

An Analysis of Transmedia Storytelling of Chinese Animated Films

— *Based on the Perspective of Media Mix*

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Abstract: In recent years, China's animation industry has drawn on the experience of some developed countries in the process of development. For example, Japan has already formed an animation industry and disseminates its works through various media through transmedia storytelling to obtain better communication effects. There are still some problems with transmedia storytelling and media mix in Chinese animation. This study uses a content analysis and ethnographic approach to compare Chinese and Japanese animation movies in terms of the number of transmedia and the effect of transmedia communication. In order to analyze the problems of Chinese animated films in transmedia communication, as a further extension of transmedia theory in animation, this paper summarises the problems of Chinese animated films in transmedia communication based on previous theories of transmedia communication as well as research on Chinese animation, and suggests that Chinese animated films should perhaps learn from Japanese animation films to increase their interaction with other media, and to become part of the media mix of Chinese animation. According to statistics, it was found that the number of Chinese animated films spread transmedia in 2019 was much lower than that of Japanese animation films, which means that if Chinese animated films are seen as part of a media mix, there are still have problems with Chinese animated films. Improving the linkage of animation films with other media to increase the number and effectiveness of their transmedia dissemination may be the solution.

Keywords: animation, transmedia, media mix, Chinese animated films

1. Introduction

In Japan, the term “animation industry” is not generally used but only when discussing manga or anime separately. The purpose of taking the name manga industry or animation industry is to indicate that the Japanese “anime” is an integral part of the Japanese content industry, cultural industry and entertainment industry. While, the use of the term ‘animation industry’ alone cannot give a complete picture of the industry [1].

At present, the Japanese animation industry has a relatively complete industrial chain. Firstly, the

original manga is published in magazines to test the market. Secondly, after two months of publication, if the content is well received, it is integrated into a single book and published. Thirdly, after 1 to 1.5 years of publication, the single book is well-distributed and animated. Lastly, businesses will immediately produce toys and other peripheral products while animated. This process strictly follows the laws of the market, and by the time the fourth step is reached, the products are already flooding the consumers [2].

In the late 1980s, under the positive influence of various factors such as policy, economy, and talent, China's animation industry embarked on a new round of rapid development after the reform and opening up [3]. As an emerging economy, whether China's animation industry model is to learn from the Japanese business model, or learn from the elite model of the United States, or explore the animation industry model with Chinese characteristics, it still needs several generations of continuous efforts [4].

China's animation industry is far from becoming an essential industry in the national economy like Japan [1]. In short, China has not yet explored a complete model of the animation industry, and China's animation development is in its formative years [5].

This paper discusses the transmedia communication of Chinese animation and combines the concept of media mix with it. With reference to the transmedia communication of Japanese animation films, the paper analyses the problems of using Chinese animated films as a part of the media mix of Chinese animation. It is intended to draw on the advantages of the Japanese animation industry, to react to the problems of Chinese animated films as well as the animation industry from the perspective of the media mix, and to propose improvement suggestions for the Chinese animation industry.

2. Transmedia Storytelling and Media Mix

The concept of transmedia storytelling was first introduced by Henry Jenkins [6] and has been applied to the field of animation in China by Mi & Wang whose argument suggests that although there are some textual differences between "transmedia storytelling" and "transmedia storytelling in the Chinese context". The core ideas are similar in that they make full use of multiple media to produce narratives that are independent of each other, but at the same time make the narratives highly logically related transmedia and ultimately unified to complete or advance the narrative [7]. While transmedia storytelling is not the same as adaptations, where the narrative process in an adaptation is more of a one-way, static narrative that is not connected to the original story in essence, transmedia storytelling strategies require the use of different media narratives to advance a unified overall narrative simultaneously, and in which the narratives between different media should also interact and intertwine [7]. And in "classic" transmedia stories, each new instance extends a fiction in time, space, or, in some cases, in another dimension. In transmedia storytelling, as each instance is added, various elements of the story universe need to be expanded without contradicting the previous instance.

Japan as a major anime country whose transmedia storytelling approach to the animation industry is of relevance to developing countries, and in Japan, a similar approach to transmedia storytelling is known as "media mix" [8]. Below is the model proposed by Pratten [9]. This is to facilitate the analysis of the problems in the media mix of "Chinese animation". As shown in Figure 1, the media mix is more of a way of looking at the various mediums associated with anime as a whole, rather than separately.

