin shares the same point of view as Zhu; she evaluated the role of folk beliefs in the development of religion from four aspects: folk beliefs' impact on religious deity belief; ritual; organization; and doctrine. And she further added that folk belief is a folk cultural phenomenon that arises in a specific social context with belief in and worship of ghosts and gods at its core. Its influence among the Chinese people is no less than that of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism (217).

There is a close connection between folk beliefs and Confucianism and Daoism, while there is also a considerable overlap between Daoism and folk belief, and the difficulties in distinguishing each from the other cannot be ignored. In terms of their religious character, they are distinct and should not be mixed up. We can discuss their relationship from two aspects.

Firstly, folk beliefs as a religious resource that played a critical role in the formation of Daoism. When folk beliefs develop to a certain extent, they try to evolve into more mature religious forms. Folk beliefs lay the foundation for the formation of religious beliefs. Without people's belief in spirits and gods, in miracles, in the afterlife of the underworld, in rewarding

good and punishing evil, and in honouring the ancestors, the most basic public foundation for any religion would be missing. Folk beliefs, as a foundation, have not only provided direct resources for Daoism, but have also provided ample possibilities for other religions to be introduced into China (Jin 7). Daoism has a relatively sound ideological and theoretical system, and a mature religious organization system, so it has become an ideal model for the transformation of folk belief (Yang 174). Secondly, Daoism has also had a major influence on folk beliefs. The rituals and the objects of worship come directly from Daoism, which developed on the basis of folk beliefs. In the process of its formation and development, Daoism on the one hand constantly absorbed folk beliefs; on the other hand, it tried to distinguish itself from folk beliefs. It was in this process of absorption and rejection that Daoism gradually matured and became influential in China.

Secondly, the relationship between Confucianism and folk belief can be analysed from the perspective of literature. Confucianism and folk beliefs are passed on through literary narration. Folk literature functioned as an important carrier of Confucian ethics to influence folk belief. As Ma Yi argues in the article ‘The Influence of Confucian Ethics on Folk Belief from the Dimension of Literary Narrative’, the literary narratives related to folk beliefs mainly refer to legends, dramas, novels, inscriptions on tablets, temples, and books that advise people to do good and refrain from doing evil. Bearing the function of education and moralization, these literary narratives convey the mainstream values of the society to the public in the form of textual oral narration. On the one hand, the literary narratives help reinforce Confucian ethics such as loyalty (zhong 忠), filial piety (xiao 孝), chastity (jie 节), and righteousness (yi 义) to infiltrate people’s conceptions of good and evil. On the other

hand, Confucian ethics are manifested in shaping the moral characters of folk deities through literary narration. Ma Yi further explains this idea from two dimensions: the deification of man by folk literary narratives, and the moralization of deities in folk literary narratives. The deification of human beings refers to the process of transforming historical figures deeply influenced by Confucian ethics into folk deities when they pass away. For example, *General Annals of Bamin* recorded the legend of the Grand General Chen Yuanguang, whose spirit manifests to protect the people by saving them from danger: “During the Song dynasty, a group of bandits disturbed the Zhangpu area. The panic residents prayed to the deities, suddenly, there was a sound of copper drums in the air. The bandits were surrounded by the divine warrior and had nowhere to escape”:¹¹

宋庆历中，有群寇自虔抵漳浦，民皆逋窜，令吕踌躇于神。俄而空中有金鼓之声，贼徒敛手就缚者三百七十余，自言四顾皆神兵无路以逸。

From the process of Chen Yuanguang's transformation from a human to a folk deity, it can be seen that Chen Yuanguang, the lord of Kaizhang, manifested the spirit of benevolence in Confucianism and made the people accept the ethical norms of Confucianism in the worship of deities. Through various literary narratives, Confucian philosophies are able to affect the shaping and forming of folk deities, so that the words and deeds of the deities that people worshipped contained Confucian ethical values and carried the moral expectations of Confucianism. Other than seeing this relationship from a literary angle, Xu Zhaoxu's book

¹¹ 黄仲昭修纂：《八闽通志》下册卷之五十九祠庙，福州：福建人民出版社，2006年版本，第543页。

Confucian Culture and Folk Belief takes the interaction between folk belief and Confucianism as the main subject matter, and points out that the interaction can be reflected in multiple aspects: the view of destiny, worshipping Confucius, the state regime, and the triangular relationship of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Therefore, research that isolates a certain belief from the Chinese belief system becomes mired in problems.

In the field of religious studies, there have been a large number of studies published addressing Daoism and Confucianism as mainstream religions in China. However, treating these two traditional Chinese philosophies simply as ‘religion’ maintains arbitrariness. As I mentioned in previous paragraph, it is worth noting that the connotation of Daoism and Confucianism is more complicated and differs from the idea of religion in the context of Christianity or Islam. In the context of China, ‘religion’ is closely associated with ‘folklore’, ‘folk beliefs’, and ‘folk worship’. Generally speaking, Daoism is intimately related to folk beliefs and customs, and through interacting with these customs and beliefs, Daoism had further impacts on Chinese festival and entertainment customs. A great number of Daoist deities are rooted in folk culture. Daoist deities in the Daoist immortals system, such as thunder lord, wind lord, door god, Mazu, silkworm god, the god of wealth, etc., are originally spread among the people, and then are gradually absorbed by Daoism, and become Daoist deities. This is not only a way of expanding Daoism’s influence, but is also an important means of attracting the masses (Yang 13). That is to say, Daoism gathers the deities in folk culture and makes them an integral part of its belief system. On the other hand, Daoism makes use of its own advantages to make these deities return to Chinese society, and has a deeper and wider influence on activities of worship. Therefore, regarding the cultural and

historical factors, while we are looking at the idea of ‘religion’, it is more appropriate to take both folk religion and folk culture into account.

As Miller states in his book *China’s Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future*, each culture in each historical period has invented its understanding of the kinds of things that people have lately come to consider as religion. He also mentions that the conception of ‘religion’ in the context of China has changed over time. Miller’s research took case studies in different regions, which contributes to my analysis of the articulation between Daoism and supportive community formation. Also, the outlook on nature that Miller conveys challenges Charles Taylor’s argument on ‘Modern Social Imaginaries’¹² by holding that “the new social imaginary will be created, which is based on the overall feeling of nature pervading human bodies, human societies, and the human sense of being an autonomous self” (Miller 21). In relation to the interpretation of ‘religion’, Chan Wing-Tsit, in her *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, shares the same perspective as Miller. Rather than defining ‘religion’, Chan explains the most influential philosophies in each historical period following the chronological order, and explores how these philosophies made an impact on society and individual practices. Her discussion about Daoism centres on the idea of *Zi Ran* and *Wu Wei*, which are the primary concepts in Daoism. Taking *Tao-te Ching* as the source of evidence, rather than arbitrarily translating the idea of *Wu Wei* as ‘non-action’, she carefully describes it as “taking no action that is contrary to nature” (138).

Understanding the essence of Confucianism is even more challenging. In the 1990s, the

¹² Charles Taylor in his article ‘Modern Social Imaginaries’ argues that a dominant tone of the collective way that modern society imagine themselves is that that they are isolated from the effects of an imagined world, whether characterized by spiritual beings or by supernatural phenomena. Taylor’s article holds that the modern social imagination regards the realms of the supernatural, nature, and the human as fundamentally distinct from one another, which raises a counterargument for the blurred boundary between human, nature, and spiritual beings in the context of Daoism and Shinto.

debate on Confucianism was very lively, and was initiated by Mou Zhongjian, then coordinated by Ren Jiyu and Lv Daji. The monumental literary works *A History of Chinese Confucianism* (Li 1999), *Criticism on the History of Chinese Confucianism* (Ju 2003), and *The Review on Religion in China* (Social Science Academic Press) brought an extensive discussion on Chinese folk religion, taking Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism all into account. In Chinese language, the idea of ‘religion’ (教 jiao) has two meanings: civilize (教化 jiaohua), and religion (宗教 zongjiao); in the context of Confucianism, its function in educating and civilizing is more obvious. “Confucianism is not a religion in the Western sense, but a discourse that represents both a practical moral teaching as well as abstract philosophy of immanent transcendence” (Rosker 2017). The religious nature of Confucianism emphasizes people's religious spiritual belief and the ultimate self-transformation of people in society (Yang 190). Whether or not Confucianism is defined as religion, it shows strong religious characteristics. It can be said that neither Confucianism nor folk beliefs are institutionalized religions in the traditional sense, but they are unique religious forms emerging from the inner part of Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, Confucianism and folk beliefs are closely related to each other, with symbiosis, coexistence, and integration in Chinese culture.

Mou Zhongjian, one of the most influential scholars in the field of Chinese religious studies, tends to see the essence of Confucianism critically. In his inspirational article ‘Exploration of Traditional Chinese Patriarchal Religion’ he pointed out the fundamental difference between Confucianism and religion, that the basic characteristic of religion is its transcendence, which constructs a world of the divine, and believes that it can save humanity

from suffering. The thought of spiritual beings and ‘the way of heaven’ (Tian Dao 天道) in Confucianism does contain some religious nature, however, its basic tendency is mundaneness (Ru Shi 入世), taking the cultivation of morality as its starting point, and to rule the world is its final destination. Yet, Mou argues that traditional patriarchal religion has an overall impact on Chinese society, while Confucianism and patriarchal religions share many similarities in terms of their nature and theory. In the context of traditional patriarchal religion, Mou further explains that it has indeed formed into rituals, customs, and etiquette, which have permeated through into people's daily lives. It is worthy of note that these relevant rituals and customs have distinct religious characteristics, and also manifest the secularization of religion, which is the common trend of most religions, including Buddhism and Daoism. Therefore, the religious nature of traditional beliefs cannot be negated. For example, a large part of the ritual studies in Confucian classics is the study of sacrifice ceremonies and funeral rites. These can be regarded as the theoretical basis of traditional religion. A group of Confucianists were enthusiastic about religious sacrifice and participated in the revision and implementation of the ceremony of sacrifice and funerals to varying extents. The theory of mandate of heaven (Tian Ming 天命) and the thought of deities and ghosts (Gui Shen 鬼神) in Confucianism are significant components of traditional religious theology.

However, Confucianism is not aligning with religion, here: it is only religious to a certain extent, and has non-religious characteristics. It is not focused on religious sacrifice, but in the cultivation of moral governance. Traditional religion has a definite system of laws and regulations and independent historical traditions, which are controlled by the authorities and

are basically unaffected by the differentiation of Confucian schools and the ups and downs of Confucian thought. That is to say, Confucianism has its own academic system and religion has its own traditions, which influence each other but maintain relatively independent positions. The traditional Chinese patriarchal religion cannot be confused with the common secular superstition. It not only has basic beliefs, strict systems, and regular activities, but also has systematic theories and elaborate rituals, which are respected by the authorities of all dynasties and by the whole society. Its orthodox status is indisputable. It should also be emphasized that the traditional patriarchal religion did not only exist in certain dynasties but continued for more than two thousand years without break, and became progressively systematic. To study the religion of the Middle Ages in China without studying the traditional worship of heaven and ancestors means that much fundamental context is missed. Therefore, it is very necessary to study the traditional patriarchal religion. Without a clear understanding of it, it is not enough to clarify a series of confusions in the current study of Chinese religion; it is difficult to create a new situation in the study of Chinese religion, and there is no way to start a comprehensive history of Chinese religion. The present task is not for us researchers to use some data to piece together the traditional religion of religious nature and create; all that is needed now is for researchers to rediscover it, introduce it truthfully, and evaluate it correctly. What religion to call it is a secondary matter. I have my own reasons for calling it a patriarchal traditional religion, as will be explained below, and others may call it by other names, but it is an authentic religion that has existed objectively in Chinese history, an indisputable fact to which we have not yet paid enough attention.

In short, previous scholars, through various approaches, argue that Daoism is not only

philosophical guidance, but permeates into the daily lives of Chinese people. Taking contemporary China as a particular case, the thesis will look at the idea of Daoism and Confucianism in a more detailed way, regarding these two religious beliefs as a set of beliefs and practices that explain the world by providing meaning to individuals and communities. These beliefs and practices are spiritual and transcendent: that is, they go beyond the human, material, or 'visible' world to contain beings and dimensions that may be invisible, powerful, and in some way able to shape or guide human and natural existence.¹³

1.3 The Essence of Confucianism

The development of Confucianism and the development of Chinese history have gone hand in hand. The development and evolution of Confucianism spans thousands of years and has had a profound impact on various aspects of Chinese politics and economy to this day. The Chinese ideological system, with Confucianism at its core, is based on the conception of the 'path' (Dao), which is the highest pursuit of Chinese people (Mou 2). The Confucian interpretation of Dao is expressed as harmony and benevolence, which is aligned with the five Confucian core concepts: benevolence (Ren), righteousness (Yi), etiquette (Li), wisdom (Zhi), and faithfulness (Xin). These core ideas not only constrain the behaviour and morality of Chinese citizens at an individual level but also at a social level, depicting the ideal Chinese social form. In exploring man's relationship with spirituality and nature, it emphasizes moderation, self-reflection, and harmony between heaven and man. In discussing the relationship between individuals, it advocates loyalty, tolerance, filial piety, and honesty. In

¹³ Timothy Iles, 'Religion and Beliefs'. Message to Chenxi Wang. February 22, 2020. Email.

discussing the relationship between individual and community, etiquette, order, and a strong sense of social responsibility are emphasized. These three relationships have enabled Confucianism to closely integrate into the development of society and become a mainstream ideology until the contemporary era.

