

An Adolescent's First Insight: On the Infiltration and Manifestation of Buddhist "Four Noble Truths" in East Asian Animation Works

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Abstract: Animation, as one of the genres of cultural products that East Asian adolescents born in the 1980s and thereafter are most exposed to in the initial stages of their lives, plays an important role in their contact with the outside world and formation of their worldview and value judgment. While Buddhism, as one of the most popular religions among East Asian countries, has an undeniable influence in the creation of literary and artistic works, as well as a strong penetration in the process of constructing the worldview and outlook on life of East Asian teenagers. As the basic doctrine of Buddhism, the core of the "Four Noble Truths" has constantly been manifested in many East Asian animation works. By analyzing the Buddhist elements and the "Four Noble Truths" of Buddhism in the three most influential animation works for East Asian adolescent audiences from the 1990s to the present, namely *One Piece*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, this paper then describes the insights and reflections on the sufferings of life, the ultimate goal of life, and the paths of life cultivation that are produced by adolescent audiences when watching the animation, and then analyses the important influence of these animation works on their way of thinking.

Keywords: East Asian Animation, Buddhism, Four Noble Truths, Adolescent

1. Introduction

In the ever-accelerating process of globalization, the cultures of different countries are spreading in a faster and more varied manner, and in East Asia, animation is one of the most important forms of cultural communication influencing the adolescent groups. Through watching animation and in-depth reading of animation text, East Asian youth audiences engage in a process of independent learning and judgmental absorption, and lay the ideological foundation for strengthening their value identity. As a carrier of thought and culture, Asian animation has deeply absorbed the philosophical expression and ideological imagery of Buddhism, which profoundly influences their spiritual core. The most widely used are the "Four Noble Truths", the basic Buddhist doctrines, which embody the fundamental principle that all things and phenomena are linked by cause and effect. Through the in-depth portrayal of the characters' tragic fates, *One Piece* reveals the essence of "Suffering"; *Neon Genesis Evangelion* explores the source of mental anguish conveyed by the idea of "Accumulation" by showing the character's confusion and anxiety; *Jujutsu Kaisen* digs into "Extinction" and "Path" through the setting of the character's skills, manifesting the path to enlightenment that leads to

Buddhahood for those who overcome the demons of the mind. These works embody the important role of Buddhist thought in guiding adolescents' outlook on life and values.

2. Animation and Value Identity

2.1. Animation as an Early Exposure of Adolescents to the Outside World

With the acceleration of globalization, the economic, political and cultural exchanges among countries around the world have become more and more frequent, and the cultures of different countries are integrated into everyone's life in various forms of communication. Animation, as one of the most important forms of communication among young people, has an indispensable influence on their exposure to the world and the formation of their worldview and values. After the booming development in the 20th century, Japanese animation not only dominates the mainstream of both commercial and cultural levels in its domestic market, but also forms a rivalry with Hollywood in the regional market of East Asia [1], and then spreads to the whole world with the help of electronic media, mainly the Internet media, and cultivates a large number of solid audience groups globally, led by the East Asian region.

Since the 1980s, animation works led by Japanese animation industry have been widely exported first in the form of television broadcasts and video discs, and later in the form of online broadcasts and Internet downloads, which have exerted a deep and wide influence on the acceptance habits and aesthetic interests of the new generation of cultural consumers in countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea. Adolescents who were born in the 1980s and thereafter grew up with the companionship of animations, and a considerable number of animation fans emerged among them. Their knowledge of the outside world was largely shaped by the animated films and series they followed. Under the influence of animation, these audiences were exposed to many concepts and areas of knowledge that they had never known before, and they began to think about topics they had never been brought up to them about before, and they began to understand the more complex aspects of human nature, the society, and the world.

2.2. Watching Animation as a Process of Value Identity for Adolescents

Animation works with different themes and contents convey various values through different narrative styles and fascinating storytelling, and these values are implied in each character of the animations, and the statements and behaviors of these diverse forms of animated images and characters are unconsciously influencing the teenage audiences' value construction with through the deepening process of image reading.

