Drivers of Popularity: Key Influence Factors Affecting the Popularity of Chinese Animation

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Abstract
This study investigates the key factors driving the popularity of Chinese animation, focusing on the roles of cultural content, technological quality, and distribution strategies. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analyses, the research examines the impact of these factors on audience engagement and the resulting popularity of Chinese animation titles. The results indicate that cultural content is the most significant driver, emphasizing the importance of culturally embedded narratives in enhancing audience appeal. Technological quality also plays a crucial role, with high production standards contributing to greater audience satisfaction and retention. Distribution strategies, particularly through digital platforms, significantly enhance visibility and accessibility, further boosting popularity. Moderation analysis reveals that audience characteristics, such as age and international preferences, influence the effectiveness of these factors. Younger audiences demonstrate a stronger preference for culturally rich content, while international viewers prioritize technological quality. The findings have important theoretical and practical implications, suggesting that integrating cultural narratives, maintaining high production quality, and leveraging strategic distribution are essential for maximizing the popularity of Chinese animation. This study contributes to the literature on cultural industries by offering empirical insights into the interplay between content, technology, and distribution in driving the success of cultural products.
Keywords: Chinese Animation, Influence Factors, Cultural Content, Technological Quality, Distribution Strategies

Introduction
The rise of Chinese animation, often referred to as 'donghua,' has garnered significant attention in both domestic and international markets over the past decade (Lent & Ying, 2013; Kim, 2018). Despite its relatively late entry into the global animation scene, Chinese animation has evolved rapidly, gaining recognition for its unique storytelling, cultural depth, and artistic diversity (Chen & Liu, 2023). The growing popularity of Chinese animation raises an important question: what factors drive its increasing appeal among audiences? Understanding these

factors is crucial not only for animators and content creators but also for cultural analysts and policymakers who are interested in the dynamics of cultural industries and media consumption in China (Keane, 2013; Liu, 2021).

The popularity of any form of entertainment is often shaped by a variety of interrelated factors, including cultural context, technological advancements, audience preferences, and industry strategies (Küng, 2007; Peltoniemi, 2015). In the case of Chinese animation, the factors contributing to its popularity are multifaceted, involving cultural narratives that resonate with the audience, improvements in animation quality, and the strategic use of both traditional and digital distribution channels (Kim, 2018; Wang & Zhong, 2024). Moreover, the blending of traditional Chinese culture with modern themes has created a unique appeal that sets Chinese animation apart from its Western and Japanese counterparts (Wang & Zhong, 2024). This cultural hybridization not only attracts younger audiences but also fosters a sense of national pride, contributing to the wider reception of Chinese animation (Chen & Liu, 2023).

Another significant aspect of Chinese animation's rise is the changing demographic of its audience (Zhou, 2020). Initially targeted mainly at children, Chinese animation has undergone a shift, now increasingly appealing to teenagers and young adults (Chen, 2021). This change is partly driven by the inclusion of more complex narratives and mature themes, which better reflect the experiences and aspirations of these older demographics (Singer, 2004). Additionally, the role of government support, aimed at promoting domestic cultural products and encouraging local animation studios, has been instrumental in enhancing the quality and reach of Chinese animation (Kamarudin & Sajilan, 2013). Government initiatives, such as subsidies and favorable policies, have fostered a supportive environment for animators and positioned Chinese animation as a vehicle for soft power and cultural diplomacy (Wang & Zhong, 2024).

Despite the rapid growth of Chinese animation, research on the factors that influence its popularity remains relatively scarce. Much of the existing literature focuses either on the historical development of Chinese animation or on its comparison with international counterparts, particularly Japanese anime (Lu, 2008; He, 2014). There is a clear need for empirical research that systematically explores the key factors influencing audience preferences and the mechanisms through which these factors contribute to the widespread appeal of Chinese animation. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by examining the key factors affecting the popularity of Chinese animation, focusing on both cultural and industry-level dynamics. By providing an in-depth analysis of these factors, this research emphasizes the effectiveness of identifying and analyzing key factors that drive popularity, such as narrative quality, artistic innovation, technological advancements, and audience-targeted marketing. These elements not only contribute to the success of Chinese animation domestically but also determine its competitiveness on the global stage. By systematically analyzing these factors, the study seeks to provide a roadmap for stakeholders to enhance the global standing and sustainable development of Chinese animation.