Confucianism has a rather grand world outlook, which includes not only human beings but also the concept of *tian* (天) in a broader sense. Throughout Chinese ancient history, this world outlook served the feudal rule by portraying destiny as the ultimate power; this outlook also functioned in maintaining a clear hierarchy and social order. The view of the mandate of heaven was rooted in the understanding of the relationship between heaven and humanity during the Western Zhou dynasty. *Tian* (天) is a sacred and fundamental concept in ancient Chinese philosophy. It has three different meanings. The first is the physical sky or the entirety of nature (not including human society), the operations of which manifest certain laws and order. The second refers to a spiritual being, which possesses an anthropomorphic will and governs everything in the universe. The third denotes the universal law, which is observed by all things and beings, and which is also the basis of human nature, morality, and social and political order. ‘The way of heaven’ (天道) refers to the basic rule governing the existence and changes of all things between heaven and earth (as opposed to ‘the way of man’, 人道). The ancient Chinese interpreted it in different ways. First, some believed that ‘the way of heaven’, especially the celestial phenomena relating to the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, foretold or dictated the success or failure of human affairs. In ancient times, designated officials predicted human affairs through observing celestial phenomena. Second, some believed that ‘the way of heaven’ was the source or the basis of man’s moral conduct

and of orderly human relations. One should comply with the way of heaven, in both words and deeds, and so should human relations; and people should recognize and develop the moral nature bestowed upon them by heaven so as to gain access to the way of heaven. Third, others thought that there were no particular correlations between the way of heaven on the one hand and moral conduct in the human world, human relations, and misfortune and fortune in human affairs on the other.

The term ‘mandate of heaven’ (天命) means order and bestowment from heaven. This terminology contains three different meanings. The first is the order of heaven over human affairs. Such order first of all focuses on a change of the supreme ruler’s authority: heaven empowers the virtuous to attack and replace a ruler who has lost his virtue, and thus enjoy the highest unsurpassed power and benefits. Secondly, ‘mandate of heaven’ means fate, which is irresistible and imposes limits on human power. Thirdly, the term indicates the natural disposition bestowed by heaven upon human beings. According to *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), “Mandate of heaven endows one with his nature” (Confucius and Legge 7). Song-dynasty Confucian scholars developed this idea, proposing that human nature was the ‘nature of mandate of heaven’, that is, the inherent pure and good nature one receives from heaven.

Regarding the multiple roles that Confucianism has played throughout Chinese history, such as serving as a tool to consolidate feudal rule in feudal society, and being a victim of the class struggle during the Cultural Revolution, with the deepening of China’s reform and opening-up, Confucianism is transferring from a state of decline to one of revival. In the

context of modern China, Confucianism is gradually fading away from politics and becoming a spiritual necessity for individuals and society. In contemporary Chinese society, Confucianism does not obtain a tightly organized system, does not value the expansion of its tangible power, and has no specific interests to claim. Confucianism promotes a communal social ethic based on common humanity and aims to provide the community with a basic moral standard and set of guidelines for public life, so that society and individuals can develop in a civilized and orderly way.

Mou (2016) points out that the contemporary value of Confucianism can be understood from three dimensions. Firstly, Confucianism promotes love to a broad degree, which goes beyond the kinship and love between men and women. Other than becoming a caring parent and decent lover, Confucianism further encourages individuals to care for others in society. Ultimately, the essence of Confucian love includes having love for all substances in the world. Secondly, Confucianism promotes equality and respect, which enables it to escape the constraints of social hierarchy, to transcend the limitations of different cultures, and fundamentally promote the development of multiculturalism. Thirdly, the fundamental philosophy of Confucianism is to solve conflict in an inclusive and harmonious manner. The Chinese civilization cherishes peace and advocates maintaining harmony while allowing for difference. This concept of harmony suggests that we are all bonded together and have a shared future (Mou 259). Therefore, Confucianism is of long-term significance for the peaceful development of the world. In *Confucianism and Globalisation* (2014), Alan Garcia Perez argues that China's rapid development has to a great extent benefited from the

traditional Chinese culture of love, pragmatism, responsibility, and diligence. Starting with the 'Chinese phenomenon', Perez points out the bias in the Western understanding of China. More importantly, he demonstrates the advantages of using Confucianism as a cultural underpinning of the Chinese ideological system, and for its relevance to the process of globalization. In other words, Confucianism goes beyond the context of traditional Chinese ideology, and is stepping into the international arena.

1.4 The Essence of Daoism

Mou Zongsan, an influential scholar in the field of Daoism in recent times, suggests that unlike other schools of faith in China, Confucianism and Daoism are the philosophies that are rooted in Chinese history and have given the Chinese people their faith (Mou 7). As a representative of the wise men of ancient China, Laozi was as much a pioneer and creator of Chinese culture as Confucius, who established China's fundamental moral system. Confucius and Laozi made significant contributions to the establishment of the direction of Chinese culture and the development of the systematization of religious beliefs. The Daoist ideology founded by Laozi with its nature-based philosophy was opposed to the ethical philosophy of the Confucianism founded by Confucius. However, it is worth noting that the nature of this opposition is not fundamentally mutually exclusive, but is instead complementary and interpenetrating. Compared with Confucianism, which emphasizes the ethics of community, bringing together duty, status, hierarchy and interdependence, Daoism takes the individual as its starting point, exploring the nature and meaning of life.

Laozi sees human life not only as a natural lifecycle, but as a process in which the living

entity constantly modifies itself according to the law of nature. The pursuit of the depth of life and its ultimate essence is an important part of the Daoist philosophy. Firstly, on a moral level, it advocates the connotations of individualism, simplicity, and perseverance. Laozi believed that human nature should be simple and generous, maintaining an infant-like innocence, while remaining humble and not showing off one's achievements and merits. *Tao Te Ching* contains specific Daoist requirements for the individual. For example, "attain the ultimate emptiness; Maintain the absolute tranquility"¹⁴ (Laozi 28); "Be simple and plain, selfless and desireless" (Laozi 34). "Noble men stay in the thick, and not in the thin; They stay with the substance, and not with the ornament" (Laozi 70). In addition, the tenacity or the persistence advocated by Daoist philosophy is a quest for flexibility and vitality in life. The idea of flexibility and vitality can be likened to water, which is not hard in itself, but can withstand strong impacts and divisions, and moistens everything on earth without conflict (Mou 41). Laozi suggested that "Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water. Yet, in attacking the hard and strong, nothing can surpass it" (Laozi 139). Therefore, maintaining continuity and flexibility in life is the key to obtaining the true self, and a balanced, stable spiritual world. Laozi was more concerned with the individual than the community. From another perspective, Laozi believed that the moral guidance of the individual and the shaping of spirituality were the basis for the development of the community.

Daoism is an internal-oriented philosophy, which does not focus on the influence of the external environment on the individual, but rather on the deepening of the individual's self-awareness. Daoism's interpretation of wisdom is unique and rich in connotation, and the

¹⁴ This means to attain the ultimate of empty things, and maintain the true rectitude of tranquil things.

wisdom in the context of Daoism allows the individual to gain great adaptability, transcendence, and foresight. Daoist wisdom does not emphasize the individual's level of intelligence, but rather the individual's insight and flexibility. A wise man will not be confused by appearances and illusions, nor are his beliefs shifted by changing circumstances. Laozi also suggested that “to know others is to be clever; to know oneself is to obtain discernment”¹⁵ and “to overcome others takes force; to overcome oneself takes strength”¹⁶ (60). This spiritual transcendence enables the individual to see through phenomena to the essence of things. As a result, taking the individual as the starting point, the behaviour of the individual in the Daoist ideological system is more a reflection of the individual's self-needs and self-perception.

The value and significance of Daoist philosophy for modern society is mainly reflected in the requirement for personal morality and in the emphasis on the importance of the spiritual world. Firstly, Daoism's emphasis on morality has fundamental implications for contemporary Chinese society. In a modern society where technology is evolving rapidly, Laozi's proposal to "suppress the desires with simplicity" (65) and "achieve the goal without competing"¹⁷ (143) can prompt individuals to reflect upon themselves thoroughly and promote a return to sincerity and simplicity in human nature. In addition, Daoism emphasizes the importance of personal agency and cultivation of the spiritual world, which is critical for raising one's spiritual level and self-awareness. Through fully exploring an individual's initiative, the overall development of modern society is effectively promoted.

¹⁵ Those who know men are merely clever; they are less than those who know themselves and surpass cleverness.

¹⁶ Those who conquer others display force only; they are less than those who overcome themselves and whose strength cannot be harmed by anything.

¹⁷ Following the path of heaven and never harm each other.

In discussing the function of Confucianism as a teaching device or mechanism to pass on ideology, the relationship between ritual and music and between beauty and goodness should be carefully addressed. The concept of *Yue* (music 乐) is broader than music, including not only music itself, but also various parts of ‘art’ in the modern sense, such as fine arts, dance, calligraphy, and sports (Fu and Wang 72). The teaching function of music is mainly reflected in the emotional and spiritual guidance of individuals, for example, “Devote yourself to music in order to govern the heart” (*Liji* 104). Practising *Yue* is with great necessity, “but must not be overdone” (Li 24). Therefore, the establishment of *Li* (rites 礼) is greatly significant. Rituals are coercive requirements, restrictions, and rules imposed on individuals with respect to their external behaviours, actions, and demeanour. By imposing these restrictions on individuals, the order and stability of the collective can be protected and maintained (Li 13). In the Confucian system of thought, the concepts of *Yue* and *Li* are harmoniously unified: “Music is that which the emotions cannot alter; the rites, that which reason cannot change” (*Liji* 102); “When the rites and propriety are established, noble and base are made equal; when music and refinement are brought together, high and low are harmonized” (*Liji* 99). In short, the concepts of ritual and music enable individuals to express their emotions in a sensible way and keep the community stable and healthy through the establishment of rules and order.

Moreover, in the context of Chinese society, the common use of the words ‘beauty’ and ‘goodness’ persists to the present day (Li 31). For example, in the so called Five Essentials of Behaviour (Wu Jiang 五讲)¹⁸, and Four Points of Beauty (Si Mei 四美)¹⁹. In demonstrating

¹⁸ The ‘Five Essentials of Behavior’ (Wu jiang 五讲) are decorum, manners, hygiene, discipline, and morals.

the concepts of beauty (*Mei* 美) and goodness (*Shan* 善), Confucius pointed out that the harmonious unity of beauty and goodness is based on ritual and music. At the level of art, he believed that the art form should be aesthetically rich, while the content should be centred on goodness and benevolence. Confucius extended this artistic pursuit to the social and personal levels, believing that this harmonious relationship could be embodied through high morality (Fu and Wang 68).

The influence of traditional Chinese ideology on modern Chinese censorship is far-reaching. In particular, the Confucian doctrine of ritual and the portrayal of social hierarchy has led modern censorship to focus more on the educational role and positive ideological guidance of artworks. In the next section, this paper will discuss the impact of modern censorship on the development of independent animation in China.

1.5 The Development of Chinese Animation under Governmental Censorship

In the late 1910s to the 1920s, when animation was first introduced to China, it was called *Ka Tong* or *Ka Tong Pian*, as signification of ‘carton’ (Du 3). After the founding of the PRC, these terms were gradually discontinued and replaced by the more indigenous term *Mei Shu Dian Ying* or *Mei Shu Pian*. Du mentions that this change reflects the articulation between the concept of animation and the traditional aesthetic constructed in China after its introduction in the country (5). It also separates Chinese animation from international films. Macdonald further adds that *Mei Shu Pian* is closely related to political ideologies, and “employs design elements that help to construct what could be called a Chinese effect” (79)

¹⁹ The ‘Four Points of Beauty’ (Si Mei 四美) are beauty of mind, language, behaviour, and environment.

and “to endorse a distinctly ideological purpose” (Whyke et al. 165). The term *Mei Shu Pian* endows Chinese animation with a stronger artistic quality, placing “Chinese animation as continuing cultural traditions rather than a technologized symbol of modernity” (Whyke et al. 167).

Some scholars working on Chinese animation, such as Ding Haiyang, Yao Guiping²⁰, Wicks James²¹, Lent A. John and Xu Ying²² employ a historical approach to its analysis. These scholars share the perspective that China should not be neglected in the animation industry. Chinese animation pioneers, on the one hand, kept the independent creative ideas and confident aesthetic expression; on the other hand, they tried their best to observe the trends of the international animation industry under limited conditions, and then reflect on them and respond through creative practice. This was not only determined by the trend of the times but was also inseparable from the spirit of introspection and sense of distress of Chinese animation artists (Fu 2021). Fu’s article refutes the two common presuppositions on Chinese animation: i) the early development of Chinese animation being solely rooted in traditional Chinese culture; and ii) Chinese animation lacking its own cultural marks. It also allows us to see the development of Chinese animation from an objective and holistic angle.

²⁰ Ding and Yao, *Conception of Chinese Animation*. 2005.

²¹ Wicks, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation*. 2019.

²² Lent A. John and Xu Ying, *Chinese Animation: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis*. 2013.



