

# *The New Digital Expression of Chinese Traditional Culture-Analysis of the Cultural Phenomenon of Chinese Animated Film “Nobody”*

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**Abstract:** As a big domestic animation film in 2025, “Nobody” burst out in the summer holiday, becoming a new milestone in the two-dimensional animated film in Chinese film history. As a cultural carrier, this film carries the spiritual identity of Chinese traditional cultural thoughts such as “filial piety” culture and family concept, debate between “righteousness and benefit” Confucianism, “the holy man has no name” Chuang-tzu thought, music and customs, etc. It has made the decoding of traditional mythological story and the cultural innovation of multi-dimensional narrative clues to adapt to social development. It puts forward creative expression for the future to continue to build the universe of mystery culture and use digital intelligent technology to shape IP image. This paper is going to use Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” methodology in “The Interpretation of Cultures” to study and analyse the narrative of Chinese traditional culture in film “Nobody”.

## 1. Introduction

As an important carrier of cultural communication, animated films play an important role in the construction and dissemination of Chinese traditional cultural images by virtue of the cultural symbols condensed by characters, pictures and cultural elements. From the first wave of revival of the animation industry in 2015 “Monkey King Hero Is Back”, and the national-level explosion of the “Nezha” series of films in 2019 and 2023, the Chinese animation industry has carried on the past and opened up the future, and has continued to launch a number of excellent animation works. The animated short film set “Yao --Chinese Folktales” jointly produced by Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio and Bilibili was broadcast at the beginning of 2023, and won a double harvest of popularity and reputation with a total broadcast volume of 360 million. As a successful short film collection showing Chinese traditional aesthetics and mystery culture at home and abroad, the first episode of “The Summer of Little Monsters” started the first round of heated discussions on Chinese culture and social status at the beginning of the broadcast. Based on “Journey to the West”, the first of China’s four famous works, it created the image of a small monster who failed to take the edge on the road and implicitly reflected the countless groups of striking workers in the society at that time who wanted to “escape from Langlang Mountain”. The high-heated “Langlang Mountain” topic makes the production team think that it has the IP attribute of the adapted film. “Nobody” reshapes

the classic monster image in a civilian way. It not only transforms the monsters of traditional Chinese folklore into vivid young characters, but also shows the struggle of ordinary people with the eyes of small people. The reflection on the hero myth in traditional culture reflects the social issues of contemporary youth's self-identity and survival anxiety.

For the study of anthropological phenomena, American anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined culture as a meaning system expressed by symbolic symbols. The concept of "thick description" proposed by Geertz inherits the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle's analysis of the multiple meanings behind the blink behavior, and points out that the study of a national culture must go deep into the cultural phenomena and cultural behaviors, and the core is "understanding the understanding of others". The three specific operational processes of "thick description" are as follows: first, careful observation and description of social actions; the second is to clarify the meaning structure and social meaning of cultural holders represented by symbolic behavior; the third is to test and deepen the theory in "thick description". Based on the "thick description" method, this paper will explain the cultural phenomena such as filial piety culture, slang, and philosophical speculation presented by the animated film "Nobody", and sort out the new digital expression forms presented by the excellent traditional Chinese cultural genes, and explore how to realize the contemporary expression and communication mechanism innovation of traditional cultural values in the development of IP image and cross-media communication.

## **2. The spiritual identity and traditional implication of Chinese traditional culture of "Nobody"**

Geertz believes that the premise of "thick description" is specific observation and description. It is necessary to explore the interior of social activities in order to get the meaning of culture and cultural owner. As a new model of the combination of contemporary animated film creation and traditional stories, "Nobody" integrates the moral ethics, philosophical speculation and aesthetic pursuit of Chinese traditional culture into the narrative, and carries out creative transformation and innovative development. The following will discuss the cultural symbols, spiritual genes and contemporary expressions contained in the film with the methodology of "thick description".

