

Analysis of the Problems and Countermeasures of the Animation Production and Promotion of *Three Body*

Yuqi Peng¹

¹School of New Media Arts, Xi'an Polytechnic University, 710048 No.19 Jinhua South Road Xi'an Shaanxi, China

Abstract. The animation of *Three Body* has attracted much anticipation from the audience since its launch and exceeded the 100 million broadcast mark in 10 hours on the first day of broadcast, setting a record for the fastest broadcast of an animation episode to break 100 million. However, as the episodes continue to air, the word-of-mouth for the work has become polarised and has dropped sharply, with the Douban score dropping to 3.9 as of March 13. This article analyses the *Three Body* animation on the levels of airplay, reviews, animation production, script logic and originality. It analyses the overly fast and thrill-seeking narrative pace of the animation. Moreover, it analyses its flat and schematic characterisation that needs more depth, and the extensive rewriting of the original text to impose conflict and the major strategic miscalculations in its audience positioning (such as losing fans of the original text due to the drastic rewriting of the original text). Furthermore, this essay gives recommendations for well-known IP adaptations, anime adaptations in the Chinese market, and the future of the animation market. This essay also advises on the need to accurately target audience groups, reduce over-adaptation of the original, avoid deconstruction of the original's undertone, and enrich the characters.

1 Introduction

"Telling Chinese stories through original IP" and "revitalising Chinese film and television" are the directions the Chinese film and television market has vigorously promoted in recent years. While Western countries, led by the United States, continue to export their mainstream culture and values through Hollywood, Universal Pictures and Disney, China is also encouraging its original works to go global and spread Chinese stories and culture. Before the release of the *Three Body* animation, some films and animations were already adapted from major IPs in China, for example, *The Wandering Earth*, *Candle in The Tomb*, *Shanghai Fortress*, *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* and *Soul Land*. Some of these works have been hugely successful, such as *The Wandering Earth* series, which has become a masterpiece of Chinese science fiction cinema. Some have received mixed reviews, such as the *Candle in The Tomb* series. A few have become bad films for reasons such as over-commercialisation, for example, *Shanghai Fortress*, which has a rating of only 2.9.

Against this backdrop, on December 10, 2023, the animation *Three Body*, co-produced by bilibili, *Three Body* Universe and YHKT ENTERTAINMENT, was released exclusively on the bilibili platform. As a work adapted from a phenomenal IP, the animation *Three Body* has been titled a "science fiction drama", "billion dollar financing", and "Chinese temperament" in the publicity before its launch. Within 10 hours on the first day of the broadcast, the animation of *Three Body* broke the record of 100 million viewers, which is the fastest record for an animated series to break 100 million. However, the reviews of *Three Body* animation soon

became polarized, and its Douban rating dropped from 7.2 to 3.9 points. This drop is because of significant errors and misjudgements in the *Three Body* animation's pacing, characters, adaptations and audience targeting. For example, *Three Body* animation is overly commercial and full of special effects scenes that do little to move the plot forward. Secondly, in its adaptation of the original, the animation adapted many of the characters to be more exaggerated, faceless and more in line with the needs of a commercial 'popcorn movie'. At the same time, the animation chose to start with one of the most iconic storylines in the original to avoid problems such as "audience churn due to lengthy writing". However, the omission of many background episodes led to confusion among new viewers and disappointment among fans who already knew the plot of *Three Body* well enough to see the loss of many classic episodes. In addition, the production team's understanding of the target audience for this anime needs to be more specific. The producers wanted to simultaneously attract fans of the original and appeal to new audiences through significant special effects, intense pacing and plot adaptations. The result is that the anime is neither fish nor fowl.

As a direct result of these problems, many fans lost faith in the animation, and some audiences even made videos to criticize the animation, pointing out its various faults of the animation. Despite this, the production quality of the anime has not improved, and many viewers can still be seen complaining about the characters and the plot in the latest episode of the show's comments.

The *Three Body* animation reflects the mentality of the current capital market that seeks to make a quick

buck by buying up well-known IPs and commercializing them. Therefore, the film and television market must avoid an aesthetic shift from appreciating well-made films to commercialized films that merely seek to be visually pleasing and cheap to produce.

