

CHINESE DRAGONS AND SEMIOTICS IN CHINESE ANIMATED FILMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the relationship between the visualisation of Chinese dragon character design in Chinese animated films and the symbolism of traditional Chinese dragon culture. Characterisation in animated films is inextricably linked to the culture in which the character is set to fulfil the film role. In the design of animated characters, the visual image of the character can be combined with symbolism to show the culture in the design context. Incorporating culture into contemporary design is conducive to transmitting and disseminating culture and is one of the most important means of passing on cultural and intangible cultural heritage. The methodology used is interdisciplinary due to the need to use different theories in character design to deal with the merging of visual elements. Using the theory of character design, the theory of dragons, and the theory of semiotics, the relationship between culture and visuals in character design is matched by whether there is a deviation or a coincidence between the representation of symbols, symbolic and metaphorical meanings in Peirce's theory of semiotics. The result is a unity between the three referential elements. It is interesting to note that different characters have different characteristics. Still, some patterns can be followed under a specific cultural background theory system, and there is consistency in the visual representation of the symbols and the cultural symbolism.

Keywords: Chinese Dragon, Cultural Heritage, Chinese Animated Films, Character Design

INTRODUCTION

Animation has emerged as an art form with unique advantages and extensive impact in the contemporary era, serving as a novel mode of expression, media content, and visual communication tool (Mills & Unsworth, 2018). Character design is an essential component of animation (Guo, 2014). The complexity of an animated film character is not limited to the visuals but also to its role in the film. Each character has different characteristics and cultures supported by visual symbols. The design of a character to be realized is a description of what is meant (object). The

culture to form an expression of consciousness (represent) and to use these interpretations for design thinking to be able to implement the design from design thinking (Ekawardhani et al., 2020).

Since the initiation of industrialization in Chinese animation, it has enabled broad creative and commercial outcomes and yielded enormous economic and social benefits. Incorporating traditional culture has provided significant details to the current Chinese animation art. As a cultural powerhouse, China should strive to improve the competitiveness of domestic animation, which is closely linked to the heritage of Chinese national cultural traditions (Ergashev & Farxodjonova, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2021). Moreover, as a highly emblematic visual symbol within Chinese culture, the Chinese dragon cultural element can potentially promote and disseminate Chinese culture (Li, 2021).

Semiotic communication is facilitated through animation. Chinese dragons are a popular theme in Chinese animated films, with their Chinese origins contributing to their potential as a symbol of Chinese national identity (ZHANG Cziráková, 2023). Along with the visual symbolic expression and practical characteristics of Chinese dragon cultural elements in today's Chinese animated films, the content of the existing case studies is analysed concerning the principles of combining semiotics and dragon culture. Hopefully, this study will provide a feasible and concrete basis for developing a conceptual design framework for animated film characters in the future, thus potentially contributing to the development of Chinese animation and the animation industry in other countries.

RELATED WORKS

In recent years, academic researchers and animation character design have received more and more attention from the animation industry (Purwaningsih, 2016), and successful character design is conducive to promoting the development of the animation industry and bringing better economic benefits (Daliot-Bul & Otmazgin, 2020). Looking back to Xue Gu, 2023, character design in animated films about myths is conducive to catering to popular aesthetics and being enjoyed by the audience (Gu, 2023). Ikhwanudin examined the deviation and unity between the dragon visual and the dragon symbolic meanings by using the principles of semiotics to test the relationship between the visual, the symbolic, and the referential. This semiotic principle is the concept of semiotics, and thoughts on filmography have significantly influenced our comprehension of signs and symbols in communication. Recognizing the elements incorporating the triangle of meaning (representamen) allows us to analyze better and interpret the messages conveyed through signs and symbols (Ikhwanudin, ASIYAH, & SS, 2020) .

