

From Blood Ties to Affective Contracts: The Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Conceptions of Family in Chinese Animated Films of the New Century

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Abstract: Based on Confucian ethics, traditional Chinese animated movies presented the family through the kinship of the patriarch and the connection between family and the state, stressing the inheritance of bloodline, the authority of the father, and social responsibility. Since the start of the 21st century, urbanization, population change, and the pluralization of values have disrupted this structure. Present-day films reduce the importance of blood relations, vary the forms of family, doubt the domestic hierarchy, and show the family as both a place of trauma and a means of recovery. By carefully studying some typical works such as the *White Snake* trilogy, the *Ne Zha* series, *The Legend of Hei* and *Deep Sea*, this paper suggests that Chinese animation rebuilds the family based on an “emotional contract”: an ethical system maintained by choice, sympathy, mutual caring and emotional work. This change is not merely denying the inherited kinship, but re-interpreting the family as a dynamic community of belonging. Therefore, animation offers a significant means by which the contemporary changes in Chinese family ethics can be observed and discussed publicly.

Keywords: Chinese animated film; Conceptions of family; Blood ties; Affective contract; Deconstruction and reconstruction

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1. Introduction

The transformation of conceptions of family is an important dimension of social structural change^[1]. In contemporary China, modernization, urbanization, population change, and diversity of values have changed family life from a single model based on kinship and hierarchy. The inherited ethics still have a great influence, resulting in a continuous conflict between belonging to lineage and the intimacy established by personal preference.

Previous research has mainly classified the changes in family images or studied individual films. Attention has not been given to the standard that determines a relationship as a family. Emphasizing this

relational standard links the formal diversity, such as single-parent families, substitute carers, cross-species relationships, and spiritual kinship, to a general ethical change from hereditary status to affective activities.

Chinese animated movies provide a special perspective to study this contradiction. As an influential art form that preserves common memories, spreads across different ages, and is frequently seen in the family environment, animation not only reflects social changes but also presents alternative family relationships. Its symbolic and allegorical stories make the modifications of family ethics more obvious. In this paper, firstly, the cultural background and narrative styles of traditional family values are traced; then, the deconstruction of these values in contemporary animation is examined by means of alterations in kinship ties, domestic authority, and portrayals of trauma. Lastly, the reconstruction of family based on an “affective contract” is discussed. The “affective contract” means a voluntary and adjustable bond maintained by recognition, reciprocity, care, and common experiences, with affective commitment as its basis.

2. The cultural genealogy and narrative system of traditional conceptions of family

Traditional Chinese animated films usually considered the family as the basis of social order and cultural identity. Based on Confucian ethics and patriarchal kinship, the family served as both a private emotional unit and a micro-society for moral education and state management.

2.1. The cultural archetype of family and Confucian ethics

Mencius wrote, “The foundation of the world lies in the state, and the foundation of the state lies in the family.” Chinese culture developed from family life ^[2]. Fei Xiaotong’s “differential mode of association” portrays the traditional Chinese society as a concentric structure which begins from kinship. In this structure, filial piety and fraternal respect are related to self-cultivation, family regulation, and state governance ^[3]. The Confucian classics also defined the hierarchical responsibilities between fathers and sons, older and younger ones, and rulers and subjects. As family and state were considered to be structurally connected, domestic ethics were necessary for maintaining social stability.

Within this role-based system, affection is closely connected with duty. A good parent, child, spouse, or sibling is acknowledged by the performance of a designated ethical duty, while emotion is subordinate to harmony and arrangement. This difference is important in the initial stage of animation: emotion has a strong influence on moral responsibilities, but does not necessarily decide who can be considered as family members.

Yang Kuo-shu talks about the traditional Chinese “family orientation,” which is a duty to the survival, harmony, and honor of the family, and usually demands that one’s personal interests should give way to the benefit of the whole community ^[4]. These rules make the family a significant place for moral teaching. Animation, combining education and enjoyment, changes this ethical system into distinct visual stories ^[5].

The *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (Wang Shuchen, Yan Dingxian, and Xu Jingda, 1979) offers a representative example. Li Jing plays a significant role in the family and follows the governmental regulations. The dissimilarity in his views with those of Nezha indicates the difference between individual freedom and inherited rights. Nezha’s readiness to sacrifice himself demonstrates the hardship in changing the place determined by birth and power. The *Legend of Sealed Book* (Wang Shuchen and Qian Yunda, 1983) shows a non-biological relationship between Yuan Gong and Dansheng, but their quasi-father-son relationship still conforms to the Confucian principle of respecting the teacher and the transmission of

inherited knowledge. In *Lotus Lantern* (Chang Guangxi, 1999), Chenxiang's rescue of his mother places filial devotion at the narrative center. Although these films configure kinship differently, they consistently position family as an ethical order preceding individual negotiation.