Therefore, this paper adopts a documentary analysis method. Firstly, by analysing the literature on "Adaptation of Masterpieces" and "Principles of Adaptation in Animation and Film", this paper summarises the rules and principles that should be followed when adapting the *Three Body* animation. Secondly, by analysing the literature on "the national identity of animation", this paper summarises the efforts that should be made to incorporate Chinese elements in the adaptation of the *Three Body* animation. Thirdly, by analysing the literature on "the current situation of the dissemination of the anime *Three Body*", this paper summarises the fundamental reasons why the anime has received so many poor reviews in the Chinese market. Based on the above three aspects, this paper adopts a qualitative research approach to analyse the current situation regarding the plummeting word-of-mouth of the animated *Three Body* due to the violation of the principles of animation adaptation and the neglect of audience needs. At the same time, suggestions for improvement are made based on the deduced causes, and viable prospects for Chinese animation production and IP adaptations are analysed.

2 Analyses of the problems with the *Three body* animation

2.1 Overquick narrative pacing

The narrative of the *Three Body* animation is too fast-paced and over-adapted from the original. The narrative pacing of the *Three Body* anime is very friendly to fans of the original, but the opposite is true for those who have never been exposed to the novel. The production team skipped a lot of the background of the introduction, only a brief flash of text on the screen to introduce the previous plot. Throughout the opening sequence, the animation does not use narration to aid the viewer's understanding. Although the animation has an 'explanatory note' page that can be expanded by clicking on it, new viewers still have to pause and watch the text repeatedly to understand it, which makes the overall experience poor.

From the animation team's perspective, there are two reasons for accelerating the narrative rhythm. On the one hand, it is one of the most iconic storylines in the original and is a quick way to draw attention to the story. On the other hand, the more extended storyline that precedes "Operation Guzheng" is mostly in literary drama and foreshadowing, so skipping it would have prevented the audience from being lost in the lengthy textual scenes. However, the animation of *Three Body* is too fast-paced and tries to attract fans by using a lot of fight scenes and special effects. However, for new audiences with high expectations such as "deep plots" and "rich characters", the key characters are not paved, and the overall plot feels a little generic. As a result, the

fast-paced narrative of the *Three Body* animation has severely impacted the viewing experience for new audiences. The animation also loses the depth that the original possessed because of the fast-paced adaptation.

In fact, from the point of view of fans and consumers, the expectations of film and television content are concretely expressed in two aspects: 'nation-state modernity' and 'national cultural historicity' [1]. On the nation-state side of modernity, it is expected that science fiction works from China will provide Chinese experiences or Chinese solutions, offering a pluralistic and alternative interpretation of the modernisation process for the science fiction imagination [1]. On the other hand, on the cultural side of historicity, there is the expectation that China's historical and cultural spirit will be distilled in the imagination of a fictional future [1]. Therefore, in the production of the three-body animation, the production team also needed to meet the people's expectations of this national aesthetic. Otherwise, a thinly-intentioned adaptation with a lack of a grand narrative of the nation-state would also make the animation challenging to be accepted by the audience.

2.2 Stereotyped character development and characterisation

The original *Three Body* is a group drama, with each character's backstory having profound significance to the overall plot progression. It is the complexity of each character that drives them to make different decisions at this point in humanity's life-and-death history, and profoundly affects the direction of human civilisation. However, the anime does not explore other essential characters in depth, only based on Law's perspective, which makes other characters 'superficial'.

At the same time, for reasons similar to the 'narrative pacing', the animation does not focus on the long-term development of the characters' personas, but instead flattens, exaggerates, and makes them more facile and stereotyped. The production team is committed to the idea that "the characters serve the plot". Therefore, the production team exaggerated the characters' personas in the anime, in order to impose the plot, stimulate it, and impose conflict. Many of the details of the work do not stand up to scrutiny, and many of the personas have collapsed compared to the original. The lack of depth in these characters makes the plot feel a little childish and predictable, with less surprise and admiration for the author's brainchild than when reading the original, and makes it difficult for the audience to immerse themselves in the narrative logic of "science fiction".

