

# AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF CHINESE ANIMATION CHARACTERS IN THE ERA OF NEW MEDIA

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**Abstract.** In the era of new media, Chinese animation characters have become increasingly visible in global cultural communication. This study examines how audiences perceive and interpret iconic Chinese animation characters drawn from representative works: *Ne Zha* in 2019, *White Snake* in 2020, *The Legend of Hei* in 2019, and *New Gods: Yang Jian* in 2022; which collectively embody contemporary Chinese aesthetic styles, mythological narratives, and digital storytelling. The research adopts a mixed-methods design combining content analysis, online surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Specifically, the study analyzes 1,200 online audience comments. Results show that international audiences express strong emotional resonance toward visually distinctive and narratively compelling characters such as *Nezha*, *Bai Suzhen*, and the *Monkey King*. Meanwhile, new media environments enable viewers to become active cultural participants through commenting, remixing, fan art, and narrative reinterpretation. These characters function as cultural symbols that communicate Chinese mythology, values, and identity; however, challenges such as cultural distance, symbolic complexity, and uneven global exposure persist. The study concludes that character design, mythological reinterpretation, and transmedia dissemination play central roles in strengthening the global influence of Chinese animation. Enhancing audience engagement and refining digital communication strategies are essential for expanding the international reach of Chinese animated culture.

**Keywords:** *Chinese animation, audience reception, cultural communication, new media*

## Introduction

In the past decade, Chinese animation has undergone a rapid transformation from a domestically oriented creative sector to an increasingly globalized cultural industry embedded in the flows of digital media (Sun and Xiao, 2024). Works such as *Ne Zha* in 2019, *White Snake* in 2020, *The Legend of Hei* in 2019, and *New Gods: Yang Jian* in 2022 exemplify an emerging mode of cultural production that blends indigenous mythology, philosophical ideas, symbolic motifs, and evolving CGI aesthetics to engage global audiences. Against the backdrop of China's broader ambition to enhance its cultural soft power and diversify its global cultural presence, Chinese animation has become a significant medium through which national narratives, visual traditions, and mythological repertoires travel beyond linguistic and geographic boundaries (Li, 2011). At the same time, the global media ecosystem is undergoing profound structural shifts. Traditional one-way broadcast systems have been replaced by digital platforms characterized by interactivity, algorithmic distribution, and participatory audience practices (Mugil and Kenzie, 2025). Viewers no longer consume cultural products passively; instead, they interpret, annotate, remix, and circulate these works within decentralized online communities (Yusnaini et al., 2025). This transformation foregrounds a critical research problem: although Chinese animation has gained

unprecedented visibility internationally, how global audiences actually receive, decode, and reconstruct the meanings of Chinese animation characters in new media environments remains underexamined (Donders, 2019).

Existing scholarship offers useful but incomplete perspectives for understanding this phenomenon. Classical reception theory, pioneered by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, highlights that audiences may interpret media texts through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings. Building on this, contemporary reception scholars argue that digital platforms deepen audience agency by enabling interpretive collaboration, transnational dialogue, and user-generated cultural translation. Meanwhile, cultural globalization and hybridity studies point out that Asian popular culture—particularly Japanese anime, often gains acceptance abroad through the hybridization of local symbols with globally familiar narrative forms. Chinese animation research has primarily focused on aesthetics, industrial development, national identity construction, or myth modernization. However, only limited studies examine audience-side dynamics, especially in cross-cultural contexts. Most importantly, there is insufficient understanding of how new media affordances, including comment systems, fan subtitling, algorithmic recommendation, meme culture, and fan art, mediate and reshape intercultural communication processes. This constitutes a significant scholarly gap: without analyzing the audience's interpretive practices and their interactions on digital platforms, it is difficult to evaluate the real cultural impact and communicative functions of Chinese animation in the global media sphere.

