

# The Popularity and Enlightenment of Japanese Fantasy Travel-Themed Animation in China

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## Abstract:

Japanese animation is widely spread in China with its wide variety and exquisite production, among which animation with fantasy travel as the theme has several loyal fans, such as *Kino's Journey: the Beautiful World*, *MUSHISHI*, *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End* and other animation works have always maintained a high quality of reputation. However, there is little research on this kind of animation in learning. This paper starts with representative animations, introduces the secondary world theory and travel narrative theory, and analyzes that fantasy travel-themed animations are popular because of their high quality, healing effect, and ability to cater to the audience's yearning. At the same time, it has the double aesthetic value of fantasy and life meaning. Therefore, it is suggested that Chinese animations can make further progress in terms of sensory experience, popular fashion, and cultural value, as well as expand the development space of Chinese animations by enriching themes and improving characters, fitting the popular points, and strengthening cultural integration.

**Keywords:** Animation; fantasy travel-themed; Japan

## 1. Introduction

Travel-related films and television shows have received increasing attention recently, ranging from movies and TV series to animations. The concept of road movies, which arose in the 1960s, originated in the United States and is an early example of applying travel elements to film and television works. It takes a journey as narrative space and cars and highways as narrative carriers, mainly telling a series of stories that occur on the migration road of the protagonist [1]. Japan is deeply influenced by American culture, and the category of road animations has been derived from road movies. After incorporating the local style of Japan, the elements of the road animation are more suitable for the characteristics of Japanese comics - more imaginative means of transport or simply setting out on foot. The travel environment has developed into forests, oceans, underground, and even the universe. Fantasy travel-themed animation can be understood as a kind of work that belongs to the category of "road animation." In a narrow sense, fantasy refers to a literary genre. In a broad sense, it covers the label of cultural goods in the secondary world that are contrary to the laws of the real world and add supernatural elements to the real world [2]. The combination of the two has produced innovative animation themes, such as "merchant meets the wise wolf,"

which describes the meeting with the Wolf girl on the medieval stage, *MUSHISHI*, which is delicate and warm and depicts the drifts in life torrent of coexistence between human and mushi, *Mononoke*, which is rich in strange talk, moreover, *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End* and *Somali and the Forest Spirit*, which tells the story about understanding the love in the journey across races and years. Without relevant papers on this genre, the continuous innovation of fantasy travel-themed animation has gained a good reputation among Chinese audiences. This paper will study the reasons and cultural influences for their widespread and provide theoretical references for the development of Chinese animation.

## 2. The Features of Fantasy Travel-Themed Animation

### 2.1 Construction of the „Secondary World“

The most prominent feature of this kind of animation is the construction of the "secondary world." The theory of "the primary World" and "the secondary world" comes from English fantasy writer J.R. Tolkien. The former is the real world in which people live. The latter, also known as the "fictitious world," was conceptually proposed in Tolkien's *On Fairyland Stories*, in which the secondary world is described as a fantasy world that is divorced from the

laws of reality and widely exists in literary works based on imagination.

The creators of the “Secondary World” have built a virtual space similar to reality but different from reality. However, it is free from the constraints of physical laws and runs smoothly according to inherent logic. The secondary world is the origin of “fantasy.” In literature and film works, their unique scenery is presented by text, painting, lens, special effects, etc., so that the audience’s thoughts are introduced to the secondary world, and they can visit the “other world” from a high-dimensional perspective.

The secondary world is higher than reality but not divorced from reality. Its architecture is often based on the real world, and it is the mimicry of the real world and the carrier of the surreal world [3]. In other words, the secondary world cannot be born out of the primary world. It can be interpreted in the current culture and reflects many aspects of reality. Countless secondary worlds generated from fantasy travel-themed animation are represented by different degrees of restoration of reality. As the product of expansion, it is often possible to glimpse the locations and cultural characteristics corresponding to reality. On the journey of *Suzume*, there are frequent realistic scenic spots, such as Yutsu Port in Miyazaki Prefecture, Akashi Kaikai Bridge, and Ocha Mizuyuno in Tokyo, which are painted with art. In the theme exploration, the *MUSHISHI* is taken as an example. In this work, the lower existence reincarnated outside human beings -MUSHI lurking in the dark of the human world, constructing the second law outside the real world. The core of the work is to reveal the Zen between humans and nature through the survival of alien life, using mild watercolor-style pictures to set off affairs, favors, and characters. The audience appreciates *MUSHISHI*’s return to human civilization in the theme of the awe of life and plain happiness, reaching the sublimation of the revelation of real life.

