

# Visual Design of Chinese Animated Films Infused with Oriental Punk Aesthetics

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, China's movie industry has been advancing, and movies based on ancient myths, which can combine cultural expression with technical expression, have become a hot topic for creation. Especially the ancient mythological novels such as "The Legend of Deification" and "Journey to the West" have become the source of creative ideas for movie adaptations, and Light Chaser Animation, as one of the most important forces in Chinese film production, has been exploring new possibilities for animation movies, inheriting and innovating traditional Chinese cultural elements. Light Chaser Animation, as one of the most important forces in Chinese film production, has been exploring new possibilities for animation films, inheriting and innovating traditional Chinese cultural elements, and has produced the famous "New Gods" series of films, which combines oriental elements and cultural characteristics, blends modernity and tradition, and forms an Oriental Punk style with Chinese characteristics. Oriental Punk not only shows the construction of modernity of Chinese traditional culture, but also the embodiment of cultural self-confidence, and at the same time presents the unique style and aesthetic value of Chinese culture to the world. This article analyzes the visual symbols, color design and action vocabulary of the film New Gods: Yang Jian, and points out a new direction for Chinese films to integrate traditional cultural elements and modern art technology in the creation of new mythological themes.*

**Keywords:** Animation; Light Chaser Animation; Visual design; China; Oriental Punk; Film.

## 1. INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1:** Statue of Yang Jian, Erlangshen Temple, Gunnan County, China, 2010

In recent years, Chinese cinema has been actively developing the storytelling potential of mythological themes, focusing on the most rebellious stories and characters in Chinese mythology, and creating a number of films with unique styles. Light Chaser Animation, as an important force in China's animation film production (Chen Chaoqing, 2022), has continued to explore new possibilities for Chinese animation films to be nationalized, modernized. As a major force in Chinese animation film production, Light Chaser Animation continues to explore new possibilities for the nationalization, modernization, and internationalization of Chinese animation films (Guo Yanchen, 2020). Based on the Ming Dynasty novels *Journey to the West* and *The Legend of Deification*, the company has adapted and created a new series of "New Gods" films, many of which reflect a strong Oriental Punk style with Chinese colors, opening up a new way of thinking about the creation of films based on Chinese mythology. In the narrative process of animated films, the creators take the visual, auditory and tactile kinesthetic senses as the narrative basis, adopt multimodal narrative means such as language, images and actions, and load symbols, so as to organically

integrate the content of the film's narrative with the values of the creators, and comprehensively enhance the infectious power of animated films. The animated movie "New Gods: Yang Jian" takes the traditional mythological character "Yang Jian" (Figure 1) as the basis for its creation, adopts multimodal narrative techniques and sets up a narrative situation in which "the ancient and the modern are one", so that the audience can have a better understanding of traditional culture and culture in the narrative scene, in the course of which they can think about and share the same thoughts. In the narrative scene, the audience will have an emotional resonance with the intertwining of traditional culture and modern civilization.

Since the 1970s, Punk culture has emerged in the United Kingdom. It initially represented a form of music with subversion, anarchy, and rebelliousness, and then extended to the field of clothing design, embodied in the rivets, leather, dark tones, and other elements of the style of mix and match. 1983, the American science fiction writer Besecker published a novel titled "Cyberpunk" in *Amazing Stories*, and for the first time put forward the "cyberpunk", that is, the combination of cybernetics and punk, and later extended to post-cyberpunk, steampunk, clockwork punk, and post-cyberpunk, and then extended to post-cyberpunk. ", a combination of the words cybernetics and punk, which in turn extended into derivative genres such as post-cyberpunk, steampunk, clockwork punk, dieselpunk, decorative punk, atompunk, and mythopunk (Ge Mengyun, 2023). Contemporary punk cultural studies have focused on the analysis of cyberpunk style genre movies; ethical exploration of the post-human form in the punk world; as well as the interpretation of punk elements in recent years in the output of anime works by producers such as Light Chaser Animation and Colorful Stripes House (Guo Yanchen, 2020). Most of them are based on the original Cyber, Steam, and Diesel punk spaces, with less elaboration on Oriental Punk and Silk Punk, which are emerging Chinese elements of punk.2022 In August 2022, the release of the film *New Gods: Yang Jian* undoubtedly added to the construction of Oriental Punk and the Chinese "mythological universe". The release of the film *New Gods: Yang Jian* in August 2022 undoubtedly added to the construction of Oriental Punk and China's "mythological universe," and, along with Light Chaser Animation's other works, constructed a modern discourse of Oriental Punk in China.