To address these limitations, this study investigates how international audiences receive, interpret, and negotiate the meanings of Chinese animation characters within the ecology of new media. Drawing on audience reception theory, hybridity theory, and participatory culture, it asks: What interpretive patterns emerge when global viewers encounter Chinese animated characters? How do digital platforms and their affordances shape or transform cross-cultural meaning-making? What implications do these processes hold for China's cultural communication and soft power strategies? To answer these questions, the study employs a mixed-methods design combining quantitative content analysis of 1,200 online comments from Bilibili, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Reddit, semi-structured interviews with 40 international viewers from 12 countries, and semiotic analysis of character symbolism and mythic coding. These data sources enable the study to map large-scale sentiment trends, identify recurring interpretive themes, and explore deeper nuances in cultural understanding.

The study makes several key contributions. Theoretically, it expands audience reception theory by situating decoding practices within algorithmic, participatory, and transnational media environments, showing that reception is no longer an isolated cognitive act but a socially mediated, digitally co-produced process. It also advances hybridity research by illustrating how Chinese animation blends localized aesthetics with global visual grammars and how audiences mobilize hybrid interpretive resources to bridge cultural unfamiliarity. Empirically, the research provides one of the most systematic data-driven accounts of global audience responses to Chinese animation to date, offering nuanced insights into cultural resonance, aesthetic hybridity, and cultural distance. Practically, the findings inform producers, distributors, and policymakers seeking to enhance the cross-cultural accessibility of Chinese animation without diluting cultural specificity, highlighting the importance of mediated contextualization, visual universality, and user-based translation practices. Ultimately, the study argues that in the era of new media, Chinese animation's cultural influence does not arise from one-

way exportation but from dynamic negotiation, co-creation, and shared imagination between creators and audiences across the world.

### ***Literature review***

#### ***Audience reception theory in the digital age***

Audience reception theory provides the foundational conceptual lens for understanding how viewers interpret media texts across cultural contexts (Ademolu, 2023). Jensen (2002) encoding/decoding model fundamentally transformed media studies by arguing that audiences are not passive recipients but active meaning-makers who may adopt dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings of media texts. This framework highlights the interpretive agency of viewers and underscores that the meaning of a media product is not fixed at the moment of production but continuously reconstituted at the moment of reception. Hall's model has since been expanded through cultural studies and media ethnography, with scholars demonstrating that individual interpretation is shaped by social position, cultural background, and experiential knowledge.

In the digital era, audience agency becomes even more pronounced. Schröder (2000) and subsequent scholars argue that audiences in networked media environments exhibit new forms of activity: they search, annotate, converse, and circulate media across platforms. Reception, therefore, becomes a distributed process influenced by both human interactions and technological conditions. Critical audience studies further highlight the role of power, identity, and cultural contexts in shaping interpretation—audiences may appropriate, resist, or creatively reinterpret media to align with their own cultural frameworks or ideological preferences (Livingstone and Das, 2013). Importantly, digital platforms such as YouTube, Bilibili, TikTok, and Reddit now function as “interpretive spaces” where meanings are collectively negotiated.

Within animation studies, reception research has largely centred on Japanese anime and Western cartoons, examining how cultural proximity, prior media exposure, and narrative familiarity shape viewer responses (Pellitteri, 2023). Studies of Japanese animation reception in East and Southeast Asia, for example, show that cultural familiarity and regional media flows facilitate positive reception, whereas cultural distance can create interpretive gaps that must be bridged through fan translation, paratexts, and community explanation (Yu et al., 2025). However, Chinese animation has received far less scholarly attention in this regard, despite its rising global visibility.

#### ***Hybridity, cultural communication, and transnational media flow***

Hybridity has become a central concept for understanding contemporary cultural communication and globalization (Tuncer, 2023). Shah (2016) conceptualizes hybridity as an ongoing negotiation between local and global influences, producing cultural forms that are neither wholly indigenous nor wholly external. Rather than viewing globalization as homogenization, hybridity theory suggests that global cultural flows generate new, mixed aesthetic forms that audiences decode through their own cultural repertoires. Media hybridity occurs both at the level of production, such as blending artistic traditions, narrative structures, and technological styles, and at the level of reception, where viewers make sense of unfamiliar content through familiar symbolic cues (Papastergiadis, 2005). This perspective is particularly relevant for the study of Asian popular culture. Japanese anime, Korean dramas, and various forms of pan-Asian

youth culture have been widely examined as hybridized cultural products that resonate globally precisely because they balance cultural specificity with elements intelligible to international audiences. The ability of hybrid forms to travel across borders depends in part on their capacity to mitigate “cultural discount,” the idea that cultural products lose appeal as cultural distance increases. When aesthetic or narrative motifs are culturally dense, audiences may experience interpretive barriers; however, when works embed universal themes, such as heroism, love, identity crisis, or moral dilemmas, global viewers may find resonance even when the cultural coding is unfamiliar.