Semiotics examine how we derive meaning from various forms of representation, such as language, imagery, and objects. Scholars like Yakin and Totu (2014) and Daimin (2015) Semiotics is commonly regarded as a theory of meaning generation and interpretation. The act or object of employing a marker linked with other signals provides meaning (Chandler, 2022). It is worth noting that, according to Pierce's theory, a sign does not represent everything but rather simply specific characteristics that carry meaning (Leitgeb et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The study was divided into three phases: in the first part, the dragon characters in Chinese films were identified for the study; in the second part, the visual characteristics of the characters; in the third part, the cultural characteristics of the characters; and in the last part, the results of the first three phases were related to the design of visualization and semiotics. Figure 1 shows an approach to study.

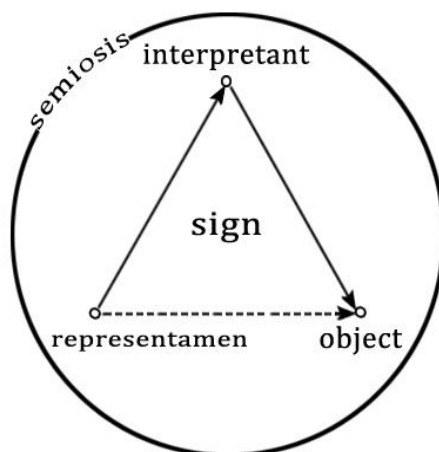


Figure 1: Pierce's elements of meaning triangle (Pierce, 1980)

The Steps of collecting data used in the research are:

1. Collect objects in the form of movies involving dragons as characters.
2. Repeatedly watching *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child* movie.
3. Analyze the dragon movie and screenshot scenes that show the physical details of the dragon.
4. Make a note and write down all the information from the dragon movie.
5. The researcher makes a table of data to analyze the data through symbolical meaning.
6. The researcher explained the data using a collection of ancient Chinese books on Chinese dragon colours and symbols (Lu Rong's *Beans Garden Miscellany* 陆容的《菽园杂记》, Li Dongyang's *Huailutang Jie* 李东阳的《怀麓堂集》, and Yang Shen's *Shengan Jie* 杨慎的《升庵集》).

Data was collected by tabulating content data numbers, data, and the meaning of symbols and characters (aligned and deviated).

Identified for the study

All the data about illustration from the study's validity was also derived from the analysis of existing case studies of 1979 *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and 2019 *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child* Chinese animated films.

Nezha Conquers the Dragon King and *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child*. According to the study's findings, the "Chinese dragon series" in Chinese animated films exists on top of traditional Chinese dragon cultural values and visual symbols. Furthermore, the animated flicks *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child* are excellent representations of the "traditional Chinese dragon." Second, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* was the first animated picture full of tragedy, and its release year marked a watershed moment for Chinese cinema's heroes (Macdonald, 2015). Its receipt of the 1979 Ministry of Culture Award for Outstanding Film in China and the 1981 Manila International Film Festival Award for Animated Film demonstrates its popularity to both old and young generations (Tang, 2023). With a box office of 5.035 billion yuan in 2019, *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child* became the second largest seller in Chinese movie history.

Dragon theory (visual characteristics and culture of the characters)

The visual styling of character design is divided into colour and appearance forms. Chinese dragons are the main symbol in many Chinese legends, myths, and traditions. As stated in the article "Under the Influence," they often play with the clouds in the sky as they are masters of the weather (e.g., rain). From ancient China, Chinese dragons have always been seen as auspicious and bring good fortune to the people (Sun & Kun, 2023).

Chinese dragon physical shape

Shuowen Jiezi says that Chinese dragons (Loong) are often depicted with animal-like features. The representation of the dragon totem consists of the head and frontal surface of a camel, the ears of an ox, the cross brow, the eyes of a hare, the nose of an ox, the whiskers of a catfish, the mouth of a dog, the teeth of a horse, the neck of a serpent, the body and tail of a serpent, the decoration of the tail by the tail of a goldfish as a style, the legs of a crocodile, the skin of a fish (the fish's scales), the mane of a lion as a decoration of the body, the claws of an eagle, the palms of a tiger, the abdomen of a tortoise, the stomach of a frog (Trauzettel & Kubin, 2020).