### **2.1. "Filial piety" culture and "family" concept**

Since the Han Dynasty established the idea of governing the country with filial piety, "filial piety" based on blood relationship has gradually realized "governing the world with filial piety" under the unity of heaven and man. "Benevolence and filial piety first", family as the smallest unit of the world, Chinese traditional filial piety culture maintains the moral accuracy of family. The traditional filial piety highlights authority and regulation, like the younger generation's obedience to the elders, and the individual's obedience to the social order. With the changes of the times and the evolution of filial piety ethics, the concept of filial piety has shifted to mutual equality and respect for the elderly. "Reciprocal filial piety" turns more to the spontaneous emotional expression between parents and children. [1] The little pig monster in "Nobody" goes home after hard work. He downplays the grievances he receives at work as "just always staying up late". The behavior of repaying happiness rather than worry reflects the self-devotion between parents and children who deliberately hide their true feelings in order to comfort each other. This kind of mutual care, in essence, reflects that family members have tended to "peer relationship", and the characteristics of equality and pure relationship in contemporary society.

Confucianism emphasizes "cultivating one's morality, regulating one's family, governing the country and pacifying the world". Confucius said that "one's own desire to set up and set up people, one's desire to reach and reach people", which is a push of benevolence from the inside to the outside, pushing the best and the good, the self and the people's benevolence. In the relationship

between people and themselves, a person who plays the role of a leader can push the kindness in life to others, and can push political decisions to others. [2] In the film “Nobody”, the equality and care of the “filial piety” of the little pig in family relations continued to the fellows who were also persecuted by the Great Wang Cave and embarked on the path. He pushed the idea of rather than fleeing, than becoming a Buddha to his companions, who were no longer forced, but wanted to obtain an equal identity as Tang monks and apprentices. Especially when they decided to help villagers save their children, they resisted and defeated similar monsters based on morality and kindness, and truly completed the transformation of the identity of the taker.

## 2.2. “The debate of righteousness and benefit” Confucian thought

As one of the pre-Qin Confucian thoughts in China, “the debate between righteousness and benefit” originated from Confucius. He said, ‘gentleman refers to righteousness, and villain refers to benefit’. It can be seen that people with noble morality know righteousness, while ordinary people pay more attention to benefit. The film “Nobody” focuses on four unnamed monsters. They set foot on the road of counterfeiting Tang monks to take sutras for different goals such as living, revenge and becoming a Buddha. The original motivation is very close to the consideration of the real interests of the common people. However, when they came to the small Leiyin Temple, in the face of the temptation of the Yellow-eyebrow Monster, the reason for their rejection is not to shout justice, but based on simple conscience judgment – ‘I think this is not right’. The transformation of this thought confirms the moral bottom line of “see the benefit of righteousness”, and chooses the human sublimation of “non-righteousness does not take”, that is, the performance of “refer to righteousness”.

Mencius regarded the “debate between righteousness and benefit” as the criterion of the human community, thus forming the value tradition of the Chinese nation of emphasizing righteousness and neglecting benefit. In the community, Mencius more respected the unity of righteousness and benefit. The dialectical unity between righteousness and benefit focuses on answering many questions, such as individual and community, individual and others, internal and external. [3] In film “Nobody”, the little monster chimpanzee is very shy. However, at the end of the story, in order to protect the companion, the chimpanzee stood on the edge of the cliff and stood up and shouted: “I’m a monkey king!” This move coincides with the righteousness of the group and the benefit of the individual. In order to help the people, they defeated the evil mice in the village temple and helped villagers. The setting of this plot already implies the possibility of mutual help and symbiosis between the demons and human beings. The “win-win” between individuals, groups and others that the film hopes to pursue expands to the balance of interests between countries and nations, echoing the inherent requirements of China’s foreign policy to build a “community of shared future for mankind”.

## 2.3. Chuang-tzu’s thought of “the holy man has no name”

“The perfect man has no self, the spiritual man has no merit, and the holy man has no name” emphasize different connotations respectively, but they all reach the highest realm of life, highlighting the Taoist ideal of natural, self-adaptive and free life value. “The holy man has no name” refers to not being coerced by social atmosphere. The four characters in the film are leftovers under the grand background of Journey to the West. They do not aim at the history of celebrities, but devote themselves to the cultivation of Buddhism. It is this “no name” state that allows them to escape the identity anxiety of who they want to be. At the end of the film, they dissipated in nature without having time to exchange names, nor did they leave their names in the world. As Chuang-tzu’s ideal personality, “the spiritual man” highlights the integration of his own spirit and the

harmony between heaven and earth, and does not build everything but grow naturally. In the battle of the yellow eyebrow monster, the four characters chose to fight for the rescue of children. This has no consideration of success and return, and is completely driven by good intentions. They conform to the virtue of the heart, and finally save the lives of the people. Because there is a state of opposition between things and me in the world, Chuang-tzu hopes to resolve the gap between things and me and return to the state of “The perfect man has no self”. At the beginning of the plot of the film, the little pig monster wanted to prove himself, and the toad monster wanted to get an opportunity. But the experience along the way made them willing to sacrifice, beyond the narrow ego. When they are scattered, they do not disappear, but return to the original form of animals, return to the mountain. This echoes the realm of Chuang-tzu’s “Heaven and I were born together, and all things and I are one”.