Fig 3 rom left: Zuotao Yang, Wennong Huang, Lifan Qin, Xuechou Mei

Lent and Xu's journal article 'Chinese Animation: An historical and contemporary analysis' (2010) combines interview materials and data to give a detailed overview on the Chinese animation industry from 1926 through to the 21st century. The pre-phase of Chinese animation was led by the Wan Brothers (twins Laiming, 1899–1997, and Guchan, 1899–1995; Chaochen, 1906–1992, and Dihuan, 1907–?). Wan Guchan's work *Tumult in the Studio* is considered to be the starting point of Chinese animation. The early works (1931–1936) of the Wan brothers such as *Blood Money* (Xue Qian, 1932), *Tortoise and Rabbit Have a Race* (Gui Tu Sai Pao, 1932), *National Sorrow* (Min Zu Tong Shi, 1933), and *New Tide* (Xin Chao, 1936) can be classified into two types: patriotic and anti-Japanese, anti-imperialist, anti-feudalist propaganda, and educational fables (Zhang 37). Starting from the mid-1930s, the Wan brothers started to carefully reflect the development of Chinese animation, and attempted to combine Chinese traditional art with Western techniques (Chen 2017; Du 2019). In their early films, the Wan brothers consciously refer to the Fleischer brothers and to Disney, but they later point out that German and Russian cartoons are also worthy of note.

They further argue that “In a Chinese film, one ought to have a story based purely on real Chinese traditions and stories, consistent with our sensibility and sense of humor... Also, our films must not only bring pleasure, but also be educational” (Wan Brothers, 1936, quoted in Quiquemelle, 1991, 178). From 1937–1942, influenced by the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Wan Brothers’ works focused on anti-Japanese and patriotic themes. For much of the 1940s, the Wan Brothers struggled from a shortage of funds, but after the establishment of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio in 1950, were able to show their talents on a bigger platform. In 1961 (and 1964), Wan Laiming was finally able to produce his nearly 20-year dream, feature-length animation *Uproar in Heaven* (Da Nao Tian Gong). The animations produced by SAFS during the Hundred Flowers Campaign are often described as the first ‘golden era’ of Chinese animation (Lent and Xu 11).

From the 1950s to the 1980s, China was a top-level animation producer. However, due to the ‘Cultural Revolution’, Chinese animation is not well known beyond the contours of the country. “During that time the studio’s work was destroyed or shelved...Animators, as all intellectuals and artists, were banished to rural settings, made to work at menial farm jobs and to do self criticism” (Lent and Xu 28). Te Wei’s ink-painting film *The Cowherd’s Flute* (1963), which shows a vivid Daoist aesthetic, was banned since it was contrary to proletarian ideology. With China’s opening-up policies from 1978 onwards, Chinese animation had a new opportunity for development. In 1988, Chinese animator Te Wei’s animated film *Feeling from Mountain and Water* won the 1st Shanghai International Animation Film Festival Award, which can be regarded as a sign of the Chinese animation industry recovering. In order to cater to the needs of the cultural and recreational market, the Shanghai

studio branched out from educational and artistic animation to a more commercial variety.

However, the huge wage gap between China and Western countries led to a serious brain drain, which made the development of Chinese animation during this period difficult.

Chinese animation is changing drastically in the new millennium. The “new production techniques emphases, government relationships, and marketing orientations” (Lent and Xu 31) have made the Chinese animation industry step into a new era (Wu 29). From 2008 to 2016, Chinese animation re-emerged as an element in ‘national style’ in conjunction with the promotion of aesthetic creativity and indigenous ideology. With the release of Chinese animated films *Big Fish and Begonia* (2011), *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *The Wind Guardians* (2018), *White Snake* (2019), and *Jiang Ziya* (2020), Chinese animation, with its vivid cultural colour, has emerged in recent years, and has returned to the world stage. The following table shows a brief history of Chinese animation and its features.²³

Table 1 Major Chinese animation works

Year	Film	Features	Directors
1926	<i>Tumult in the Studio</i> ²⁴	Chinese painting	Wan Brothers
1938	<i>Princess Iron Fan</i> ²⁵	Traditional Chinese novel <i>Journey to the West</i> , Beijing opera, traditional Chinese painting.	Wan Brothers
1955	<i>Magic Pen Ma Liang</i>	Chinese puppet show	SAFS
1958	<i>Piggy Eats Watermelon</i>	Chinese paper cut	SAFS
1960	<i>Where is Mama</i>	Chinese wash painting	SAFS
1964	<i>Uproar in Heaven</i>	Chinese folk music, Chinese	SAFS

²³ The information provided by the table is gathered in China's most influential animation sharing website, "Bilibili." "Bilibili" also nicknamed B site, themed around animation, comic, and game, where users can submit, view, and add commentary subtitles on videos. It is the most significant sharing and exchanging platform in China.

²⁴ Yu and Diao, “Chinese Cartoon before *Tumult in Studio*.” *Hundred Schools in Arts*. no. 1 (2017): 1-9.

²⁵ Wang, “The Analysis of the Practical Significance of *Princess Iron Fan*.” *Chinese Arts*. no. 1 (2020): 17.

		folk New Year Painting, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in the context of China.	
1979	<i>Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King</i> ²⁶	Traditional Chinese novel <i>Feng Shen Yanyi</i> , Confucianism, Buddhism, Cultural revolution	SAFS
1981	<i>A Deer of Nine Colors</i>	Traditional Chinese wall painting	SAFS
1988	<i>Feeling from Mountain and Water</i>	Chinese water-ink painting, Daoism	SAFS
1999	<i>Lotus Lantern</i> ²⁷	Daoism, Chinese Folklore	SAFS
2011	<i>Big Fish and Begonia</i>	Daoism, Chinese Folklore, Chinese painting	Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun
2015	<i>Monkey King: Hero is Back</i>	Traditional Chinese novel <i>Journey to the West</i>	Tian Xiaopeng
2019	<i>White Snake</i> ²⁸	Chinese painting, Chinese folklore	Warner Brothers

This table shows that most of the representative animated films in Chinese animation history have Chinese characteristics and embody religious thoughts in the context of China. Nevertheless, since many studies focus on the early period, the development and improvement of Chinese animation in recent decades have been neglected. Recent Chinese animations have reflected increasingly blurred boundaries between the ‘Chinese style of animation’ and the animation styles of Japan and the United States. The aim of this table is

²⁶ Liu, “From Havoc in Heaven to Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King: The Analysis of the image of NeZha.” *Art Studies*. no. 5 (2019): 25-27.

²⁷ Zeng, ‘The Character designs in Lotus Lantern’. *Chinese Theatre*. no. 20 (2016): 93-94.

²⁸ Zhang, ‘The Representation of Chinese Tradition and Aesthetic Construction in *White Snake*’. *Art Criticism*, no. 24 (2019):165–168.

not limited to providing an agenda of Chinese animation. It also points out that the ‘Chineseness’ or cultural mark continues to show in Chinese animated films.

The development of independent animation in the context of post-socialist China has distinct uniqueness. The term ‘post-socialist’ in China emerged after 1992, following the economic reform proposed by Deng Xiaoping. With the slogans of building a ‘Socialist market economy’ and ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’, Chinese culture in the new era has taken on a distinct ‘Chineseness’ and a postmodern nature. In Chinese independent animation, this social transformation is mainly reflected in the structure of feelings and aesthetic practice of the work. While examining Chinese independent animation, in addition to considering the collision and fusion between Chinese socialist ideology and capitalist thought, it is also important to recognize the inherent tension in Chinese society, which is the conflict between the improvement of the creative environment and the remaining problems of hegemonism. In other words, “contemporary China maintains a dichotomy where both ‘new’ and ‘old’ or ‘East’ and ‘West’ coexist as socio-cultural entities” (Zhou, 2020, 9).

Compared to Japan, the United States and France, where a comprehensive animation industry has developed, there is still significant obstruction to the development of Chinese animation. Also, the art creation process in these countries is independent of government control and political interference, which ensures its cultural and economic value. Chinese independent animation is “fluctuating on a path to rediscovery and arguably is still yet to be fully established” (Zhou 18); and to a greater extent it is constrained by the development of the national political system. As a result, Chinese independent animation has an open yet

independent ecology. The thriving independent animation industry in China “embodies an as yet not fully revealed potential to discover a realm of discourse beyond the current post-socialist Chinese society” (Zhou 3). Through the design of its storyline and its experimental narrative forms, Chinese independent animation responds to post-socialist realities and challenges existing collective ideologies in China in a relatively subtle way. This has made the creation of Chinese independent animation more adaptable and flexible, as well as giving it greater inherent independence. As Zhou suggests, currently “independent animators embark on diversified trajectories in an aesthetic arena to find an alternative approach to pursuing cultural expression beyond the political” (10). The initial core of traditional cultural expression drives this vibrant creative practice towards the development of self-supporting networks, thus maintaining the trajectory of an ecologically 'sustainable' community (Zhou 3). Although Chinese independent animation embodies a strong oriental cultural identity, its exploration of the modern expression of traditional culture belongs to a worldwide discourse. The essence of the fusion and collision of cultures is about finding a commonality that can be better expressed, rather than adding a certain stereotype, antagonism, or bias.

According to statistical data provided by the National Radio and Television Administration, the annual production of domestic animation films was around 100 minutes in the early years of the founding of the PRC, and by 2017 had reached more than 110,000 minutes (National Radio and Television Administration 2020). Despite the impressive progress that Chinese animation has made, in order to fully comprehend China’s animation industry and to review the Chinese animation history critically, Lu, Zheng, and Niu in their

article ‘Annual Report on the Development of China’s Animation Industry’ summarize the six main obstacles that Chinese animation currently needs to overcome:

- i) The shortage of creative personnel and hard-to-find excellent scripts.
- ii) The lack of attention to pre-production as profit motivations hurry animations along. Especially apparent is the low paid scriptwriters.
- iii) Insufficient promotion and advertising, blamed on the inability to sell animation and to get it distributed effectively.
- iv) Difficulties getting domestic animation shown as it competes for theater space with the 20 foreign and many domestic blockbusters released yearly.
- v) The shortage in product development, attributed to poor judgment in character design. Many characters are complicated and not suitable for side products.
- vi) The unfamiliarity of a number of animation houses with the skills of investment and seeking financing. Potential investors have not been sufficiently informed about animation.

Recognizing its great development without ignoring the continuing obstacles, we can conclude that Chinese animation is still on its way in terms of exploring and growing. With the social background of consumerism and commercialization, Chinese animators should insist on their originality while absorbing advanced ideas and technologies from Japanese and Western animation, and should pay more attention to the pursuit of the cultural connotation of their works.

Chapter 2. Feeling Chinese Religion in *Big Fish and Begonia*

This chapter will explore the Chinese independent animated film *Big Fish and Begonia*, demonstrating how it embodies and visualizes the traditional religious ideologies in the context of modern China. Methodologically, my analysis focuses on the film's narrative and aesthetics. As mentioned in the previous sections, animation is intimately related to reality. To be more specific, the nature of the independent animated film is a representation and reconstruction of reality driven by the director's values, ideology, and sensitivity to reality. How has the reality been constructed? What reality does the film construct? What message does the director attempt to convey through the design of cinematic elements? Sikov argues that the nature of film and photographs are representations (3). He further explains, "representation is a sign or symbol that communicates meaning with a combination of content and form" (195). By close reading the film, this chapter demonstrates the director's reflections on the practicality of traditional religious philosophy in modern discourse through the analysis of symbolic images in specific scenes. And, more importantly, this chapter develops a discussion of the way in which Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun convey their argument. Through the frequent presence of traditional religious symbols, the careful design of dialogue, and the switching of shooting perspectives, these two directors attempt to achieve their subjective artistic expression through the construction of a fictional worldview based on reality. In conveying the message of ethnicity and cultural context, Chinese animation creation deals with the "institutionalized public" (Du 2019, 17), while seeking a more explicit but more balanced way of expression.

Directed by Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun, *Big Fish and Begonia* tells the story of a

fictional world that lies beneath the bottom of the ocean of human world. On the day the heroine Chun turns 16, she transforms into a red dolphin to explore the human world. Chun is rescued by a human boy at the cost of his own life. Moved by the boy's courage and kindness, Chun decides to use her transcendent power to give him life again, which goes against the rules of the divine world. To do this, she must protect the boy's soul, a tiny fish, and nurture it to grow. Through adventure and sacrifice, love grows, yet now she must release him back to the sea, back to life in the human world.

The beginning of the film is largely in line with Daoist philosophy. Starting with a famous quote from *A Happy Excursion* by Zhuang Zi, "In the northern ocean there is a fish, called the Kun. I do not know how many thousand miles in size", the first scene depicts a giant 'Kun' and sets the cultural tone for the film. This is followed by the traditional inquiries of 'who are we? where do we come from?' This series of questions implies that this film revolves around the discussion of the identity of various entities including human and spiritual beings. As Laozi holds in *Tao Te Ching*, "Man conforms to the rule of earth; earth conforms to the rule of heaven; heaven conforms to the rule of Dao; Dao conforms to the rule of nature" (人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然) and "Great means out-going; out-going means far-reaching; far-reaching means returning" (大曰逝, 逝曰远, 远曰反) (45). 'Out-going' is the idea of not being restricted by the rules and political system. 'Far-reaching' means to reach the ultimate self. "Going around there is nowhere it cannot go, but it does not go in one direction only. It does not stay where it goes, its body is free" (Lin 48). The traditional Daoist aesthetic culture is based on the idea of transcending the self, freeing

oneself from restrictions, allowing one to follow one's natural development and make choices from one's heart, in search of a spiritual quest that transcends reality.