In the original work, Wenjie Ye was a favourite of many fans, who often affectionately called him "Commander" and "Ye Shuai". This results from the character's charisma, which comes from her life of trials and tribulations. However, Wenjie Ye is portrayed as a "horrible villainous old woman" in the anime, much to the fans' anger at the anime. There are many examples of this in this anime. Therefore, the production team should first determine who is the audience for *Three Body* and then choose whom they want. If they chose to capture the large core audience of fans of the original, they should be faithful to it. The broader market

generated by the credible word of mouth of fans of the original is also worth waiting for. If they choose to capture new audience, they must create in-depth content that makes fans feel it is good value for money and then spontaneously promote the anime. However, the approach of the production team loses too much of the core audience with a basic understanding of the original work. They did not use the ‘faithful to the source material’ approach, which would be better and more stable. After all, *The Three Body* is a novel with a reading threshold, and so is the animation. Viewers who watch the anime with an understanding of the original will be more empathetic to the team’s intentions, and the anime will become more watchable through their distribution.

2.3 Low respect for the originality of the original story

The primary mark of success of an adapted work is its originality. As an animator, when conceptualizing the source work, animators should base their adaptation on the original, clarify the original story’s development and plot, identify the original storylines, and then choose attractive and innovative animation material for the adaptation design [2]. As an animation based on a novel, the production team of *Three Body* also had to respect the originality of the original story and follow the rules of adaptation. However, the animation has a wrong tendency to deconstruct the undertone and reinforce the entertainment pastime [3].

For example, in the anime trilogy, the “Wallfacer Selection Conference” is one of the most criticized plot adaptations. It is one of the most crucial plot points of the second part of the original. In the original book, due to the alien civilization, “*Three Body*”, coming to occupy the Earth, the Earth has been thoroughly monitored by the “*Three Body*” using high-tech. As a result, the Earth has no secrets from the Tribe, but at the same time, the Tribe cannot monitor the human mind. In order to gain a strategic advantage, the United Nations launched the Wallfacer Plan, appointing four Wallfacer - people who do not have to explain their plans to the outside world, who can mobilize vast resources to achieve their plans, and who do not need to explain their reasons. The wallfacer aim to mislead and deceive the entire world, both the enemy and their side, letting the enemy loses its proper judgement and delay as long as possible the real strategic intent of our side.

The Wallfacer of the original work were tremendous and lonely, undertaking the most challenging mission in human history. They are true solitaries who close their minds to the whole world and even the whole universe. The only person they can talk to and communicate with, the only person they can rely on spiritually, is themselves. They will walk alone with this great mission for many years. However, the production team in the anime has heavily reworked this episode and has not explained that “Wallfacer is great and lonely”. In this episode, the selection ceremony is instead “broadcast live worldwide” (not broadcast live in the original to ensure safety), with much cheering and gossip from the people. The production team used the

people’s reactions to make the position of “Wallfacer” a position that even ordinary people were eager to take. This series of adaptations deviate from the original text, making the solemnity of the “the Wallfacer Plan”, the greatness of the Wallfacer’s duty and the sense of crisis of the human race in the face of life and death all disappear. These are the foundations of the second part of the original, which is the basis of the *Three Body* anime adaptation. The result is that this anime becomes a commercialized, entertainment-driven, popular production. The logic of the plot does not stand up to scrutiny and deviates from the original. The multifaceted characters are weakened, and the tense and dramatic plot also takes up the audience’s time for reflection, losing the shock of the original. The work presented has deviated somewhat from the core of “science fiction”. Only some technological elements can be seen.

This adaptation is very similar to the drama *The Sacrifice*, directed by Kaige Chen. The play adapts a central plot point and transforms the protagonist’s active choice to live up to his moral ideals into a coincidence of fate. As a result, the protagonist’s significance as a symbol of Confucian morality and ethics is dissolved, and the protagonist’s character no longer embodies the Confucian tradition of loyalty and righteousness [4]. This adaptation is likely fatal. Just as the *Three Body* animation somewhat dissolves the meaning of the existence of the “Wallfacer Plan”, the subsequent plot is accordingly illogical.