2.2. Narrative patterns of traditional family values in Chinese animated film

Early Chinese animated movies did not depict family using realistic domestic scenes. Kinship was rather expressed in symbolic and collective narratives which aimed at promoting national spirit, moral education and cultural transmission. Tu Xianzhi relates the animation developments in China during the two periods from 1949 to 1966 and 1976 to 1993 to national construction and the subsequent cultural revival. Serious stories were selected during both periods, which were appropriate for satisfying the general requirements^[6]. Wang Rui points out that there is a transition from politically centered family images in the 1950s and 1960s to the emphasis on daily life in the 1970s and 1980s, and then to more uniform family images after the 1990s^[7]. In all these stages, the themes of paternal authority, maternal care and the growth of the younger generation have been recurring.

A Piece of Zhuang Brocade (Qian Jiajun, 1959) turns the bond between a mother and her sons into a moral trial of filial devotion and inheritance. *The Golden Conch* (Wan Guchan, 1963) places mutual support within a marital ethic shaped by traditional gender expectations. *The Peacock Princess* (Jin Xi, 1963) connects paternal succession, marital solidarity, and responsibility to the community, reinforcing the continuity between family and state. *Havoc in Heaven* (Wan Laiming and Tang Cheng, 1965) transforms the conflict between paternal order and individual will into a political allegory through the confrontation between the Jade Emperor and Sun Wukong. Even when these films depict fictive kinship or personal resistance, their relationships remain organized largely through vertical obligation, inheritance, and collective discipline rather than chosen, reciprocal intimacy.

Their recurrent structures of journey, rescue, sacrifice, and trial translate familial status into moral action: younger figures demonstrate worth by accepting or fulfilling inherited responsibility. Rebellion may challenge an authority figure, yet it seldom makes the legitimacy of kinship itself depend on mutual emotional recognition. Early animation is therefore affectively rich without treating affection as the constitutive basis of family.

3. The deconstruction of family since the beginning of the twenty-first century

Since 2000, demographic transformation, urban mobility, marketization, and changing values have encouraged Chinese animation to reconsider inherited family ethics. This deconstruction operates through three related shifts: the diversification of kinship, the redistribution of domestic authority, and the exposure of family trauma.

3.1. The loosening of blood ties and the diversification of family structures

Demographic research shows that Chinese nuclear families have decreased in size while becoming more internally diverse, including conjugal, standard, and incomplete nuclear families^[8]. Blood ties remain significant, but they are no longer the sole basis of family formation. Yu Zhiqiang argues that kinship is increasingly maintained through shared experience and everyday interaction rather than legal and ethical obligation alone. Egalitarian communication and affective identification have consequently become more

important ^[9]. Urban mobility, smaller households, and greater emotional autonomy have expanded the meaning of family toward companionship and voluntary commitment.

The *White Snake* trilogy provides a sustained cinematic response to this transformation. In *White Snake* (Huang Jiakang and Zhao Ji, 2019), A Xuan chooses transformation after discovering White Snake's nonhuman identity. Their bond is sustained through voluntary commitment rather than material dependence or inherited duty. The sisterly relationship between White Snake and Green Snake similarly develops through shared cultivation and protection, forming a spiritual family beyond biological kinship. *Green Snake* (Huang Jiakang, 2021) intensifies this logic: Green Snake's determination to bring White Snake home turns family into an affective domain capable of crossing life and death. The Masked Man's sacrifice and Green Snake's temporary alliance with Sister Sun further show how care can activate familial functions without predetermined kinship. In *White Snake: Afloat* (Chen Jianxi and Li Jiakai, 2024), paintings, the hairpin, storytelling, and memory connect reincarnated individuals across time. Together, the trilogy presents family as a fluid but durable affective community whose continuity depends on recognition and renewed commitment rather than bloodline alone.

The trilogy's significance lies not merely in replacing a conventional household with fantastic relationships. It redistributes the functions of memory, protection, sacrifice, and intergenerational transmission across lovers, sisters, reincarnated figures, and temporary allies. Formal diversity thus becomes an ethical proposition: kinship is validated by what participants repeatedly do for one another.