### 2.2 Travel Narrative

Secondly, this kind of theme is inseparable from the travel narrative space. Travel is what humans do to explore the world and themselves. Travel often means changes in place, new things, and even dangerous adventures. Individuals in a new environment often face the influx of new knowledge, the formation of new ideas, and the touch of new events.

The road is the happening space in the early film and television works related to the “travel narrative” - road movies category. Under the fantasy travel theme, the travel narrative takes place in the second space with fantasy elements. The addition of this fantasy color brings a more gorgeous experience to the travel narrative of animation. The change of narrative scene adds an uncanny element to

the scenery along the highway. The rich imagination combines the wonderful scenes that people have long expected, giving the atmosphere of the romanticized travel narrative, such as “a floating island defying gravity, a giant mobile fortress kingdom constantly migrating, a country with only one person. The protagonists of *Kino’s Journey* and *Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina* shuttle between the states of different worlds, and the characteristics of change are fully displayed. The mystery of the scene serves as the occurrence of strange events. Under the travel in this situation, the people or things encountered by the protagonist are particularly dramatic, bringing the scene’s double surprise to the audience. In addition, the characters and themes expressed in such works are also more diverse. Through the depiction of different races, the author creates contradictions that are difficult to reproduce in the real world so that the theme of expression is different, and the audience can further think about life, death, and love. Adding a travel narrative enhances the entertainment properties of animation itself, intensifies the appeal to potential audiences, and presents the author’s unique insight.

## 3. Causes of Preval

### 3.1 Providing a Feast for the Senses

Japanese animation has formed a mature industrial chain, and the works produced are often of high quality thanks to financial and technical support. It manifests in smooth dynamic states, silky transitions, meticulous painting, etc. The young group expects Excellent production strength so that animation works to win the qualification to enter the market. Moreover, the outstanding features of animations include clever dubbing and suitable sound effects. The combination of sound and painting will present the complete plot.

In fantasy travel-themed animation, the secondary world enhances the uniqueness of landscape elements and creates a colorful fantasy world. The changes brought by travel make fresh scenery emerge in an endless stream, avoiding the characters in a space for a long time and drawing the same background.

The opening song (OP) and the ending song (ED) are broadcast in each episode. Combining good animation plot elements, high-quality tracks, and pictures can also increase the charm of animation. For example, the opening song, *The Sore Feet Song* of *MUSHISHI*, borrowed guitar accompaniment to let the audience feel the slow-moving scenery in the forest. *Anytime Anywhere*, the ending song of *Frieren: Beyond Journey’s End*, uses the style of a colorful picture book to draw the journey of the protagonist Frieren, where the pupil shows petals, and the flower branches are compared to hair. Such scene designs

are unique and extremely beautiful.

Immersing in high-quality works is a simple and necessary entertainment experience, and the sensory impact enriches the audience's appreciation mood.

### 3.2 Applying Spiritual Healing

Animation with fantasy journey themes often carries the label of "healing," which means the audience can feel a sense of inner peace and tranquility on the way to watch. This effect can be analyzed in terms of scene and plot.

#### 3.2.1 Neutral scene

The fantasy travel genre inevitably has many natural elements, with forests and trees being the most frequent. On the one hand, the lush forest represents the continuation of life from primitive times. On the other hand, it means the balance of all things on earth.

Compared with the short life of human beings, the forest in the comics or animes often appears as a kind of "everlasting" eternal scene. Forests are closely related to life, like the source that feeds humans. In "Somali and the Forest Spirit," the guardian of the forest tries his best to act as the image of the "father" of the human girl Somali, symbolizing the rich gift and long-term protection of the forest for mankind.

Ancient Chinese philosophers once pointed out that man is a part of nature, and his existence, destination, essence, and value are closely related to nature. They proposed "conforming to things" and ultimately achieving happiness and freedom [4]. Closing to the forest and the natural beauty it represents, people can often look inside and get the purification of the mind. The animations show the natural picture of peace and stability, attracting people to feel well and touch the whole world.

*MUSHISHI* paints the four distinct seasons' scenery of the forest. The audience is immersed in the quiet forest, feeling the inner movement. This sentiment from the *MUSHISHI* can be known from the highly praised comments under the animate platform. Animation *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End* depicts the spire blooming with blue moon flowers, while the picture is accompanied by wind-blowing petals, which also fascinates the viewer, thus inspiring the effect of moving.