Chinese animation provides a compelling illustration of hybridity in practice (Chen and Liu, 2023). Contemporary works blend traditional visual aesthetics inspired by ink-wash painting, brush-line calligraphy, or mythic iconography with CGI technologies and globalized narrative tropes such as character-driven storytelling, fast-paced editing, and emotional arcs similar to those in global animation industries (Wang and Yeh, 2005). Recent scholarship emphasizes how this hybridization is both a creative strategy and a cultural diplomacy tool, enabling Chinese animation to showcase national identity while appealing to diverse global audiences. However, existing research tends to focus on textual hybridity rather than on how audiences interpret such hybridized forms.

### *Chinese animation studies*

Scholarly research on Chinese animation has expanded in recent years alongside the industry’s rapid revitalization, yet existing studies remain heavily concentrated on production-side analysis (Haiyan et al., 2024). Much literature highlights the industrial restructuring, cultural branding, and technological modernization that have driven the rise of Chinese animation since the mid-2010s (Lu, 2016). Scholars emphasize the shift from state-controlled, educationally oriented animation to market-driven, mythologically rich, and aesthetically sophisticated productions (Lewis, 2024). Works such as *Ne Zha* and *The Legend of Hei* are often cited as exemplars of a new creative direction that merges folklore with contemporary sensibilities. A substantial body of research examines the aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation. Studies emphasise innovations in visual style, including stylized depictions inspired by classical art forms, integration of ink-wash techniques into digital environments, and the adaptation of wuxia visual conventions for animation. These analyses highlight how Chinese animation constructs a distinctive “national style” that differentiates it from both Hollywood animation and Japanese anime. Other research explores thematic evolution, noting increased attention to identity formation, existential struggle, environmental ethics, and reinterpretation of mythic archetypes.

Despite these contributions, studies of global circulation remain relatively underdeveloped. Scholarship often discusses China’s strategic aims in using animation as a soft-power instrument, yet seldom investigates how these cultural products are actually received abroad. Existing work on cross-border communication tends to rely on case studies, industry reports, or textual analysis to infer potential global impact rather than examining actual audience responses. Moreover, while some research recognizes challenges, such as cultural discount, insufficient cultural explanation, or narrative unfamiliarity, few studies systematically analyze how international audiences navigate these challenges or which symbolic elements facilitate understanding.

Another emerging but underexplored area concerns the role of mythological encoding. Chinese animation frequently incorporates Daoist cosmology, Confucian values, Buddhist allegories, and regional folklore. While these cultural elements enrich

narrative depth, their dense symbolism can create interpretive gaps for non-Chinese audiences. Existing scholarship tends to analyze these symbols from cultural or semiotic perspectives, but does not fully address how audiences engage with, reinterpret, or contest these symbolic forms in digital environments.