3.2. The destabilization of patriarchal structure and the reorganization of domestic power

Traditional Chinese families were organized around patriarchal and patrilineal authority, visible in residence, surname, inheritance, and kin-support practices. Modernization and the waning of patriarchal culture have gradually changed this structure, especially in urban settings ^[10]. Contemporary animation reflects this shift by questioning the father's automatic authority and redistributing familial agency.

In *Ne Zha* (Jiaozi, 2019), the relationship between Nezha and his parents is shaped by misunderstanding, negotiation, and eventual recognition rather than unquestioning obedience. Li Jing is no longer an invulnerable patriarch but a conflicted parent whose authority must be re-established through empathy and sacrifice. *Ne Zha 2* (Jiaozi, 2025) develops the critique through the Shen family, showing the emotional consequences of paternal repression and the younger generation's resistance to inherited hierarchy. *I Am What I Am* (Sun Haipeng, 2021) turns to a working-class household marked by paternal absence, where the mother and grandfather provide material and emotional support. The film demonstrates that family functions can be sustained without male authority at their center. *Boonie Bears: Guardian Code* (Lin Yongchang and Shao Heqi, 2023) likewise relocates emotional authority through Briar and Bramble's search for their mother and their attachment to a mechanical maternal figure. These narratives do not simply eliminate parental authority; they redefine its legitimacy. Care, responsiveness, and mutual growth replace gender and hierarchy as its primary foundations.

Domestic authority consequently changes from a positional entitlement into a relational achievement. Parents retain responsibility and may still exercise guidance, but their decisions are tested against the child's emotional needs and capacity for self-definition. Conflict becomes a process through which authority must explain itself, listen, and earn recognition rather than demand obedience through status alone.

3.3. Family as a space of trauma: Emotional absence and crises of identity

Where traditional animation often idealized family as a source of warmth and protection, new-century films reveal it as a site where trauma and healing coexist. Individualization has loosened once-stable affective bonds and made the intergenerational transmission of intimacy less secure ^[11]. Animation consequently brings emotional deprivation, generational rupture, and identity crisis into view.

This change also alters the narrative function of home. Instead of serving as a stable origin to which characters naturally return, it may become an unresolved past that must be revisited and reinterpreted. The search for belonging therefore entails reunion alongside a reckoning with silence, abandonment, unequal sacrifice, and failed recognition.

In *Big Fish & Begonia* (Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun, 2016), Chun's personal desires are constrained by communal duty and a sacrificial family order. Her attempt to save Kun becomes both an affective projection and a resistance to that order, exposing the tension between individual emotion and collective will. *Have a Nice Day* (Liu Jian, 2017) portrays marginalized characters without stable kinship networks who seek provisional forms of intimacy through alliance and mutual dependence. These fragile connections offer momentary refuge, while the absence of family produces material insecurity and affective loss. John Bradshaw conceptualizes the family as a rule-governed dynamic system in which "toxic" rules can cause lasting harm ^[12]. By exposing such injuries, contemporary animation strips family of its taken-for-granted aura of consolation and presents intimacy as something that must be understood, negotiated, and repaired.

Neither film assumes that the loss of an inherited family automatically produces a successful alternative. Their precarious alliances show the risks accompanying weakened kinship, while their moments of care preserve the possibility of repair. Deconstruction is therefore diagnostic as well as emancipatory: it reveals why family remains necessary even when its traditional form becomes untenable.

4. Affective contracts and the imaginary of the reconstructed new family

Against the background of the "new familism" of the twenty-first century, family is being re-embedded in everyday life through a negotiation between individual autonomy and familial attachment ^[13]. Animation gives this structural change an imaginative form by presenting kinship as a relationship sustained through affective practice.

4.1. Chosen kinship beyond blood

Intensive mediated interaction has produced relational forms such as fictive kinship and quasi-intimacy. Research on online kin-making suggests that estrangement from inherited relations and the formation of selective new ones may occur simultaneously ^[14]. Kinship can therefore be understood as something repeatedly produced through co-presence, reciprocity, and commitment, rather than an attribute automatically conferred by birth.

Selectivity does not mean that relationships are unrestricted or disposable. Chosen kin become familial precisely when preference is converted into durable obligation through repeated acts of presence, protection, and accountability. The affective contract therefore combines autonomy with responsibility: entry is voluntary, but maintenance makes ethical demands on all participants.

