

Classics of World Literature: The Cultural Capital for Animated Adaptations

Wu Sijia

School of Literature, Communication University of Zhejiang,

998 Xueyuan Street, Hangzhou 310018, China

Email: wusijia@yeah.net

Abstract The classics of world literature are not only passed down from generation to generation in the form of paper texts including translated works but also transmitted in a cross-media way and acquired a new life form in this way. Especially in animation adaptations, the classics of world literature are important cultural capital and an inexhaustible source of creation. The aim of this paper, which is divided into three parts, is to explore the function of cultural capital played by world literary classics in animation adaptation. Firstly, it is argued that literary classics are the source of animation creation and the common assets of all the social classes. Secondly, it is believed that animation adaptation provides a new way for the cultural transmission of literary classics, and there are successful adaptation practices of literary classics in various periods. Thirdly, it is believed that literary classics, as cultural capital, can play a historical role in the animated adaptation, which can also be evidenced by the development of Disney, the representative of animation companies. The author concludes that the literary classics passed down through time are the common wealth of human beings and the cultural capital that can be utilized, and moreover, it is the artistic guarantee for animation adaptations to obtain cultural values.

Keywords literary classics; cultural capital; animated adaptation; cultural inheritance

Author **Wu Sijia** is Professor at School of Literature, Communication University of Zhejiang. She received her Ph.D. from Zhejiang University, China. She was a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge for the 2018-19 academic year. Her research interests include dramatic literature, animation and film studies. Her recent publications include the monograph *A Study of the Animation Adaptation of Shakespeare's Plays* (2021). This paper is sponsored by The National Social Science Fund of China (Project No. 20FYSB017).

Introduction

The concept of “cultural capital” was proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, who believed that capital is expressed as economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, symbolic capital, and other fundamental types of capital (Bourdieu 241-58). In his opinion, it is obviously not comprehensive to look at capital only from the perspective of economy, and the capital should also include the elements of culture. And the cultural capital and economic capital have their own functions. “The difference between cultural capital and economic capital is that economic capital can be immediately transformed into money, it is institutionalized in the form of property rights, while cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital only under certain conditions” (Wang 437). However, we neither expect nor intend to explore the academic content of this doctrine here. It is only to borrow the idea of cultural capital to emphasize the capital property of literary classics, and the importance and value of our facing up to this capital property for the development of animation and cultural industry.

The animated films based on the literary classics are easier to be accepted by the audience, and can give full play to the function of cultivating sentiment and ethical education that literary works can develop. Moreover, in a certain sense, the acceptance process of animation is also the cognitive process of the original work. Take the animation feature films in the history of world animation as an example. The vast majority of them are successful due to the adaptation of literary classics, which are cultural capital. Moreover, the original literary classics on which these animated films are based are not only the domestic literary classics, but also literary classics from all over the world, which fully reflect the characteristics of literary classics as the common cultural heritage of humankind.

Literary Classics: The Source of Creation of Animation

According to John Guillory, “Canonical texts are the repositories of cultural values” (Guillory 22). “Cultural capital” is the common wealth of human beings, and this rich wealth cannot be exclusive to a few classes, but should become the common asset of all classes of humankind. Only with this rich common cultural heritage of humankind can the concept of structuring the community of human destiny be put into practice.

In terms of the development of animated films, narrative works such as novels and fairy tales are important sources of animated adaptations, but of course,

other genres of literature have not been neglected by the animators. In the case of drama, Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies are of interest to many animators and have been adapted into a variety of animated works. Even poetical works are no exception to the attention of animation and have undergone successful animated adaptations. For example, Dante's epic poem *The Divine Comedy* has been adapted for animation in a wide variety of ways. Pushkin's poem, *Ruslan and Lyudmyla*, was also adapted to *The Stolen Princess*, a Ukrainian animation released in 2018. Even lyrical poems have been animated by some animators, such as Hannes Rall's adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem "The Raven" into an animated short film in 1999, followed by Goethe's famous poem "The Erl-King."