Chinese dragon meaning

According to Lu Rong's Beans Garden Miscellany 陆容的《菽园杂记》, Li Dongyang's Huai-lutang Jie 李东阳的《怀麓堂集》, and Yang Shen's Shengan Jie 杨慎的《升庵集》:

1. The camel represents wisdom and intelligence.
2. The ears and nose of the ox represent diligence, strength and energy.
3. The cross-eyebrow represents majesty and sharpness.
4. The eyes of the hare represent swarthy and might.
5. The catfish's beard represents longevity.
6. The dog's mouth represents loyalty and guardianship.
7. Horse's teeth represent diligence.
8. The snake's neck, body, and tail represent flexibility and instant movement.
9. The tail of a goldfish represents smoothness and being like a fish in water.
10. The legs of a crocodile represent strength.
11. The skin of a fish represents hardness and guardianship.
12. The lion's mane represents dominance and majesty.
13. The eagle's claws represent tension, strength, and speed.
14. The tiger's paw represents swiftness and power.
15. The tortoise's belly represents longevity, hardness, and protection.
16. The frog's belly represents wealth, longevity, hardness, and protection refer to Table 1

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Table 1: Dragon symbolic meaning of tradition culture (Charts from academics)

Variable	Measurement questions	Source
Symbolic Meaning of Chinese Dragon Character Design	Shrimp/rabbits' eyes : Smart /fierce and majestic Antlers : Honour and majesty/sacrosanct/nations	(Yang,1488-1559);

Bull's ears , nose : diligence strength and energy	(Yoon, 2003);
Dog mouth : Speed and guarding	(Peng Lingning & Nam Hoon Kim, 2010);
Sheat fish whiskers (zoology) : Longevity and Wisdom	(Smokina,2022); (Chen, 2019); 戰國策
Lion's mane : Power wisdom	陆容. 菽園雜記
The claws of an eagle : tension, strength, and speed	(Xie ,2021)
Fish scales: Indestructible/Protection	(Trauzettel, R. &Kubin, W. 2020)
Goldfish Tail: Flexibility	
Turtle's abdomen: Longevity, hardness, and protection	
Snake body & Serpentine: Flexibility/change	
Head of a camel: wisdom	
Frog Tummy: wealth,	
Legs of a crocodile: strength	
Horse's teeth : diligent and kind	
Tiger's palm: formidable power	

According to the article "What do the colours of Chinese dragons mean?" there are five different sorts of dragons, each with its colour, meaning, season, and ocean. Blue and green(blue) dragons, black and white dragons, and red, yellow, and gold dragons are the four varieties of dragons described. The blue and green dragons protect the Eastern Sea and relate to spring, nature, growth, harmony, and health. The black and white dragon signifies balance, with yin (black) symbolizing winter and yang (white) representing autumn and is the Chinese North and West Seas' guardian god. The Red Dragon signifies summer, wealth, and happiness (China). It also serves as the South China Sea's defender. Finally, the highest of all dragons, the golden and yellow, represent knowledge and prosperity. This dragon is linked to the Chinese royal family since the first imperial dynasty of China referred to themselves as "heirs of the dragon" and were supposed to have dragon blood in their veins. As a result, embroidered dragons became popular in royal clothing (American Museum of Natural History, Imperial Dragons).

Semiotic Theory

Pierce's theory of signs, commonly known as semiotics, provides a comprehensive framework for comprehending meaning, representation, denotation, and significance. Although semiotic theory has a long history, Pierce's account is particularly notable for its complexity and emphasis on interpretation's role in shaping meaning. Many scholars consider Pierce the founder of an American semiotic tradition that employs signs to clarify concepts transparently and straightforwardly. According to Pierce, a sign symbolizes or represents something else in some

capacity. It aims to engage individuals with a similar or higher level of understanding (Pierce, 1980).

Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce are noted scholars who have been credited with developing this concept. Saussure's approach differs from Peirce's semiotics, which comprises a triangular theory of signs, objects, and explanatory terms. Within this theory, each element of the triad is further subdivided into three sub-types, including icons, indices, and symbols. Peirce's theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how symbols and signs communicate meaning. Representation denotes how a sign is presented or acts as a signifier. The object is the entity linked with the sign, while the thing denoted refers to the referent that the representation is associated with. Finally, interpretation refers to the meaning or significance of the symbol in one's mind.