## **2.4. Music and slang**

In terms of music, the film “Nobody” soundtrack adopts large-scale instruments from different regions, combining traditional oriental music with Western instruments to achieve unity in integration. Chinese traditional national musical instruments such as dongxiao, flute, pipa, xun, etc., laid the foundation for the tune, and introduced unique musical instruments from the Arab world, India and American aborigines such as udeqin, mandolin and sitarqin. [4] For example, at the moment when the four characters were recognized by the Yellow Eyebrow Monster, the heavy blow of the war drum gave a headbang, and the soundtrack introduced Sanskrit chanting. The collision between the war drum and the orchestra creates a strong dramatic tension, bringing the audience a double sense of visual and auditory oppression. The film’s episode is also very folk rap color, “take the west to have the appearance” is composed by the Yan’an City Northern Shaanxi storytelling inheritors, equipped with gongs and drums and suona and other folk music accompaniment, showing Northern Shaanxi folk songs plain, bold Loess Plateau sense. The audience seemed to be listening to the book as they went to the funny scene of the four little monsters to the west.

Slang is spread by the folk oral, with distinct regional characteristics. In the face of the hopelessness of catching Tang monks, the toad monster said: “Toad wants to eat Tang monk meat”, and used the slang of “A toad on the ground wants to eat a goose in the sky”; the toad was mistakenly caught as a Tang monk and boiled in water. Self-deprecating is “boiled toad in warm water”, using the colloquialism of “boiled frog in warm water”, so that people can feel the charm of traditional Chinese folk culture when they laugh.

## **3. The decoding reconstruction and innovative presentation of Chinese excellent traditional culture of “Nobody”**

“Thick description” is to grasp the meaning related to the specific social situation embodied in the symbolic behavior as much as possible. Through the decoding of classical mythological symbols, contemporary reconstruction, group image narration, digital technology empowerment and other multi-dimensional innovations, “Nobody” expresses the most common narrative skills of Chinese traditional mystery culture and the audience in a contemporary way, so that the film can radiate fresh vitality.

### **3.1. The contemporary decoding of classical mythological symbols**

“Nobody” takes the class order of “Journey to the West” as the narrative background, breaking the inherent framework of destiny. The English name “Nobody” also confirms this core. The film uses the lines to break the identity privilege of traditional myths and satirize the solidified concept

of “origin determines destiny”. It integrates the idea of equality between Confucianism and Taoism, lets the little monster actively pursue the road of becoming a Buddha, and transforms the ideal of taking scriptures into the road of ordinary people, which is in line with the contemporary narrative trend of ordinary people. The film also breaks the opposite label of monster and fairy in traditional mythology. Through the contrast between the little pig monster’s conscience and good deeds, and the yellow eyebrow monster’s evil deeds, it proves that good and evil are defined by action rather than identity. The classic lines embody the value pursuit of contemporary young people who resist labeling and aspire to become heroes in their lives.

### **3.2. Group image narrative and emotional innovation**

Focusing on serious themes such as fate and identity, “Nobody” skillfully uses narrative techniques such as workplace’s slang and online language to achieve Z-generation emotional resonance from reality, so that heavy topics can be expressed in a lightweight way. The film integrates the popular slang and comedy and uses the plot of the toad monster to go to the back door to find a job, the cock painter to meet the customer’s requirements, etc., to resonate with the workers and humorously criticize the contemporary workplace phenomenon. At the same time, the film adopts a multi-cue group image narrative, and uses four little monsters to fake the scriptures to save people, the master of the double dog holes family to seek revenge, the heavens plan the disaster, and the people are attacked. The four clues are promoted in parallel, which not only enriches the macro scene presentation, but also makes the characters more vivid.

