Ethical Impact: A Perspective for Understanding Chinese Animation Creators

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the ethical practices of Chinese animation creators, focusing on how their attitudes, intentions, and behaviors influence ethical standards in animation. The study addresses four research objectives: (1) to summarize the current state of ethical issues in the animation industry, (2) to analyze research on violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity, and (3) to identify gaps in ethical research specific to Chinese animation creators. Findings reveal a lack of empirical research on ethical practices within the Chinese animation industry, with significant gaps in understanding creators' perspectives on ethics. This research provides valuable insights for industry professionals, scholars, educators, students and policymaker by highlighting the importance of ethics in creative processes. By exploring ethics and Chinese animation creators, this study offers guidance for ethical decision-making, fostering a more socially responsible and ethically conscious animation industry. This paper emphasizes the need for further empirical studies to enhance ethical standards and practices among Chinese animation creators.

Keywords: Ethics, Animation Industry, Chinese Animation Creators

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 animated film *Ne Zha* generated $692 million in global box office revenue, attracting over 141 million viewers worldwide (Zhen & Noraien, 2024). Not only did it top the charts for animated films, but it also outperformed numerous live-action films, becoming the highest-grossing film in mainland China for 2019. In recent years, animated series such as *The Outcast, Scissor Seven, Please Take My Red Bean Paste,* and *Non-Human* have achieved remarkable popularity, with over 5 billion total views on the Bilibili platform alone. These series have even been localized into English and Japanese to reach international audiences (Chen, 2021; Xiao & Areeprayolkij, 2024). According to VG Insights, China's first AAA game *Black Myth: Wukong*, launched in August 2024, has sold 20 million copies on the Steam platform, generating over $961 million in revenue (Wu & Xu, 2024). The impressive achievements of China's animation industry underscore the sector's growing maturity, while the number of workers in China's cultural and creative industries continues to rise at an astounding pace (Yuan et al., 2024).

Figure 1. Screenshots of China's most popular commercial animated works: *Nezha*,
The Outcast, *Scissor Seven*, *Black Myth: Wukong*

The number of Chinese animation creators has grown significantly alongside the development of the cultural and creative industries. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC), the annual employment figures for creative design services from 2019 to 2022 were as follows (refer with: Figure 2): 4.02 million in 2019, 4.01 million in 2020, 4.19 million in 2021, and 4.16 million in 2022. From 2020 to 2021 alone, the workforce in creative design services increased by 180,000 people (NBSC, 2024). Employment statistics for creative design services include those working in the animation industry. Animation creators control the quantity and quality of output, and their ethical beliefs subtly influence the ethical dimensions of their work (Boeckenhoff & Ruddell, 2019).
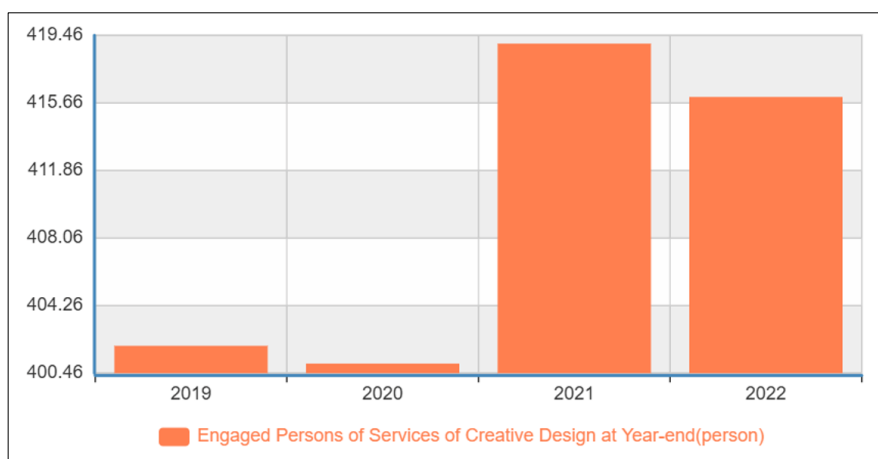

Figure 2. The year-end employment figures for creative design services in the cultural industry
from 2019 to 2022(NBSC, 2024)

