

Classic Ink Animation 1960-1988: Chinese traditional Aesthetics, Animation Design and Educational Function

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ABSTRACT

Classical ink animation arose in China from the 1960s to the 1980s and was a new animation art form created by the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio. Between 1960 and 1988, classic ink animation was the most representative type of animation. This study explores traditional Chinese aesthetics, animation design, and educational functions embodied in classic ink animation. Using qualitative research methods, this study explores the elements of traditional Chinese aesthetics and the characteristics of animation design by analyzing the research text and understanding the cultural connotation and educational significance of classic ink animation through the analysis of multiculturalism and animation symbols. It is found that classic ink animation not only reshapes traditional painting elements but also is closely linked to the cultural and socio-economic context in which it is embedded, embodying profound humanistic ideas. This study helps the audience and related people understand the artistic charm and cultural connotation of classic ink animation more profoundly, provides better references and inspiration for contemporary animation creation, and promotes the educational function of animation design.

Key words: Classic Ink Animation, Chinese Traditional Aesthetics, Animation Design, Educational Function, Animation Symbols

INTRODUCTION

This study is about the traditional Chinese aesthetics, animation design, and educational functions of classic ink animation. Classic ink animation is one of China's most characteristic animation art forms. It is a masterpiece in the development of Chinese animation. It integrates traditional Chinese ink painting art into animation production, reflecting the innovative expression of Chinese traditional aesthetics and animation design. From the perspective of China's cultural industry, classic ink animation has absorbed the forms and elements of ink art to form a new product. Therefore, on the one hand, it is the dialectical thinking of artistic creation; on the other, it is the creative result of the product.

The researcher utilized three main concepts in this study: traditional Chinese aesthetics, animation design, and educational function. The concept of traditional Chinese aesthetics comes from Principles of Aesthetics, in which the sense of beauty is not cognition but experience. The sense of beauty is closely related to human life and living. At the same time, cognition can be detached from human life and living and isolated from studying things as the material world (Ye, 2009). The concept of animation design comes from Introduction to Animation, which is a synthesis of many art forms, such as time, space, media, and interactive art. This multiplicity

determines that animation art has its unique aesthetic characteristics (Wang, 2010). The concept of educational function comes from educational wisdom in traditional culture. Traditional culture contains countless educational concepts and meanings, revealing traditional culture and educational function and enhancing cultural confidence and literacy (Zhang, 2019).

Previous studies are roughly divided into two categories: text-based development studies. The second category mainly studies the picture, color, and composition of classic ink animation from the perspective of art. Fewer researchers have studied classic ink animation from the perspective of aesthetics and design. On the one hand, classic ink animation is a kind of artwork; on the other hand, classic ink animation is a re-creation of traditional art forms. From the perspective of artwork, it is a highly aesthetic form of animation that elaborates on traditional culture and serves as an educational function for the audience. From a cultural perspective, it can embody images of natural beauty, social beauty, artistic beauty, and other images related to society. Through this study, the relationship between traditional Chinese aesthetics and animation design can be discovered and understood, explaining the reconstruction and innovation of traditional ink painting elements.

Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are as follows: first, to study the development history of classic Chinese ink animation. Starting from the history of classic ink animation, we analyze the development stages of classic ink animation in terms of Chinese art and culture. Second, to study the traditional Chinese aesthetics and the innovative expression of Chinese classic ink animation. It analyzes the aesthetic fields of natural beauty, social beauty, artistic beauty, and technical beauty embodied in classic ink animation, as well as the artistic expressions and narratives of animation design. Third, the educational function of classic ink animation should be studied. Fourth, study the case of Chinese animation artist Mr. Yan Dingxian and classic ink animation. Analyze Mr. Yan Dingxian's reshaping and revelation of the nationalization of Chinese animation and the expression of the classic ink animation "Tadpole Looking for Mother."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through the study of classic ink animation, it is found that most researchers study the development history, artistic style, and creative themes of classic ink animation. However, the researchers found that these studies should have addressed the relationship between traditional Chinese aesthetics and animation design. In the academic and research circles, this is the first time anyone has looked at this subject from this perspective. The traditional Chinese aesthetics and animation design expressed in classical ink animation are essential for improving the comprehensive value of animation development. Therefore, this study emphasizes the innovative expression of traditional Chinese aesthetics and animation design embodied in classic ink animation.