The construction of modernity in Oriental Punk is embodied in the visual symbols that serve as the cornerstone, the reconstruction of myths and legends, and the outlook of the cultural meta-cosmic spatial narrative. In view of the fact that the existing research on Oriental Punk is not yet in-depth, that there exists the application and misrecognition of cyberpunk and steampunk, and that there is no clear explanation and analysis of its unique image style, this paper takes the film *New Gods: Yang Jian* as an example, and tries to analyze the characteristics of the visual design of the screen of Chinese films infiltrated with Oriental Punk aesthetics, to explore the creation of new Chinese mythological films, and to explore the creation of new Chinese mythological films. In this paper, we take the *New Gods: Yang Jian* as an example, and try to analyze the characteristics of the visual design of Chinese movies infused with Oriental Punk aesthetics, and explore the new direction of the creation of Chinese mythological movies.

## 2. THE PROPOSAL OF ORIENTAL PUNK

The birth of punk was based on the spirit of rebellion that confronts the social reality and carries the innate working class gene. Punk and hippie culture signaled young people's concern for the underclass, discussion of people's rights, as well as their rejection of the consumer culture and their concern for ecological balance. As the most intuitive visual elements, dark leather jackets, tight pants, leather, metal zippers and accessories, prints and graffiti patterns on clothes, safety pins and other non-mainstream decorative garments describe their own situation. Currently there is not enough research dedicated to Oriental Punk, and there is the application and misidentification of the concepts of cyberpunk and steampunk, so here is a brief distinction between Oriental Punk and cyberpunk and steampunk. The similarity between the three is that their naming logic is basically the same, all of them are synthetic nouns including "punk", and all of them have the connotation of anti-traditional and anti-mainstream, and the most obvious characteristic is the uniqueness of their visual representations. Cyberpunk" is a compound word consisting of "cybernetic" and "punk," and "steampunk" is a compound word consisting of "steam" and "punk," and "steampunk" is a compound word consisting of "cybernetic" and "punk." "Steampunk" is a compound word of "cybernetic" and "punk," "steampunk" is a combination of "steam" and "punk," and Oriental Punk refers to "Oriental" plus "punk. ". The difference is that both cyberpunk and steampunk originated in the American science fiction community in the 1980s and were widely influential. The reference to Oriental Punk comes from the Chinese animated film industry, where some practitioners argue, "What we are doing is the Oriental's own punk, a kind of punk that matches China's current aesthetics." Of course, there are also people from the Chinese video game industry who refer to this style as "East-punk". *New Gods: Yang Jian* is based on the archetype of "Yang Jian" from "The Legend of Deification" (Gao Ximin, 2023), and extensively absorbs Chinese

folklore and traditional arts and culture, some of the audiovisual elements of cyberpunk and steampunk movies, and the visual characteristics of punk culture to create a unique Oriental Punk style. Mr. Zhao Ji, the director of *New Gods: Yang Jian*, does not consider Oriental Punk to be either cyberpunk or steampunk. He believes that the futuristic technology and artificial intelligence highlighted by cyberpunk, and the specific Victorian context and technological stagnation of steampunk are notable features that can hardly be found in *New Gods: Yang Jian* (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Entrance to Penglai City, Movie *New Gods: Yang Jian*, China, 2022

Oriental Punk is not a subgenre of science fiction movies, but a visual style that inevitably borrows from and overlaps with "cyberpunk" and "steampunk" due to the partial overlap of the meaning of the words, compared with "cyberpunk" and "steampunk". In contrast, the combination of Oriental Punk and the visual symbols of Chinese culture is closer, and the metal elements are more prominent, while the significant sense of technology and the sense of the times are relatively weakened or dissipated. Specifically, Cyberpunk films prefer to focus on building an anti-utopian future society, exploring the eternal themes of Cyberpunk, and visualizing and expressing the eternal contradictions between human beings and high-tech such as cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and bio-engineering. Steampunk films have a typical narrative time and space set in the Victorian era, and Oriental Punk refers to a film style that closely combines traditional Chinese aesthetic elements with punk visual symbols, specifically manifested in the use of a large number of metal installations such as steel frames and pipes, and Chinese architecture as dominant urban symbols in landscape design, and in the styling of the characters, which mostly use close-fitting leather materials, metal pendants and accessories, and ancient Chinese character styling materials. In the character modeling, the characters are made of close-fitting leather materials and metal pendants, accessories and other materials, and the ancient Chinese character modeling tradition is used as a character building element (Figure 3), and the soundtrack music is based on punk rock and adds elements of traditional Chinese music such as Peking Opera and Folk Music, and reprocesses them with electronic synthesizers as an atmospheric effect, and the most notable feature is the unique visual style.