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In recent years, the ethical crises lurking beneath animated works have become a cause for concern. From December 2020 to March 2021, the Jiangsu Consumer Protection Commission in China conducted a project titled "Investigation into Animation-Related Risks to Minors' Growth and Safety". In April of the same year, the *Report on the Investigation of Animation-Related Risks to Minors' Growth and Safety* (hereafter referred to as the "Report") was released. The report analyzed 21 representative animated shows targeting minors by conducting a full viewing. Additionally, a survey was conducted with 1,026 parents through offline questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews were held with 20 parents and early childhood educators. Of the 21 animated shows, 9 were domestic productions. A total of 1,465 issues were identified across all the shows, with prominent concerns related to violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity. These issues were particularly notable in the reviewed animations.

From 2019 to 2024, nearly all Chinese animated films featuring supernatural themes have incorporated elements of Oriental "aestheticized violence" (Gai & Lin, 2022). This trend has been particularly prominent following the high box-office successes of Chinese martial arts films in the international film industry, which have increasingly catered to consumer fantasies involving non-realistic scenarios, such as resisting oppression, seeking revenge, and upholding justice. Consequently, in recent years, action and combat scenes have become essential elements in the majority of animated films, comics, and video games, whether or not the storyline necessitates them. Gender stereotypes are also prevalent in many animated works. In *White Snake* and *Green Snake*, the female protagonists and supporting characters exemplify traditional gender stereotypes. While male characters like Xu Xuan and Fahai represent humanity, female characters such as Bai Suzhen, Xiao Qing, and Baoqing Fangzhu are depicted as snake or fox demons. Although these characters have been modernized to reflect contemporary societal values, this type of character identity still perpetuates stereotypical portrayals of female demonization (Sun & Hou, 2023; Zhang, 2022).

Cultural sensitivity in Chinese animated works is largely reflected in the accurate understanding and portrayal of traditional cultural elements. The 2021 animated film *I Am What I Am* sparked considerable controversy on numerous domestic social media platforms due to its character designs, which featured wide-set eyes and narrow eye shapes (Wang & Lin, 2023). Many netizens felt that the "slanted eyes" design was a deliberate attempt to defame Chinese people, evoking stereotypes imposed by Western perspectives. Although the production team publicly stated that there was no intent to malign, and that the design aimed at stylistic diversity, this incident highlights the creators' lack of in-depth consideration and appropriate expression of cultural sensitivity issues. As Chinese animated works continue to evolve in terms of story content, character design, technical capabilities, and audience acceptance, the ethical views reflected in these works underscore internal ethical issues within the animation industry. Animation creators, who are the driving force behind these productions, have a direct influence on the ethical quality of the content, which is closely related to their own ethical awareness. This raises important questions: What ethical issues have emerged in the Chinese animation industry? Are there academic studies in the international animation industry that address similar issues? What research has been conducted on the attitudes, intentions, behaviors, and effects of animation creators' ethical practices? How extensive and thorough are these studies? Does China have any ethical practice guidelines specifically tailored to animation creators? This paper will focus on three ethical issues that have garnered significant public attention over the past five years in commercially influential Chinese works: violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity. By examining Chinese animation creators' attitudes, ethical intentions, and the effects of their ethical decisions on these representative issues, this study aims to propose ethical practice guidelines for animation creators within the context of the rapid growth of the Chinese animation industry. Such guidelines could help foster ethical standards within China's animation industry and encourage responsible ethical practices among creators.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To further explore ethical practice guidelines for Chinese animation creators, this paper will summarize and analyze existing research within the industry. The following research objectives have been established:

a. To summarize the current state of research on ethical issues in the animation industry.
b. To summarize research on violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity in animation.
c. To identify gaps in ethical research from the perspective of Chinese animation creators.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to collect and review literature on ethical issues within the animation industry, focusing on the current state and gaps in ethical research from the perspective of Chinese animation creators, as well as potential directions for ethical practices among these creators. The literature search will be conducted across renowned online databases, including Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online, and CNKI. Relevant studies will be extracted and reviewed to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research on this topic.