As cultural capital, the works of classical writers are often more favored in the process of conversion from written text to the screen. In 2011, Forrest Wickman conducted a survey and made a detailed analysis of IMDB data, thereby identifying the writers whose works had been adapted most frequently for the screen. The result of the survey is that the most respected writers in the literature circle are often also the most adapted writers, and the higher the reputation of the original works, the more frequently they are adapted. At the top of the statistical list are some of the world's most famous writers: Shakespeare, the representative writer of the English Renaissance, ranked the first place with 831 adapted works, followed by Chekhov, the world's giant of short stories, who ranked second with 320 adapted works, then followed by Dickens, the outstanding representative of British realist literature, who ranked third with 300 adapted works, and Allan Poe, a famous American writer in the 19th century, ranked fourth with 240 adaptations (Rall 190).

Shakespeare ranks at the top of the list of screen adaptations, mainly because of the unique value of his works that lend to the construction of a community of human destiny. In this regard, critic Roberta Pearson put it very pertinently when she argued that "The humanist Shakespeare, set free from the stifling historicism of a particular English heritage, is a transcendent genius who wrote of universal themes and emotions and created emblematic characters recognized by all" (Pearson 91-2). Fiona Shaw also makes the point: she believes that Shakespeare's plays "can be reset at any time and any place because what we recognize in them isn't the dates and towns, it's the emotions and experiences and the personalities familiar to everyone everywhere" (Qtd Voigts-Virchow 92).

The same is true for Chekhov's works. He was both a story writer and a playwright, and his works have entered the literary world as a humorist, and are mainly characterized by their brevity and humorous satire. However, his works, despite the fact that they are generally short and concise in form, are voluminous

and profoundly thoughtful. He often started with ordinary events to reflect the important issues in social life. Therefore, the ordinary themes have profound philosophical connotations, and ordinary subjects reflect significant social issues.

Chekhov's works are suitable for the screen because of their wide range of subjects, their profound meanings, and their relevance to real life. His works were first adapted for screen in 1910. From then to the present day, hundreds of his works have been adapted into films, including *The Sea Gull* directed by Sidney Lumet, *Mirror*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, and *Winter Sleep*, adapted from the novella "The Wife" and directed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

The famous British writer Charles Dickens has been widely adapted, again due to the depth of thought and artistic impact of his works. Therefore, Dickens' writings are also a valuable cultural asset in the field of film and television adaptations. His works have not only been adapted into live-action versions or TV series such as *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and *Oliver Twist*, but have also been quite successful in animated adaptations, from the animated shorts to 3D masterpieces. Dickens' works have provided rich cultural resources for animated adaptations. The animated short film of the same name, based on Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, was a great success and won the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 1972. Based on Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*, Disney's animated film *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* was also very successful. Moreover, The animated *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *The Pickwick Papers* also won a large audience.

Animation Adaptation: A New Way of Cultural Inheritance

In the history of World literature, the adaptation practice of literary classics as cultural capital in various countries has laid a solid foundation for the development of animation and provides a rich guarantee for the source of animation creation. In particular, many animation adaptations of literary classics, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Arabian *One Thousand and One Nights*, Shakespeare's plays and other literary classics of animation adaptation, as well as the successful adaptation examples of "Chinese School of Animation," are the outstanding achievements of "cultural heritage" of humankind.

Taking Dante's masterpiece *The Divine Comedy* as an example, American animator Boris Acosta has been engaged in film and television adaptations of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and he has completed more than ten films or animated films adapted from *The Divine Comedy*. His 3D animated films based on *The Divine Comedy* have been quite successful, and he has largely followed the

structural features of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* to build his own 3D animated films, including *Dante's Hell 3D Animation*, *Dante's Purgatory 3D Animation*, and *Dante's Paradise 3D Animation*. Of course, the animation adaptation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is not limited to a single artist or a single country, the animated film *Dante's Inferno: An Animated Epic* is the collective work of many animators on an international scale. This so-called animated epic is 100 minutes long, and the animated film also follows the main plot of Dante's original story, and is divided into seven parts according to the specific stages of development of the plot, and was respectively directed by seven animation experts from the United States, Japan, Korea and other anime experts, including the well-known American director Victor Cook. Compared with the original, there are certain variations in the plot and spiritual content, which highlights the prominent visibility and narrativity. Moreover, "the variation in the animated adaptation of *The Divine Comedy* is also reflected in the tendency to highlight the storyline at the expense of religious connotations. In Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, the 'Purgatory' is about 'sins', which may have some ethical and moral obstacles, while the "Paradise" not only involves the ideal realm, but also the topics discussed involve theology, philosophy and many other aspects, and the content seems to be ponderous, so, compared with the 'Purgatory' and the 'Paradise.' Therefore, compared with 'Purgatory' and 'Paradise,' 'Hell' is more likely to be chosen and loved by film and TV writers and directors" (Wu 90).