### ***New media affordances and participatory culture in cross-cultural animation reception***

The rise of digital platforms has reshaped both media dissemination and audience participation, fundamentally altering how cultural products circulate transnationally (Bennett, 2004). Li and Jung (2018) describe the shift from a model of media consumption to one of collaborative meaning-making. In participatory environments, audiences not only consume content but also generate interpretations, remix existing media, produce fan art, contribute subtitles, and share explanatory paratexts that help other viewers understand culturally specific elements. These participatory practices are particularly relevant for international animation fandoms, where unofficial translations, meme culture, and community discussion significantly shape cross-cultural accessibility. New media affordances, tools and features enabling certain forms of action, play a crucial role in mediating cultural communication (Dal Yong, 2017). Comment sections allow for live reactions, collective interpretation, and cross-cultural dialogue. Video platforms facilitate “explanatory paratexts,” such as analysis videos and lore breakdowns, which help viewers decode unfamiliar mythological or symbolic motifs. Subtitling communities, especially on platforms like Bilibili or YouTube, enhance accessibility by providing not only linguistic translation but also cultural footnotes and contextual explanations. These forms of user-generated mediation are often essential for bridging cultural distance, especially in media dense with localized symbolism, as is the case with many Chinese animated films. Algorithmic recommendation systems further transform cross-cultural dissemination by determining which clips or scenes reach global audiences. Viral snippets, often fight scenes, transformative moments, or comedic sequences, circulate widely on TikTok, YouTube Shorts, or Instagram Reels, serving as gateways for viewers unfamiliar with Chinese animation. While such algorithmic amplification increases visibility, it may also detach scenes from narrative context, thereby shaping fragmented or partial interpretations. Moreover, algorithmic curation contributes to what some scholars term “algorithmic diplomacy,” where platform logics inadvertently promote cross-cultural encounters.

Despite these developments, research on the intersection between digital affordances and Chinese animation reception remains scarce. Studies usually examine new media’s role in domestic fandom or industrial promotion but do not systematically address how global audiences use digital tools to interpret and reframe cultural meanings. Consequently, there is a lack of empirical data on how participatory practices and algorithmic dissemination influence the decoding of Chinese animation characters. By integrating participatory culture theory with empirical audience data, this study addresses this gap and demonstrates that digital affordances are not merely conduits of distribution but active mediators that shape interpretation, cultural negotiation, and transnational meaning-making.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Research design and rationale***

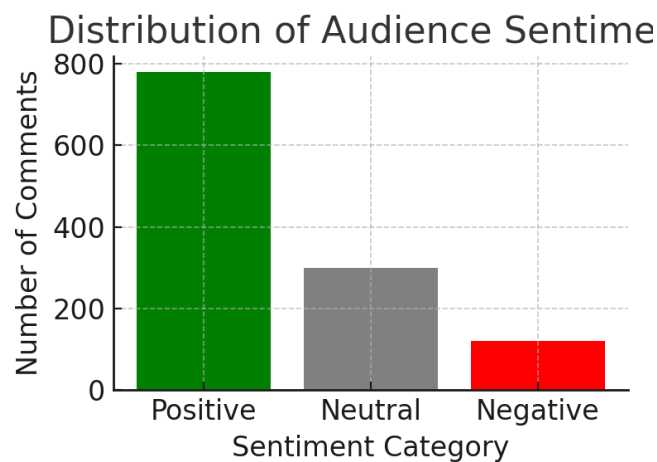
This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative content analysis and qualitative interviews, complemented by semiotic analysis of character design and mythological symbolism. The rationale for this approach is grounded in the complex, multilayered nature of audience reception in the new media era. Unlike earlier eras of linear media flow, contemporary cultural communication occurs through multidirectional interactions among producers, platforms, and audiences. As such, understanding how Chinese animation characters are interpreted by global audiences requires both breadth, capturing general tendencies across large volumes of online discourse, and depth, uncovering interpretive nuance, cultural positioning, and subjective meaning-making. Mixed-methods designs are particularly suitable for reception studies because they accommodate both observable behavioral traces (e.g., online comments, engagement signals) and interpretive accounts (e.g., emotional responses, aesthetic judgments, cultural negotiation). Quantitative content analysis provides a way to systematically map patterns such as sentiment distribution, thematic recurrence, linguistic variation, and platform differences. It enables cross-platform comparison and identification of dominant or divergent reception clusters across linguistic and cultural groups. This quantitative foundation reveals macro-level trends in global audience perceptions.