Planning the Review

In the initial stage, we defined research questions focusing on the ethical perspectives and practices of Chinese animation creators. We aimed to explore how creators' attitudes and behaviors influence ethical standards in animation, addressing three core research questions:

    a. What are the prevalent ethical issues studied in animation industry?
    b. How do Chinese animation creators perceive ethical issues related to violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity?
    c. What are the research gaps from the perspective of Chinese animation creators?

Data Collection

This study conducted a systematic review of relevant literature, by searching through multiple databases, including Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online, and CNKI. The keywords used were "Animation and Industry and Ethics," "Animation and Violence," "Animation and Gender Stereotypes," "Animation and Cultural Sensitivity," and "Ethics and Animation Creators." To ensure quality, only peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2024 were included. The search yielded a total of 24330 articles; after screening for relevance, 116 articles were selected for a detailed review based on their alignment with the research objectives.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

Inclusion: Studies addressing ethical issues within the animation industry, especially those relevant to Chinese creators; both quantitative and qualitative study; studies whose full text was available; high-level papers in Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online, and CNKI that have been cited more than once.

Exclusion: Articles not directly related to ethical practices in animation or lacking full text availability; duplicate papers. The selected articles were categorized based on research themes, such as ethical perceptions of violence, gender, and cultural sensitivity. This categorization allowed us to identify gaps and trends in the literature, aiding in the development of a conceptual framework.

Data Analysis

We employed thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in the literature, focusing on ethical concerns among animation creators. Systematic analysis methods were used to evaluate the prevalence of these themes, aiding in the synthesis of findings. By following this methodological approach, our study systematically examines the ethical dimensions within the Chinese animation industry, providing insights and guidelines to encourage more responsible and ethically conscious practices.

RESULTS

Research State of Ethical Issues in the Animation Industry

The animation industry, which revolves around the creation, production, and distribution of animated works, spans various formats such as film, television, online content, and gaming. This industry involves multiple stages, including content ideation, technical production, and market promotion. As a cultural industry, it plays a crucial role in cultural dissemination, public entertainment, and economic value generation (Crane, 2014; Garrett, 2018; Okeda & Koike, 2011). However, the animation industry faces several ethical issues that have long impacted both audiences and the healthy development of the industry. These issues include the depiction of violence, gender stereotypes, racial discrimination, protection of underage viewers, copyright and plagiarism disputes, and the labor rights of creators (Gao, 2019; Levitt & College, 2014).

To explore these ethical issues, this study searched on Scopus and Taylor & Francis Online using the keywords "Animation and Industry and Ethics," limited to publications from 2019 to 2024, with Taylor & Francis Online further narrowed to the arts domain. The search yielded a total of 454 related articles. After screening and filtering, five articles specifically addressed ethical issues in the animation industry. Among these, one paper focused on the application of animated character movements in teaching (Woodcock, 2023), while the remaining four discussed the ethical challenges faced by animation industry professionals regarding their working conditions. Additionally, this study searched CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) for the topic "Animation Industry" between 2019 and 2024, which returned 533 studies. Further narrowing down the search to "Animation Industry and Ethics" produced nine relevant studies. Of these, five articles examined the cultivation of professional skills and ethical concepts in animation education at higher education and vocational institutions. Another paper explored the ethical relationship between the service economy and the animation market (Gao, 2020). Two articles discussed the representation of traditional Chinese culture and core socialist values in domestic animated works (Jiang & Ma, 2019; Zhang, 2019). The final paper addressed consumer ethics within the animation market (Gao, 2019). These findings highlight a significant gap in research on the creative ethics specific to Chinese animation creators. Ethical issues within the Chinese animation industry have yet to be comprehensively examined, indicating an area of research that remains largely unexplored.

Research Status on Violence, Gender Stereotypes, and Cultural Sensitivity in Animation

In the context of animation ethics, "Violence" refers to scenes involving physical harm, aggressive behavior, or threats, portrayed through visual or auditory means. Such depictions can negatively impact viewers, particularly adolescents and children (Anderson, 1999; Mitkus, 2021; Zong, 2021).