Looking back at the history of world literature, we can see that there are successful adaptation practices of literary classics in all the developing periods.

For example, the animated film of the same name, *Oedipus the King*, is based on the tragedy in ancient Greek literature, as well as the animated short film based on Greek mythology, and the animated film *The Prince of Egypt*, based on "Exodus" of the ancient Hebrew Bible. Even the epic work of ancient Babylon, *Gilgamesh*, was adapted into an animated film by the Quay brothers, Stephen and Timothy Quay in 1985. In China, based on a story in *Aesop's Fables*, China's first animated short with sound, *Camel Dance*, emerged in 1935. Since then, "Chinese animation has entered the era of sound" (Lin 12). The international adaptation of Chinese literature also developed in this way. For example, the first Japanese animated feature film, *The Legend of the White Snake* (1958), was based on classical Chinese folk literature and was the first color animated film produced by Toei Animation Co. Ltd.

In medieval literature, in addition to the above-mentioned *The Divine Comedy*, one of the successful examples is the animated film *Beowulf* (2007), based on the

British medieval heroic epic of the same title. The film was directed by Robert Zemeckis, and although it is not a live-action film, it can be said that, from the perspective of animation effects, it is more live than the live-action film. Whether it is the scenes or the characters, the producers are characterized by “realism,” using animation film technology to reproduce the real world of human beings. The advantages of animation in this film are evident. It can not only avoid the high pay of a few actors but also easily solve any difficult movements that cannot be completed by real actors. If it were not for the animation film technology, it would be unimaginable to see the main character Beowulf with amazing power and the presentation of the bloody battle between him and Glendale.

The eminent plays of Renaissance literature, represented by the English playwright Shakespeare, have been the sources of inspiration and materials for many animation creators. There are not only the series of The Animated Shakespeare but also various animations based on his single works. Among them, *The Lion King*, based on *Hamlet*, has been a great success. Besides, *Romeo and Juliet* is particularly favored by adapters. As Robert Hamilton Ball notes, “Romeo and Juliet was the most popular subject for Shakespeare film” (Ball 235). American animator John Randolph Bray (1879-1978) had already begun his attempts to adapt the Shakespearean play *Romeo and Juliet* into animation as early as 1915 with the short animated film *Romiet and Julio*, which expressed his attitude towards the adaptation by reconstructing the names of the play’s protagonists. Later, *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted into dozens of animated feature films and shorts in Britain, the United States, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania, Spain, Yugoslavia, Canada, Japan, Bulgaria, and other countries. Among them are three animated films that received a certain amount of attention, which are the American animation *The Lion King 2: Simba’s Pride* (1998), the Japanese animation *Romeo × Juliet* (2007), and the British animation *Gnomeo & Juliet* (2011).

In the 17th- and 18th-century literature, *Robinson Crusoe* (2016), which was based on Defoe’s novel *The Adventure of Robinson Crusoe*, was directed by Vincent Kesteloot. In the animated film, the same theme of survival on a desert island is embodied. Compared with Defoe’s original work, the animation film is more prominent in the communication between Robinson and the parrot Mike and other animals on the island.

From the 19th century to the 20th century, important works in the history of world literature have been adapted into animation. Some of them have been very successful, such as *Frozen*, adapted from Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Snow Queen”, and *Cinderella*, adapted from the fairy tale of the same title.

It can be seen that whether it is the plays of ancient Greco-Roman or Shakespeare, or the epic poems of Dante in the Middle Ages, or the novels of the 18th century, or the folk literature such as “Cinderella,” all can be disseminated through animation and gain a new life in this way.

Disney’s Journey: The Value of Cultural Capital

The historical role that literary classics can play as cultural capital in animated film adaptations can also be evidenced by the development of the Walt Disney Company, the representative of animation companies. The Disney Company, which has a history of 100 years, is usually divided into six developing periods by the academic circles, namely: 1. Groundbreaking period (1937-1942), 2. Adjustment period (1943-1949), 3. Golden period (1950-1967), 4. Depression period (1968-1988), 5. Re-boom period (1989-2000), and 6. Transition period (2001-present) (Yang 2-13). With a closer examination of the development process of animation in the six periods mentioned above, we will find that whenever the animations get prosperous, they are always inseparable from the animation adaptation of literary classics and from the reference of animated films to the classics of world literature.