In addition, adolescents' judgement and choice of the values of these on-screen characters also continuously strengthen their own value identity. The first stage of value identity is the process of learning. For teenagers, this process is specifically manifested in the sense of vicarious identification with animated characters, i.e., the identity establishment. [2] When a young audience in front of the screen feels compassion for the life of an animated character, expresses understanding and support for the character's actions and choices, and rejoices for the character's achievements and joys, this is already a process of substitution into the character's symbols, a process of learning to externalize into behavioral styles, and internalize into value judgement. The second stage of value identification is the process of judgmental absorption. In different animation works, while telling stories, they attract teenagers to immerse themselves wholeheartedly in a created world, so that they can identify with the image cognition and values of the works, and then set up specific historical values, cultural values, and values of life, that is, the values conveyed in animation works as "signs". [3] At this stage, the influence of the work no longer only stays on the value identity of the plot, but realizes effective migration, i.e., through the interaction and presentation of diversified roles, it achieves the effect of

empathy, which abstracts the concrete events and images therein into the mode of daily thinking, which is used to understand daily events, and subconsciously influences the value tendency of the adolescents in dealing with the world.

3. The "Four Noble Truths" as the Fundamental Doctrine of Buddhism

3.1. The Philosophical Expression of Buddhist Doctrines

As one of the mainstream religions in East Asia, Buddhism has had a great influence on the dominant ideas adopted by the ideology and culture as well as literature and art creation. As a carrier of ideology and culture, animation, in the process of its development, has continuously manifested, deepened and systematized the presentation of Buddhist elements and Buddhist thought. Because of the decoration of Buddhist symbolic elements and the embeddedness of Buddhist spiritual elements, the animation works of East Asian countries have continuously presented unique oriental meanings and artistic charms. These works are no longer limited to the simple borrowing of Buddhist symbols and elements, but by deeply absorbing the spirit of Buddhist doctrine and cleverly borrowing Buddhist elements, they carry out a variety of thought-provoking philosophical expressions and metaphorical construction of imagery, which in turn triggers in-depth thinking of adolescent audiences. The world of Buddhism is vast and complex, and various sects continue to bring in their own understanding and new creations in the process of development, making Buddhist doctrines and ideas prosperous and complex. One of the most widely used Buddhist thought systems is the "Four Noble Truths", which are the most basic doctrines recognized by all Buddhist sects.

3.2. The Explanation and Relationship of the "Four Noble Truths"

The "Four Noble Truths" are the four fundamental truths created by Buddha Sakyamuni, and are the core of Buddhist doctrines and the most fundamental and profound part of Buddhist thought, namely, Suffering, Accumulation, Extinction, and Path. They basically reflect the views and attitudes of Buddhism as a religion towards the problems of society and life, and the pursuit of an ideal state. The fundamental principle on which the "Four Noble Truths" are based is the theory of Karma, which states that all things and phenomena are linked by cause and effect, and are dependent on certain conditions, karmic causes and combinations.

The Noble Truth of Suffering is Sakyamuni's value judgement on the phenomenon of life, mainly about the suffering of reality. Buddhism believes that suffering is a necessary attribute of sentient existence, everything in life is suffering. The real world is full of suffering, and human existence is suffering. This is the foundation of all Buddhist theories, and all its doctrines are elaborated from it. The Noble Truth of Accumulation extends the Doctrine of Suffering, which is Buddhism's inquiry into the causes of suffering, pointing out the root cause of life's suffering. Buddhism believes that the accumulation of suffering is caused by desires and passions. All suffering originates from the three confusions of greed, hatred and stupidity, which lead to the creation of the three karmas of body, mouth and mind. Because people cannot see through the impermanent and illusory nature of the world, cannot be disillusioned with human society, so they are bewildered by impermanence and have endless worries and pains. The Noble Truth of Extinction means to extinguish, to wipe out. It mainly refers to the extinction of the root cause of suffering, which is also known as the liberation from life and death, so that one is no longer subject to the sufferings of birth and death in the three realms and is liberated. From this, Buddhism puts forward the highest ideal of the world - "Nirvana", which means "extinction", "complete silence", etc. It originally meant that the fire was extinguished or the wind dispersed. Some other religions in India have also adopted this term as their highest ideal, refers to the truth of eliminating suffering and desires, thus achieving the highest ideal of transcending the

cycle of life and death. The Noble Truth of Path means access, or the way. This path is the way to reach the state of “Nirvana”. It is centered on asking people to be firm in their Buddhist beliefs, to strictly follow the precepts of the disciplines and doctrines, to restrain their words and deeds, so that to stop the evil and cultivate the good. Buddhism believes that by practicing according to the Path, one can reach the realm of the Noble Truth, which is the realm of silence and liberation.