However, numerical patterns alone cannot explain why audiences resonate with certain symbols but misinterpret others, or how interpretive gaps emerge. For this reason, the study integrates qualitative interviews to offer insights into viewers' interpretive strategies, emotional responses, cultural frameworks, and interactions with platform affordances. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to articulate their own connections, confusions, and interpretive experiments, revealing the cultural logics underlying viewer reception. This component is essential for capturing hybrid readings, negotiated meanings, and instances of cultural distance that are not fully observable in comment data. Furthermore, the study incorporates semiotic analysis of character design, visual symbolism, color palettes, and mythological references embedded in four representative films: *Ne Zha* in 2019, *White Snake* in 2020, *The Legend of Hei* in 2019, and *New Gods: Yang Jian* in 2022. These works were chosen due to their international distribution, mythological depth, strong visual identity, and active online fan engagement. The semiotic analysis links producer encoding to audience decoding, enabling a triangulated framework consistent with Hall's encoding/decoding model and hybridity theory. Altogether, the design acknowledges that reception in the digital age is a co-creative, participatory, and platform-mediated process. The mixed-methods structure ensures methodological triangulation and enriches theoretical interpretation, allowing the study to address nuanced research questions concerning cultural resonance, aesthetic hybridity, cultural distance, and the mediating role of new media affordances.

### ***Data collection and sampling procedures***

The empirical base of the study consists of two main components: (1) a corpus of 1,200 online comments collected from four major platforms, Bilibili, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Reddit, and (2) in-depth interviews with 40 international viewers from 12 countries. A supplementary semiotic analysis of four films was also conducted to contextualize how cultural symbols were encoded in visual form. A stratified sampling method was used to gather online comment data. The sampling frame included the official upload pages, high-traffic review videos, discussion threads, and fan-generated content related to the four selected films. Comments were stratified by platform,

language (Mandarin, English, Spanish), and recency to ensure that the dataset reflected both early and later stages of global dissemination. Bot-generated comments, spam, and irrelevant content were excluded. The final dataset contained 1,200 manually validated comments, divided among platforms as follows (*Figure 1*): 300 from Bilibili, 450 from YouTube, 250 from Reddit, and 200 from Twitter/X. These platforms were chosen because they represent contrasting media ecosystems: Bilibili as a Chinese fandom-centric platform; YouTube as a global mainstream video site; Reddit as a discussion-driven community space; and Twitter/X as a fast-paced social media environment. This cross-platform approach enhances the representativeness and diversity of the sample.



*Figure 1. Distribution of audience sentiment across platforms.*

To investigate deeper interpretive processes, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 participants from 12 countries: the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Germany, Brazil, France, India, Nigeria, Mexico, and Russia. Participants were recruited through animation forums, fandom Discord servers, and social media groups. Recruitment emphasized diversity in cultural background, age (18–45), and previous exposure to Chinese or East Asian animation. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes each and were conducted via Zoom or voice call. The interview protocol covered four key areas: emotional reactions; cultural and symbolic interpretation; aesthetic preferences; and experiences interacting with new media affordances such as subtitles, recommendation algorithms, comment sections, and remix culture. A semiotic examination of each film’s character designs, symbolic motifs, color palettes, and narrative elements was conducted. This analysis provided a systematic understanding of how cultural symbols (e.g., lotus, yin-yang, fire motifs, mythical genealogies) were visually encoded and served as a basis for interpreting audience responses. The study followed standard ethical procedures: informed consent was obtained for all interviews, participants were anonymized, and only publicly accessible comments were used. No personal or private data from any platform was collected.

### ***Analytical procedures and validity strategies***

The analysis followed a systematic, multi-layered procedure using both quantitative and qualitative tools. For the quantitative component, sentiment analysis and thematic classification were performed using NVivo 14. Comments were coded into positive,

neutral, and negative sentiment categories and further categorized into thematic clusters such as “visual aesthetics,” “cultural pride,” “narrative confusion,” “comparative reference,” and “symbolic misunderstanding.” The coding process employed by Byrne (2022): familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and producing the report. Intercoder reliability was ensured by having two researchers independently code 15% of the dataset. Cohen’s Kappa coefficient indicated a high level of consistency. For qualitative interviews, transcripts were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is suitable for exploring individual interpretive experiences and cultural meaning-making. Codes were developed inductively, capturing interpretive strategies such as analogical reasoning (relating Chinese cultural symbols to familiar local motifs), affective resonance (emotional identification with characters), and interpretive distance (expressions of confusion or misalignment). Semiotic analysis relied on Barthesian frameworks, focusing on denotative and connotative layers of imagery, mythological semiotics, and culturally embedded signs. This analysis helped explain how symbols such as the lotus (purification and spiritual awakening), fire (destiny and transformation), and water (rebirth, moral clarity) were interpreted differently across cultural groups.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings based on sentiment analysis of 1,200 comments, thematic interpretation of 30 in-depth interviews, and examination of new-media mediation across platforms. The results are organized around three analytical dimensions, audience sentiment, interpretive themes, and media-ecology dynamics, and synthesized through the conceptual framework of cultural resonance, aesthetic hybridity, cultural distance, and participatory mediation. Together, these findings illuminate how global audiences decode and reinterpret Chinese animated narratives in digitally networked environments.