Violence in Animation:

An analysis of Scopus and Taylor & Francis Online databases for studies between 2019 and 2024 using the keywords "Animation and Violence" yielded a total of 1,685 articles. Among these, 17 focused primarily on issues of violence in animation, comics, and gaming. This subset includes 8 quantitative studies and 9 qualitative studies. Key areas of concern include the risks associated with blurring the lines between internal and external worlds in animated games, the promotion of isolation, xenophobia, and anti-Asian violence. All quantitative studies analyzed violence from the perspectives of children and adolescents, focusing on violence education and the detection of violent content in animation and games.

The qualitative studies include one paper from the perspective of a Colombian documentary filmmaker examining anti-war and anti-violence messages in films (Guzmán-Ramírez & Aristizábal-Gómez, 2022). Seven other papers focus on violence in various contexts, including domestic violence, emotional violence, horror, armed conflict, religious violence, and violent action scenes (Mandolini, 2021). One study explores the use of animation in the medical field (Kranioti et al., 2020), while another addresses Bruce Lee's films and the representation of stoicism through violence (Steenberg, 2019).

These qualitative studies largely use narrative analysis and interviews to explore animated works with violent elements. In CNKI, a search for studies on "Violence" between 2019 and 2024 returned 14,277 results. Refining the search with the keywords "Animation and Violence" produced 27 articles, of which 3 did not primarily discuss violence. The remaining 24 articles centered on issues such as online violence, media violence, aestheticized violence, school violence, verbal abuse, and war. Most studies are based on the perspectives of child and adolescent audiences. No research exists from the perspective of animation creators. Of the 24 articles, all were narrative studies, and none conducted quantitative analyses.

Chinese scholars generally hold two perspectives on the discussion of violence in animation. One perspective, supported by six studies, views aestheticized violence favorably, emphasizing its artistic value. The other, reflected in eighteen studies, expresses concern over the use and dissemination of violent elements in animation, particularly with regard to their potential negative impact on children, adolescents, and social harmony. This suggests that Chinese scholars tend to take a negative view on the effects of violence in animation. In summary, both international and domestic academic communities lack analysis on the attitudes, creative intentions, and behavioral outcomes of Chinese animation creators with respect to the portrayal of violence. This perspective remains largely unexplored in existing research.

Gender stereotype in Animation:

Gender stereotypes refer to fixed, overly simplified notions of the roles, behaviors, and abilities of men and women. These stereotypes often disregard individual differences, leading to unfair treatment and bias (Gill & Gill, 2007; Liu, 2023). Gender stereotypes not only affect individual self-perception and development but also contribute to issues of gender discrimination and inequality across various social levels (Li, 2022).

A search on Scopus and Taylor & Francis Online for studies from 2019 to 2024 using the keywords "Animation and Gender and Stereotypes" yielded a total of 3,804 articles. Of these, 19 articles were closely related to the topic. There were 17 qualitative studies, which analyzed gender stereotypes from various perspectives. Scholars have conducted case studies on the male-centric character designs in Indian, Muslim, and Russian/Soviet animation, examining how these designs reinforce enduring gender stereotypes (Dolgina, 2022; Moody, 2022; Shanmugapriya & Christopher, 2023; Shubina, 2022). Other analyses focused on Japanese animations such as *Beelzebub*, *Japan Skin*, and *Spirited Away*, exploring the key attributes of female characters and their impact on visual storytelling (Merlano, 2023; Papastavros, 2023). Further qualitative studies examined themes of subversion of female roles, heteronormativity, lesbian narratives, and feminism (Fanasca, 2021; Mihailova, 2019). Only two studies were quantitative: one surveyed Malaysian audience on their acceptance of the female superhero in *Captain Marvel* (Chau et al., 2020), and another used virtual animated characters of different genders and attire to test the influence of occupational stereotypes (Küster et al., 2019).

On CNKI, a search for publications on "Gender stereotypes" from 2019 to 2024 returned 373 results. However, only three studies were found when searching for "Animation and Gender Stereotypes." No studies were found on "Comics and Gender Stereotypes." Searching "Gaming and Gender Stereotypes" yielded 23 studies, of which 12 focused on gender stereotypes in games related to children's education. Another 10 were qualitative studies on gender stereotypes associated with female character settings and female players' experiences in gaming (Huang et al., 2021; Li, 2022; Liu, 2023). One study quantitatively examined consumer perspectives on gender stereotypes in video game advertisements (Zhou & Zhang, 2021). Thus, in both international and domestic academic communities, there remains a lack of research analyzing how Chinese animation creators perceive gender stereotypes, their creative intentions, and the effects of their actions. This perspective remains largely unexplored.