**Figure 3:** Lao Kang, Movie *New Gods: Yang Jian*, China, 2022

### 3. ORIENTAL PUNK VISUAL STYLE DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

### 3.1 Scene

Beginning with *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (Figure 4), Light Chaser Animation began to experiment with more punk-inspired graphics (He Sisi, 2023), and *New Gods: Yang Jian* used punk elements from beginning to end to create a world where gods and humans coexist (Zhan Shaoyi, 2023).



**Figure 4:** Donghai City, Movie *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, China, 2021

In *New Gods: Yang Jian*, Penglai (Figure 5) is the first to appear in the film, a two-dimensional plane is created by the layers of pavilions, a three-dimensional effect is created, dark clouds float in the air, pressing the pavilions downwards, light leaks out from the houses, the darkness of the sky mingles with the light at the bottom, and vaguely one can catch a glimpse of several airships in the clouds, which are just about to rush into the foreground. The framework of the airship is rough and simple, rather like steel and mud, classical architecture and modern industrial airships coexist in the same picture, with Erlangshen as the core of the gods and immortals falling into the mortal world, and the island of immortality that used to float in the air drowning in the darkness, suggesting the fall of the "gods" and the suffering of the earth, and what is needed after the suffering is a new round of awakening and salvation. Yingzhou is inspired by Dunhuang's Crescent Moon Spring, and as a place of entertainment where one can spend time in the world of the gods, everything from the modeling to the rendering highlights the word "ethereal", with the barren desert as the main background, which is only bleak at the beginning of the viewing, but when the camera advances, an oasis gradually appears in the desert, and on top of the oasis is a pavilion. Unlike the complexity and variety of Penglai, Yingzhou Island is dominated by a single building, emphasizing its height, and it seems to be the only building that rises up from the ground in the remote space, surrounded by cranes and airships, with dried tree trunks and airships appearing in the air, wrapping all the highly contrasting elements, and the patchwork combination of which brings about an explosive visual effect. In the crowded space where the hulls of the ships are arranged in a haphazard manner, the metallic light reflects the old atmosphere under the light, and the main characters jump and fight in the space, where the people and the scenery are merged into one (Liu Dandan, 2022).



**Figure 5:** Penglai City, Movie *New Gods: Yang Jian*, China, 2022

### 3.2 Characters

Yang Jian is one of the most familiar mythological characters to the Chinese people, and he has been portrayed in different ways in early comics, TV, movies and cartoons. In the movie "New Gods: Yang Jian", Yang Jian has a face like a crown of jade, sword-like eyebrows, and a nose like a hanging gall. In terms of temperament, Yang Jian is also very graceful, elegant and dignified. The production team also took great pains in designing the costumes. Yang Jian wears a seemingly simple but detailed costume, with a white round-necked robe with cloud pattern, and a forehead scarf that uses the tie-dye technique that was popular in the era to which the story belongs. Dyed silk was found as early as the Sixteen Kingdoms period (Shen Ju, 2023). Flower-dyed silk is an ancient Chinese printing process. In addition to producing a variety of circular patterns, it can also be combined to produce a variety of patterns, such as stripes, polka dots, grids, and even decorative paintings of relatively figurative things. According to Cui Yuemei, the character design director of New Gods: Yang Jian, in an interview, "We also thought of a lot of ways to cover up Yang Jian's eyes; hair covering would make the character look less refreshing, and a hat covering was not quite right, so we finally chose a blue bandana that looks more modern (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Yang Jian, Movie New Gods: Yang Jian, China, 2022

The success of New Gods: Yang Jian lies not only in its use of mythological archetypes, but also in the presence of artistic vehicles that have shone in the long history of China, such as ink paintings, Dunhuang caves, flying frescoes, costumes of the Wei and Jin dynasties, ancient architecture, wooden clogs, the Lunar Spring, the Luoshen Fu, tie-dye, etc. The film infects the viewer in front of the screen with a subtle sense of belonging. The movie infects the viewers in front of the screen in a subtle way, making them feel a sense of belonging all the time. There are countless magnificent scenes in the film, but the most classical Chinese aesthetic is the sight of the dancers dancing in the air, swaying slowly from the stage with long skirts, scarves and belts around their shoulders, suspended in mid-air (Figure 7), with a melodious atmosphere of song and dance amongst the high platforms, the Buddhist term for the flying sky, which refers to the sky god flying in the air (Jiasheng Jin, & Sharul Azim Bin Sharudin, 2023).