This study makes significant contributions to the understanding of Chinese animation by identifying and analyzing the key factors driving its popularity. It bridges a critical gap in existing literature by providing a systematic framework to evaluate the cultural, narrative, and technological dimensions that influence audience engagement. The findings offer

valuable insights for industry stakeholders to refine their production and marketing strategies, empowering them to compete more effectively in the global animation market. Additionally, the research supports cultural policymakers in leveraging animation as a tool for soft power and global cultural exchange, thereby enriching the discourse on media globalization and cultural diplomacy. Ultimately, this study not only advances academic knowledge but also fosters the sustainable growth and international recognition of Chinese animation.

Literature Review

The rising popularity of Chinese animation has been a subject of growing academic interest, prompting extensive investigation into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to its success (Jiang & Huang, 2017; Junzhe & Shuxian, 2024; Wang & Zhong, 2024). The body of literature on this topic reflects diverse perspectives, with researchers employing a variety of theoretical frameworks and empirical approaches to understand the factors influencing this phenomenon (Junzhe & Shuxian, 2024). This review aims to synthesize existing studies, providing a holistic perspective on the current state of research and identifying the key themes that have emerged from the discourse.

Much of the scholarly attention has focused on understanding how Chinese animation distinguishes itself within the broader landscape of global animation (Fan & Feng, 2021; Wang & Zhong, 2024). Researchers have explored a variety of themes, including the intersection of cultural representation (Wu, 2017), market dynamics (Zhou, 2024), and creative innovation (Junzhe & Shuxian, 2024). The distinctiveness of Chinese animation lies partly in its evolving narrative strategies, visual styles, and the integration of local cultural elements (Fan & Feng, 2021). Scholars argue that the unique identity of Chinese animation is shaped by a complex interplay of historical influences, cultural narratives, and industry-specific developments (Jiang & Huang, 2017). These aspects are seen as essential in forming a distinctive appeal that resonates with both domestic and international audiences.

In addition to content analysis, researchers have also examined the structural factors that influence the production and distribution of Chinese animation (Li, 2011). Academic discourse has highlighted the role of industry stakeholders, production studios, and government policies in shaping the direction of the animation sector (Lee, 2019). The literature often points to the influence of regulatory frameworks and economic incentives in promoting the growth of Chinese animation, as well as the collaborative efforts within the industry to expand its reach (Wu, 2017). These structural dynamics have facilitated an environment conducive to both creative experimentation and strategic market positioning.

Another significant area of research has been the role of audience engagement in driving the popularity of Chinese animation (Wang et al., 2024). Studies have emphasized the importance of audience reception and the role of fan communities in promoting animated content (Annett, 2011). Researchers have noted that the growth of digital platforms and social media has transformed the way audiences interact with content, enabling greater participation and fostering communities that actively contribute to the visibility of Chinese animation (Wang et al., 2023). This shift towards more interactive modes of consumption has created new opportunities for content creators and has been recognized as a vital factor in the dissemination and popularization of animated works (Zhou, 2024).

Despite the wealth of research on Chinese animation, there are several areas that warrant further exploration. Notably, empirical studies that provide quantitative assessments of the drivers behind the popularity of Chinese animation are still limited. Moreover, the dynamic relationships between cultural content, production processes, and audience behavior remain underexplored, necessitating a more integrative approach to understand how these elements collectively influence the success of Chinese animation. By addressing these gaps, future research can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms that underpin the sustained growth and global appeal of Chinese animation, thereby contributing to the broader literature on cultural industries and creative economies.

This study aims to identify and analyze the key factors influencing the popularity of Chinese animation, utilizing a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The section below details the data sources, sampling methods, and analytical techniques used to achieve the research objectives.

Data Collection and Sampling
The data utilized in this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure robustness and to provide a holistic understanding of the factors driving the popularity of Chinese animation. Primary data were gathered through structured interviews with key industry stakeholders, including animation producers, directors, and content platform managers. These interviews aimed to capture insights regarding industry practices, production challenges, and audience preferences. Secondary data were obtained from publicly available reports, including industry whitepapers, market analysis documents, and government policy reports on cultural industries, which offered additional context and evidence for the trends identified in the interviews.