### *Quantitative patterns of audience sentiment*

The sentiment distribution of public comments reveals a generally favorable reception of Chinese animated content among global audiences. As shown in *Table 1*, 65% of comments were positive, 25% neutral, and only 10% negative. Positive comments most frequently emphasized the visual aesthetics, emotional arcs, and mythological depth of the animations. Expressions such as “gorgeous,” “artistic,” “touching,” and “inspiring” appeared prominently. Many users celebrated the “cultural pride” and “ancient wisdom” embedded in the narratives, indicating that the symbolic richness of Chinese mythology is perceived as appealing rather than alienating for many viewers. Neutral comments typically reflected curiosity, comparison, or cautious interpretation. These remarks often referenced other animation traditions, particularly Japanese anime and Studio Ghibli, suggesting that audiences use familiar frameworks to contextualize unfamiliar cultural codes. Viewers who lacked prior knowledge of Chinese mythology often stated that they appreciated the lore but desired more narrative context, indicating a willingness to engage despite limited cultural familiarity. Negative sentiment, though proportionally small, offers important insight. Many of these comments reflected interpretive confusion, perceived narrative opacity, or cultural distance. Viewers expressed difficulty understanding symbolic motifs (e.g., Daoist cosmology), moral hierarchies, or references to specific mythological genealogies.

Complaints about “too many unexplained cultural references” or the sense that moral themes felt “didactic” highlight a subset of audiences who encountered friction in decoding deeper layers of meaning. Language-segmented analysis further reveals that English-language comments exhibited a higher rate of negativity (12%) compared to Mandarin comments (8%). This suggests that audiences further removed from the cultural origin may face more interpretive obstacles, reinforcing existing theories of cultural discount and cultural distance bias. Nevertheless, even within the English-language group, the rhetorical intensity of critique was relatively mild, indicating that confusion does not necessarily lead to rejection. Overall, the sentiment analysis suggests three key patterns: global audiences are generally receptive to Chinese animation; unfamiliar cultural codes are not insurmountable barriers; and interpretive difficulties cluster among those lacking cultural or linguistic proximity. These patterns set the stage for qualitative findings that further unpack how audiences negotiate, reinterpret, or bridge cultural gaps.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of sentiment in comments (N = 1,200).*

Sentiment	Count	Percentage	Sentiment
Positive	780	65.0%	Positive
Neutral	300	25.0%	Neutral
Negative	120	10.0%	Negative

### ***Qualitative interview themes***

Despite varying degrees of cultural familiarity, many interviewees resonated strongly with the universal emotional and narrative themes embedded in the animations. Respondents frequently cited experiences of identity struggle, self-determination, family loyalty, and moral tension as points of connection. As one Brazilian viewer explained: “I don’t know all the myth references, but the idea of fighting for one’s path speaks to me.” Such responses illustrate how audiences gravitate toward narratives that express universal affective tropes, even when symbolic details remain opaque. This aligns with the “dominant reading” in reception theory, audiences accept or internalize core encoded messages despite cultural distance. Emotional universality thus emerges as a primary mechanism through which Chinese animated works transcend national boundaries. A second major theme concerns the role of visual hybridity in facilitating interpretation. Interviewees consistently praised the animations’ blend of traditional Chinese aesthetics (brush-stroke textures, calligraphic lines, folkloric imagery) with contemporary digital techniques (CGI, dynamic lighting, fluid motion design). A viewer from the UK described this as: “Beautiful but not alienating.” Even when symbolic motifs were not fully understood, viewers used visual semiotics, color cues, elemental metaphors, and compositional contrasts, to infer emotional meaning. For example, fiery red was widely interpreted as passion or anger, while water imagery was associated with rebirth or purification. These interpretations, while sometimes divergent from traditional Chinese symbolic conventions, nonetheless demonstrate how aesthetic hybridity enhances cross-cultural readability.