It can be seen that Suffering is a description of the present state of affairs endured, Accumulation is an analysis of the causes of suffering, Extinction is the ultimate goal to be pursued, and Path is the method of practice or the way to be followed in order to achieve the goal of Extinction. It is within these four truths that the basic doctrines of Buddhism are articulated and analyzed. [4] Buddhism explains the root causes of nature, society, life, and various spiritual phenomena, believing that all things are made by chance, that there is nothing eternal in the world, that everything is changeable, that nothing is certain, and that of course everything is empty.

4. The Infiltration and Manifestation of the “Four Noble Truth” in Animation Works

4.1. The Noble Truth of Suffering in the Setting of Characters in *One Piece*

As a classic in the history of animation, *One Piece* is regarded as a work of far-reaching influence. Its grasp and fusion of traditional culture, as well as its power transcending the times, have made its birth and popularity a huge influence worldwide. Behind the compelling adventure story, and unique and interesting characterization, what is presented to the adolescent audience is indeed a web of pain and hopelessness that adheres to the fate of the characters. For example, Nico Robin, one of the main characters of *One Piece*, had a very lonely childhood that can be described as dark. Her mother left when she was only two years old. The island where she survived was destroyed, her entire family members were massacred. Robin narrowly escaped death, but was constantly hunted down, repeatedly betrayed and abandoned by others. Robin survived by betraying others, which took a great toll on her soul.

According to Buddhism, in the "Saha" real world, life is full of suffering. In the three realms and six paths of life and death, pain and suffering are everywhere. There are seven sufferings: living, being aged, sickness, death, hatred and resentment, separating when loving, cannot get and cannot let go. Although this is only a short list of words, it constitutes this boundless world of suffering, the characters in *One Piece* are placed in this painful world, which reflects the sentient beings in the society who are suffering from the seven sorrows. [5] Imagine that when an adolescent who has not yet experienced the world first comes into contact with these animated characters who have incomparably tragic lives, substitutes his/her own feelings, immerses himself in the emotional changes of the characters, and cries and laughs along with them, his/her deepening reading of the animated text will effectively affect the construction of values. When he/she changes the value orientation for the first time for the sake of other people's suffering, he/she gains a deeper understanding of "suffering" and is inspired for the first time by the penetration of Buddhist thought in the present world.

4.2. The Noble Truth of Accumulation in the Explanation of the Source of Mental Suffering in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

Premiered in 1990s, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* has been hailed as a game-changer for the East Asian animation industry. The use of religious and philosophical imagery made it a "social phenomenon" and a milestone in the history of animation, and was regarded by many teenage audiences as one of the greatest works in the history of animation.

In the story, the fate of mankind in the animation is closely related to the personal growth of the cowardly protagonist Ikari Shinji. When he is forced to take up the mission of shaping the fate of mankind, he has to pilot the battle mech EVANGELION-01 and fight with the "Apostles" who have invaded the earth, and his perplexity, confusion, panic and anxiety coincidentally reflect the youths who have to enter the society in a period of time when they can't see a clear path ahead, and who are shackled with the mission of saving their personal lives, families, and societies without any vision or goals, just like the timid protagonist Shinji, who has not yet grown up, and is pushed into the huge mech that will lead mankind to become Buddha. [6] The memories and traumas of the characters in the story begin to merge with the minds of the adolescent audiences in front of the television screen, causing them to gradually see clearly the context of the times in which they live and the truth about the source of their own suffering in life, i.e., the reason why life is full of suffering, which according to Buddhism, is mainly due to people's ignorance of the truth. The reason for this is the human nature's unwillingness to trace various desires, such as the desire to become famous, the desire for power, the desire for love, the desire for survival, and so on. Driven by endless desires, the worries of greed, anger and stupidity arise, which is the source of human suffering.