Classic Ink Animation

As a new demonstration of traditional ink painting, Ink animation can quickly attract audiences and play a historical turning point in world animation. Its artistic expression of external visual imagery is bound to be different from traditional ink painting and other forms of animation (Li, 2013). From an artistic point of view, ink animation is an experimental form of language for exploration. Ink animation can also be seen as a new form and state of ink art in modern society. As the creation of a video language states, ink animation has excellent significance both artistically and socially (Wang, 2009).

Chinese animation has embarked on the path of national style under exceptional circumstances and for various historical reasons, including ink animation, which breaks the production methods inherent in animated films ever (Tao, 2009). The production of ink animation, especially the direct or indirect participants of ink animation, entailed embodying the social connotations of life through the ideas in the value system of ink animation (Li, 2013). The generation of Chinese ink animation is rooted in a strong foundation of traditional Chinese culture, which was created and developed in a specific historical period under cultural, artistic, and political conditions (Lv, 2006).

Traditional Chinese Aesthetics

Chinese traditional aesthetic system is extensive, but the most influential on the formation of Chinese traditional culture is still Taoist aesthetics, Confucian aesthetics, and Zen aesthetics, and it is the aesthetic thought of these three systems constitute Chinese traditional aesthetics (Peng, 2006). Aesthetics is both a humanities and a theoretical discipline; most importantly, he is a cross-discipline. Aesthetics is closely related to art, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, mythology, folklore, cultural history, and customs history. Thus, traditional Chinese aesthetics extends to almost every aspect of Chinese culture and has become a spiritual place (Ye, 2009).

A relationship of interdependence and co-development exists between Chinese traditional aesthetics and Chinese animated films, which can be summarized as a symbiotic relationship (Zou, 2012). The aesthetics expressed in Chinese animated films are film and television aesthetics based on the meaning of the movie and animation aesthetics based on the form of the work. When it comes to Chinese traditional aesthetics, it is more embodied in the inner spirit of the animated film work and the expression of traditional aesthetics (Ai, 2019).

Animation Design

As a cultural and creative industry, animation design differs from traditional manufacturing, and its value is no longer convergent use value but more inclined to convergent creativity (Chen, 2017). Animation design as an image communication also aligns with the above analysis points. Animation design has created a new space for expression regarding pictures and cultural expression (Chen, 2020). It is also necessary to inherit Chinese traditional culture in animation design based on continuous innovation and organic integration of national elements with contemporary ideas and world culture (Zhang, 2020).

Animation designers have consciously explored many new possibilities of animation forms or content and have presented the truth, goodness, and beauty of life to the audience in a new way (Geng, 2019). Successful animation design can show the national style and cultural connotation, giving Chinese animation a more legendary color, meeting the current development path, and emphasizing the corresponding ideology and artistry (Chen, 2020).

Education Function

Animation education is a product of the development of the animation industry to a particular stage; as a conceptual form, it reflects the development practice of the animation industry, and as an institutional form, it supports and even shapes the progress of the animation industry with a constant supply of talents (Ge, 2007). Excellent works of art have their embedded emotional connotation, ideological themes, cultural meanings, etc. The artistic implication is the fundamental reason literary works have the immortal artistic charm (Peng, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comprehensive qualitative research approach to explore the intricate history, development, and cultural significance of classical ink animation in China. The research is structured around two primary phases: fieldwork and secondary data analysis, both of which are meticulously designed to uncover the multifaceted influences shaping this unique animation genre.

1. The first phase of the research involves an extensive fieldwork component, where the researcher engages in direct interactions with key stakeholders and practitioners in the field of classical ink animation. This phase is crucial for gathering rich, contextually grounded data that captures the lived experiences and insights of individuals deeply connected to this art form. The data collection methods employed in this phase include: primary surveys, observations, interviews, focus group discussions.
2. The second phase of the study involves an in-depth analysis of existing documents, literature, and archival materials relevant to the development of classical ink animation between 1960 and 1988. This phase is crucial for contextualizing the primary data within the broader historical and cultural framework. The researcher undertakes the following tasks: literature review, documentary analysis, artistic analysis.