### **3.3. The technology of digital innovation presents oriental aesthetics**

Digital technology empowerment is the key to the transformation of cultural resources into development advantages. “Nobody” integrates two-dimensional ink animation and three-dimensional space technology. The film first uses three-dimensional line technology to create the appearance of the role. The production team three-dimensionalizes the traditional fine brushwork skills, combines the role characteristics to design the image, and gives three-dimensional and real visual and dynamic expression: when making the weasel’s hair, the fine brushwork silk hair technique is simulated, so that the hair naturally flutters; when creating the fangs of the pig, the hand-drawn line map and the three-dimensional deformation technology are combined to present the irregular state under light and shadow. [5] These details take into account the dynamic logic and the beauty of fine brushwork, creating a realistic and freehand visual texture, highlighting the traditional painting heritage. At the same time, the film uses sub-scene rendering and particle diffusion to create an ink painting scene, and uses a single frame of 50 layers of layered rendering to deal with ink shades and edge virtual reality. The digital particle simulates the ink effect, and also adjusts the particle diffusion rhythm. Practice the aesthetic principle of traditional painting “white as black”. The integration of three-dimensional animation and oriental aesthetics has created a new carrier for traditional culture and promoted domestic animation to show the contemporary expression of Chinese aesthetics to the world.

## **4. The contemporary new expression of Chinese traditional culture of “Nobody”**

The highest level of requirement is to deepen the theory in “deep description”. “Nobody” will sort out the strategies of contemporary expression of Chinese traditional culture from the perspectives of creating a new track of cultural communication in the universe of ghost culture, and integrating cultural development with digital intelligence programs.

#### 4.1. Create a “Ghost Culture” universe

In the field of traditional mythological IP, the “Journey to the West Universe” represented by the “Nezha” series have entered a mature stage of development, but they are also easy to fall into the industry dilemma of creative involution and content homogenization. From the series creation of animation “Yao --Chinese Folktales” to the film practice of “Nobody”, the creator has opened up a new narrative field of “Ghost Culture”. In Chinese traditional culture, the classic collection of mystery novels takes the wild fairy and the folk stranger as the main characters of the story. However, at present, the domestic mystery culture has not yet successfully created a systematic IP. This also puts forward a new proposition for the development of cultural industry. The spread influence of “Nobody” confirms the feasibility and value of the Ghost Universe circuit. This work takes the traditional myth as the background and the mystery narrative as the carrier. It integrates the core concept of “Tao follows nature” in ancient philosophy and the traditional oriental aesthetics, and finally creates a cultural identity with Chinese characteristics.

#### 4.2. The organic combination of digital intelligence technology and culture

By using the mathematical tools based on the big language model, we can systematically sort out the mythical classics such as “The Classic of Mountain and Rivers”, and dig out the monster images and folk customs and stories. Different from manual labor AI can generate multi-dimensional role setting and plot framework through big data analysis, and build a large-scale creative material library for mystery culture and other traditional themes.

The organic combination of dynamic ink particles and layered rendering technology used in the film can improve the efficiency of traditional craftsmen’s hand drawing and post-production, realize the integration of illusory scene and realistic texture, and promote the landing of unique aesthetic expression in the East. [6] More importantly, AI technology can extract and transform the traditional aesthetic modeling such as the blank of Song Dynasty paintings, the color of Dunhuang murals, and the modeling of folk New Year paintings, and build a professional database.

### 5. Conclusion

From the “Monkey King Hero Is Back” to the “Nezha” series, the film adaptation of Chinese traditional mythological stories is experiencing the positive spread of culture at home and abroad, and has realized the prosperity of culture. At the same time, the “Yao --Chinese Folktales” produced by Shanghai Fine Arts Film Studio also allows viewers to see the possibility of traditional Chinese mystery novels. From the “little monster’s summer” animated short film to the breakthrough of the animated film “Nobody”, the Chinese animated film industry is also taking a step towards the vigorous development of Chinese traditional culture. The oriental aesthetics embodied in traditional Chinese painting has gradually been appreciated by more audiences through the continuous development of digital technology. The methodology of “thick description” of cultural phenomena proposed by Geertz in “The Interpretation of Cultures” also provides the necessary theoretical basis for the contemporary transformation of Chinese culture.

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