Interestingly, the Confucian doctrine of order and rules is mainly reflected in this film through conflict in the plot. This conflict is not limited to the conflict between the individual and society but is depicted more through the character's conflict between their social identity and self-identity. As mentioned in the discussion on the essence of Confucianism in the first chapter, etiquette, order, and a strong sense of social responsibility are the basic expectations of Confucianism for the individual. The far-reaching influence of Confucianism on Chinese society has led to a widespread acceptance of the concept of 'Jia Tian Xia' (家天下), which means all people are of one family. In other words, the community is treated in the same way as the individual family, the interest of the community is treated as the needs of the individual, and public well-being is even valued over the needs of the individual. On the other hand, self-identity is intimately related to the individual's personal experiences, memories, and agencies. Therefore, considering the uniqueness of individual experiences, individual behaviours and choices are likely to diverge from the needs of the community. Through the innovative settings of the characters, which blur the boundaries between humans and gods, *Big Fish and Begonia* accepts the traditional view of the harmony between humans, spiritual entities, and nature from three aspects: through the conflict and interplay between the destiny of humans and the 'others'; through the rebuttal of absolute fate and divine authority; and through the endowing of gods with the sense of hesitation, intense human emotions, and the pain of sacrifice.

Big Fish and Begonia's presentation of Confucian philosophy manifests in three main areas: the depiction of 'benevolence' (Ren 仁) and order in society, the exploration of 'ritual' (Li 礼) and 'music' (Yue 乐), and the narrative of the difference between collective interests and individual needs. The concept of 'benevolence' in the Confucian ideological system mainly carries the connotations of compassion, empathy, and humanistic care. Confucian love goes beyond the narrow sense of love between a man and a woman, and blood kinship. Confucianism promotes the idea of 'love without distinction' (Ai Wu Cha Deng 爱无差等). Functioning as a moral paradigm, this concept is bounded by the rational 'righteousness' (Yi 义). Since sensual 'love' has its inevitable bias or preferences, rational 'righteousness' can overcome this limitation through the establishment of order and moral constraints. This process of balancing and adapting subjective and sensual love to non-differentiated love through 'righteousness' is the process of achieving 'benevolence' (Li 21). Love in the context of Confucianism to a great extent emphasizes caring and contributing to the whole community. As one of the founders of Confucianism, Mencius (89) proposed, "A noble man devotes himself to elevate by circumstances, and endeavours to benefit the society while in position" (穷则独善其身，达则兼济天下). The aesthetics of Confucianism lie in a secular perspective that emphasizes the sense of responsibility to society and nation. 'Benevolence', as one of the main ideological concepts of Confucianism, is frequently embodied in Chinese animated films. In *Big Fish and Begonia*, the depiction of 'Ren' is in the gradual shaping of the characters' identities and emotional selves as they interact with the fictional society.

In the scene where Chun chooses to sacrifice her life as a begonia tree to resist the flood (Big Fish and Begonia 01:17:08), the director symbolizes the image of Chun, simplifying the image of her in terms of lines, colours, light, and shade, finally presenting only the outline of the character. Chun's choice reflects her ultimate choice to take responsibility for the community, linking her own life to the well-being of society. Besides,

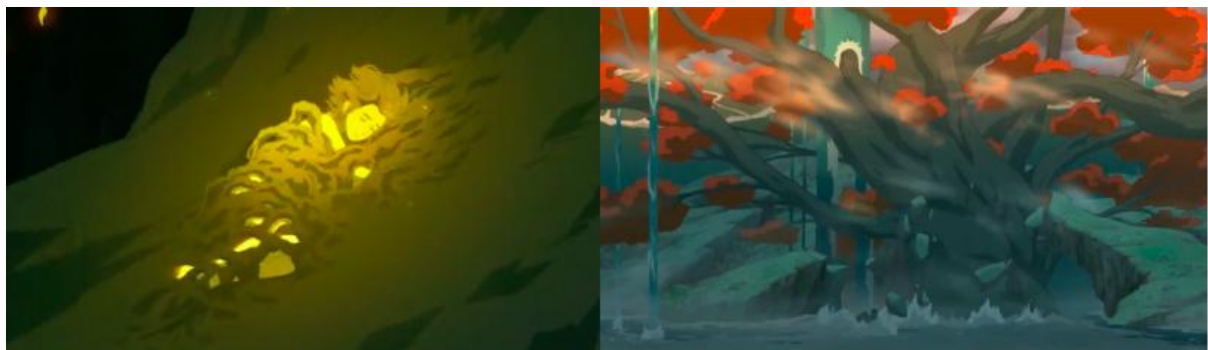


Fig 4 Chun's sacrifice

Confucianism focuses on harmonious endings, such as reconciliation of conflicts, or reunification of families. Big Fish and Begonia shows traditional Chinese aesthetics' discussion and reflection of how human beings are situated in a broader dimension, which takes the role of nature and spiritual beings into account. Based on consideration of man's place in the world, the topics include but are not limited to morality, spirituality, emotion, and world perception. The original Confucian philosophy, with 'benevolence' as its core, forms the philosophical basis of Confucian aesthetics, which is characterized by a simple humanistic aesthetic ideology. Li demonstrates conclusively the fundamental role of aesthetics in the development of the cultural and psychological structures in Chinese culture that define 'humanity'. In demonstrating Confucian aesthetics, Li suggests that the influence of the Confucian tradition of rites and music "has solidified into a fixture of the cultural

psyche” (Li 38). He further adds that Chinese art, which aims to shape emotions, has its origins in an ancient tradition “founded on the standard of ‘music entails harmony’” (乐以载道) (Li 29). Through the extensive practice of ritual and music in everyday life, Confucianism was embraced in a secularized form.

The construction of this tight-knit fictional community in *Big Fish and Begonia* symbolizes the Confucian system of ritual (Li 礼) and music (Yue 乐), which proposes the establishment of a strict ethical hierarchy and patriarchal social structure.



Fig 5 Hakka style of architecture

Architectural design is a clever way of pointing out tradition and also the beauty of social order through harmonious form. In terms of scene settings, the place where the characters live is based on Hakka's 'Round-Dragon House' (围龙屋). Hakka is one of the Han Chinese sub-nations, the only one not named after a region, and is one of the most widely distributed and influential sub-nations in the world (Xie and Wang 23). The Round-Dragon House is a representative Hakka style of architecture. The geomancy features of the Round-Dragon House's site selection, layout and building are exquisite. Round-Dragon House depicts the features of “finding happiness in the mountains, worshipping water for wealth and luck,

avoiding evil, and attaining the balance between heaven and earth” (Luo and Wang 6).

Regarding this unique architectural style, Wang argues that the Round-Dragon House contains symbolic meanings such as "the harmony between heaven and earth", "consciousness of clan and family" and "reverence for ancestors" (56). He shares the same perspective with Wang, further suggesting that the Round-Dragon House as a residential building style embodies traditional Chinese rituals and ethics (144).



Fig. 6 Architectural style in Big Fish and Begonia

The Round-Dragon House emphasizes the idea of gathering together family members and aims to build a community where people are interconnected. Throughout Chinese history, influenced by geographic and political factors, the survival of Hakkas was often accompanied by migration and dispersion. Frequent migrations and dispersions have led to a strong sense of kinship and ritual among the Hakka (Luo and Wang 6). Hakka people value traditions, therefore, the Hakka style of architecture (Fig. 7) emphasizes the ancestral hall as the centre, with residential houses surrounding it. Individual family dwelling units are subordinate and dependent on the overall architecture. This architectural pattern is used to sustain the

collective consciousness within the community, creating a unique spatial combination of 'public' and 'private' relationships (Jiang and Jia 28). As Pan describes, this architecture "expresses a 'ritual' content that is basically unrelated to private life. It expresses a spirit, a kind of supreme worship of the family, of the ancestors. It is an important factor in determining the basic form of Hakka architecture" (111). To pray for the prosperity of the people and the family, the Hakkas placed their aspirations for a better life on the worship of their ancestors and spirits (Jiang and Jia 26). A group consensus that reveres rituals and honours the old and the ancestors is very much in line with Confucian philosophy. In *Analects*, Confucius explicitly showcased his attitudes towards ancestor worship. Confucius advised that the occurrence of sacrifice should be thus: "when sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. When sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present" (祭如在, 祭神如神在。吾不与祭, 如不祭) (13). Thus, the notion of ritual promoted by Confucius is solemn and sincere. The concept of ritual is not only externalized and manifested through sacrifices and ceremonies, but also emphasizes the individual's internalization and attention to this concept. During festivals, births, weddings, and funerals, Hakka people went to the ancestral hall to worship their ancestors and spirits and pray for blessings, which reflects the importance Hakka people attached to rituals.

The film involves several close-ups of the Round-Dragon House, mostly long shots and down shots. The cinematic techniques imply the bonds of order and rules on individuals through the construction of architectural solemnity. This architectural design coincides with the 'Wu Fu' model (五服制) in the context of Confucianism. Wang Qian points out that the

'Wu Fu' world-order model is the most detailed and well-known Confucian representation of

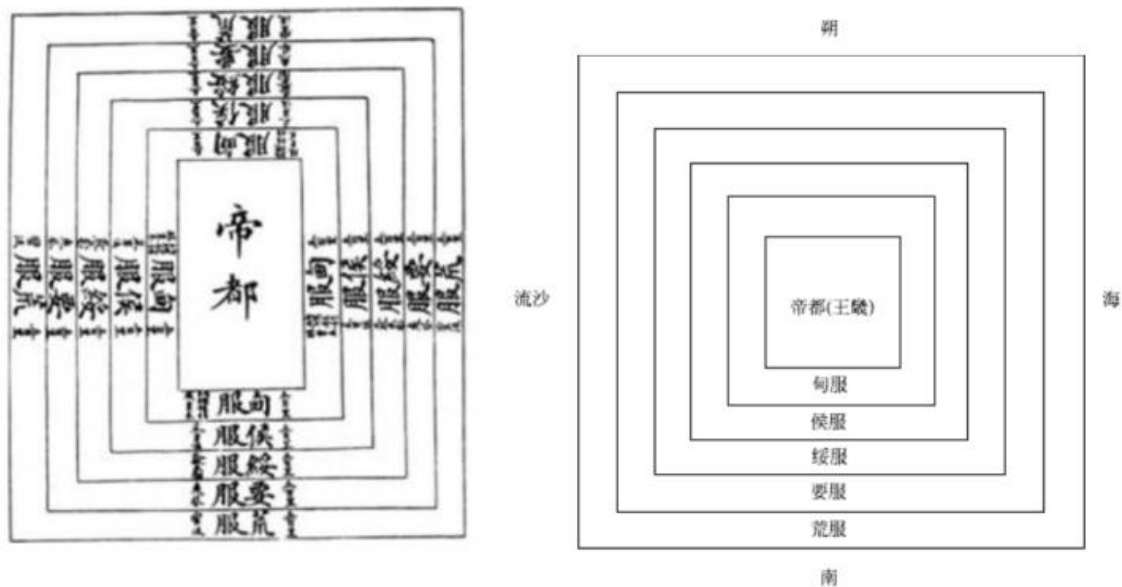


Fig 7 Wu Fu model

the world structure (73). The model divides the world into five circles, from the centre to the periphery. With the imperial capital at the centre, the level of civilization and prosperity decreases from the centre outwards (Wang 74). This model highlights the authority of the emperor and the importance of rules for collective life. The 'centre-fringe' structure of the world order in the Confucian ideological system reflects a distinct hierarchical character. Authority is concentrated at the centre of the hierarchical model (Wang 81). In discussing the way to govern the state, Confucius proposed, "to maintain a good relationship between the emperor and his subordinates, both of them should fulfil their obligations and observe the rituals according to their status. So should the father and the son" (48). Regarding the Confucian conception of hierarchy, Wang indicates that the concept of hierarchy has long served as a dominant value in China, regulating the politics, patriarchy, and daily lives of people in Chinese society (83). In the Confucian value system, respect for seniority and the

distinction between inferiors and authority are prerequisites for the stability of the community. The prominent political and literary figure in the Song dynasty, Fan Zhongyan (989–1052) proposed, “Know the etiquette and humility, do not be negligent and frivolous. Respect the elders and care for the young, and show compassion for the widows, widowers and the poor” (Fan 17).

In *Big Fish and Begonia*, although the spirits living in the Round-Dragon House are closely related to each other, they also have distinct hierarchical characteristics. This design implies that the worldview of *Big Fish and Begonia* is not flat, but vertical. This social structure argues for a clear hierarchy, and through the value of the idea of family and the reverence for patriarchal order, the social structure presents an authority-dependent pattern. There is a dependent relationship between the individual and the community. For example, in the film, the villagers follow the leadership of the village leader, and when Qiu tries to break the rules to open the sky, the villagers choose to seek help from Qiu's grandmother. Another example is that the rat lady, a symbol of darkness and filth, lives in the underground of the sewers, while the silkworm goddess Lei Zu appears near the clear, large river.