Pierce's concepts of semiotics and thoughts on filmography have significantly influenced our comprehension of signs and symbols in communication. By recognizing the elements incorporating the triangle of meaning, we can better analyze and interpret the messages conveyed through signs and symbols.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

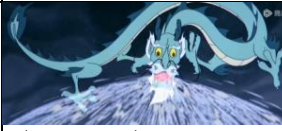

The design of the animated film characters was enhanced by considering visual symbol theory, culture and the visual elements created by semiotics on the face and body. Both approaches enable the creation of high-quality characters that will be placed in the film and then provide acting roles for the film. The critical point in creating a successful animated film character is the semiotic principle of language; cultural imagery and objects need to be unified.





Credibility can be seen in the following discussion:



Based on Chinese Dragon Theory and Semiotics Theory

Symbols in Film about 1979 *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and 2019 *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child* (refer to Table 2 and 3).

Table 2: Color Symbols

NO.	Data number	Data Picture	Meaning of The symbol of theory	Interpretation	Character	
					Valid	Invalid
1	/01/green/AoG uang/1979	 (00:00:59)  (00:36:41)	Green/blue -Aligned	The Dragon King of the East Sea is the first of the Dragon Kings, while in the animation, it is the Dragon King of the East Sea as the leader of the four, who call the winds and rains together. It is aligned with scholars' descriptions of	V	

					Chinese dragons as having blue and green colors.	
2	'02/red/AoQin/1979	 (00:39:59)	Red Aligned	-	 (00:56:38) The Dragon King of the South China Sea breathes flames to burn Ne Zha. This is consistent (aligned) with scholars' records that the Chinese dragon is red and Hu (火).	V
3	'03/black/1979	 (00:57:16)	Black Aligned	-	 (00:01:14) The explanation of the picture demonstrates the ability of the Dragon King of the Western Sea to raise the wind. Also, it matches the ability of the Dragon King of the Western Sea in the myth, which does not match the image of the Dragon King of the Western Sea as a white dragon in the myth. There is also no mention of winter, which does not	V

				match the description. But it matches (aligned) the scholarly description of the Chinese dragon as black.	
4	/04/white /1979	 (00:37:18)	White Aligned	– It does not reflect that the white dragon symbolizes autumn and yin. But it matches (aligned) scholarly descriptions of Chinese dragons having white.	V
5	/05/yellow /2016	 (01:05:56)	Yel- low/golden- Aligned	It matches (aligned) scholarly descriptions of Chinese dragons having yellow and gold colors.	V








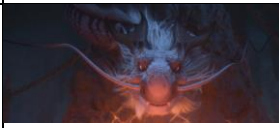










6	/01/blue/green /AoBing/2016	 (01:34:46)	Green/blue -Aligned	In the fight with Nezha, the dragon appears to be blue-green, which is consistent (aligned) with scholarly descriptions of Chinese dragons as having a blue-green colour. However, it is inconsistent with the fact that AoBing, the third prince of the Dragon King, is white.	V
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Table 3: Physical Parts symbols

NO.	Data number	Data Picture	Meaning of The symbol of theory	Interpretation	Character	
					Valid	Invalid
1	/01/Ant-lers/AoGuang	 (00:30:32)	Honour and majesty/sacrosanct/nations	 (00:10:56) Turtle Prime Minister reported that the people had offered many gifts and requested the Dragon King to send rain. This reflects the status of the Dragon King with honour and majesty, sacrosanct.	V	

2	/02/Head & eyebrows of camel/AoGuang	 <p>(00:58:19)</p>	wisdom	 <p>(00:29:34)</p> <p>After failing in the battle with Nezha, you quickly jumped up and flew to the Heavenly Court to seek help from the Jade Emperor, demonstrating intelligence and wisdom!</p>	V
3	/03/Shrimp, rabbits eyes/AoGuang	 <p>(00:53:24)</p>	Smart /fierce and majestic	 <p>(00:38:44)</p> <p>The clip shows the Dragon King of the East China Sea spitting a flood of water at Nezha when he is provoked by him. It reflects his majestic ferocity and majesty.</p>	V
4	/04/Bull's nose /AoGuang/2019	 <p>(00:16:20)</p>	Strength and energy	<p>The Dragon King is trapped in a dungeon and comes out with a powerful and energetic vibe with a frontal nose in the picture.</p>	V