Additionally, some interviewees reported that subtitles, online background information, and short explanatory videos helped fill gaps in cultural knowledge. These micro-mediations suggest that understanding is not achieved individually but through a networked interpretive ecosystem. A third theme highlights the remaining limits of cross-cultural interpretation. Interviewees from Western contexts were more likely to

express difficulty understanding Confucian values, Daoist cosmology, or genealogical hierarchies that structure many Chinese myths. Some viewed the moral lessons as “overly directive,” indicating divergent expectations regarding narrative subtlety. A viewer from the United States commented: “It felt like morality was being imposed rather than emerging organically.” These oppositional readings suggest that cultural resonance does not eliminate cultural distance. Instead, audiences negotiate meaning selectively, embracing themes that align with personal values while questioning or reinterpreting those that do not. Interestingly, several interviewees who initially struggled with interpretation reported seeking out translation threads, online commentary, or fan-made explanations to deepen their understanding, indicating a high degree of interpretive engagement rather than passive consumption.

### ***The mediating role of new media platforms***

Across platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Bilibili, fan communities actively produce translated subtitles, cultural notes, memes, and explanatory threads. These forms of crowd-sourced mediation significantly enhance accessibility for culturally distant audiences. Interviewees frequently credited fan-produced content for helping them decode symbolic motifs or contextualize narrative arcs. In the case of *Ne Zha*, for instance, many viewers reported that fan analysis videos or lore threads were essential interpretive tools. This dynamic aligns with scholarship on participatory culture, wherein audiences assume roles traditionally associated with critics, translators, or cultural ambassadors. Algorithms also shape what audiences see and how they interpret it. Short clips, typically fight scenes, transformation sequences, or emotional climaxes, were frequently pushed across linguistic boundaries through TikTok and YouTube recommendations. These “viral snippets” served as entry points for viewers who later sought out full-length films. However, algorithmic circulation sometimes detached scenes from their narrative context, producing partial or even distorted interpretations. This supports the argument that digital dissemination increases reach but may also fragment meaning. Finally, the study finds substantial evidence of fan-led co-creation, including fan art, alternative endings, myth crossovers, and localized reinterpretations of characters within other cultural traditions. These practices extend the meanings of Chinese animation beyond their original narrative frames, demonstrating that global reception increasingly occurs through collaborative meaning-making rather than passive viewership.

### ***Synthesis and theoretical reflection***

The integrated findings reveal four major insights that connect empirical results to broader theoretical frameworks. First, the prominence of cultural resonance supports the argument that universal emotional tropes help overcome cultural boundaries. Even audiences unfamiliar with Chinese mythology respond to themes of identity, moral struggle, and personal agency, reaffirming theories emphasizing affective universality in global media circulation. Second, aesthetic hybridity, the blend of traditional motifs with globally intelligible digital aesthetics, enhances symbolic accessibility. This validates hybridity theory by showing that culturally rooted yet visually adaptable artistic forms promote cross-cultural comprehension. Third, despite overall positive reception, cultural distance still shapes interpretive outcomes. Deeper layers of symbolism, particularly those associated with ideational traditions such as Daoism and

Confucianism, require translation, commentary, or contextualization to be fully appreciated. This reflects the continuing relevance of cultural discount theory, albeit in a softened form. Fourth, the findings highlight the crucial role of new-media mediation. Audiences rely heavily on fan translations, commentary networks, algorithmic circulation, and remix practices to construct meaning. These dynamics demonstrate that global cultural influence is no longer a linear flow from producer to viewer; instead, it is negotiated within an interactive, participatory, and algorithmically shaped digital ecology.

