

# A Study of Animal Imagery in Chinese Cinema (1930–1949)

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**Abstract:** Rooted in traditional Chinese culture, animal imagery in early Chinese cinema served as a crucial vehicle for conveying national consciousness. Such imagery played a significant role in character construction, depiction of living conditions, and manifestation of the national spirit. Focusing on film production between the 1930s and 1940s, this paper explores how animal images were presented, what narrative functions they performed, and what values they embodied. Within the historical contexts of national salvation and class critique, progressive filmmakers invested animal figures with social and political appeals, turning them into visual-rhetorical tools for moral judgment, political allegory, and value orientation. These practices vividly demonstrate the deep interaction between artistic creation and ideological expression, underscoring the artistic tradition of “literature as a vehicle for moral instruction” and the social commitment of early Chinese cinema.

**Keywords:** Animal Imagery; National Discourse; Cinematic Rhetoric; Collective Memory

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## 1.Introduction

Traditional Chinese literature is relatively implicit, often relying on other imagery to express emotions through textual descriptions. Both animal and plant imagery are commonly seen in classical Chinese literary works. <sup>[1]</sup> Imagery is an artistic expression through which people use specific objects to convey emotions, that is, “expressing emotions through objects”. Humans and animals coexist in nature and have an inseparable relationship. Animal imagery has appeared in people’s lyrical expressions since ancient times, such as the “morality of the lamb” in the Book of Songs, which uses lambs to symbolize people’s upright character, or the “mandarin ducks flying together, never parting” which uses mandarin ducks to symbolize unyielding love. In film narratives, animals are often used to represent characters, deepen the film’s theme, and illustrate life philosophies. <sup>[2]</sup> Animals also appear quite frequently in movies, but many of them are objective existences in the real world rather than bearers of the director’s lyrical expressions. This cannot be called animal imagery, which refers to animal images that carry people’s emotional expressions.

Chinese films have given different positioning and expressions to the function of animal characters in different periods. The use of animal imagery as a narrative means in films was a major feature in the 1930s and 1940s. Early filmmakers employed film rhetorical devices, drew nutrition from traditional culture, and used animal imagery to tell stories, reflect on social issues, and explore human nature, forming an artistic style rich in national characteristics. When audiences watch films, they consciously or unconsciously reflect on and internalize historical narratives, ideologies, and values related to national identity in the films, strengthening their individual national identity, sense of belonging, and community consciousness. <sup>[3]</sup> From the chaotic social environment in Mingxing Film Company’s “Spring Silkworms” (1933), which caused farmers to go bankrupt

due to sericulture, to director Fei Mu's defense film "Wolf Mountain Bloodshed" (1936), which uses wolves wreaking havoc in a village to reflect the brutal Japanese invaders; to "The False Phoenix" (1947), where the two protagonists, Yang Xiaomao and Fan Ruhua, aptly fit the titles, one is the false phoenix and the other is the real phoenix. We see that animal imagery appears more and more frequently in films, and the expression methods are becoming more diverse. The use of animal imagery has become an increasingly mature narrative means in film.

## 2. The presentation of animal imagery

Due to differences in story content, emotional expression, narrative strategies, and creative personalities, the visual presentation of animal imagery in early Chinese films generally takes three forms. One form is when the animal appears in the film title and serves as the protagonist, being the main subject of the film. Here, the animal imagery is not only a rhetorical device but also the main bearer of the narrative. The character is the core of the story, and the narrative must revolve around a series of actions undertaken by the character. This character is not limited to "humans" and can also be an anthropomorphic "object".<sup>[4]</sup> In the film "The Bloody Battle at Langshan", the "wolf" is the core of the narrative, and the story unfolds around the theme of "hunting wolves". The first scene in the film's opening sequence is a scene of wild wolves running on the mountain, using a long shot combined with slow-motion processing, accompanied by the mournful melody of the theme song "Langshan Song", "There are yellow wolves in the east mountain, wolf! Wolf! There are white wolves in the west mountain, wolf! Wolf! People from all directions shout, wolf! Wolf! Swords and guns are raised everywhere, hunting wolves!" This effectively creates a visual and psychological effect of wild wolves wreaking havoc and people being panic-stricken. The different views towards "wolves" in the village in the film also reflect the attitude of society towards the Japanese invaders. The first character to appear is an old father, Li Laodi, who is mending a broken fishing net while constantly recounting how his son was taken away by a wolf. His attitude towards wolves is extremely hateful, but he is already old and frail and powerless. He can only relieve his pain by repeatedly recounting to his daughter, undoubtedly representing the typical poor working people who lost their loved ones under the invasion of the Japanese invaders. Although they hate the invaders immensely, they are powerless.