5	/5/Eagle's claws/AoQin	 (00:38:28)	Tension, strength, and speed	AoQin was the first to counterattack, casting lightning spells. Ao Qin's claws embodied tension, immense power and speed in an attempt to pressure Li Jing.	V
6	/6/Tiger's palm/	 (00:36:41)	Formidable power	The Dragon King of the East China Sea cast a water spell and his palm lunged towards Chentang Guan , embodying the powerful force .	V
7	/7/Snake body/neck/AoRun 、 AoQin 、 AoShun/1979	 (00:58:30)	Flexibility/change	 (00:38:24) The four dragon kings were hit . Quickly dodging, it shows Snake body flexibility and changes.	V
8	/8/Turtle's abdomen/AoGuang/1979	 (00:27:11)	longevity, hardness, and protection.	 (00:30:27) The tortoise's belly represents longevity, hardness, and protection.	V

9	/9/Frog Tummy/AoGuang/1979	 (00:00:59)	wealth	 (00:12:53) The Dragon Palace table full of tribute reflects the Dragon King's wealth	V
10	/10/Goldfish tail/AoQin/1979	 (00:57:41)	Flexibility	When it loses the fight to Nezha, it is very flexible and agile and burrows into the hole.	V
11	/11/Fish scales/AoBing/2019	 (00:17:10)	Indestructible/Protection	 (01:24:04) The skin of a fish represents Indestructible and Protection	V

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researchers will conclude the symbols shown in Nezha's descending and Nezha's disturbing the sea. From this study, the researchers found 18 symbols from both theories. According to the Chinese Dragon Colour Theory (WILLOW C,2021), the researchers found 7 colour symbols: black, blue (green), yellow (gold), red and white. According to ancient Chinese books on Chinese dragon colours and symbols (Lu Rong's Beans Garden Miscellany, 陆容的《菽园杂记》, and Li Dongyang's Huailutang Jie 李东阳的《怀麓堂集》, and Yang Shen's Shengan Jie 杨慎的《升庵集》), the researchers found seven colour symbols; there are: black, blue (green), yellow (gold), red and white. And the researchers found that although there are seventeen physical structures of the Chinese dragon (1 the ear and nose of the ox, 2 the antlers of the deer, 3 the forehead of the camel, 4 the rounded eyes, 5 the beard of the catfish, 6 the mouth of the dog, 7 the teeth of the horse, 8 the body of the snake, 9 the skin of the fish, 10 the tummy of the frog, 11 the belly of the tortoise, 12 the claw of the eagle, 13 the paw of the Tiger, 14 the leg of the lizard, 15 the mane of the lion, 16 the tail of the goldfish, and 17 the tail of the goldfish),

there is no evidence to suggest that it is not the same as the Chinese dragon. Mane, goldfish's tail), but the physical symbols that fit the symbolism of the Chinese dragon culture are 11 (Antlers, Head & eyebrows of camel, Shrimp/rabbit eyes, Bull's nose, eagle's claws, Tiger's palm, Snake body, Turtle's abdomen, Frog Tummy, Goldfish tail, Goldfish tail, Fish scales).

The analysis of the 1979 *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and 2019 *Nezha- Birth of the Demon Child* data was divided into colour and physical symbols. There are 18 symbols in the 7 Chinese dragons in *Nezha*, and the dominant symbols in Chinese dragon animated films are "the above 18 symbols". Daniel Ogden (2013) explains that the dragon symbols reflect the masculinity of the dragon. This demonstrates that most dragons have masculine characters in their stories, which aligns with the traditional Chinese culture in which dragons represent yang. This will provide a favourable reference for animated film character design. In Chinese animated films, there is a consistency between the visual symbols and cultural symbolism of the Chinese dragon character design.

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