The Confucian concepts of ‘ritual’ (礼) and ‘music’ (乐) are relatively easy to identify in *Big Fish and Begonia*. Confucianism values artistic practice and the relationship between aesthetic and moral values. In discussing Confucianism's view of art, Mullis suggests that Confucius believed that rituals were necessary to achieve social harmony and that art, as an essential part of rituals, was critical for achieving social harmony and enhancing one's self-cultivation (100). The relationship between ritual and music is extensively discussed by

Confucius in the *Book of Rites*:

Music is the harmonization of heaven and earth; the rites order heaven and earth. When there is harmony, the myriad living things are in accord; when there is order, all things are differentiated. (*Book of Rites* 99)

When the rites and propriety are established, noble and base are made equal; when music and refinement are brought together, high and low are harmonized. (*Book of Rites* 99)

Modern neo-Confucian Liang Shuming holds that the relationship between music, rites and individual emotions is rather intimate. “Emotions arise from inner feelings and take shape externally; this is what forms the basis for the content and essence of ritual and music” (108). Human emotions arise from inner feelings and are formed externally; this is what forms the basis for the content and essence of ritual and music. Confucians placed emphasis on ritual, music, and ceremonial life because they were able to direct and cultivate emotions from the outside in. Emotions must be honest, sincere, profound, and wise. The concepts of ritual and music allow for a variety of emotions to be expressed in an orderly, moderate manner. It is under the guidance of music and the regulation of ritual that human life achieves a certain continuity and natural stability.

In *Big Fish and Begonia*, in the typical scene of the coming-of-age ceremony, the gods stand in two rows inside the gate with the word ‘rite’ (禮) posted on it. This scene directly points to the fact that the structure of the film is heavily based on the concept of

ritual in Confucianism. The completion of the coming-of-age ceremony symbolizes the maturity of the young generation within the community, who will continue its vitality. The maturation of their transcendent power enables them to control water, fire, seasons, and other essential elements in the human world. In this scene, there is the recurrence of musical



Fig 8 Word li posted on the buildin

elements such as bells and the Chinese flute. The application of these elements not only creates a sacred atmosphere but also accepts the importance of ritual and music in the process of personal growth and maturity.

In addition, there are several close-ups of the ceramic ocarina, an ancient instrument that was widely used in the court and as a ritual accompaniment during the Zhou dynasty. The ocarina has a clear symbolic meaning in the film. In the two scenes where Chun doubts herself and tries to awaken Kun's soul, the director does not apply dialogue but has Chun play with a fish-shaped ocarina. The imagery of the ocarina appears for the first time in the film

when Chun is afraid and confused about the passing of life because of the death of the human boy (*Big Fish and Begonia* 00:20:36). The melody of the ocarina awakens the statue of the Pi Xiu. Pi Xiu's guidance was an important factor in prompting Chun to risk her life for Kun.



Fig 9 The imagery of the ocarina

The design of this scene implicitly reflects that music has an intimate connection with human agency. The second appearance of the ocarina is after the grown-up Kun's failed attempt to pass through the gate. This scene is a transitional point in the storyline of Chun and Kun.

When Kun gets injured and falls unconscious, Chun played the ocarina and wakes him. After regaining consciousness, Kun is determined to return to the human world and finally succeeds in passing through the gate. By depicting the scene where Kun is awakened by music, the film visualizes the concept of 'music' in Confucianism in a direct but artistic way.

Through the practice of music, both Kun and Chun make the transition from confusion to determination. The use of the ceramic ocarina in the film also reflects the director's reflections on the modern meaning of traditional Confucianism.

In reflecting the tension between the community and individual, the film does not cater to the Confucian philosophy of collective interests over individual interests, which is commonly accepted by Chinese audiences (Liu 11). As a result, the controversy over *Big Fish and Begonia* centres on the film's depiction of the relationship between the community and the individual. In embodying the concept of the community, the film makes frequent use of panoramic shots to include the characters of the community without distinction, thus weakening the existence of the individual. For example, in the scene in which Chun stands in opposition to the villagers to protect Kun, the individual characteristics of the villagers in terms of dress and expression are weakened. The villagers are depicted as a blurred group holding flaming torches. In this scene, Chun, in vivid red clothes, contrasts sharply with the group of villagers.



Fig 10 The image of Kun

In addition to the direct conflict between the character and the community, *Big Fish and Begonia* also devises a conflict between different standpoints. In the scene where Chun tries to trade half of his life for Kun's soul, the dialogue between Chun and the soul keeper is very representative. The soul keeper represents the established order and rules of the community on the one hand; on the other, it also represents a cautious and conservative attitude towards life. "You youngsters, treat life as if it were rocks on the roadside, while we old people, try everything we can to live one more day"(1:01:25). It is easy to identify from the conversation between the soul keeper and Qiu that the soul keeper does not approve of Qiu's act of using life as a bargaining chip in exchange of Chun's life. This difference in standpoint is even more evident in Chun's conflict with the soul keeper: "The heaven have their rules, which you are now publicly violating," says the soul keeper in a warning tone. "I don't care, I must revive him". Chun's attitude seems more resolute. Then the soul keeper further explains the consequences of violating the rules: "Disobeying the heavens will incur the harshest of punishments, no matter who you are". The soul keeper represents the survival and interests of the collective, and compliance with the order is the basis of social stability and harmony in the context of Confucianism. Chun, on the other hand, focuses on the realization of her own will, and she is willing to pay the price of her life to achieve her goals.

None of the characters is cast as the hero or villain. It is worth noting that *Big Fish and Begonia* does not divide characters in terms of good and evil in its character design. Nonetheless, each of the main characters has a complete identity and a clear position. The characters' actions are based on their logics. The film is produced mainly from a first-person

narrative perspective, and the narrator has omniscience. The film uses Chun in her twilight years as the narrator, a design that allows the audience to observe Chun's life from a different point in time. This way of storytelling effectively ensures the integrity of the audience's understanding of the plot. Meanwhile, it balances the expression of the characters' subjective emotions with the objective development of the story. In embodying the film's view of life, the director narrates the cycle of human life through the elder Chun's voice:

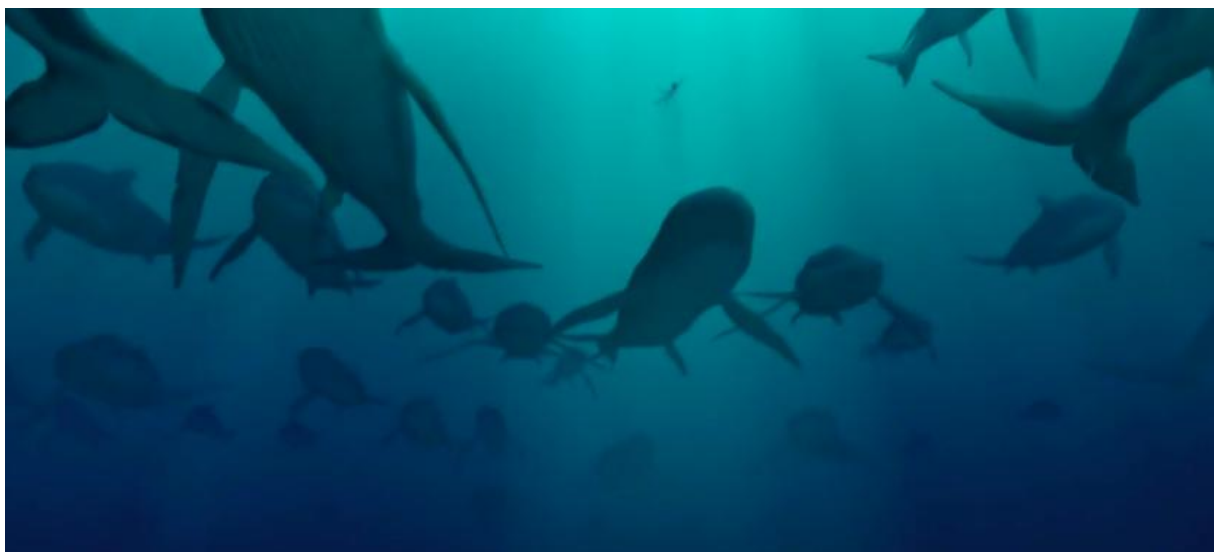


Fig 11 The imagery of giant fish

“I am already 117 years old. Many times I have told them that each living human being is a giant fish in the sea. and that human life is just like swimming across the sea” (*Big Fish and Begonia* 00:02:12). The monologue of the elderly Chun at the beginning of the film enables the audience to quickly grasp the meaning of the central symbol of the fish and equate humans' souls with the fish.

Moreover, at times the narrative voice shifts to a first-person or a third-person limited perspective, providing stronger insight into a particular character. This fluidity of narrative

voice allows readers to observe and understand the thoughts and reactions of the various characters as they respond to the events around them. By encouraging the audience to empathize with all characters, Liang and Zhang generate sympathy and understanding for each of them, regardless of how unpalatable their actions might appear. This comprehensive approach to constructing the characters' identities serves to guide the viewer to examine the relationship between the individual and the community objectively. Since Confucianism has played a dominant role in Chinese society from ancient times to the present (Mou 118), its emphasis on community and order means the audience tends to ignore this design in the process of watching the film and inadvertently brings about the generally accepted concept of the collective over the individual into their perception of the film. This is one of the main reasons for the imbalance between the narrative concept and the audience's aesthetic expectations.

Regarding this imbalanced relationship, Liu Yang provides a comprehensive discussion, suggesting that the main character's experience in the film is the most direct emotional experience for the audience. The film uses the elder Chun's voice as a sign of perspective shift, but the narrator's tone is relatively flat and largely devoid of emotional ups and downs. This makes the narration, which is supposed to be an emotional supplement, become a simple supplementary statement, solely to explain the plot for the audience (10). In the key scenes where Chun's grandfather dies to save Qiu, and Chun needs to choose between Kun's life and the safety of her community, the narrator's tone is aloof and detached, which causes the characters' emotions to become distanced from the themes of sacrifice, love,

and life. This flat tone deprives the film of the opportunity to communicate its intentions and themes to the audience. Meanwhile, although Chun's behaviour can be interpreted to a certain extent as a manifestation of holding on to her choice, it cannot be ignored that the main character's choice deviates significantly from the audience's moral aesthetics. Chun's choice to save Kun with half of her life is admirable, but Kun's death in the film is due to Chun's mistake, and Chun's actions and choices are intertwined with the motive to assuage her guilt and make up for her mistakes. Therefore, Chun's behaviour of sacrificing her community in order to assuage her guilt is relatively selfish. In the end, Qiu sacrifices himself for the rebirth of both Chun and Kun in the human world. On the one hand, this is Qiu's insistence on self-choice, and on the other, it adds proof of Chun's selfishness. There is a clear disconnect between this plot setting and the film's theme of love and perseverance.

With a more balanced and smoother narrative and plot design, *Big Fish and Begonia's* portrayal of Daoist philosophy is more sensitive and subtle. In presenting the Daoist idea and ideal, the film focuses on three topics: the Daoist conception of life, the Daoist interpretation of self-awareness, and the relationship between sacrifice and self-accomplishment. Through the discussion of life, death, and reincarnation, Liang and Zhang try to present the simple Daoist philosophy in an intuitive way. The storylines of the three main characters Chun, Kun, and Qiu in the film are all centred on the reincarnation of life, focusing on the transformation and rebirth of the characters in different forms of life. Fish are the most representative imagery in the film, symbolizing the origin of human life. Zhuang Zi contains many narratives about fish and its related aspects, including the imagination of fish transforming

into birds, debates about the joy of fish, and multiple plots about dreaming of fish. In the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi and Huizi are walking along the dam of the Hao River, when Zhuangzi says, “How the fish come to play! That is how the fish enjoy themselves.” Huizi says, “You are not a fish. How do you know what fish enjoy?” (Zhuangzi 189). These quotes demonstrate that the human cognitive ability cannot go beyond the scope of sensory experience and cannot understand the nature of things and the laws of development. All things have their own laws of existence and development, and individuals can only obey this natural boundary.

In the context of Daoism, fish is not an isolated subject but is extensively linked to multiple objects such as water, birds, and humans. Through the construction of these images, Zhuang Zi expresses his special understanding and profound reflection on human social ethics, political positions, and the ultimate meaning of life and the spiritual world (Mou 53).



Fig 12 The imagery of giant fish

Big Fish and Begonia presents the human soul as a fish, which is very much in line with the Daoist concept that all things are closely related. The image of fish is the basis for building the relationships between the film's characters. For example, in the human world, Chun and Kun first meet when Chun is in the form of a red dolphin. While in the realm of the gods, Kun's soul also exists in the form of a fish. The imagery of fish recurs in the human world and the realm of the gods and the two worlds are connected through the sea. The main characters achieve their breakthrough and transformation by going up to the sky and entering the sea. The connections between fish and water, sky and sea, spirit and flesh connect all things in the film, forming an open worldview where there is no absolute good or evil, and where reality and illusion co-exist. The construction of this worldview is beyond the concept of human ethics emphasized by Confucianism. In this film, the meaning of life lies in constant growth and transformation. The scene where Kun eventually grows huge wings and flies through the gates of the sea and the sky suggests that this natural life force transcends mundane rules. Liang and Zhang put more passion into their love for the whole universe and nature. Through the transformation of a large fish into a giant bird, they embody the infinite possibilities of life in nature.