The *Legend of Hei* (MTJJ, 2019) dramatizes this distinction through Xiaohei's relationships with Fengxi and Wuxian. His bond with Fengxi rests on shared species identity but fails without genuine responsiveness.

His initially reluctant relationship with Wuxian, by contrast, becomes stable through respect, companionship, and trust. The film thus locates family in the quality of affective treatment rather than identity congruence. The *Legend of Hei 2* (MTJJ and Gu Jie, 2025) extends this logic when Xiaohei and Luye develop a familial bond by protecting one another through shared danger. *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (Tian Xiaopeng, 2015) presents chosen kinship as a process of awakening. Jiang Liuer's companionship moves Sun Wukong from resistance to attachment and finally to voluntary protection. The decisive transition occurs when another person is actively included within one's sphere of responsibility.

These films suggest that the stability of kinship increasingly depends on emotional labor in everyday interaction. When blood relationships do not ensure presence, communication, or support, family becomes a network that requires continuous maintenance. This proposition does not negate consanguineous ties; it changes the criterion by which any familial relationship acquires emotional legitimacy.

Nor should the contractual metaphor be mistaken for market exchange. It emphasizes explicit recognition and reciprocity in contrast to the presumed permanence of inherited status. Because the bond can fail, its continuation must be renewed through practice. This fragility is also its ethical strength: participants remain connected because they continue to acknowledge and care for one another.

4.2. The re-poeticization of family and its function as social allegory

The poetic shaping of home has deep roots in Chinese culture. Images such as the parental mulberry and catalpa in *The Book of Songs* and the protected community in Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* transform dwelling into a symbol of memory, order, and spiritual belonging. Contemporary animation inherits this tradition while adapting it to the psychological pressures of mobility and fragmented identity.

In *Deep Sea* (Tian Xiaopeng, 2023), Shenxiu's inner world becomes the film's imaginative canvas. The fluid deep-sea fantasy externalizes her desire to be held and supported, while its imagined restaurant and dwelling form a metaphorical home for psychological reconstruction. *Mr. Miao* (Li Lingxiao, 2020) uses surreal allegory to present the protection of an ideal home as dependent on benevolent intention and the restoration of equilibrium among people and between humanity and nature. *Chang'an* (Xie Junwei and Zou Jing, 2023) broadens the meaning of family through the poetic friendship between Gao Shi and Li Bai, recollection of the Tang dynasty, and continuation of a shared cultural lineage. Here, spiritual kinship becomes a means of reconstructing historical and national identification.

Under conditions of rapid social change, art, narrative, virtual characters, and cultural space can all help individuals imagine a stable home. Animation therefore transforms family from a private arrangement into both a psychological dwelling and a medium of public feeling. Its allegories provide a space in which audiences can reconsider relations among intimacy, ethics, community, and cultural memory.

Re-poeticization thus operates at two levels. Individually, it gives emotional injury a symbolic form through which loss can be narrated and healing imagined. Collectively, it links personal belonging to shared histories and cultural memory. The reconstructed home is neither a simple return to patriarchal order nor a purely private refuge, but an open symbolic space in which personal and communal identities can be renegotiated.

5. Conclusion

With its cross-generational appeal, direct affective expression, and circulation in family-centered viewing

contexts, animation participates in the everyday formation of family values. It offers repeatable models of relationships that can generate intergenerational discussion and return to lived experience. The popularity of Ne Zha, Boonie Bears, and mythology-based franchises indicates the public resonance of narratives about companionship, parental recognition, and chosen responsibility.

The transformation of family in Chinese animation after 2000 is not a simple substitution of kinship ties by feelings. Although blood relations and hereditary duties still have cultural importance, they are no longer considered the only basis for close relationships or authority. The films produced in the new century show diversified family patterns, doubt the father's power, recognize the harmfulness of domestic life, and shift the sense of belonging to mutual caring. The "affective contract" reflects these changes; family turns into a changing relation supported by voluntary devotion, understanding, common experiences, and continuous emotional work.

This transformation still maintains some features of the traditional ethics. The responsibilities, protections, and inter-generational continuities are still kept, but they are re-explained in an equal and negotiated way. Therefore, Chinese animated movies act as a medium connecting the inherited family culture and the new forms of intimacy, presenting the ethical changes and making them discussable publicly. Further research might broaden this textual study by conducting comparative audience investigations and analyzing the influence of the distribution channels on the reception of familial narratives.

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