**Figure 7:** Dancing Girl, Movie New Gods: Yang Jian, China, 2022

Director Zhao Ji mentioned in the interview, "Traditional themes are a kind of inheritance of traditional Chinese culture, while modern expression is an innovation that explores and interprets on this basis to fit the thinking of

modern people, and it is a way for our creations to communicate with the current audience." Light Chaser Animation is adept at telling modern stories with traditional themes as the underpinnings, and the requirements for the images combine the contrasting characteristics of modernity and tradition (Yang Di, 2021). Therefore, the movie has both the ink flavor of ancient Chinese ink painting and the punk atmosphere, and this kind of extremely tearing visual experience gives the audience new sensory enjoyment. Ink painting is obviously suitable for interpreting the mythological system that is very characteristic of the Chinese nation, further echoing Light Chaser Animation's desire to explore this aspect of cultural identity. Modernized expression, on the other hand, pays attention to the path of interpretation from the outside in, emphasizing not only the "vision" level of punk style images to create the Oriental Punk mythological world, but also the "spirit" level of portrayal, i.e. highlighting the awakening of the individual's sense of self. The movie's characters are awakened from their ignorance to their self-awareness. The character in the film goes from ignorance to wakefulness, from symbolization to concretization, and truly becomes a thinking individual, rather than a god or demon symbolizing order.

#### 4. FURTHER EXPLORATION OF ORIENTAL PUNK

The real exploration of modernization should not only stay in the category of form, behind the Oriental Punk images lies the core demand of modern humanism, that is, the pursuit of human values and the concern for the overall destiny of mankind. Therefore, the excavation of the connotation of the artwork is the core of "New Gods: Yang Jian", i.e. the humanity of God. Anime works are often weakened in their deeper meanings due to subject matter and market constraints, and Light Chaser Animation has clearly made a conscious effort to overcome this in order to pursue a family-friendly effect, so that the film explores the generation and awakening of individual self-consciousness, and appears to be talking about God, but is actually written about human beings. Yu Zhou, co-founder of Light Chaser Animation, believes that the character of Yang Jian in the movie resonates with the audience because he appears as a human being rather than a god who has completely discarded his emotional distress, "Just like Yang Jian, even without the third eye that symbolizes the great power of the god, he's still Yang Jian, and we want to tell the audience that you don't need to be perfect, and that being able to hold on to your heart is the best of you. We also want to tell the audience that you don't need to be perfect, but to keep your heart is the best you." As soon as Yang Jian appears in the movie, he loses his most typical feature and the most powerful source of his power, i.e. the third eye. From the story setting, we can see that the eye on the forehead is exactly where Yang Jian's divine power lies, but the director uses a cloth to cover it up. Therefore, Yang Jian in the movie is given another name "Mu Er". Throughout the movie, the title "Erlang God" never appears, because Yang Jian here is a self-aware "human being", not a "god" who maintains the order of the Heavenly Court as in the legend. When Yang Jian is riding on the spaceship with his companions, he exclaims the benefits of being "free" after losing his position as a god, which seems to be an irrelevant line, but actually reveals the true meaning of the generation of individual self-consciousness. This is one of the most important spirits of punk culture, which respects the individuality and development of each person.