During the groundbreaking period of its development, the Disney Company was able to open a new page in the world of animation, thanks mainly to the animated adaptations of literary classics. The year “1937” was a groundbreaking year because the Disney Company released its first animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This film was the first animated film to be shot with multiplane camera and got an “enormous success” (Lucia 324). *The New Republic* wrote that it was “among the genuine artistic achievements of this country” (Madej 61). The film received an Academy Honorary Award in 1938, becoming a pioneering work in the history of world animation. During this period, not only *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* but also *Pinocchio* and *Bambi*, which were also adapted from famous literary works, achieved great success.

In the third stage, the “Golden Age (1950-1967)”, the most crucial contribution that represents the glory of Disney animation is the nine brilliant animated films. They are *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *Mary Poppins* (1964), and *The Jungle Book* (1967).

Most animated films come from adaptations of literary classics from various countries. *Cinderella* was adapted from the Grimm brother’s fairy tale *Cinderella*. *Cinderella*’s kind character, her positive outlook on life, and her romantic

relationship with the prince meet the emotional needs of the post-war generation. It is this literary classic that has acclimated to the spirit of the times and opened the prelude to the golden age of animated films.

Disney's animated film *Alice in Wonderland* is based on the world-famous British writer Lewis Carroll's fairy tale *Alice's adventure in Wonderland*. The original work has been translated into dozens of languages worldwide and is loved by readers, especially young readers. Its narrative and structural patterns, as well as its characters and imagery, have profoundly influenced popular culture and literature, especially fantasy works. As early as the end of the 19th century, Sir Walter Besant argued that *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* was "a book of that scarce kind which will belong to all the generations to come until the language becomes obsolete" (Carpenter 68). Sir Walter Besant's viewpoint aptly illustrates the tenacious vitality and enduring charm of the fairy tale.

Moreover, Carroll's fairy tale is not only popular in paper form but also in the form of film and television and has been adapted into dozens of film and television productions since it was adapted into a silent movie in 1903, which has been widely distributed. Disney's 1951 version of *Alice's in Wonderland* adopted a surreal approach and received a certain amount of attention. Later, Disney readapted the fairy tale for several times, such as the 2010 animated film *Alice in Wonderland*, directed by Tim Burton, and the 2016 animated film *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, directed by James Bobin, which attracted even more attention.

Disney Animation *Peter Pan* (1953) is an adaptation of the representative work *Peter Pan* by British novelist-playwright James Matthew Barrie. The work focuses on the adventures of a young girl, Wendy, and pulls back the curtain on a gorgeous and metaphysical Neverland for readers. *Peter Pan* has been adapted several times into musicals, television programs, films and animations. Disney produced the animated film *Peter Pan* in 1953, becoming one of Disney's classic animations.

The 1959 version of *Sleeping Beauty* is based on the famous French fairy tale writer Charles Perrault's classic *Sleeping Beauty*, which belongs to the well-known "prince + princess + witch" model of fairy tales. Furthermore, *The Sword in the Stone* is an adaptation of the famous British medieval series *The Legend of King Arthur*.

The animated film *Mary Poppins*, released in 1964, is based on the children's classic by British writer P. L. Travers. The original work tells the story of Mary, the magical governess who can fly with an umbrella. Disney's combination of live-action and animation in this film was a great success, and the film "received 13 Academy Awards nominations, including Best Picture—a record for films released

by Walt Disney Studios” (Madej 80).

It can be seen that making full use of the cultural capital of literary classics is highly critical to the success of animation works. From the development history of Disney animation, it will be successful whenever the cultural capital has adhered. This was revealed in the Disney animation development of the fifth period, “Re-boom period (1989-2000).” In this period, not only the old French mythology such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) was adapted, but also *Aladdin* (1993), which was adapted from the famous Arabic literature *Tales from the thousand and one nights*, *Hercules* (1997) which adapted from Greek mythology, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), which adapted from the great French writer Victor Hugo’s novel, *The Lion King* (1994), which is based on Shakespeare’s masterpiece *Hamlet*, and *Mulan* (1998), which is based on the famous folk poem in the Northern and Southern Dynasties of China. This period of success for Disney animation was so remarkable that some scholars have called it “the Disney Renaissance” (Pallant 89). The reason for Disney’s renewed success was the adaptation of literary classics.