The healing of fantasy travel-themed animation is reflected in the fact that it allows the audience to discover poetic feelings about nature and life. The animation arouses people's keen sense of nature. Rich emotions are also good medicine for soothing the wounds of life. It is in line with the idea of the unity of the self and encourages people not only to adhere to the materials in life but to embrace the beauty of life. It helps people to be aware of themselves inward and move forward bravely outwards. The natural

presentation of this kind of animation can also be called the embodiment of life aesthetics.

#### 3.2.2 Spot

Due to the travel narrative, the protagonist constantly meets new characters in the anime, and a story is usually told as a unit drama. The animation of this kind of theme is very particular about the plot setting. As the protagonist switches between spectator and participant, the audience experiences the meaning of life through their eyes. The animation plot's story, scene, or emotion often becomes a composite projection that coincides with the audience's understanding [5]. The emotional input of the author and the audience to the anime intersects in different times and spaces, forming a subtle resonance and finally expressing the comfort of reflecting on real life.

*Mushishi: From the Sea* tells the story of exiles who put aside their obsession to escape poverty. *The Rolling Girls* depicts a group of girls who are asserted to have "no future" who see a colorful world on the road and harvest their youth full of "free" and "rebellion." When the audience is frustrated or struggling, they can see themselves and get new motivation from the animation plot, which makes people face up to their smallness but not meanness. The plot of the work is not limited to this. If the audience holds careful appreciation and positive feelings, no matter which animation, they can more or less understand the warmth of life and repair the defects of the soul to improve themselves.

### 3.3 Catering to the Audience's Travel Aspiration

At the same time, fantasy travel-themed animation is also in line with the main audience of animation- the general yearning of young people. At a time when China's domestic supply of jobs is limited, and the pressure of competition is increasing, young people feel poor about their lives and futures. Traveling, especially for long periods, has become a means for many people to relieve stress. Being in a foreign land far from the original living environment allows people to escape the routine of life. It provides the opportunity to escape from the conditions of earning real needs and enjoy life without burdens. Travel gives individuals or groups the prospect of visiting other places to let them be filled with the enthusiasm of exploring unknown environments. The essence of life lies in the pursuit of happiness, and travel helps to promote people's active life in this pursuit process.

However, some groups, constrained by money, time, and so on, cannot travel freely. Therefore, cultural works containing "travel narrative" have, to some extent, undertaken their yearning and become the way for them to get close

to travel itself.

Besides, people are curious about the exotic atmosphere's different customs and living habits. Contemporary youth prefer to explore the unforeseeable and imponderable things in daily life, move along the undefined route, and drift in the exotic atmosphere's foreignness, unknown, and luxury [6]. The construction of the second world also makes such emotions more easily aroused. By visiting the exotic scenery, the audience compares different details of life to stimulate new temperaments and hobbies. Freshness helps young people have expectations, which also confirms vitality.

## 4. Aesthetic and Cultural Values

### 4.1 Fantasy Aesthetics

Animation with the theme of fantasy travel adds aesthetic value. It blends and shows traces of the exploration of fantasy in human history, allowing animation to combine with other fields such as literature, breaking through the accumulation of imagination for thousands of years, and bringing a new world to the audience.

Nowadays, with the development of technology, people have a deeper and more universal understanding of nature and science. This makes the secondary world, which is jointly constructed by magic and witchcraft, more needed by society. Fantasy aesthetics is a subversive sensory reflection of the real world. For the audience, it is one of the most accessible aesthetic experiences in entertainment life and symbolizes people's beautiful conception of the world.

The secondary world in the cartoon has a strong romantic color and ideal feelings. Gorgeous colors, magnificent buildings, and beautiful figures appear in the picture one after another, giving people the simple enjoyment of visual beauty. They are good at cooperating with the plot to set off the corresponding atmosphere, bringing the audience's thoughts into the fantasy scroll, and providing a special emotional visual experience. *Mushishi* surges in the underground flood of life--light wine exudes a clear light, like a flowing galaxy, trickling where the flourishing vegetation is. The protagonist, Ginko, can see the "Mushi" that the light wine breeds and the luminous objects of different forms float in the air, constructing a mysterious scene. The correspondence between virtual and real and the magnificent artistic conception presents the meaningful beauty of life, which is the model of literary works, leading the audience to the secluded and indifferent world.