4.3. The Interpretation of The Noble Truth of Extinction and Path in *Jujutsu Kaisen*

The animation *Jujutsu Kaisen*, which was put on television in 2020, is of a very high standard in both story and artwork, and as the flag bearer of Japanese long-running hot-blooded animation, it has created a very strong fervor among adolescent audiences. It is an animation with strong Buddhist elements and philosophy. In a conversation with another Japanese manga artist Taito Kubo, the creator of *Jujutsu Kaisen*, Gege Akutami, explained that the core element he used in creating this work was Buddhist thought, and that he had given the character Satoru Gojo a powerful Buddhist nature.

Several of the character's skills are inspired by Buddhist terminology. The Six Eyes Skill comes from the Tibetan Buddhism, pointing to the cutting off of worries and ultimately reaching the shore of "Nirvana", which is the highest ideal of Buddhist cultivation as stated by the Noble Truth of Extinction, that is, "no life, no death, beyond the Samsara". Another skill Unlimited Void shows the Buddhist "emptiness" idea that "everything is in perpetual motion and change, and that nothing remains constant". "Unlimited " means that the realm is not elusive and ungraspable, whereas "Void" implies infinite change, a place where thought cannot take hold. [7] Throughout the story, Gojo thinks carefully and meticulously for others, redeeming and saving many souls over and over again, and he carries all the hardship and heaviness alone without showing it to the outside world. What made him rush to the side of the sufferers to save them was his love for all beings without discrimination, that is, the method of realizing "Nirvana" and seeing the "emptiness" (i.e., the place of Unlimited Void) of the world in the thought of the Noble Truth of the Path., which is the compassionate heart for all beings, regardless of their differences. This enabled Gojo to realize "Prajna Wisdom", to stop any obsessiveness, and to realize complete freedom from life and death, and to see the real emptiness.

The basic judgement of Buddhism on the value of secular life is not only a true portrayal of the harsh natural living environment and unreasonable social living conditions at that time, but also a reflection of the fundamental contradiction between the finite and the infinite, the instantaneous and the eternal in human psychological consciousness. Sakyamuni's value judgement that the situation of life is suffering laid the theoretical cornerstone of the entire Buddhist concept of life. Since secular life is full of suffering, transcendence of the secular naturally becomes the goal of Buddhist pursuit and the ultimate orientation of life. After the "insight" process, the Satoru Gojo in *Jujutsu Kaisen* not only realized new techniques, but also threw away worries and distractions, as if filled with purest wisdom. It is a sudden clarity of mind, like the sudden brightness of the moon in a dark night, and an instantaneous awakening in a nightmare that has been going on for a long time. The adolescent audiences who are watching Gojo's insight in front of their computer or television screens are

experiencing an insight together with him. Through the Buddhist elements and ideas that permeate this animation, young viewers realize that the greatest enemy is the mind, which has yet to achieve enlightenment. Only those who overcome the demons of the heart can become a Buddha.

5. Conclusion

It is undeniable that in the process of literary and artistic creation, artists are influenced by a variety of ideas and cultures, but there is no doubt that a large portion of East Asian animation works are profoundly introducing the Buddhist doctrine and marked with distinctive Buddhist ideas. These works reveal the basic ideas of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism in their visual communication, cultural attributes, and ideological core, and then penetrate into the minds of adolescent audiences, shaping their attitudes towards life and cultivating the realm of life thinking.

The insight that bursts out of every teenager when he or she is struck by the inspiration of thought while watching the animation, coupled with the inheritance of Buddhist beliefs from their family members and the influence of the factors of the times, make the Buddhist attitude of facing suffering, with the Buddha nature of compassion, deeply imprinted into their minds, and become their spiritual support. [8] Although they are not standard religious believers, they possess a specific outlook on life, values, and cosmology of the East Asian population, just as human's suffering, are permanently in the cycle of reincarnation, generation after generation.

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