The animated film *Beauty and the Beast*, co-directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, has a prominent feature in showing the dialectical relationship between appearance and heart. The Beaston, with horrible appearance, slowly showed to the audience and the heroine his kind heart, while Caston, with the lively and lovely appearance, gradually revealed his sinister side. Thus, the film “deeply depicted the psychology of the characters and openly challenged the equation ‘ugly=bad’” (Bendazzi 12).

Adapted from the famous book *Notre Dame de Paris*, the animated film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* got an exceptional success because of the reputation of the original. The film still draws attention to the story of the good-natured Quasimodo and the beautiful Gypsy girl Esmerelda. The film, also co-directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, won the 69th Academy Awards and various awards, including the Best Animated Film Annie Awards.

Moreover, *The Lion King*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s well-known tragedy *Hamlet*, was a huge commercial success, “Propelled to new box-office heights with the release of *The Lion King*, the Disney Renaissance reached peak profitability in 1994” (Pallant 94). *The Lion King* set the story of the Danish prince into the animal world, bringing to life the classic tragic story of the prince who killed his uncle after the uncle killed his father and usurped the throne.

Again, John Guillory argues, “The selection of texts is the selection of values” (Guillory 23). The text selection process is about discovering value. However, as important as the discovery of value is, it requires the embodiment of value. Disney’s

animation adaptation based on the literary classics fully shows that the animated adaptation of literary classics is an essential aspect of the value of cultural capital possessed by literary classics.

Conclusion

To sum up, for the animation art, which has only been developed for more than a century, the literary classics, which have a history of thousands of years and passed down through the baptism of a long time, are the cultural capital that can be utilized and inexhaustible art treasures with rich cultural values. The practical experience of advanced animation countries has fully explained the significance of the use of cultural capital in animation practice. Because animated works based on literary classics are not only easier to be accepted by audiences in terms of theme, but also, and more importantly, in terms of ideological acceptance. Some ideological meanings in literary classics, such as collectivism, patriotism, heroism, optimism and the harmonious relationship between human beings and nature, have been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and are generally accepted. Therefore, animated films adapted from literary classics are more easily converted from pure entertainment to life education and are more capable of giving full play to the function of appreciations and the ethical education of guiding audiences to learn to be human.

Work Cited

- Ball, Robert Hamilton. *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History*. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by Richardson, J. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986, pp. 241-58.
- Bendazzi, Giannalberto. *Animation: A World History*, vol. 3. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2017.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *Secret Gardens: The Golden Age of Children's Literature*. Houghton Mifflin, 1985.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.
- 林清著：《中国动画电影》，上海：同济大学出版社，2014年。
- [Lin, Qing, *Chinese Animation Films*, Shanghai: Tongji UP, 2014.]
- Lucia, Cynthia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon. *American Film History: Selected Readings, Origins to 1960*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016.
- Madej, Krystina & Lee, Newton. *Disney Stories: Getting to Digital*. Cham: Springer, 2020.
- Pallant, Chris. *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation*. New York:

Continuum, 2011.

Pearson, Roberta. "Heritage, Humanism, Populism: The Representation of Shakespeare in Contemporary British Television." *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s*, edited by Eckart Voigts-Virchow, Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004, pp. 87-100.

Rall, Hannes. *Adaptation for Animation Transforming Literature Frame by Frame*, New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

Voigts-Virchow, Eckart ed. *Janespotting and Beyond. British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004.

王岳川著：《当代西方最新文论教程》。上海：复旦大学出版社，2008 年。

[Wang, Yuechuan. *A Course in Contemporary Recent Western Literature*, Shanghai: Fudan UP, 2008.]

吴笛：“论但丁〈神曲〉的跨媒体传播及其变异”，《外国文学研究》，2015 年第 5 期，第 88-94 页。

[Wu, Di, "The Inter-Media Transmission of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and its Variations," *Foreign Literature Studies*, no. 5, 2015, pp. 88-94.]

杨晓林等著：《好莱坞动画电影导论》。上海：复旦大学出版社，2012 年。

[Yang, Xiaolin. *Introduction to Hollywood Animated Films*, Shanghai: Fudan UP, 2012.]