The quantitative component of the study was based on a dataset comprising Chinese animation titles released between 2015 and 2023. This timeframe was chosen to capture recent developments in the animation industry, given the surge in popularity observed over the past decade. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select animations that have achieved notable popularity domestically and internationally, as indicated by viewership data, social media trends, and awards received. The sample includes animation titles available on major digital platforms, such as Bilibili, Tencent Video, and Youku, to ensure a representative selection of popular works across different genres and target audiences.

Variables and Measurement
To empirically assess the factors influencing the popularity of Chinese animation, we identified a set of key variables based on existing literature and expert interviews. The dependent variable in this study is popularity, which was measured using a composite index comprising viewership metrics, user ratings, and social media engagement. Viewership metrics were obtained from streaming platforms, while user ratings and social media engagement were gathered from public platforms such as Douban and Weibo. The composite index was developed to provide a balanced measure of both quantitative and qualitative indicators of popularity.

The independent variables included factors related to cultural content, technological quality, and distribution channels. Cultural content was measured by coding the presence of traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as mythology and folklore, using a content analysis approach. Technological quality was assessed based on animation techniques employed, including the use of CGI and motion capture, with ratings provided by industry experts. Distribution channels were evaluated by examining the accessibility of animation titles across major streaming platforms and the use of multi-platform marketing strategies.

Analytical Techniques
A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze the data. For the qualitative component, thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the factors that contribute to the popularity of Chinese animation. This approach allowed for the exploration of nuanced perspectives that may not be fully captured through quantitative methods alone (Curry et al., 2009). NVivo software was used to facilitate the coding process and to systematically organize the interview data.

For the quantitative component, multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the relationship between the identified independent variables and the popularity of Chinese animation. The regression model included controls for confounding variables such as release year, genre, and target audience, which were included to account for potential influences unrelated to the core factors under investigation (Boatwright et al., 2007). The regression analysis was conducted using Stata 17.0, and robustness checks were performed to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Validity and Reliability
To enhance the validity of the findings, triangulation was employed by cross-referencing data from different sources, including interview responses, secondary reports, and quantitative metrics. Reliability was ensured through the use of consistent coding procedures and inter-coder reliability checks during the content analysis stage. Additionally, pilot testing of the interview protocol was conducted to refine the questions and ensure clarity for participants.

Empirical Results
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis
The descriptive statistics for the variables are summarized in Table 1. The average popularity index for Chinese animation titles was found to be 3.54, with a standard deviation of 1.67, indicating moderate variability across the sample. This suggests that while some animation titles have achieved considerable popularity, others have struggled to capture audience interest.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Popularity Index	3.54	1.67	1.00	9.50
Cultural Content	2.78	1.15	1.00	5.00
Technological Quality	3.12	1.03	1.00	5.00

Distribution Channels	3.45	1.22	1.00	5.00
Social Media Engagement	4.11	1.58	1.00	9.00

Table 2 presents the results of the correlation analysis. Significant positive correlations were observed between the independent variables—cultural content, technological quality, and distribution channels—and the popularity index. The strongest correlation was between cultural content and popularity (r = 0.47, p < 0.01), suggesting that culturally resonant storytelling plays a major role in engaging audiences. Technological quality also showed a moderate correlation (r = 0.39, p < 0.05), indicating that higher production quality contributes to greater popularity. Distribution channels were positively correlated with popularity (r = 0.35, p < 0.05), emphasizing the role of accessibility and strategic dissemination in boosting audience reach.

Table 2
Correlation Matrix

Variable	Popularity Index	Cultural Content	Technological Quality	Distribution Channels
Popularity Index	1.00	0.47***	0.39**	0.35*
Cultural Content	0.47***	1.00	0.22	0.19
Technological Quality	0.39**	0.22	1.00	0.26
Distribution Channels	0.35*	0.19	0.26	1.00

Note: *, **, and *** refer to levels of significance of 10%, 5%, and 1%, respectively.