Cultural Sensitivity in Animation:

Cultural sensitivity, in an ethical context, refers to the respect and consideration of differences in cultural backgrounds and values when making moral decisions and taking actions, to avoid cultural biases and misunderstandings (Crossan et al., 2013). According to Benhabib (2002), cultural sensitivity has become especially important in the context of globalization, as it enables individuals and organizations

to make more inclusive and respectful choices within multicultural environments (Benhabib, 2002). A search on Scopus and Taylor & Francis Online for articles from 2019 to 2024 using the keywords "Animation and Cultural Sensitivity" and "Animation and Culture and Sensitivity" yielded 670 articles. However, 98.5% of these articles were primarily about culture, and strictly speaking, only 10 focused on issues of cultural sensitivity within the animation field. A small portion of the research was focused on cross-cultural comparisons of animation case studies (Zhu, 2019), and critical discussions on cultural appropriation and cultural colonialism (Domas, 2021; Huang & Wang, 2022).

On CNKI, searching for "Cultural Sensitivity" returned 180 relevant studies. However, no studies specifically addressed "Animation and Cultural Sensitivity." Searching for "Animation and Cultural Appropriation" yielded four articles, primarily focused on methods of cultural appropriation and analyses of films like *Mulan* and *Kung Fu Panda* (Domas, 2021). Searching for "Animation and Cultural Colonialism" yielded another four articles, which examined the spread of American hegemony through animation, discourse analysis of *Spirited Away*, and the infiltration of foreign cultures in cartoon character design (Chen & Ma, 2019). Lastly, two articles on "Animation and Cultural Erosion" discussed the balancing act in Chinese animation between developing a national identity and engaging in cross-cultural exchange (Xiao & Jing, 2021; Zheng, 2019). In conclusion, both international and domestic academic circles lack comprehensive analyses on how Chinese animation creators perceive cultural sensitivity, their creative intentions, and the effects of their actions on this complex issue. Thus, this perspective remains largely unexplored, highlighting a research gap in the field.

Research Status on Ethics in Animation Creators

Animation creator teams consist of industry professionals, including screenwriters, directors, producers, storyboard artists, character designers, concept artists, key animators, in-betweeners, modelers, special effects artists, voice actors, and post-production staff. These individuals play critical roles throughout the animation creation process (Yağcı & Avcıkurt, 2020). In particular, creators involved in the early stages of production hold a unique responsibility for overseeing the ethical quality of their works and promoting moral values within animation (Pi et al., 2021). A search on Scopus using the terms "Animation and Creators and Ethics" and "Animation and Practitioner and Ethics" for articles from 2019 to 2024 returned 1,268 articles. After screening, seven articles were found to be closely related to the search terms. Among these, one was a quantitative study, and six were qualitative. The studies included experimental research on Spanish stop-motion animators' perceptions of material ethics (Orfila & Ortega-Grimaldo, 2023), and discussions on bodily ethics in animation education (Woodcock, 2023). The remaining five articles explored the perspectives of media practitioners, children's animation producers, and animation filmmakers from various countries, focusing on their views on industry conditions and the influence of the market on content (Noyan & Çöpçü, 2021; Potter, 2021; Tan et al., 2024; Warburton, 2022). On CNKI, a search for "Animation Creators" from 2019 to 2024 returned 1,086 articles, of which 15 specifically addressed "Ethics and Animation Creators." After filtering and reviewing these studies, all were found to analyze and review animation cases from the perspectives of ecological and AI technology ethics narratives, without exploring how animation creators perceive ethical issues. Moreover, no quantitative research from the perspective of animation creators was identified. In summary, both the international and domestic academic communities lack research on the ethical attitudes, intentions towards ethics, and the effects of ethical creative behaviors of Chinese animation creators regarding issues such as violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity in animation, particularly quantitative studies. As a result, this perspective remains largely unexplored in both international and Chinese academia.