In the fantasy travel-themed animation, there will be a lot of borrowing of traditional Japanese culture, especially the demon and Kwaidan culture. The legend of the Japanese Mermaid is referenced in the anime *Mermaid Forest*.

The anime *Mononoke* is directly based on the well-known Japanese strange talks, adding the author's adaptation to establish a new story. Traditional monsters featured in the animation include the Zashikiwarash, Nue, and the Umibozu.

The fantastic secondary world and the accumulation of history together deepen this kind of animation's aesthetic and cultural value.

### 4.2 Life Aesthetics

From the perspective of aesthetic characteristics, fantasy travel is also related to people's inner aesthetic value orientation, which reflects the meaning exploration initiated by people and reveals the aesthetic characteristics closely matching with "life."

The rapid development of modern civilization is gradually changing people's psychology, causing them to have the urge to distance themselves from the cultural sphere created by mankind. The concept of self and other is defined differently, and people's antagonistic consciousness gives birth to the emotion of "alienation." These subjective feelings are embodied in aesthetic communication as the trend of "sense returning to the true state." The animation producer hopes to provide concepts such as "daily life and nature" to present the life noumenon of natural living space and meet the audience's psychological needs of lack of security caused by strangeness [7]. In the face of the passionate grand narrative scene and the emotional disputes between the characters, the daily life of the fantasy travel theme is depicted, highlighting the relative peace of the narrative space. The narrative goal is narrowed down to a certain range to depict the life of the common people. This routine implies that the character has a healthy growth space, away from the ups and downs of an uncertain life. Their lives follow regular cycles, changing with small frictions in a constant environment. It does not aim to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary but rather the common basis in the ordinary system[8]. This is the original state of life in the human mind and retains the peace of mind that things have not jumped out of the frame and are still under control. The protagonist stays in a foreign country for a short time, subjectively integrating into different daily lives, showing the local plain and harmonious life picture. Even if the protagonist's identity is an "outsider" or a "traveler" rather than a native inhabitant, the daily engagement is enough to comfort and warm both the protagonist and the audience, providing an aestheticized habitat for life.

Travel narrative is often inseparable from the author's portrayal of the protagonist's spiritual level. After experiencing different events along the way, the animation settles on the theme of growth, revealing the awakening of

the protagonist's consciousness and projecting into reality the breakthrough of the audience's inward self-awareness. Awakening is a kind of growth that transcends inherent constraints and elevates one's cognitive level. In fantasy travel, the protagonist's progress is usually emotional rather than irrational. Sensibility means that he has a deeper understanding of his environment and life in the direction of departure from absolute reason. It is their feet that measure thousands of mountains, their all-encompassing eyes, and their net of many wandering things that they retain a broad enough vision, maintain their inner principles and empathy, and can calmly face the front with a flowing mind. Tracing back to the nature of human emotion, *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End* takes love as the anime's theme. After embarking on a new journey, the protagonist Frieren gradually realizes the value of life and finds that the emotion is touched by the alternating influx of new memories and old memories, and the cognition of love is rewritten by the short time. Aesthetic activities emphasize the recovery of an individual's sensibility to life and make their life experience more real. This awakening arouses people's ultimate concern for the finiteness of life and achieves maximum reconciliation with the self [7].

The fantasy travel theme is rich in humanistic care, mainly reflected in the presentation of human society. The so-called favors are the feelings between people. In addition to the profound relationships, people will always gain help from others. This kind of emotional transmission from the same race reflects the importance of human culture in animation and portrays the beauty of favors. The story of the *Mushishi: Singing Shellfish* shows the simplicity of favor through understanding and forgiveness. The fisherman could not save the girl's mother from the shark, so the girl's father could not accept it and moved out of the village. Until the sound of Singing Shellfish came, the red tide disaster came to the fishing village. The girl was forced to return to the village for treatment, and her father also forgave the past, using the collection of pearls to help the villagers through the disaster. No one does evil in this story, but circumstances make it so, and tragedy is inevitable. The final reconciliation between the two sides is the embodiment of favors, which indicates helping each other may survive the settlement.

Starting from the realization of life, the fantasy travel-themed animation has realized the role of life inspiration to the individual audience in many aspects, such as the return of the true state, the awakening of individual consciousness, and the depiction of human favors.