The interpretation of the visual runes of Oriental Punk's work is the cornerstone of its architecture of modernity. The ephemeral elements in the code can be transformed into co-temporal in the process of symbolic decoding, such as the pre-text carried by the image, i.e., the historical meaning carried by the artwork can be regarded as a part of the ongoing history of the present, and the elements within the space of punk possess the process of encoding the ephemeral and decoding the co-temporal, which is the process of decoding the meaning of the pre-text carried by the ephemeral elements. The elements within the punk space have a coding process of "ephemerality" and a decoding process of "co-temporality". By combining the "pre-textual" meanings carried by the ephemeral elements with the current spatial context, the meanings of the elements can be merged and coexisted with the "history of the present". When the ancient landscape elements are encoded and overlaid with the Oriental Punk space, they form the co-temporal meaning of the interaction and fusion of the ancient and the modern. There is a very important setting in New Gods: Yang Jian, which is that after the natural disaster, the gods lost their ability to fly and could only fly in "boats", which are powered by "gas energy", and the boundaries of Penglai, Fanghu, Yingzhou, Mount Li, Jinxia Cave, and so on. The names of places such as Penglai, Fangpu, Yingzhou, Mount Li, and Jinxia Cave are also mythological. The interior of Penglai, where the gas energy is sold, is filled with tall buildings, airships, Chinese bridges and intertwined trestles in the air, flying insect-style vehicles, swimming fish, and dragon lanterns floating in the air. The window for purchasing gas is named "Yin Zi Kou", and the mechanical mechanism references the combination of yin and yang trigrams. Inside the square kettle, there is a gambling house with slot machines symbolized by bronze lions, and the construction method is similar to that of Penglai. Yingzhou is a song and dance workshop, the dancers are flying in the shape of the sky, slowly rising from the mechanical lotus. More specific to Lishan is the automated, embroidered mantle of divine birds. The punk elements of Jinxia Cave in the God Realm are close to non-existent, with only ancient mythological landscapes such as floating

stones, water vapor, clouds, and falling leaves. The Po Lin Lantern (Figure 8), a mythological magic treasure, has a mechanical lotus petal shape, while the Tai Chi diagram is a mechanical shell with an ink core. The spatial imagination of modernity exists in the encoding and construction of the film's visual symbols, in which fantastical and "oriental" landscape elements are intertwined, providing visual impact and imagery simulation for the generation of meaning under decoding.



**Figure 8:** Baolian Lantern, Movie *New Gods*: Yang Jian, China, 2022

Resistance is the kernel of modernity inherited from punk culture, and it is also the part of the myth new writing continued in the new spatial context. The alienation of man from nature, society, and the self is more than real in punk space, reflecting the problem of the repression of man by modernity and the overdevelopment of capital, which seeks to turn the mass of mixed, useless, and blindly flowing flesh and power into a diversity of individual elements through training. This is a particular technique that sees the individual as both the object and the instrument of the power of the drill. The fearless, courageous, rebellious punk spirit is the product of this spatial repression. According to Zhao Ji, director of *New Gods*: Yang Jian, the word punk is an imported word, but it doesn't mean that China doesn't have punk, the spirit of punk is a kind of defiance, rebellion, and the pursuit of freedom, and China has never been short of this kind of spirit from ancient times to the present. Nezha and the Monkey King are particularly punk heroes, and their behavior is very punk. Nezha, as a child, dares to kill himself in front of his parents, and the Monkey King dares to wreak havoc on the heavenly palace and the earthly abode, both of them are punk heroes with a classical Chinese character. This is why *New Gods*: Yang Jian decided to make a punkized visual (Zhang YiMei, 2021).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the present time of global cultural development and competition, the creation and export of Oriental Punk style movies should draw on the advantages and development experience of other countries. Take Japan as an example, the success of localization of its cyberpunk animation films cannot be separated from the first-class production level, but even more so, it cannot be separated from the creators' unswerving and appropriate integration of Japanese cultural elements, and through this way to show the unique cultural charm. China has also made attempts to emphasize cultural subjectivity in the fusion of oriental cultural elements and diversified aesthetic orientations, and Oriental Punk style movies are a bold attempt to stimulate the audience's curiosity. The combination of myths and legends with Oriental Punk has led to the gradual transformation of Chinese animation movie creation. If the creators of Chinese movies are based on the nationalized foundation, keep the traditional stories, draw creative nutrients from the classic characters and excellent Chinese traditional ideology, enrich the story core, and at the same time make innovative breakthroughs in the creative elements of animation movies, incorporate modern cyber elements, and explain the modern awakening consciousness, which not only keeps the excellent traditional core, but also innovates and enriches the form of the content. Rooted in the fertile soil of Chinese culture, the new era of Chinese movies presents typical national style artistic characteristics, forming a natural harmony between traditional story kernel and modern artistic expression, which is exactly the right way for Chinese animation movies to reach their heyday.

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