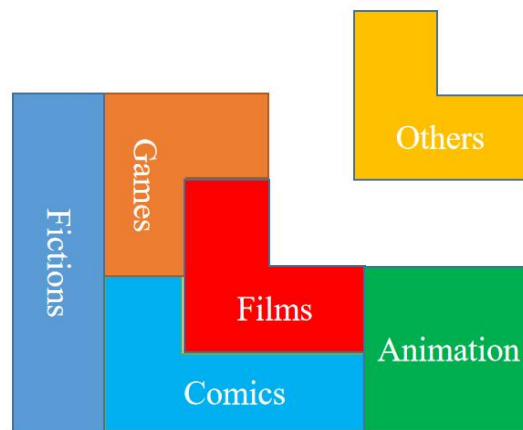


Figure 1: Transmedia storytelling and media mix [9].

Previous research found that the media mix of anime may be a multi-media hybrid with internal transmedia storytelling. Several scholars have demonstrated that the media mix of anime includes many media and is interrelated.

Denison proposed that the world of anime extends far beyond what appears on screen [10]. Lamarre asserted that anime may be “considered a node in a communication network that requires the proliferation of a range of narrative and non-narrative forms transmedia storytelling interfaces and platforms” [11]. Werning also suggested that cinema should not be the only revenue-generating aspect of transmedia storytelling, but rather one of them, and that it should have the capacity not only to generate revenue but also, more importantly, to act as an advertisement for other media [12]. Steinberg also used the case surface that some comics start as a “project” rather than a single comic [13].

3. Research Status of Transmedia Storytelling in China

3.1. Analysis and Citation of Transmedia Theory

Some studies have applied transmedia theory and applied transmedia storytelling methods to the field of Chinese animation [8]. Shi & Gao used Marvel in the US as an example, showed that constructing transmedia story worlds is a time-spanning process [14]. The lack of a higher perspective and blind licensing and exploitation of works can gradually erode the value of the Intellectual Property itself through negative word-of-mouth among the audience. Transmedia story worlds are constructed from three perspectives: the larger story world blueprint, the construction of a single product for transmedia story worlds, and the trans-cultural dissemination of cultural products [14], and some other theoretical suggestions.

3.2. Practical Application Suggestions and Example Analysis

Cai & Chen used White Snake as an example of a film series that is deficient in transmedia derivative linkages and struggles to build a storytelling universe [15]. It also indirectly proved that some Chinese animated films have not done enough in terms of transmedia storytelling and the linkage and derivation of their works. As well as in a study of transmedia creation of children's movies, comics and cartoons were more effective than novels in transmedia communication [16].

Li also analysed a case of success through transmedia distribution and media mix in China, where, like many successful animated films, One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes is part of a top-rated transmedia series. It started as a webcomic series, released on the webcomic platform

u17.com in 2010, followed by a web video animation series. It has gained increasing popularity on Chinese video-sharing platforms. Since 2012, it has gained increasing popularity on Chinese video-sharing platforms such as Youku, Tencent, and Bilibili, before the release of the animated feature film. Despite the success of One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes, this media mix-like format may not yet have taken off in China [17].

The review finds that previous studies focused more on the theoretical analysis of transmedia storytelling and media mix theories and the application of transmedia theories in the context of Chinese animation. Therefore, This study focus on the theoretical problems of Chinese animation in transmedia storytelling.

4. An Analysis of China's Transmedia Storytelling

4.1. Methods

This study collected data from anime data sites such as Moegirlpedia and MyAnimeList, a well-known Chinese anime advisory encyclopedia, and MyAnimeList, a prominent foreign anime dating site.

This study analyzes the current problems in the transmedia distribution of Chinese anime by collecting data on the number of times anime works are distributed through transmedia storytelling and the duration of transmedia distribution. Records of when and what media anime works were distributed are collected from an animation data scoring website. Each video is analyzed through a design-led approach (media, time, space;).

This study uses all Chinese and Japanese anime works between 2019 to 2020 as the scope of the collection.

4.2. Results

The current statistics show that in 2019, the number of transmedia distribution of Japanese anime films was much higher than that of Chinese anime films. Figure 2 lists the selected Chinese anime films released in Chinese cinemas in 2019, and Figure 3 lists anime films released in Japanese of 2019 as a demonstration. This paper analyzes Chinese anime films through factors such as their transmedia counts. The data is obtained from Moegirlpedia, and anime rating and information websites such as MyAnimeList.