2.4 Inaccurate targeting of audiences

The *Three Body* animation team focused on a new audience and skipped much of the original storyline to attract new viewers with the conflict-ridden storyline. The production team’s style in this animation is more commercial. It is about entertaining the audience, dramatising the storyline and stereotyping the characters. This production style will inevitably disappoint new audiences who come to enjoy an animation based on one of China’s most iconic science fiction novels because of its lack of depth. At the same time, the production team abandoned the narrative style that appealed to fans of the original (for example, reasonable and moderate adaptations based on the original or in-depth restorations of characters, scenes and plots), thus losing a large core audience who love the *Three Body* original. On the contrary, the production team of the *Three Body* TV series has done an excellent job in this regard.

At the same time, the production team should also recognise that animation in this new era is gradually changing the stereotypical perception of most people, expanding from a slight scope to a social one day by day [5]. Toddlerisation is not a trend, nor is over-entertainment. Although a work of science fiction, *Three Body* has a solid realistic point of view [6]. The characters in the play have also always had an unyielding spirit, as well as the Chinese way of expressing emotions in an introspective, restrained and subtle manner, all of which make this work unique [6]. So when adapting it, the production team also should bring out these qualities so that the film and television

adaptation of the *Three Body* would have a national power [6].

3 Recommendations for the problems

3.1 Lower narrative pace and reduce over-revision of the original works

For a work rich in scientific and technical knowledge, with a wide range of topics and a certain viewing threshold, the production team will inevitably have to choose between “respect for the original” and “popularization”. Respecting the original will require corresponding patience on the part of the audience, and the production team will be rewarded with a large number of fans of the original and their spontaneous publicity. Moreover, for popularisation, the production team needs to take the pace of the narrative and cut the content volume. This will enable new audiences not to abandon the show due to its Incomprehensibility and lengthy plots.

In terms of narrative pacing, the animated *Three Body* could reference the TV version of *Three Body* and fill in more of the plot with ‘background’, ‘detailing’ and ‘logic’. At the same time, there is the option of interspersing the previous content in the form of interludes to ensure that the audience is understood. With a top-tier IP in hand, it is only suitable to pay more attention to the needs of its original audience and take the work seriously. Otherwise, it will be backfired in this popularity. A fast-paced narrative can appeal to the masses but is more suited to film productions. Long-running drama productions that are too commercially driven to be ‘fast’ without the correspondingly good content to satisfy audiences will only lead to ‘fatigue’ and greater dissatisfaction with the pace of the production. On the contrary, with an extensive IP in hand, slowing down the pace and handling the details will not only make the viewing experience better and more acceptable to the audience but will also reap much word-of-mouth from fans of the original and recycle these fans as an audience group, thus driving the animation’s reviews will be positive. Like what Bilibili, the investor of the *Three Body* animation, expects, the production of *Three Body* animation should avoid over-consumption of IP but should instead advance step by step [7]. *Three Body* animation reaches out to as many audiences as possible and collect market feedback so that the quality of the work can be better improved [7].

3.2 Sharpening and enriching the character

Three Body is a work that succeeds in its storytelling and the excellent portrayal of its different characters. The work is set in an international, even cosmic, perspective, in which the personalities of the different characters, their corresponding countries, organizations and civilizations are in a high degree of complexity. The “cold-blooded advanced civilization *Three Body*”, the “Wenjie Ye, who betrayed but also left a chance for humanity”, and the people who represent the great powers in their game against all of humanity all add to

the unique magnificence of this complex story. Therefore, for such a wonderful group drama, the animation *Three Body* could have expanded its narrative perspective from just one of the main characters, Luo, to a multi-perspective narrative, preventing the show from becoming monotonous like a “biography of Luo”. Secondly, the production team should focus on enriching the characters rather than making them homogeneous. In the case of *The Avengers*, for example, even in the shorter duration medium of film, the film still brings out the best in each character. By recounting the changes in their lives, their highs and lows, and their life-and-death decisions, each character is shown to be unique and sets the stage for his subsequent actions. Also, the audience will be moved and empathetic when foreshadowings are revealed. The *Three Body* animation should focus on taking advantage of the TV series’ long layouts to fill in the gaps in the personas so that viewers do not feel homogenized by the character modelling and feel that each character is too lacking in depth.