In traditional Chinese culture, the wolf carries a distinct and unique connotation. If the two wolves portrayed by Pu Songling are fierce and cunning, which can be dealt with by the wit and bravery of a butcher, then the pack of wolves in "The Bloody Battle at Wolf Mountain" are cruel and terrifying, necessitating an attack by the entire village. The death of Old Li is a scene that reaches the pinnacle of tragedy. On his way back from collecting debts in town, Old Li was attacked by a pack of wolves. By the time the villagers arrived, Old Li had already succumbed to his injuries. Old Li's death awakened everyone's determination to unite and fight the wolves, and also moved the audience in the cinema. As the song goes, "We would rather fight and die than lose our hometown." This film is a fable that subtly promotes anti-Japanese ideology and calls for unity among the people of the country to resist Japan. The release of "The Bloody Battle at Wolf Mountain" has generated significant social repercussions, sparking patriotic enthusiasm and promoting the development of the "National Defense Film Movement."<sup>[5]</sup>

The second authentic animal image does not appear in the film itself, but rather manifests in the title, serving as a symbol and metaphor. The metaphorical animal imagery here mostly derives from people's life experiences. The use of imagery in films has been endowed with certain connotations by filmmakers across different eras, and audiences' perception of imagery also continually evolves and develops with their life experiences, aesthetic changes, social environments, and education. Viewing based on this foundation will resonate with audiences, enabling them to understand the characters' personalities and emotions, to rejoice with the characters' joy, and to shed tears with their sorrow. French historian Pierre Nora proposed the concept of "the field of memory," which refers to "a unity that has significant material or spiritual meaning. Through human will or the power of time, these unities have been transformed into a symbolic element of the memory heritage of any community."<sup>[6]</sup> In early Chinese films, some animal imagery was borrowed from the totems of traditional Chinese culture, serving as a metaphor to awaken people. The most representative example is the phoenix imagery in the film "The Fake Phoenix and the Real Dragon," where, like the dragon totem, the phoenix totem is also one of the objects worshipped by Chinese civilization. In Chinese aesthetic consciousness, the phoenix symbolizes noble, beautiful, and golden things. Therefore, there is a

popular saying in folklore, “climbing the dragon and attaching to the phoenix,” which is used to describe those who are lazy, unambitious, and rely on ingratiating themselves with powerful people to obtain wealth and status. In the film “The Fake Phoenix and the Real Dragon,” the protagonists Yang Xiaomao and Fan Ruhua yearn for the extravagant life of the wealthy and have the idea of pretending to be wealthy to seek marriage. The two, who have mutual feelings for each other, eventually see through each other, feeling awkward and helpless. Finally, persuaded by their friends, they reconcile and live a happy life. In the film, Yang Xiaomao and Fan Ruhua correspond to the title, one being the fake phoenix and the other the real dragon. The director chose the title from the common saying “The Fake Phoenix and the Real Dragon,” which not only makes the film’s theme clear to the audience and catchy, but also evokes people’s collective memory through the image of the phoenix, a traditional totem. This made the film a huge hit among audiences upon its release, becoming one of the highest-grossing films of the post-war period.

The use of animal imagery in movies is quite common, but it is not used as the main narrative or metaphorical object. Instead, it serves as a finishing touch in a certain segment of the film, used to advance the story, create a story atmosphere, or serve as a symbol and metaphor. In the movie “Wild Rose”, the use of animals creates a strong local atmosphere. The scene of a group of big white geese slowly swimming ashore behind the protagonist Xiao Feng, and later the director’s design of Xiao Feng feeding the geese and pigs, reflects the tranquility of rural life and portrays Xiao Feng’s simple and hardworking character. In the movie “Hope in the World”, sunlight shines through the prison window onto Professor Deng’s face, and he smiles as he watches the birds chirping softly on the branches. This vibrant bird, which can always spread its wings and fly high, symbolizes the hope and ideals of a generation of intellectuals for the future of the country. And in 1934, director Fei Mu’s “Tianlun” was a film born during the “New Life Movement”, which conforms to the movement’s requirement of “based on the inherent virtues of the Republic of China - courtesy, righteousness, integrity, and shame”. The opening scene of a lamb running in the fields represents the vibrant and hopeful scene of the countryside, and the lamb kneeling to suckle reflects Confucian ethics. The son galloping back to visit his critically ill father echoes this theme.

### 3.The role function of animal imagery

“Film imagery can narrate, but it rarely functions alone. It often combines with characters, plots, and environments to participate in the narrative process, express creative intentions, and create an overall atmosphere.”<sup>[7]</sup> Animal imagery is one type of film imagery. Directors use these images in conjunction with film rhetorical devices such as environment, color, character, and lighting in the film to achieve the goal of telling a good story, reflecting the early filmmakers’ observations and reflections on Chinese society.