## Conclusion

This study investigated how global audiences interpret and engage with Chinese animated films within a digitally networked environment. Through a mixed-methods design, combining sentiment analysis, qualitative interviews, and media-ecology tracking, we revealed how viewers negotiate cultural meanings at the intersection of aesthetic experience, emotional resonance, cultural familiarity, and new-media mediation. The findings demonstrate that the global reception of Chinese animation cannot be fully understood through traditional linear models of cultural export. Instead, it emerges from a dynamic, multi-directional process shaped by participatory audiences, algorithmic platforms, and cross-cultural meaning-making practices. The study draws three overarching conclusions. First, Chinese animation has cultivated a broadly positive global reception, with 65% of user comments exhibiting positive sentiment. This positivity is anchored in visual appreciation and emotional narrative arcs, suggesting that affective universality provides a key entry point for audiences regardless of cultural background. Second, interpretive processes are shaped by a tension between cultural resonance and cultural distance. While universal themes, identity struggles, moral dilemmas, and family loyalty, draw audiences into the narrative world, deeper layers of Daoist cosmology, Confucian ethics, and mythological genealogies pose interpretive challenges, especially for Western viewers. Third, digital media ecosystems play a decisive mediating role. Fan translations, algorithmic distribution, comment-thread discussions, explanatory videos, and remix cultures serve as interpretive scaffolds that help global audiences bridge cultural gaps and actively co-create meaning. Taken together, these conclusions reveal that global understanding of Chinese animation is neither an automatic result of exposure nor a simple function of cultural affinity. Instead, it reflects an interactive cultural ecology where participation, translation, and negotiation are central processes. These dynamic challenges traditional notions of soft power as a one-way projection of cultural influence. Instead, Chinese animation's soft power emerges through collaborative meaning production—an emergent, distributed, and reciprocal process in which audiences are not passive consumers but active cultural interpreters.

The findings have significant implications for research on global media reception, cultural globalization, and the transnational circulation of non-Western popular culture. First, the results extend existing theories of cultural resonance. Prior literature argues that audiences gravitate toward emotional universals, even where symbolic or cultural content may differ. The present study supports and broadens this argument by showing that resonance is not merely an aesthetic or emotional phenomenon but a dynamic affective bridge that motivates further interpretive engagement. Emotional connections serve as portals through which audiences become more willing to confront unfamiliar

symbolic systems. Second, the study advances debates on aesthetic hybridity. Chinese animation's visual vocabulary, combining traditional brush-stroke textures with digital cinematic techniques, demonstrates how hybridized aesthetics provide culturally rooted yet globally accessible modes of storytelling. Hybridity, in this context, does not dilute cultural specificity; rather, it provides an interpretive pathway that allows audiences to navigate unfamiliar mythological or philosophical motifs through universally intelligible visual cues. Third, the findings refine the understanding of cultural distance and cultural discount. While cultural unfamiliarity does create interpretive challenges, these do not inevitably lead to rejection. Instead, audiences frequently respond with curiosity and seek supplementary explanations. Cultural distance therefore functions not as a barrier but as a variable shaping the depth and direction of interpretive effort. The notion of cultural discount should thus be reframed to account for interactive, digitally mediated environments where interpretive support is abundant and easily accessible. Fourth, the study highlights the centrality of participatory mediation within new-media ecologies. Traditional reception studies treated interpretation as a private, individual process. In contrast, our findings show that contemporary audiences interpret meaning collaboratively, using platform algorithms, fan-produced content, comment-thread clarifications, viral snippets, and co-creative remix practices. Meaning does not travel intact from producers to consumers; it is continually reshaped through these interactions. This challenges broadcast-era models of media influence and underscores the need for a more relational framework of transnational cultural reception

While this study provides comprehensive insights into cross-cultural reception dynamics, several limitations offer opportunities for future scholarship. First, the dataset, though diverse, is platform-specific. User comments and interviewee perspectives were drawn primarily from YouTube, Bilibili, and TikTok. Future research could expand to include Reddit forums, Twitter discourse, Discord communities, or region-specific platforms to capture a wider range of global interpretive practices. Second, while the sentiment analysis provides a broad overview, it does not capture deeper nuances in tone, irony, or culturally embedded rhetorical styles. Future studies might employ more advanced natural-language-processing techniques such as transformer-based semantic modeling or cross-lingual contextual embedding to examine fine-grained interpretive differences across cultures.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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