3.3 Identify the target audience

As a science fiction novel that is difficult to understand and slow-paced, the animated adaptations of *Three Body* inevitably have a similar viewing threshold. This also determines their audience to exclude juvenile audience group that needs more knowledge. Moreover, as online media, film, and television have expanded their reach, the audience for *Three Body* now shows the typical characteristics of a young, highly intellectual and commercially energetic audience, generally distributed in the 18 to 30 age group. Its core audience is strongly associated with the pioneering demographic that represents a high level of awareness and commercial energy in the market [8].

This suggests that the narrative style of the *Three Body* animation should lean towards that of the original: told through foreshadowing, deep plotting and progressive narrative. Furthermore, gradually, in a group storyline, to discover the truth with the unknowing protagonists. The narrative in the audience orientation will focus on the overall logic. However, the animation team set the production standards for general public appreciation and positioned the audience as a ‘popcorn movie’ audience. As a result, the production team focused on special effects and action sequences, neglecting much of the plot and character depth, leaving much of the story illogical. Explosions and fight sequences should not be the core of this animated film. The conflict imposed by the anime, which is based on the second part of the original, which rarely sees any fight scenes, makes the film entirely unsuitable for the audience’s imagination and admiration for the content of the original.

In the general feedback from the audience, the word “sense of resemblance” was often mentioned. This is because the character modelling, character aesthetics and performance design of the *Three Body* produced by the YHKT ENTERTAINMENT production team are very similar to its other anime, which is named INCARNATION. This has led to a strong illusion that the audience is watching a sister film to the

INCARNATION. The animation uses grim blue and black as ambient colours and uses high brightness colour contrasts to create a visual impact, thus creating a scary, gloomy atmosphere [9]. This is due to the production team's inherent style and a lack of understanding of the target audience. The logic of the show and the narrative should be distinctive to each production, with a unique style that needs to be carefully polished by reading the original. Especially when the two works are so different, such treatment will lead to a gradual polarization of reviews for *Three Body* (loved by fans of the production team but loathed by fans of the original *Three Body*) and to an escalation of negative reviews when the production quality does not improve.

3.4 Avoid over-commercialisation

Over-commercialisation is also not worth taking. Although both have opening credits commercials compared to the *Three Body* TV series, the anime has too many commercial placements. For example, in the fifth episode of the anime, there is a 36-second-long nonsensical shot of "Luo eating chocolate". This sequence is speculated to have been initially reserved for Oreo's advertising time (Oreo did have a tie-in with the *Three Body* animation during this period). At the same time, the overall style of the animation is a mix of last-century China and the 'cyberpunk' art style of the INCARNATION (the original novel is set in 21st-century China), an oddity that many viewers will find difficult to understand. It is as if the production team intended to fit the mainstream foreign image of Chinese society and use it to spread the anime to overseas markets. If this was the intention, the production team should have changed their art thinking to include more Chinese elements (costumes, street scenes, ideas, food), which would have helped the animation to be more in tune with mainstream Chinese aesthetics and facilitate its distribution to its market and audience.

In order to construct a unique cultural identity, Chinese animation (including the *Three body*) must first have "self-knowledge" of its own national culture, which is the fundamental premise for Chinese animation to reconstruct its cultural identity and confidence [10]. Furthermore, with the start of such high-investment, high-profile works as the *Three Body* animation, Chinese animation is shifting from predominantly low-child content to a new phase aimed at audiences of all ages, including adults [11]. It will become one of the future trends of Chinese animation to try to produce stories that focus on human nature and Chinese thinking under a grand worldview and cosmology [11]. Following this trend will also help the *Three body* animation team reap the benefits of the national market and go global.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, despite having the phenomenal IP in hand, the *Three Body* animation team needed more awareness of how to exploit this IP and more judgement of the market. The narrative pacing is slightly patterned, with