By integrating the insights gained from both the fieldwork and secondary data analysis, the researcher conducts a comprehensive analysis of the history and formation of classical ink animation. This synthesis not only reconstructs the developmental trajectory of the genre but also illuminates its contributions to Chinese traditional aesthetics, animation design, and educational functions. The study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how classical ink animation embodies and perpetuates Chinese cultural values, while also adapting to contemporary challenges and opportunities.

RESULTS

The history and Formation of Classic Chinese Ink Animation

Impact of socio-political-economic factors

Classic ink animation is a product of the 1960s, based at the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio, where animation artists

created a new genre based on the art of painting and the medium's technology. The analysis in Table 1 reveals the socio-political and economic characteristics of the time.

Table 1 shows the five primary periods in developing classic ink animation between 1960 and 1988. Due to different economic and political influences, different stories of classic ink animation were formed. However, from 1966 to 1976, classic ink animation and other forms of animation were almost at a standstill due to the impact of the Cultural Revolution in China. Starting in 1978, after China's reform and opening up, classic ink began to recover, following political and economic adjustments, and finally entered a period of glory.

Influence of chinese art and culture

The graphic elements of classic ink animation draw on the elements of traditional Chinese ink painting, which was created based on Chinese literature and opera culture. The artistic and cultural influences are revealed in Figure 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Figure 1 shows that the classic ink animation character image draws on the contrasting effect of traditional painting and completes the image design according to the elements of traditional ink painting. Table 2 shows the story themes, borrowed authors, borrowed works, and the use of traditional opera elements in classic ink animation. Under the influence of Chinese art, culture, and animation symbols, they play an essential role in forming and developing classic ink animation.

Innovative Expressions of Chinese Traditional Aesthetics and Animation Design of Classic Ink Animation

Traditional chinese aesthetics of classic ink animation

Classic ink animation's aesthetic characteristics and expressions are mainly reflected in four aspects: nature, society, art, and technology. The creator creates and then innovates after subjective creation so that the aesthetic characteristics reach a harmonious and perfect unity, reflecting the relevant information of classic ink animation (Table 3).

Table 3 shows the characteristics and expressions of traditional Chinese aesthetics embodied in classic ink animation. Regarding the technical beauty in the table, through the

Table 1. Socio-political economy statistics for different time periods

NO	Time Period	Economy: Average GDP of Shanghai (billion yuan)	Political Direction	Representative Work	Statuses
I	1960AD-1961AD	130.08	Planned Economy	1961: "Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother "	Formative period
II	1962AD-1965AD	97.41	Planned Economy	1963:"Mu Di"	Period of development
III	1966AD-1976AD	162.17	Cultural Revolution	none	Stagnation
IV	1977AD-1983AD	302.16	Reform and Opening Up	1982: "Lu Ling"	Recovery
V	1984AD-1988AD	508.43	Market Economy	1988:"Feelings of Mountains and Waters"	Period of splendor

Source: Organized by Zhang Chengwen, November 15, 2023

Table 2. Artistic and cultural elements of classic ink animation

NO	Movie Title	Story Source	Story Topics	Drawing on Authors	Borrowed Work	Opera Instrument
1	1961:" Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother "	Adaptation of the fairy tale of the same name	Tadpole's Look for their Mother	Qi Baishi	Frogs and Ants, Fish, Shrimp and Crabs, etc.	Guqin, flute, erhu
2	1963: "Mu Di"	Folklore and Poetry Adaptations	A story between a cowherd and a cow	Li Keran	Picture of Herding Cattle	Yangqin, gaohu, erhu, banqin, hulusi, xiao
3	1982: "Lu Ling"	Adaptation of the story of the White Deer School	The story of the little girl and the deer	Cheng Shifa	The Maiden	Guqin, erhu, flute, touch bells
4	1988: "Feelings of Mountains and Waters"	Ancient Poetry Meaning Adaptation	The story of the luthier and the boy	Wu Shanming	The Drunken Immortal	Guqin, pipa, shengxiao, hulusi

**Figure 1.** Comparison between paintings and animated character images

field survey, 86% of the viewers therein believed that the functional and formal beauty of classic ink animation is more balanced when the ratio of these two is average. If the value is greater than the functional value, it will emphasize the social and natural; if the value is greater than the formal value, it will emphasize the artistic and technical. For the function and form of classic ink animation, the creation is not to achieve a completely balanced state; the aesthetic characteristics embodied in these four animations are different; for example, in the “Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother” film, the proportion of the picture elements (Figures 2 and 3), is skewed in favor of artistry and technology.