In addition, the characters of the film reflect the concept of 'Zi Ran' (自然) in Daoist philosophy. At the beginning of the film, the identity of Chun's group is explained: "Its sky lies just beneath the bottom of the ocean of our human world. The people there know the magic that governs the natural rhythms of Earth" (*Big Fish and Begonia* 00:03:36). It is worth noting that this monologue not only sets the tone for the whole film, but also indicates

the position of Chun's group: they are not the controllers of nature or rule makers, but the guardians of the law of nature. Although these characters within the community are in charge of the cycles of life and death, they never destroy nature or change it arbitrarily. Zhuang Zi, in his 'Mountain and Wood' chapter, also proposes that "man and nature are one", and that they should be one, interconnected and interdependent, with man's existence conforming to the changes of nature and preserving his true nature and self (Zhuangzi 209). Almost every character has a fascinating origin grounded in ancient Chinese legends and mythical texts like the Classic of Mountains and Seas (山海经) and Search of the Supernaturals (搜神记). The supernatural abilities of the characters are closely related to the elements in nature. For example, 'Chun' means the sacred wood of ancient China, and she is in charge of the growth of begonias. Chun's grandfather, Pie, is in charge of all plants and transforms into a giant tree after his death. Chun's grandmother is in charge of the birds and appears in the film as a phoenix. There is also the god of fire, Zhu Rong, the god of water, Chi Song Zi, and Gong Gong, who is in charge of the land. The natural elements and lifeforms appear in the film as anthropomorphic images, and the interaction between the characters reflects the interplay and mutual influence of the various elements in nature. This interaction transcends the social laws of the human world and the constraints of time, thus embodying 'the constancy to the activities of heaven' (Tian Dao You Chang, 天道有常) advocated by Xunzi (175). Xunzi believed that nature operates with its laws, and the interactions between individuals occur naturally rather than deliberately (177). To a certain extent, the destiny of an individual is formed naturally in the process of interaction.

The open view of life embodied in *Big Fish and Begonia* fits quite well with the Daoist conception of life. First, in analysing the idea of life, Li suggests that Daoist philosophy advocates caring for human beings and cherishing life, abnegating killing because of compassion (263). The Daoist system of thoughts has a comprehensive and extensive exposition of life. From ‘caring for life’, ‘appreciating the self’, and ‘longevity’ in the Lao Zi and ‘protecting life’, ‘making life complete’, ‘living to the end of one's allotted lifespan’, and ‘respecting life’, in the Zhuang Zi, to ‘caring for life and appreciating the self’, of the Master Lv's *Spring and Autumn Annals* (吕氏春秋), and of

always been present in Daoist teachings. The two plaques that frequently appear in *Big Fish and Begonia* are largely in line with the

Fig. 13 The plaque reads 'Hui Na Wan Chuan'

Daoist interpretation of the essence of life. 'Hui' represents wisdom, 'Na' represents an embrace, and 'Chuan' represents rivers. This plaque tries to convey the message that real wisdom can encompass everything. It is hung in the Rusheng House, where the souls of



Fig 13 The plaque reads 'Hui Na Bai Chuan'

deceased humans rest. The soul keeper, whose code of conduct is to be tolerant of and responsive to human nature, knows that Chun's behaviour is against the laws of their

community, but still assists her in reviving Kun. The soul keeper with his omniscient perspective plays a relatively neutral role in the film. In anticipation of Chun and Qiu's fate, the soul keeper does not interfere with the characters' choices. This plot implicitly echoes the Daoist concept of 'Wu Wei' (无为), which is 'to follow the natural nature and trend of things'. Another plaque reads 'Jin Mu Chang Sheng' (金母长生). It is located in the centre of the Round-Dragon House. This allusion is from the *Tao-Te Ching*, which means that heaven and earth can last for a long time because they do not operate and exist for their own sake. In other words, life lasts because it follows the laws of nature. The laws of nature recurs in the scene of Chun and Kun's interaction, suggesting the tension between the laws of nature and the laws of the community.



Fig 14 The plaque reads 'Jin Mu Chang Sheng'

What is more, the dialogue of the characters in the film also reflects the director's reflection on the Daoist concept of life:

Chun: Grandpa, where do humans go when they die?

Pie: Their body will turn into dirt.

Chun: Will we die too?

Pie: Of course, where there is life, there is death. It is the law of nature. Death is nothing but the gate to eternity (*Big Fish and Begonia* 00:19:51).

This dialogue hints at *Big Fish and Begonia's* interpretation of life. Zhuang Zi advocated that 'life and death are equal', considering them both part of natural evolution. He wrote: "life and death are fixed, like day and night, which are natural. Human beings cannot intervene" (Lin 731). In this scene, the director applies a montage technique, combining Pie's long hair and the river, reflecting that human life is the same as the river, constantly diverging and re-joining, flowing endlessly towards the end. This poetic expression does not define death as the end of life, but rather as the integration of the individual and nature, the individual is born from nature and eventually returns to nature, and all fates are interrelated. Just as in Chun's monologue in the film:



Fig 15 Montage technique

Every living human being is a giant fish in the sea. Then they are born, their journey in the sea starts. Human life is just like swimming across the sea. Sometimes they meet, and sometimes they depart. When they die, they arrive at the shore, and head for their respective worlds. (*Big Fish and Begonia* 00:30:49)

The attitude of the characters towards sacrifice in *Big Fish and Begonia* is more indicative of self-realization and self-seeking beyond social constraints. In the film, Chun trades half of her life for the soul of Kun. Chun's soul is presented as a translucent begonia flower. From then on, a begonia flower grows from the bottom of Kun's fish tank. The imagery of the begonia flower visualizes the connection between the lives of the characters, thus reflecting the inherent connection between all entities in the Daoist ideological framework. The begonia functions as a symbol of Chun's life and also makes it easier for the audience to identify the characters' presence in the plot. When Chun becomes a begonia tree to block the flood, the audience does not need to identify the characters by their specific images; the blooming begonia tree represents Chun's vigorous life force.



Fig 16 The imagery of begonia

On the other hand, in comparison to *Big Fish and Begonia's* ambitious world outlook, the main character Chun is not easy to like: she is sensitive, obstinate, and dismissive of other characters' admonitions. Her choice is arguably selfish. *Big Fish and Begonia's* depiction of Chun's interactions with the community is very limited. Chun appears independently in most scenes. The scene design alludes to Chun's independence and the rebellious nature of her personality. This characterization is not in line with Confucianism's expectations and requirements for the individual. However, if we look at Daoism's definition of the self, the setting of the character's struggle and rebellion is reasonable. Unlike Confucianism, Daoism takes the individual as the starting point. According to Laozi, "Dao does not violate its own nature and thus achieves its virtue because it abides by nature" (25). The primary requirement of Daoism for the individual is to conform to the natural laws of all things, to follow the inevitable trend of development, and to oppose arbitrary interference, conquest, and destruction. It proposes an open life outlook that conforms to the natural tendency of things and opposes social rules' restrictions on human nature. Chun's characterization is more in line



Fig 17 The imagery of Chun and Kun

with the Daoist description of individual development. The scene of her interaction with Kun in the gap between two walls reflects the tension between individual consciousness and collective rules in a calm and peaceful atmosphere. The wide sky contrasts with the crumbling architectural walls, and the greyness of the enclosed building contrasts with the red giant fish and Chun. The perspective of this scene changes from an overhead view to an upward view of the walled house, which symbolizes shackles and rules, highlighting the expanse and freedom of the sky, echoing the theme of the character's pursuit of their hearts.

The dragon king mask is another core symbol in the depiction of the character's pursuit of self-achievement and the relief of nature. Qiu plays the role of Chun's guardian throughout the film. One of the most representative scenes is when Qiu, as the water god, steals the mask of the dragon king and tries to open the sky to send Kun back to the human world. In this scene, Qiu does not appear in his original appearance. He is bound by the rules



Fig 18 Qiu in the mask of dragon king

of the community, but with the mask of the dragon king, Qiu releases his inner impulse and will, giving up his social identity and stepping out of morality and order to act according to his own will. The imagery of the dragon king mask symbolizes Qiu's change in identity. Qiu burns his bridges when he risks his life for the rebirth of Kun. Qiu, with a dragon mask, has a sense of desperation and determination. The dragon king mask can either hide the real self or release it. This release of real self may also entail the risk of losing social identity, since "the mask has no mobility, it only produces an image or an idea; it represents a choice, it indicates an intention" (Poirion 27). Qiu chooses to abandon his social identity to help Chun achieve her goal, and this tragic sacrifice is the ultimate realization of his identity as the guardian he insists on being.

Although the above analysis discusses Confucianism and Daoism separately, integration and harmony are among the key themes of *Big Fish and Begonia*. In this film, the interdependence of life and death between the giant wood and the phoenix, the connection between the sky and the sea, and the inextricable connection between the soul keeper and the rat lady, who symbolize light and darkness, all point to the spiritual core of harmony and symbiosis. Therefore, if *Big Fish and Begonia* is solely interpreted from a Confucian perspective, misunderstanding and criticism will easily occur. It is worth noting that the relationship between Confucianism and Daoism was not depicted as co-existing or parallel in this animated work. The boundaries between these two ideologies are blurred and show the tendency of being more integrated and unified. Confucianism and Daoism together form the tone of the Chinese ideological system. Through the process of interpenetration and

complementation, Confucianism and Daoism construct the inherent root of Chinese thought.

Mou provides a theoretical basis for this complementary relationship between Daoism and Confucianism. Firstly, there is harmony between the explicit, representational culture and the implicit, abstract culture (243). As suggested in *General History of China*, Confucianism was the dominant ideology in Chinese society for two millennia after the Han dynasty, and it shines brightly in Chinese society today. In contrast, the role of Daoism was more subtle, as it advocated conformity to human nature and unobtrusiveness. Meanwhile, the Daoist doctrine gradually permeated into the Confucian ideological system, playing the role of moderating and complementing.

Secondly, the complementary relationship between Confucianism and Daoism shows a balance between a driven culture and a moderated culture (Mou 244). Confucianism is distinctly mundane and secular in nature, emphasizing the contribution and responsibility of the individual to the community, nation, and society. Therefore, Confucianism closely links the viability and development of society to the individual. As Gu (220) suggests, “for the rise and fall of the country, every common man has his obligation” (天下兴亡匹夫有责). The role of Confucianism is demonstrated through motivating and encouraging individuals to participate in society and create social value. Daoism, however, focuses more on cultivating individuals' spiritual world and recognizing their personal needs, promoting a calm and moderate state of mind (Mou 244). Therefore, Daoism's function in reconciling individuals and society is manifested when they are caught in contradictions and dilemmas in the pursuit of development. For example, “calamity is what good fortune depends on” (福兮祸之所倚,

祸兮福之所伏) (Zhuangzi 170). The concept of transformation of weal and woe in Daoist philosophy is intended to guide the individual to maintain a relatively stable state of mind in the face of adversity, conflict, and joy.

Thirdly, the complementary relationship between Confucianism and Daoism shows a balance between community and individual (Mou 246). Noting that individuals and society have different developmental contradictions and priorities at different phases, the blend of Confucianism and Daoism makes the edification function of these two thoughts align with the needs of individuals and society in different discourses. Confucianism focuses on serving the community and nation, which promotes the collective good as a priority. Daoism, on the other hand, focuses more on the idea of ‘self’ and the pursuit of harmony between spirit and body (Mou 245). For example, In *Tao Te Ching* Laozi (168) suggested that “It’s a humiliation to expect more than you deserve and a danger if you don’t know when to stop” (知足不辱, 知止不殆). Zhuang Zi’s philosophy is of being content with one’s nature and life (顺性安命). Both Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi’s theories are anchored in inner peace and satisfaction. The blend of Confucianism and Daoism enables individuals to pursue social values and self-fulfilment, while also reserving the necessary space for their spiritual needs and the expansion of their individuality, therefore achieving a balance between the individual and the community.

Fourth, the complementary relationship between Confucianism and Daoism shows a balance between realism and transcendentalism (Mou 247). Confucianism emphasizes truth-seeking and pragmatism, and is oriented towards the realities of social life, such as the order and development of the family and the state. Confucianism’s ‘Dao’ emphasizes the

fulfilment of and obedience to concrete order, rules, and laws. Daoism is more concerned with the metaphysical world, taking the human spirit out of the real world and mundane life, beyond material utilitarianism and moral life. Therefore, “the eternal ‘Dao’ can not be named” (道可道，非常道) (Laozi 3), “the great voice sounds faint; the great image has no shape; Dao is concealed and has no name” (大音希声，大象无形，道隐无名) (Laozi 78). The individual should “attain the ultimate emptiness; maintain the absolute tranquillity” (致虚极，守静笃) (Laozi 28). Daoism breaks through the limitations of the state or political system and is more concerned with the nature of man and his harmonious coexistence with the natural environment. This ideology places the existence of the individual in a context as grand as the universe, where the nature of the man behind the tangible world is explored and questioned.

The polarized review of *Big Fish and Begonia* is a manifestation of the artistic ambition of this independent animated film. While bringing together the idea of two main religious thoughts into a 100-minute-long story, Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun conduct a meaningful attempt to integrate different religious concepts. However, the consistency of the film's narrative concept and the audience's aesthetic expectations to a large extent determine the film's fate. The limitations of *Big Fish and Begonia* are mainly reflected in the incomplete representation of the worldview and the fragmentation of the description of Confucian and Daoist value systems. Most importantly, the behaviour of Chun, the main character in the narrative, deviates greatly from the traditional moral aesthetic of the audience. From a macro perspective of China's independent film development, *Big Fish and Begonia* is an important attempt for Chinese independent films to meet the audience's aesthetic expectations in terms

of expression. The rise of independent films can effectively guide audiences to adapt to diverse film aesthetics. The creation of *Big Fish and Begonia* is thus of pioneering significance.