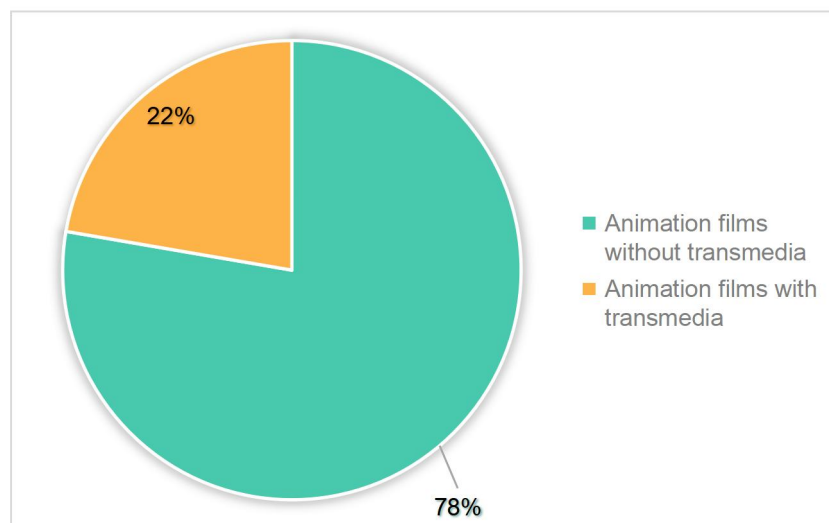


Figure 2: Statistical figure of transmedia storytelling distributed in China in 2019.

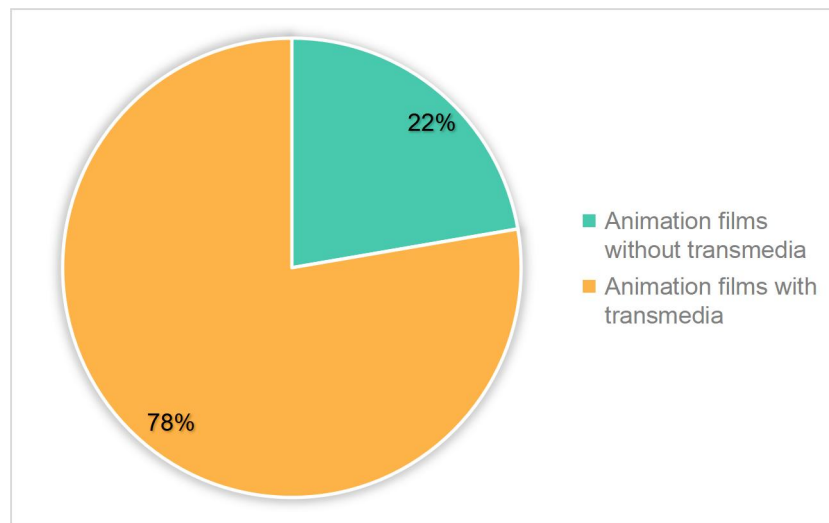


Figure 3: Statistical figure of transmedia storytelling distributed in Japan in 2019.

According to the statistics, there are a total of 27 Chinese animated films released in theatres in 2019. Among them, a total of 6 films accounted for only 22% of the total number of transmedia communication behaviours, and the remaining 21 animation films were all original animation. The total number of Japanese animation films released in cinemas in the same year was 69. Among them, 54 films accounted for 78% of the total number of films with transmedia distribution, and only 22% of the total number of films were completely original. In the survey of animation films of the same year, the transmedia distribution of Chinese and Japanese animation films has almost opposite figures.

4.3. Discussion

Analysis of the data in the Figure 3 shows roughly that Japanese anime films do not usually appear as separate products. Anime films are more inclined to be a part of a media mix of anime. Also Japanese animation films are more inclined to be associated with other derivative works in terms of storyline. This strategy may increase the risk tolerance of anime products, but it may also increase the learning costs for some new viewers. Of course, some animation films start out as sequels or theatre versions of a particular series.

And while Chinese animated films are more independent compared to Japanese animation films, in 2019, most Chinese animated films are more likely to be standalone works than part of a media mix. And even if some animation films have spin-offs, the content of the animation film is relatively independent in terms of plot, and rarely appears as a sequel to a particular work. And in China in recent years, few of the more outstanding animation works have been released in cinemas, which may be a waste of resources. Because in the past few years, works such as Luo Xiaohei's Battle Story and Hundred Thousand Cold Jokes have been released in cinemas through transmedia communication and achieved good results.

Therefore, for Chinese animated films, becoming a part of this media mix may be an option to increase their risk resistance and improve their ratings.

5. Conclusion

This study takes 2019 as an example to count the transmedia communication effect of Chinese and Japanese animation films, and finds that the transmedia communication ratio of Japanese animation films is much higher than the transmedia communication ratio of Chinese animated films. In 2019,

the transmedia communication ratio of Japanese animation films is 78%, while the transmedia communication ratio of Chinese animated films is only 22%. Referring to the Japanese animation industry, which has a complete industry chain, Chinese animation movies may need more transmedia communication.

And, the media mix model has been mature for many years in Japan, and it has been successful in China, but it has not become a mainstream model. If the medium of film can be integrated into the media mix of Chinese animation, it may have better results.

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