According to Figure 3, the visual elements in the overall picture account for 30%, and the blankness of the picture accounts for 70%. This is in line with the aesthetic characteristics of traditional ink painting techniques, which focus on the role of “leave white space,” which is a reflection of space, and also the traditional Chinese aesthetics of the “meaning of the situation,” to give the audience a greater space for imagination.

**Figure 2.** Elements of the picture

Animation design for classic ink animation

The animation design of classic ink animation is mainly carried out through the animation production process, art form, and expression form. The production process is based on the production method of traditional animation, which utilizes

Table 3. Data sheet of traditional chinese aesthetics embodied in classic ink animation

Field	Content	Illustrations
Natural Aesthetics	Physical appearance: the most primitive and direct impression of a natural object Physical nature: the intrinsic nature of natural objects. Physical function: the internal mechanism of interdependence and cooperation among various elements and characteristics of natural objects. Physical history: observation, perception and experience of all kinds of natural objects with a historical perspective.	
Social Aesthetics	Humanistic Concerns: Educational Sentiments and Ethical Concepts Humanistic values: the art form of national individuality	
Artistic aesthetics	Form and Demeanor Symbolism Folk music	

	Thresholds	Numeric (0 to 1, min: 0, max: 1)	Total (max: 1)	Effect	Aesthetic Characteristics
Technical aesthetics	Formal value + function value	0.5	0.5+0.5=1	Overall beauty	Balanced characteristics
	Formal value + function value	<0.5+>0.5	<0.5+>0.5=1	Functional beauty	Highlighting social and natural characteristics
	Formal value + function value	>0.5+<0.5	>0.5+<0.5 = 1	Favoring Form	Highlighting artistry and technology

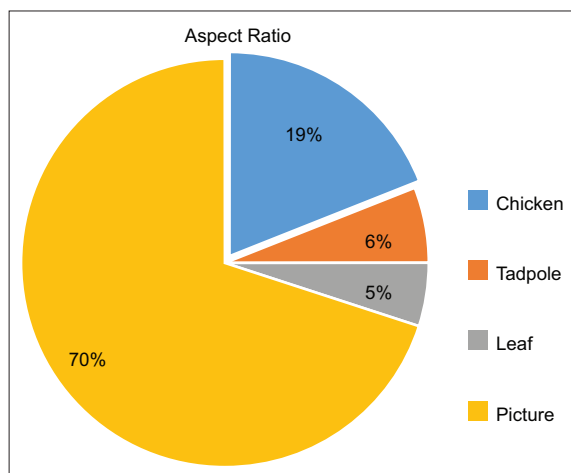


Figure 3. Analysis of the data of the proportion of screen elements to the overall screen

elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as ink painting and opera (Table 4). Analyzed from the perspective of art form, classic ink animation is a comprehensive form of artistic expression, embodying the diversity of animation expression methods, the diversity of subject matter, the wide range of production means and materials used, and the

characteristic of re-giving and shaping characters (Table 5). Analyzed from the perspective of expression, classic ink animation is a reconstruction of ideological narrative, framing the story through the narrative laws of literature and cinematic imagination as a principle, with several shots constituting a paragraph and then several paragraphs constituting the complete story, emphasizing the law of conflict, dramatic cause and effect connection (Table 6).

Table 4 shows that the production process of classic ink animation can be divided into three main stages: pre-planning, mid-production, and post-synthesis. The animation production stage takes seven months and requires extensive hand-drawing work.

Table 5 shows that artists need to fully understand traditional Chinese ink painting and opera forms and combine traditional aesthetic concepts with animation design. In addition, to present the best visual effects, creators need to use film and television media technology to optimize and enhance animation’s visual effects and dynamic interactive experience.