many fight scenes and special effects stacked on each other to attract attention and create a "Hollywood-style" aesthetic. This production style is not a mistake, but without foundation, the intense performances imposed will only give the audience a momentary thrill, and it is not easy to appreciate the production concept and logic. Regarding the characters, the production team has a similar problem to "Narrative Rhythm". The desire to attract new audiences without providing them with sufficient background knowledge leads to fragmented impressions and leaves the audience disappointed by the flat characters. In the adaptation, the production team omitted too much of the original text while drastically redacting important character personalities and intensifying many plot conflicts for commercialism.

Regarding audience targeting, the production still needs to position itself carefully and choose its market. Understanding the audience rather than catering to capital is integral to successfully adapting an IP. At the same time, this also provides a reference case for future adaptations of animation IPs in China and worldwide. Animation production, first and foremost, serves an essentially national audience. Therefore, integrating national elements, ideas and concepts in the animation adaptation will help promote cultural identity and export in the national market. At the same time, the animation itself is international content, which makes it easier to go abroad than live-action dramas. As China exports its culture, it will also gradually learn the cultural reception habits of countries worldwide, gradually expanding its international horizons and broadening how it can effectively communicate its culture abroad. At the same time, the continued release of animations such as *Three Body* will help to break the traditional label of animation as "under-aged". Animation will also move towards the mainstream medium, and the market environment for animation production will become friendlier. This will also provide a way for more innovative talent to develop and allow the animation to become a mainstream industry, breaking the hegemony of the big companies and expanding employment.

Finally, the continued healthy development of animation can also promote the development of visual images, special effects, 3D and other high technology, gradually helping to create a replicable industry chain and ecological chain. This is also the direction the *Three Body* and Chinese animation teams must take.

While the *Three Body* animation has many shortcomings, this production also has little experience to draw on, making it as challenging to produce as one might imagine. For the Chinese animation market, the emergence of *Three body* anime is already a certain degree of success. Through continuous improvement of the production process and exploration of the market environment, one day, the production team of YHKT ENTERTAINMENT will also be able to produce even better works and go overseas to help China's animation industry go global.

References

1. M. Huang, A Study of the Consumption of Science Fiction IP Repositories and Grand Narratives: The Three-Body Universe as an Example, *RADIO TV JOURNAL* **3**, 25-28 (2023)
2. M.B. Zhang, Principles and Forms of Adaptation in Chinese Animated Films, *Design* **20**, 120-121 (2015)
3. D.D. Su, A study of television adaptations of masterpieces of modern Chinese literature, Chinese National Academy of Arts, (2012)
4. Q. Zhang, Reflections on the principle of fidelity in film adaptations, *Movie Literature* **13**, 13-15 (2011)
5. C. Liu, The current state of aesthetic communication of animation under the development of new animation in China, *Movie Literature* **15**, 84-88 (2022)
6. Y.L. Wu, TV series "*Three Body*": a science fiction drama full of Chinese philosophical, aesthetic and human implications, *China Art Newspaper*, 006 (2023)
7. Z. Feng, After the highs of the premiere of *The Three Body*, *CHINA BRAND* **1**, 72-73 (2023)
8. Q. Jia, Audience Analysis of Cross-Media Communication of Classic Texts - The Novel "*Three Body*" as an Example, *Journal of News Research*, 48-49+84 (2017)
9. W. Tong, Y.Q. Yan, A Study of the Waste Land Style in the Chinese Science Fiction Animated Series *The INCARNATION*, *Package Design* **4**, 128-129 (2022).
10. J.D. Wang, Historical Tracing and Present Reconstruction - A Study on the Path of Reconstructing the National Cultural Identity of Chinese Animation, *Art and Design (Theory)* **4**, 118-121 (2022)
11. J. Xuan, The *Three Body* animation has reached over 100 million, what inspiration does it bring for Chinese comics "going abroad"?, *Wenhui Daily* **6**, 006 (2022)