Chapter 3. Situating Chinese Independent Animation in a Broader Discourse

The controversy that *Big Fish and Begonia* faces has referential implications for the long-term development of Chinese animation. The purpose of theoretical research and interpretation of independent animation is neither to criticize and question, nor to draw specific conclusions. The most fundamental purpose of theoretical research is to serve artistic creation. The narrative concept of *Big Fish and Begonia* has been clearly defined to convey the modern importance of traditional religious philosophy through its poetic storyline. The deviation of the film's theme from the audience's aesthetic expectations provides an opportunity for reflection on the choice of narrative strategy for future independent animation creation. The characters' personalities and destinies are the main way to depict the traditional religious ideology of the nation. In terms of the selection of symbolic elements, *Big Fish and Begonia* may need to further restore and expand the meaning behind the typical narrative symbols, and to enhance the connection between different visual and aural symbols therefore avoiding the viewers' sense of fragmentation in the process of watching the film. Taking the first scene as an example: after the introduction of Zhuangzi's *Happy Excursion* at the very beginning, the connotation of this literal symbol can be more fully embedded in the film by expanding the interpretation of the text. With more information provided, the audience can understand the specific meaning of this text more thoroughly. In addition, Kun, who is a

symbol of the Daoist idea of being free, natural, and not overly bound by rules, plays a key role in the film. Nonetheless, in this film, Kun goes through a ‘rebellious journey’ that is contrary to the laws of society, and once Kun has no pond to live in and no wind to ride, he will still be trapped. This reflects the sadness of not being able to transcend fate or the laws of nature. The storyline of Chun, the heroine, also contains a certain amount of tragedy. The price of Chun’s choice of rescuing Kun is the suffering of her people and community. After Chun sends Kun back to the human world and sacrifices her life to save her community, Chun's final resurrection comes at the cost of Qiu's life. As the theme of the film is the conception of life and the pursuit of true self in the context of Daoism and Confucianism, the narration of Chun in her twilight years can be further utilized to reflect the theme, such as adding descriptions of the meaning of life, interpretations of the rules and order in the context of Confucianism, and discussion about the idea of nature in the context of Daoism. By expanding the symbolic connotation and supplementing the religious message, the fragmentation of *Big Fish and Begonia* in terms of value perception will be improved.

However, equating the modern thinking of traditional religion conveyed by *Big Fish and Begonia* with the overall trend of artistic expression in Chinese independent animation is biased and inappropriate. In China's independent animation environment, animation creators are gradually moving away from superficial ‘traditional Chinese imagery’ such as the Monkey King, pandas, dumplings, and red lanterns to pursue more profound cultural expressions, not only to bring Chinese images into the international arena, but also to give new vitality to traditional Chinese thought and ideology. In terms of cultural export, Japan has started earlier than China, and the content involved is also richer and more

comprehensive. The work of Miyazaki Hayao is a rather convincing example. Miyazaki's works, such as *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and *Spirited Away* (2001) have explored the relationship between humans and nature and the cultivation of the human spiritual world in diverse ways. The recurrence of traditional Japanese cultural symbols in these works demonstrates Miyazaki's reflection and questioning of the construction of personal identity, the critical role of nature, and the modern significance of Shinto ideas and ideals.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, apart from the debates on plot design and characters' value system construction, the controversy about the visual expression of *Big Fish and Begonia* mainly focuses on its excessive similarity to Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*. However, through the binary discussion of Confucianism and Daoism and the analysis of character design, *Big Fish and Begonia* is still noteworthy in reflecting the traditional Chinese ideological system. However, this controversial point can trigger an inquiry into the creative intent of *Big Fish and Begonia* and *Spirited Away*. Taking these two influential animated works as examples, through similar visual artistic techniques, it seems that both Chinese independent animation and Japanese animation are trying to convey a similar message: that traditional religious beliefs still play an indispensable role in modern social life. The comparative study of *Big Fish and Begonia* and *Spirited Away* considers Chinese independent animation from an international perspective. Moreover, through comparative analysis, it is easy to see that the topic of modernizing of traditional religion is not only limited to the artistic expression of typical Chinese animation artists; it has cross-cultural significance and research value.

Released in 2001, *Spirited Away* (せんと千尋の神隠し) is a Japanese animated coming-of-age fantasy film directed by Miyazaki Hayao. This film tells a story of humans, nature, and spiritual beings. Ten-year-old Chihiro and her parents stumble upon a seemingly abandoned amusement park. After her mother and father are turned into giant pigs, Chihiro meets the mysterious Haku, who explains that the park is a resort for supernatural beings who need a break from their time spent in the earthly realm and that she must work there to free herself and her parents.

First, on the aspect of religious expression, *Spirited Away*, like *Big Fish and Begonia*, has chosen the most influential religious beliefs in its own culture as the ideological basis for its artistic creation. Shinto, as the core of Japanese religious thought, has influenced Japanese aesthetics, literature, and national characteristics. As Pye indicates, Shinto can be defined as a natural, national religion in nature. As the ‘primal religion’ of Japan, Shinto is closely associated with the issue of Japanese social and political identity (1). The ideas of purity, nature worship, animism, and harmony that Shinto advocates play critical roles in constructing Japanese cultural identity. It is notable that in modern Japan, a large number of Japanese animation artists import the idea of Shinto into their art creations. Through plots in which the protagonist fulfils and changes their identity by interacting with spiritual beings, the artists express their perceptions about life, spirituality, religion, and nature. Miyazaki emphasizes that contrary to the metaphysical and ambiguous spiritual guidance, Shinto and animist philosophy still matter. *Spirited Away* is a story about finding oneself and recognizing oneself. In the plot of Chihiro regaining her name and saving her parents, Miyazaki incorporates a large number of Shinto images, which allows the film to build a

modern fantasy world in a traditional religious atmosphere. Through his animated work, Miyazaki argues that an individual's process of self-recognition must take place in the context of the supportive of the natural community, including humans, animals, and kami (神). In modern society, constructing and cultivating an individual's spiritual world is necessary.

Miyazaki's films have a distinct mythical quality, and his animated works express his unique interpretations of Shinto through an accessible visual method. As Shinto scholar Thomas Kasulis suggests, "individual never exists without some relation to the spiritual" (16). From Kasulis's point of view, the philosophy of Shinto encompasses the idea of animism. In the Shinto worldview, the deities or spiritual beings are interdependent and closely related to the entire material world, including human beings. *Spirited Away* is an inspirational piece of cinema. The fantasy of Miyazaki's animation comes largely from his artistic representation of Shinto deities and supernatural phenomena. In Miyazaki's artistic world, these sacred or hideous spiritual beings appear in a form that is in line with the aesthetic expectations of the audience, which reflects a delicate balance between artistic expression and traditional culture.

In historical discourse, the similarities between Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto are mainly reflected in the continuing communal influence and the close relationship with political rule. Shinto is also a longstanding philosophy in the context of Japanese society, and runs through Japanese history. The shift of Shinto's function is quite consistent with the evolutionary trajectory of the role of religious belief in China on a macro level. Shinto has had different functions during different historical periods. During the feudal period, Shinto served primarily as a tool for the emperor to consolidate and maintain his rule, and therefore

it was more politically charged during this period. During the Heian period, both *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* had formally promulgated the familial connection between the sun kami Amaterasu and the imperial line (Kasulis 94). Therefore, the emperor was the direct descendant of the kami. The function of Shinto around this period started to transform into consolidating the political power of the emperor and stabilizing the domination. During the Kamakura period, Shinto started to satisfy the needs of the general public, and the religion of citizens was restored. Because the ruler promoted Shinto through the support of policy, the significance of the religious artifacts and the authority of Shinto shrines was recognized. During the Edo period, Yoshida Shinto was combined with Confucian thoughts and emphasized the significance of being loyal to the emperor. It was not only related to rites and rituals, but was the foundation of politics and morality.

During the Meiji restoration, the main purpose of Shinto was to revive the royal power and unify the country. “To define an ideological space for enlisting essentialist Shinto spirituality in the service of nationalism, the Japanese government supported ‘State Shinto’” (Kasulis 134). With the expansion of Japanese militarism, promoting nationalism and ruling the nation through the spiritual method became the primary purposes of Shinto. After World War II, religion and government separated from each other. In 1946, the Japanese emperor issued ‘The Humanity Declaration’. This denied the idea that the emperor was the descendant of the kami, and Shinto transformed into a folk belief system.

Shinto has also made a return from the political to the secular in modern society. With rapid industrialization and urbanization, people in the modern world are experiencing a

strong sense of alienation. As Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin suggests in his book *Regionalizing Culture: The Political Economy of Japanese Popular Culture in Asia*, "Big cities in East Asia increasingly resemble one another as their residents share similar types of employment, education, lifestyle, and consumption patterns and aspire to the same standard of living" (19). In order to better adapt to the changes in production and living modes caused by industrialization and urbanization, people are cut off from their traditions, families, communities, nature, and hope for the future. Although urbanization, to some extent, shortens the physical distance between individuals and brings specific benefits, such as more opportunities for employment and education, it also increases the pressure of modern people and makes their anxiety and panic easier to spread. One of the significances of Shinto is that it helps people in modern society to rebuild connections with things around them. Through this process of interaction, individuals can gain their memories and experience, which is critical in forming a sound personality and identity. A Shinto-inspired community understands the idea of community as extending far beyond simply the 'human society'. It reinforces the emotional acceptance of non-human beings, including all animals, non-living objects, and kami.

Shinto philosophy permeates through the daily lives of Japanese people. "Shintoism is seen as an integral part of Japanese cultural fabric and traditions rather than a doctrinaire religion with orthodox teachings and theological principles, especially for younger generations of Japanese" (Lim 151). For example, it is easy to find a Shinto shrine in every Japanese city or village, and people with different social roles all tend to visit Shinto shrines

before important moments in their lives. Fig. 22 shows the distribution density of shrines in different areas of Japan. Also, Japanese people tend to dry their clothes at the sunniest spot in their homes because they believe that is where kami exist. According to the graph showing the density of Shinto shrines, we can conclude that in Japan, people are always able to find a Shinto shrine to connect to Kami. Therefore, from both a historical and cultural aspect, Shinto has never disappeared from the lives of the Japanese people.

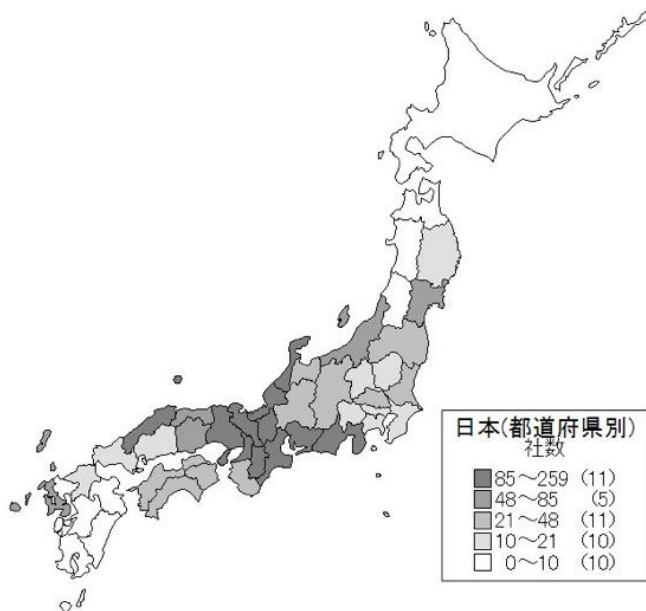


Fig 19 The density of Shinto Shrines in Japan

In terms of the film's graphic design and visual expression, both *Spirited Away* and *Big Fish and Begonia* have carefully chosen religious symbols. *Spirited Away* mainly demonstrates the worship of the forest, and the concept of animism in the context of Shinto. Lucy Wright carefully reviews the historical context of Shinto in her article ‘Forest Spirits, Giant Insects and World Trees, The Nature Vision of Hayao Miyazaki’, pointing out that “Shinto is one of the few surviving animistic faiths in the world” (3). Wright further provides

the information that Motoori Norinaga constructed a comprehensive outlook of ‘natural’ Shinto through “extensive studies of *Kojiki*”, and concluded that in the context of Shinto, the “Kami-given nature” allowed people to live in perfect harmony with their natural



Fig 20 Chihiro with Haku

surroundings (Wright 3). Shinto offers a careful discussion about the significance of maintaining a harmonious relationship between human and non-human beings and objects.

The poem written by the Meiji Emperor embodies this idea of harmony: “When all the seas, I deem, are our brethren, why do the winds and waves noisily rise?” (四方の海 みなはからと思ふ世に, など波風の 立ちさはぐらん) (Ono, *Shinto the Kami Way*). This poem

indicates that the relationship between humans and non-human objects is as close as families.

We are all connected, and we are all breathing each other’s breath. In this film, Haku, as one of the manifestations of the kami, is always with Chihiro. Haku plays a role as the companion, protector, and leader of Chihiro’s adventure in the world of the divine. Notably, *Spirited*

Away did not design kami's status as superior when designing the plot of human–kami

interactions. Haku is not a character without flaws or problems. Haku protects Chihiro in vary occasions; while interacting with Chihiro, he also achieves his self-recognition, which the film depicts in the film as him realizing his real name.