Table 6 shows that the representation of classical ink animation is mainly a narrative text, on the basis of which the story is narrated by analyzing narrative discourses and narrative fictions, representations of images and sounds, which

Table 4. Statistics of the production process of classic ink animation (Take “Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother” as an example)



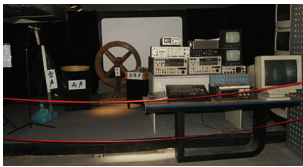
Stages	Time	Illustrations	Content
1. Pre-planning	2 months		Completion of story ideas based on literary scripts, and drawing of subplot tableaux and art designs
2. Mid-production	7 months		Original drawings and animation production and coloring, background painting
3. post-editing and compositing	2 months		Dubbing and editing

Table 5. Statistics of classic ink animation art forms (take “feelings of mountains and waters” as an example)

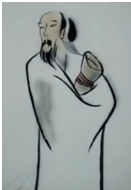




1. Profiling	2. Spatial Composition	3. Brushwork and Ink	4. Sound Performance
			

Table 6. Narrative statistics of classical ink animation (taking “mu di” as an example)

Animated Narrative	Time	Illustrations	Event
Story Time	Morning, Noon, Afternoon		Going out to graze, resting in a tree, finding buffalo through the sound of a flute
Narrative time	21 minutes		
Screening Time	1963AD		Public Screening

are combined with space and time to realize the storytelling intentions.

Educational Function of Classical Ink Animation

Through the processing and narrative organization of animation materials, the creators deviate from the traditional understanding of narrative art, thus highlighting the function of education. At the same time, education also organizes experience with the help of artistic means so that animation becomes a fundamental educational tool rather than being used only for propaganda or preaching. For classic ink animation, each frame needs to weaken its independent meaning and cut off the direct connection with the object to connect with other frames and build a complex narrative together. Applying the ink painting form to animation pushes

it beyond its practical function towards artistic expression, i.e., to change the realistic orientation of ink animation and make it focus on fictional characters. For educational purposes, ink animation needs to clarify its referential tendency in the drawing material so that the symbols establish a connection with the natural objects while maintaining the boundaries with the fluent narrative. It is this unique bias of meaning and narrative that gives space to the educational function of animation.

When animation narrative is inadvertently seen as a screening and orchestration of experience, it is closely linked to education. The educational function of classic ink animation implies a sense of guidance. The active role of animation in educational practice and the need for form naturally incorporate the goal of guidance. The reason why the audience can interpret the form of traditional narrative art

as guidance stems from the consensus shared by the creator and the audience. In the function of education, “educating” and “teaching” are inseparable, and guidance accompanies the process of education, so the dual concepts of “teaching” and “guiding” are activated. Therefore, the dual concepts of “teaching” and “guiding” are activated.

Figure 4 shows how parenting in its natural sense has gradually been given a cultural meaning of guidance and combined with “teaching. Guiding and teaching go hand in hand; it is impossible to find a starting point in history where they are entirely separate. Similarly, the meaning of education in the natural, sociocultural, and institutionalized spheres coexisted in the audience’s perceptions.

Case Studies of Chinese Animation Artist Mr. Yan Dingxian and Ink Animation Works

Animation artist Mr. Yan Dingxian

Mr. Yan Dingxian has become an outstanding representative of Chinese animation artists because of his profound influence on the creation of Chinese animation art, which mainly includes the excavation of national themes and expressions,

the inheritance and creation of national styles, and the diversified embodiment of national spirit (Table 7). Mr. Yan Dingxian’s works have played an important role in enlightening the subsequent development of Chinese animation. His creative concepts and methods have given Chinese animation creators valuable lessons and references. Under his influence, Chinese animation began to focus on the excavation and inheritance of traditional culture, and it paid more attention to the use and innovation of modern animation technology.

Table 7 shows a small part of Mr. Yan Dingxian’s animation works. When he was the director of Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio, he produced 99 animation works, covering a variety of art forms such as animation films, puppet films, paper-cutting films, origami films, and so on. These works have reached new heights in quality, quantity, expression, and artistry. Mr. Yan Dingxian has deeply integrated animation design with traditional Chinese culture, presenting colorful national art forms and conveying the essence of national culture.

Classic ink animation “Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother”

The origin and representative work of classic ink animation, “Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother” is a story about a group of tadpoles looking for their mothers, which embodies the relationship between mothers and children through delicate images and storyline (Table 8).