DISCUSSION

The literature review reveals significant gaps in the study of Chinese animation creators' ethical practices in terms of knowledge, methodology, and data.

Knowledge Gap : Current literature lacks systematic research on the ethical creative behaviors of Chinese animation creators. Most international studies on violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity are qualitative, focusing on case analysis, with a minority using quantitative methods to assess the impact of these elements on children and adolescent audiences. In China, ethical research is primarily reflective and narrative, centered on case studies from the perspective of child audiences. No studies have been found that examine ethical attitudes, intentions, or the creative behaviors of animation creators from their own perspective. Thus, exploring how Chinese animation creators perceive ethical issues—and how these perceptions influence their creative intentions and behaviors—fills a significant knowledge gap within the animation industry. This focus not only addresses a missing aspect of current research but also offers valuable and novel insights into ethical practices among animation creators in China.

Methodological Gap : Many studies on creative ethics primarily utilize qualitative methods, such as case studies, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Currently, no research employs quantitative methods to explore the factors influencing ethical creative behaviors and their relationships or causal links. To objectively analyze how Chinese animation creators perceive specific ethical issues, particularly those related to violence, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity, it is essential to measure the relationship between their attitudes, ethical intentions, and the effects of their ethical creative behavior. Quantitative research methods are needed to fill this methodological gap, providing a more comprehensive approach to studying ethical issues within animation creation.

Data Gap : There is a significant lack of empirical data on the ethical behaviors of Chinese animation creators, particularly quantitative data. Research focusing on the behaviors of animation creators is scarce, and most studies rely on small-scale interviews or case analyses, resulting in limited data sets. The study of animation creators' ethical attitudes, intentions, and behaviors lacks empirical data support. To gain a deeper understanding of these ethical behaviors, more quantitative data and large-sample survey results are necessary to reveal behavioral patterns and influencing factors. Supplementing current research with empirical data will support the development of practical ethical guidelines for Chinese animation creators. Based on the analysis above and focusing on research objectives, three dimensions of gaps in the study of ethical issues among Chinese animation creators have been identified: knowledge gap, methodological gap, and data gap. A quantitative study examining the attitudes of animation creators, their ethical creative intentions, and the effects of their ethical creative behaviors can address these gaps. This research aims to provide a fresh perspective on the ethical creative behaviors of Chinese animation creators, contributing to the development of ethical standards within the Chinese animation industry.

CONCLUSION

Audiences are the beneficiaries of film and television works, while creators are the direct driving force behind their production. The characters, narratives, aesthetics, and cultural traditions depicted in animation strongly reflect the creators' motivations, which in turn influence the attitudes and behaviors of the audience. Therefore, animation creators' perspectives on ethical issues and their creative motivations directly impact the ethical quality of their works, ultimately contributing to the broader social influence of ethical creation. However, academic research within the animation industry focusing on creators' attitudes, intentions, and behaviors is currently sparse, with a particular lack of empirical studies. This study identifies prominent ethical issues reflected in Chinese animated works—violent elements, gender stereotypes, and cultural sensitivity. A review of literature on ethical issues in the animation industry, both internationally and in China, reveals a research gap from the perspective of Chinese animation creators concerning these three prominent ethical challenges. As a result, the study establishes research objectives centered on understanding the ethical considerations of Chinese animation creators. This research explores the ethical impact of creative behaviors among Chinese animation creators, holding significant implications for various stakeholders within the animation industry. For animation creators and the industry, it provides an ethical framework to guide creators in

producing content that aligns with moral standards and resonates with a global audience. For scholars in animation ethics, the study fills a gap in the literature and lays the foundation for deeper exploration of ethical practices within the Chinese and global animation industries. For animation educators, it offers valuable teaching materials that foster students' ethical reflection skills, enhancing future animation professionals' sensitivity to ethical issues. For animation students, the research encourages ethical reflection, helping them balance artistic expression with moral responsibility. For government agencies and cultural policymakers, the study provides insights to inform the development of industry-specific ethical policies, promoting responsible and ethically conscious growth within the industry. Thus, the ethical considerations of Chinese animation creators represent a crucial area for academic inquiry. Further research is needed to explore the influence of different ethical issues as they manifest in animated works.

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