In the worldview of both Shinto and Miyazaki's cinema, nature is not just nature, but part of the divine fabric of reality, and as such deserves human respect. Nature worship runs through the entirety of Japanese history, and it is the root of Japanese culture. Japan has a relatively small land area, but the forest coverage rate is as high as 67%, of which 54% are natural forests (He 16). Since ancient times, the forest occupied an important place in the Japanese people's minds. The forest in the context of Japan is more than just the lushness of natural forest, the ubiquitous forest, as a religious and cultural symbol, it also provides solace to Japanese people on a spiritual level. Nature worship flows in the blood of the Japanese people. The worship of trees is the manifestation of forest worship. From the perspective of ancient Japanese, big trees are often bestowed with the nature of the divine. Residents in the forest have a close relationship with trees, and regard them as objects of worship. Tree worship is also a ritual of the ancient Japanese because they adored the vitality of trees. In ancient Japanese myth, birds were the incarnation of Gods, and were always perching on trees. Birds fly from the world of kami and bring the kami to the human world; trees are the place where the birds choose to perch, and are thus the boundary between the world of humans and the world of kami.

In the film *Spirited Away*, nature has the power to provide humans with a sense of belonging and plays a role as leading people to their true selves. *Torii* (鳥居), as one of the

symbols of Shinto, is the derivative of tree worship. The film's first hint that we are departing

the world of mundane and entering to the world of the divine comes in the form of a wooden gate called a *torii*. Miyazaki applies the first-person point of view in this scene to shorten the distance between the audience and characters. The main character and also the audience in this scene step into the world of divine together with Chihiro. The *torii* gates signify the entrance to a shrine of the Shinto religion. Entering through a *torii* signifies you are entering into the sacred realm of kami. The word Shinto itself means 'way of the gods'.



Fig 21 The wrecked Torii

Although Chihiro does not pass through this *torii*, this scene implies that she will pass through another gate soon and enter the realm of the kami. The original title of *Spirited Away* in Japanese is 'Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi' (千と千尋の神隠し), which means 'hidden by gods', a concept in Japanese folklore comparable to being taken or spirited away by fairies in European folklore. There are two main functions of Shinto symbolism in this film, one of

which is the function within the religion, for instance, in Shinto, the *torii* serves as manifestation of secret space and kami. In other words, we must be aware of the religious function of these symbols in reality beyond these films. Also, we must be aware that their functions within the work of art may not be the same as their functions in reality.

Moreover, the wrecked *torii* leaning against the tree in this specific scene also implies that the significance of Shinto has been forgotten; the cut-off between the human and spiritual world broke the original co-existing relationship between human and kami. The later scene where Chihiro's parents transform into giant pigs shows the consequence of being disrespectful towards kami. The scene following this also indicates modern people's ignorance of kami. Below the shrine, Chihiro notices the little stone houses called 'Hokora'. The Hokora in this scene are also wrecked. These tiny roadside shrines are meant to house minor kami and guardian spirits named by 'Dōsojin' (道祖神). Another representation of Dōsojin is roadside statues like the ones Chihiro notices in the forest and the one that forces her father to hit the brakes of his car abruptly. Dōsojin statues mark boundaries, such as the one that Chihiro and her family are about to cross. These kami are also thought to protect travellers and those in 'transitional phases'.



Fig 22 The wrecked Hokora

Similar to *Big Fish and Begonia*, *Spirited Away* also places humans in a larger worldview. By embodying the concept of animism in Shinto, *Spirited Away* tries to convey to the audience the concept of harmony between individuals and nature. Other than the human-shaped spiritual beings such as Haku and Yubaaba, the dust-elves are also with characteristics. They are members of the bathhouse and work for Kamaji, the half-human half-spider old being. When they find that Chihiro might be the one who can help them, they pretend that they are sick and tired. Also, they help Chihiro to find her shoes when Chihiro wants to visit her parents secretly. This scene also reveals the nature of Shinto. That is, there is no difference or hierarchy between human and non-human beings or objects; we can communicate with each other in some ways, and we are all living in this world, equally. Another example of animism is the jumping road lamp. On the one hand, it is an object; on the other hand, it also has a spirit. The jumping road lamp leads Chihiro to Zeniba's place, where she finds the way to save Haku. The jumping road lamp shows different emotions and

reactions in different situations. For example, in its first encounter with Chihiro, it is humble and bowed; when Chihiro leaves Zeniba's house it also waves its 'hand'. In *Spirited Away*, once human and non-human beings can communicate with each other, there is no difference between them. The boundary between human and spiritual beings blurs, they accompany each other, encourage each other, and they are emotionally bound with each other.



Fig 23 The dust-elf

In *Big Fish and Begonia*, Liang and Zhang demonstrate the teaching role of traditional religious philosophy through the interpretation and symbolic embodiment of the concept of 'Yue'. *Spirited Away* is also quite elaborate in terms of music design: through the use of traditional instruments that often appear in traditional Japanese religious ceremonies, Miyazaki also embodies the important role of Shinto as a teaching device in music and art. This musical design, which is highly consistent with the plot, allows the director's message to be conveyed more effectively to the audience. At the same time, the incorporation of such

traditional Japanese tunes can build a connection between the audience and the traditional religious culture represented by the music.

The use of Shamisen (三味線), which is frequently applied in Kagura (神楽), is a convincing example. The Kagura, a pantomimic dance with masks and music, representing some incident of the mythical narrative, has been at all times a prominent part of Shinto religious festivals, and, as in other countries, has become the parent of secular drama. In many scenes where Miyazaki depicts the coming of gods, he uses the soundtrack of 'Procession of Gods', which is a very Japanese style of film music. The first appearance of this soundtrack is at 13:53 of the film, and the second is at 30:31. The most representative scene is when Chihiro is overwhelmed by his sudden arrival in the realm of the gods, and a huge, brightly lit cruise ship slowly docks. Next, the gods in different forms come ashore, one after another. In combination with such a picture, the melody with traditional religious colours is chosen with the element of Shamisen. In addition, near the end of the film, when the various spirits in the bathhouse cheer Chihiro's successful return to the human world, the design of the scene is quite similar to the stage design in Kagura. The images of masked spirits dancing in different forms convey a message of the connection between tradition and modernity, and the harmonious coexistence of religion and secular life.



Fig 24 The coming of gods

In a nutshell, in delivering the themes, both *Big Fish Begonia* and *Spirited Away* emphasize the continued necessity of religious philosophy as a spiritual guide in modern society. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that in both animated films, abstract religious concepts appear in a figurative and symbolic manner. Although the cultural backgrounds of the two films are distinctly different, both films explore the relationship between human beings and the wider spiritual and natural world in their content. In modern society, the social nature of the individual is more pronounced; in other words, most of our interactions with the environment take place within human society. This trend is likely to lead to a fragmentation of man from the spiritual world as well as from nature. The emphasis on the concept of harmony in religious beliefs and the exploration of the spiritual world can rebuild these connections. Thus, traditional religious philosophy is positive for the shaping of individual identity in the context of modern society.



Fig 25 Gods in the bathhouse

Conclusion

The fundamental purpose of this thesis is to argue that in the modern Chinese context, traditional religious beliefs still have a continuing role in teaching and guiding individuals and even society. Applying close reading as the main research method, this thesis takes *Big Fish and Begonia* as a specific research object and attempts to analyse the interpretation and representation of traditional Daoist and Confucian philosophy by Chinese independent animation creators in their artistic expression. Through an overview of the development of Chinese independent animation in historical discourse, it is clear that the development of Chinese independent animation has undergone several ups and downs. In the past two decades, animation creators represented by Liang Xuan, Zhang Chun, Bu Sifan, and Pi San have embarked on a diversified creative trajectory. The target audience of Chinese animation has shown a trend from children to all ages. The expansion of the audience and the diversity of artistic expression have further optimized the creative environment of Chinese animation, therefore providing the possibility for more in-depth cultural expression. Through the combination of traditional religious symbols and images, Liang and Zhang demonstrate both the Confucian concept of ritual (*li* 礼) and music (*yue* 乐), and the Daoist philosophy of nature (*ziran* 自然) in the film. Meanwhile, the highlight of *Big Fish and Begonia* is that the film does not depict the different religious ideas separately but combines the two ideas through the Confucian concept of benevolence (*ren* 仁) and the Daoist concept of harmony, blurring the boundaries between the different religious beliefs. Thus, the film conveys to the audience a more ambitious religious view that Confucianism and Daoism complement each other and together constitute the ideological and cultural background of modern Chinese

society.

Big Fish and Begonia mainly argues for the modern significance of traditional religious culture from three aspects. First, in terms of genre and filming techniques, *Big Fish and Begonia*, as an independent animation, is with a distinct experimental and modern character. In terms of content selection, it renders the theme of traditional culture to a considerable extent. In addition, in expressing traditional ideology, *Big Fish and Begonia* chooses advanced visual communication technology to build a fantasy world through the combination of 2D and 3D techniques. In addition, in terms of artistic expression, the scene design and character design of *Big Fish and Begonia* echo the audience's expectations of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Instead of relying on superficial Chinese cultural symbols such as red lanterns, dragons, and dumplings, Liang and Zhang apply literal symbols such as plaques, masks, and the word 'rituals' posted on doors. This logic of visual expression is more in line with the Chinese audience's ideological perception and expectation of traditional culture. Shao and Ma (101) suggest that *Big Fish and Begonia's* spiritual and ethereal art style fits well with the concept of nature in Daoist philosophy. Also, Liu Yang (10) and Song Kai (161) also affirm the expression of 'Chineseness' in the artistic design of *Big Fish and Begonia*. Lastly, on a cultural level, *Big Fish and Begonia* embodies the teaching significance of traditional religious thought through modern means of artistic expression. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the plot design of *Big Fish and Begonia* demonstrates the concept of 'music' in Confucianism. Through Chun's act of using a ceramic ocarina to awaken Kun, the film tries to give the message that music functions as an inspiration for the individual. In

addition, the architectural and scene design of the film convey the directors' thoughts on the two concepts of community and order in Confucianism. In short, *Big Fish and Begonia* attempts to construct a connection between modern artistic expression and traditional religious culture. It argues for the continuing necessity of Daoism and Confucianism by demonstrating the relevance of specific religious ideas within modern society.

Situating *Big Fish and Begonia* and *Spirited Away* in a global perspective, the interpretations of the works shift from 'close reading' to 'far reading'. This new logic of interpretation allows us to 'step back' and offers the possibility of exploring the inherent connections between the two films. *Big Fish and Begonia* and *Spirited Away* share a very similar spiritual core. That is, they both explore the concept of harmony in depth and, through their artistic expressions, emphasize the role of art as a teaching device for individuals and society. As Laozi argued, "A large state is like a low land; it is the focus point of the world" (114). The great rivers all flow on lower land; therefore, there are hundreds of streams flowing into them. If a nation, a culture, remains humble, the whole world comes to it. The development of independent animation needs to have a global perspective. When pursuing the artistic expression of traditional culture and an ancient philosophical outlook, in addition to symbolic expression, animation creators should focus on rich connotation of the message conveyed by the symbols, plots, and artistic representations.

The dilemma of the development of traditional Chinese philosophy lies not only in the impact of Western ideology, but also in the Chinese people's neglect of traditional thought and the pursuit of material profits. The booming development of Chinese animation has, on

the one hand, brought Confucianism, Daoism, and traditional aesthetics back to the public through the use of traditional ideologies and images, thus alleviating the dilemma of the development of traditional culture and religious beliefs and compensating for the lack of spiritual cultivation of the Chinese people under the social atmosphere of consumerism and materialism. On the other hand, the speed of this development has, to a certain extent, caused imbalance between theoretical research and artistic creation. Whether Chinese animation can achieve sustainable development "mainly lies in whether the Chinese animation theory system can be established and whether animation theory can be closely combined with creation" (Cao 47). Cao suggests that Chinese animation practitioners lack a comprehensive understanding of animation history and related traditional cultural concepts, and this lack of knowledge and theoretical background may directly cause superficiality and inaccuracy in their artistic expression of animation. Therefore, it is especially important to explore the cultural core and traditional techniques of classic works in the history of Chinese animation. In addition, there are still a lot of research gaps in the field of Chinese animation that need to be filled. In addition to a vertical chronological approach to the development of Chinese animation, we also need to analyze the connections between animation works horizontally. Starting from the characters, events, and creators of the works, we need to explore the characteristics and connotations of Chinese animation in a comprehensive and in-depth manner. For researchers of Chinese animation at this stage, rather than pursuing originality and pioneering research, they should first integrate the relevant historical materials with a rigorous attitude, enriching theoretical research and detailed historical data, and establishing a complete theoretical system of animation research.

Viewing modern society from an objective perspective, consumerism, the abundance of material life, and the convenience of modern technology have led to a general focus on the accumulation of personal wealth and the pursuit of social status. Carelessness, in terms of an intellectually 'lazy' generation, will have a destructive effect on society. To restore the virtue of traditional ideology, the entire nation must seek a way back to innocence and decency.

Unlike scientific research, the central theme of religion is more simple and essential: through the discussion of the nature of human beings, it tries to enable individuals to have a more complete knowledge of themselves. This inward inquiry shifts the focus of our attention from the external environment and material level to the ultimate self. Religion, as the development of the most primitive totem worship, guides people to live in harmony with self, community, and nature, and also bonds people together in a well-integrated belief system that guides and disciplines individuals and communities on a spiritual level in conditions where human beings are immature in their own knowledge and moral literacy. The significance of extending the study of Daoism and Confucianism to popular culture is that it provides an opportunity for people in modern society to look rationally at the nature of life, materiality, and wealth. At the same time, the exploration and interpretation of morality in mainstream Chinese religious concepts can go a long way to avoid the uncertainty, confusion, and loss of control of the whole era.

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