## 5. Enlightenment

### 5.1 Enriching Sensory Experience

Most popular Chinese animations are derived from online novels, mainly with sophisticated battle scenes and classical fantasy styles. Inadvertently, it also caused the phenomenon of homogenization of Chinese animations. Chinese anime can increase the choice of story themes, dabble in different fields, and include audiences with different needs. Few wonderful anime are as soothing and healing as fantasy travel. In addition to the main context of the "plot," the Chinese animation may try to add other emotional values from the food, campus, sports, detective, and other plates. Fantasy travel is also one of the relatively blank fields in Chinese anime, which needs to be explored. The richer sense of Chinese anime can also start from the portrayal of characters and world views. The characters in the animation category described in the article depicted delicate emotions and individual growth, which resonate with the audience in many ways. Excellent animation should strive to create virtual characters as if existing in reality, skillfully grasp the boundary between reality and illusion, and show the ideological level rooted in life but higher than life [9]. Visual sightseeing through language-induced imagination space and picture composition can also make the animation world rooted in the audience's thinking with a visible "reality," increasing its appeal among different groups.

### 5.2 Catering the Pulse of the Time

The spread of popular culture in any region reflects the pulse of the times to some extent. Their Contemporaneity connects the audience's value orientation and can be accepted by the public. The fantasy travel theme caters to the common value of "the search for free will" among young people. In most cases, the protagonist cannot obtain enough complete meaning of existence from the original environment, so they choose to wander continuously or temporarily. On the journey, they seek to annotate their loneliness and to perfect themselves in a spiritual utopia. Walking on the road, a journey as far away as if it had no end, expresses the steadfastness of tradition and the persistence of rebels [10]. This is the protagonist's pursuit of self-essence and wants to keep a foothold in the independent world. When traditional societies prefer obedience and authority, the need for free will be more valuable. The core of fantasy travel-themed animation encourages modern young people to find the necessary passion for life and the meaning of personal existence in the monotony of order. It exposes the heart of yearning for freedom with idealized creation.

From the Chinese Internet buzzwords in 2023, one can

see the expectation of Chinese pop culture to “walk out.” In the first half of 2023, the Internet term “special forced-style travel” generally refers to the phenomenon of groups, mainly college students traveling to different scenic spots in short and intensive free time, such as weekends. This reflects the desire of most young people to explore the world after the return of offline activities, hoping to seize the current opportunity to escape from the city. In the second half of 2023, city walking is popular; that is, walking in familiar city streets, exploring characteristic routes, and deeply experiencing the city’s hidden beauty. The animation industry must also keep pace with the times and grasp the popular points. Cultural commodities convey to the audience the connotation of guiding the path of happiness in life. When animation meets the spiritual needs of young people in response to the times, it is easier to move people’s hearts, to be loved, and to realize the elevation of reputation.

### 5.3 Increasing Cultural Connotation

Just as Japanese animations often combine folklore and modern technology to promote their traditional culture to other cultural communities through a huge animation network, Chinese animations have considerable advantages in cultural accumulation. In the application of traditional culture, Chinese animation should avoid rigid imitation of the arrangement of traditional stories, reduce the Chinese stereotype brought by cultural goods to foreign audiences, and consider the form and content of works in the process of internationalization of artistic creation.

Various Japanese anime, including fantasy travel themes, have also introduced many non-Japanese foreign cultures. For example, the *Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina* contains witchcraft, magic, Western clothing, and architecture. The geographical differences between Asia and Europe make Western fantasy greatly different from Eastern fantasy, and the influx of new elements also makes the work refreshing.

In addition, it is also important to balance commercial and artistic works in the development of the animation market. The average taste represented by the mass market may kill some of the passion for artistic creation, and commercial works pay more attention to security and collect profits. Works of art do not necessarily have a stable and rising audience, but they are often a major carrier of aesthetic value. Works that pursue unique spirit and style are more likely to become classics and leave a distant echo of Chi-

nese culture in animation.

To improve the connotation of animation culture, relevant practitioners should not only start from the local situation but also make reasonable reference to foreign cultures and clarify the essential attributes of the works.

## 6. Conclusion

The publication and popularity of fantasy travel-themed animation shows a gradual trend and attracts a considerable and loyal fan base, which is necessary for business and culture. Starting from the secondary world and travel narrative theory, this paper analyzes popular reasons from sensory, healing, and audience yearning perspectives. It discusses the spiritual power of this kind of animation aesthetics. Its return to the true state, the awakening of individual consciousness, and the communication of human society are closely related to today’s life. Based on this, this paper holds that Chinese animations can learn from Japanese animation masterpieces, enrich emotional communication, combine popular points and deepen cultural connotations, and produce more outstanding works that move hearts.

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