Regression Analysis
The results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3. The regression model assesses the impact of cultural content, technological quality, and distribution channels on the popularity of Chinese animation. All three variables were found to be significant predictors of popularity, with varying magnitudes of influence.

Table 3
Regression Results for Popularity of Chinese Animation

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-Value	p-Value
Cultural Content	0.345	0.056	6.16	< 0.01
Technological Quality	0.278	0.069	4.03	< 0.05
Distribution Channels	0.312	0.062	5.03	< 0.05
Constant	1.109	0.348	3.19	< 0.01

The coefficient for cultural content (β = 0.345, p < 0.01) indicates a strong positive effect on popularity, underscoring the significance of cultural storytelling in enhancing audience engagement. This finding is consistent with prior studies that highlight the importance of culturally embedded narratives in attracting both domestic and international audiences. The positive effect of technological quality (β = 0.278, p < 0.05) suggests that production quality, including animation techniques and visual effects, contributes substantially to audience satisfaction and retention. Lastly, the coefficient for distribution channels (β = 0.312, p < 0.05)

confirms that the availability of content across multiple streaming platforms and effective marketing strategies are crucial in driving the visibility and popularity of Chinese animation titles.

Moderation Analysis

To further investigate the interaction effects, we introduced interaction terms between the independent variables and control variables such as release year and target audience. The moderation analysis results are summarized in Table 4. The interaction term between cultural content and target audience was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.128$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that younger audiences exhibit a stronger preference for culturally rich content. The interaction between technological quality and international audience was also significant ($\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that high production quality is particularly valued by viewers outside of China, possibly due to differences in aesthetic expectations.

Table 4
Moderation Analysis Results

Interaction Term	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-Value	p-Value
Cultural Content × Target Audience	0.128	0.045	2.84	< 0.05
Technological Quality × International Audience	0.102	0.048	2.13	< 0.05

Robustness Checks

To validate the reliability of the findings, several robustness checks were performed. First, we re-estimated the regression models using alternative measures of popularity, such as social media engagement metrics and user-generated content indices. The results, presented in Table 5, were consistent with the original findings, indicating that cultural content, technological quality, and distribution channels remained significant predictors of popularity across different operationalizations of the dependent variable.

Additionally, we conducted split-sample analyses to examine the stability of the results across different genres and release periods. The results of the split-sample analysis are presented in Table 6 and indicate that the effects of cultural content, technological quality, and distribution channels were generally consistent, although the magnitude of influence varied slightly depending on the genre. Notably, fantasy and historical genres exhibited a stronger association between cultural content and popularity, suggesting that cultural storytelling may be particularly impactful within these genres.

Table 5
Robustness Check Results Using Alternative Popularity Measures

Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-Value
Cultural Content	0.329	< 0.01
Technological Quality	0.291	< 0.05
Distribution Channels	0.307	< 0.05

Table 6
Split-Sample Analysis Results by Genre

Genre	Cultural Content (β)	Technological Quality (β)	Distribution Channels (β)
Fantasy	0.412**	0.298*	0.275*
Historical	0.395**	0.221	0.319*
Modern	0.287*	0.341*	0.304*

Note: *, **, and *** refer to levels of significance of 10%, 5%, and 1%, respectively.

Discussion

The empirical results demonstrate that cultural content is the most influential factor affecting the popularity of Chinese animation. This finding emphasizes the importance of culturally embedded narratives, suggesting that audiences, particularly in China, are drawn to stories that reflect their cultural heritage and identity. The strong positive effect of cultural content on popularity aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of cultural authenticity in shaping audience preferences (Chen & Liu, 2023). This suggests that content creators should prioritize the inclusion of traditional Chinese elements, such as folklore, mythology, and cultural symbols, to appeal to both domestic and international audiences seeking culturally enriched content.

The significant impact of technological quality on the popularity of Chinese animation underscores the importance of high production standards in a competitive entertainment landscape. Advances in animation techniques, such as CGI and motion capture, have enabled Chinese studios to produce visually appealing content that rivals international standards. The positive correlation between technological quality and popularity suggests that audiences place a high value on production aesthetics, which enhances their viewing experience. This finding aligns with studies that highlight the role of visual quality in audience retention and satisfaction (Zhou, 2020). For Chinese animation to further penetrate international markets, investment in cutting-edge production technologies must continue to be a priority.