Table 8 shows the modeling performance, scene performance, picture performance, and mood performance of the film “Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother,” which is mainly embodied in symbolism and expressionism in modeling performance, physical space, and imagination space in scene performance, position, white space and unique perspective relationship of ink painting in picture performance, and content, form and main idea in mood performance.

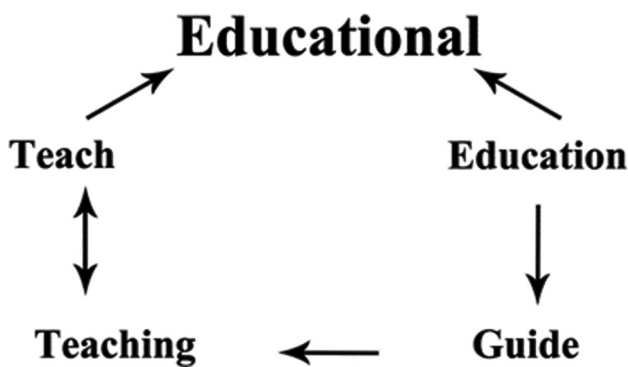


Figure 4. The link between guiding and giving in education

Table 7. Statistics of Mr. Yan Dingxian’s animation production (part)













1956 The Proud General	1959 The King of the Forest	1961 Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother	1961 The Greatest Showman
			
1979 Ne Zha in the Sea	1981 Ginseng Fruit	1985 The Golden Monkey Sets Down the Demon	1989 Shuk and Beta
			
1995 The Hero of All Time	1995 The White Egg	1996 Dr. Frog	1997 Legend of the Crane
			

Table 8. Statistical table of the form of works of “Baby Tadpoles Look for Their Mother”

Content	Expression	Illustrations
Modeling Performance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Symbolization 2. Expressionism 	
Scene Performance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Physical space 2. Consciousness space 	
Graphic Representation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Placement 2. Leave a white space 3. Perspective 	
Meaningful performance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Story content 2. Picture Form 3. Main Idea 	

Educational significance of “Tadpole Looking for Mother”

There are rich educational functions embedded in this movie. Firstly, the process of tadpoles looking for their moms conveys the values of persistence and courage to the audience. In the face of difficulties and challenges, the tadpole does not give up and finally finds his mother, which inspires the audience to maintain the spirit of perseverance in the face of difficulties in life. Secondly, the movie introduces the natural laws of biological growth and how the tadpole gradually turns into a frog, which allows viewers to grow their knowledge and curiosity about the natural world while watching the animation. In addition, the film emphasizes the importance of family love. The tadpoles’ longing and searching for their mothers show the deep emotional bond between mother and child, guiding the audience to cherish family and friendship and cultivate correct values in life.

DISCUSSION

Classic ink animation, inspired by traditional Chinese ink painting, is a groundbreaking art form developed through five key stages: creation, development, stagnation, recovery, and splendor. Produced by the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio, these animations reflect the innovation and diversity of animation design while embodying traditional Chinese aesthetics. The studio’s creative process was deeply influenced by Shanghai’s multicultural environment, which fostered inclusiveness and innovation in exploring “nationalization.” This cultural and artistic context shaped the ideological foundation of classic ink animation. By analyzing its artistic characteristics, cultural connotations, and social background, we gain deeper insights into the creative ideas and artistic value of classic ink animation. This unique form not only preserves the aesthetic spirit of traditional Chinese ink painting but also advances animation design, offering rich educational and expressive potential.

CONCLUSION

Classical ink animation, as developed by the Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio from the 1960s to the 1980s, represents a

unique fusion of traditional Chinese aesthetics with modern animation techniques. This art form not only revitalizes the essence of traditional Chinese painting but also reflects the cultural, social, and economic contexts of its time, making it a profound medium for humanistic expression. Through the qualitative analysis of its design elements and cultural symbols, this study has illuminated the deep cultural connotations and educational significance embedded within classical ink animation. The insights gained from this research not only enhance our understanding of the artistic charm of this animation style but also offer valuable inspiration for contemporary animators and educators. By recognizing and leveraging the educational functions of classical ink animation, we can continue to promote and preserve the rich cultural heritage it embodies while informing and enriching modern animation practices.

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