The role of distribution channels also emerged as a significant predictor of animation popularity, emphasizing the importance of accessibility and strategic content dissemination. The availability of Chinese animation across major streaming platforms, such as Bilibili, Tencent Video, and Youku, has played a critical role in enhancing visibility and audience reach. The positive effect of distribution channels on popularity highlights the importance of digital platforms in democratizing access to content and fostering online fan communities. These platforms have not only facilitated wider dissemination but have also contributed to the active engagement of viewers, which is crucial for building a loyal audience base. This finding is consistent with the growing body of literature on the impact of digital platforms on media consumption behavior (He et al., 2022).

The moderation analysis provided additional insights into how audience characteristics shape the effectiveness of these key factors. The finding that younger audiences exhibit a stronger preference for culturally rich content suggests that animation studios should focus on

producing narratives that resonate with younger demographics. This audience segment is more likely to seek content that reflects their cultural identity, and they value authenticity and creativity in storytelling. Conversely, the significant positive moderation effect of technological quality for international audiences highlights the need to maintain high production standards to attract viewers outside of China, who may have different aesthetic expectations and place greater emphasis on visual quality. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring content strategies to different audience segments to maximize engagement.

The robustness checks conducted in this study confirmed the stability of the results across different measures of popularity and various subsamples, adding credibility to the conclusions drawn. The consistent effects observed across genres suggest that the identified drivers of popularity—cultural content, technological quality, and distribution channels—are applicable across diverse types of animation, albeit with slight variations in magnitude. Notably, genres such as fantasy and historical were found to benefit more from culturally embedded narratives, implying that certain genres are inherently more suitable for storytelling that draws on cultural heritage.

Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for animation studios, content creators, and policymakers. For animation studios, the emphasis on cultural content suggests that integrating traditional Chinese elements into storytelling can significantly enhance audience engagement. Studios should invest in research and development to ensure that culturally relevant narratives are creatively and effectively incorporated into their productions. Additionally, continued investment in technological innovation is essential to maintain high production quality and meet the expectations of both domestic and international audiences.

For content creators, understanding the preferences of different audience segments is crucial. Younger audiences, in particular, are drawn to culturally resonant stories, while international viewers prioritize visual quality. Therefore, content creators should adopt a targeted approach, tailoring their narratives and production quality to meet the preferences of specific audience groups. Collaborating with digital platforms to enhance accessibility and leverage data-driven insights into audience behavior can further improve the effectiveness of content distribution strategies.

Policymakers can play a role in supporting the growth of Chinese animation by providing incentives for cultural content production and technological advancements. Policies that promote the integration of traditional cultural elements into animation can help strengthen the cultural identity of Chinese animation and enhance its appeal to both domestic and international audiences. Additionally, support for the development of digital platforms and the creative industries as a whole can contribute to the sustainable growth of the animation sector.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data used for the quantitative analysis were limited to publicly available metrics, which may not capture all

dimensions of audience engagement. Future research could incorporate more detailed audience analytics, such as viewing duration and user interaction data, to provide a more comprehensive assessment of popularity. Second, the focus on Chinese animation limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving animation from different countries could provide deeper insights into the global appeal of culturally specific narratives.

Future research could also explore the longitudinal effects of digital transformation in the animation industry, examining how technological advancements over time influence content production and audience preferences. Additionally, studies that investigate the impact of cross-industry collaborations, such as partnerships between animation studios and gaming companies, could shed light on the broader ecosystem dynamics that contribute to the success of creative content.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the key factors influencing the popularity of Chinese animation, highlighting the importance of cultural content, technological quality, and distribution strategies. The findings underscore the value of culturally resonant storytelling and high production standards in attracting diverse audiences, while also emphasizing the role of digital platforms in enhancing content accessibility. By offering both theoretical contributions and practical implications, this research contributes to the growing discourse on cultural industries and creative economies, providing valuable insights for stakeholders seeking to enhance the global impact of Chinese animation.

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