#### 3.1 Constructing the storyline

The combination and arrangement of imagery are crucial means of film narration. In the film “Spring Silkworms” directed by Cheng Bugao, the conflicts and plot developments in the story revolve around silkworms. As the director recalled, “The protagonist of ‘Spring Silkworms’ is the silkworm. To ensure the work was done well, the company authorities specially invited three experts from Suzhou to take charge of silkworm rearing... A small shed was specially set aside for the exclusive use of silkworm rearing in ‘Spring Silkworms’.”<sup>[8]</sup> In the rural areas of Zhejiang in the 1930s, every family in the village would raise silkworms during the Qingming Festival, relying on selling silk to supplement their livelihood. The two main contradictions in the film revolve around “silkworms”. On the one hand, the protagonist, an old silkworm farmer named Tongbao, borrows usury to buy mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms. Although the silk harvest is abundant, it is exploited by capitalist profiteers and he eventually goes bankrupt. On the other hand, Hehua, who had once worked as a servant for a wealthy family in the village, is considered an ominous person by the villagers and is not allowed to approach the silkworms. However, she deliberately approaches the silkworms to retaliate against Tongbao’s feudal superstitions. The silkworms like Tongbao’s do not die because of Hehua’s approach, but their family does not live a good life due to their hard work in raising silkworms. The silkworms in the film symbolize the last hope that farmers hold for feudal society. In the end, Tongbao’s family goes bankrupt and becomes even poorer, telling the audience that without a change in thinking, there will be no new life.

### 3.2 Participate in character portrayal

The portrayal of characters in films is a crucial indicator of storytelling, and animal imagery plays a significant complementary and propelling role in shaping these characters. In the film “Spring Silkworms”, sericulture is sacred in the eyes of the silkworm farmers, who scrupulously follow the sericultural taboos passed down from their ancestors: avoiding smoke, alcohol, vinegar, the five pungent foods, paint, and speaking inauspicious words. He Huahe, whose tragic background is considered ominous by the entire village, deliberately sabotages and even steals silkworms to retaliate against Old Tongbao, who is wary of her for the sake of a bountiful harvest. Old Tongbao warns his son that speaking to He Huahe again is disobedience. The silkworm farmers’ persistence in old sericultural customs in the film reflects the ignorant and stubborn nature of farmers, while He Huahe’s words and deeds highlight women’s resistance to injustice, vividly portraying the ignorant and stubborn silkworm farmer Old Tongbao and the rebellious new woman He Huahe. The character portrayal in the film “Wolf Mountain Bloody Tale” is also closely related to the appearance of wolves. The wolves in the film naturally correspond to Japanese invaders, while the villagers with various positions in the village are a true portrayal of the Chinese people. When viewed from an allegorical perspective, the hypertextual meaning behind “Wolf Mountain Bloody Tale” becomes immediately clear.<sup>[9]</sup> The attitude of each person towards fighting wolves in the film also reflects their character. Some are afraid of wolves and retreat and avoid fighting them, some are pedantic and believe that praying to gods and hanging talismans can solve problems, and some are brave and call on villagers to unite and fight wolves together. The film’s portrayal of villagers’ attitudes towards wolves also reflects society’s attitude towards Japanese invaders.

### 3.3 Forming the film style

“Style varies with time, place, and individual. When examining film imagery and style, one can delve into a single text, or broadly survey the characteristics of the writer (director), the era, and the nation.”<sup>[10]</sup> The characters or events metaphorically represented by animal imagery in films are usually summarized by filmmakers after objectively and calmly observing real life. The expression of these images not only embodies the director’s unique personal sentiments but also carries the collective emotions of the era and the nation. In the film “Crow and Sparrow”, through a metaphorical story, it depicts the scene of urban residents bravely fighting against the oppression of the Kuomintang (KMT) under the inspiration of China’s imminent establishment of political power. The two animal imagery of “crow” and “sparrow” are endowed with special metaphors by the director. The opposition between “crow” and “sparrow” reflects the contradiction and struggle between the reactionary ruling class and the ordinary people, and also indicates the inevitable trend of social change.<sup>[11]</sup> In traditional Chinese culture, crows have always been regarded as ominous omens, and due to their ferocious habits and omnivorous diet, which includes grains, they have always been driven away by people. In the film, KMT agents are referred to as “crows”, who, exploiting the KMT’s power and authority, occupy the house of Kong Youwen, an old schoolteacher, and rent it to other tenants, intending to make a fortune, thus expressing people’s disgust towards the KMT. Sparrows belong to small birds, with a large population, prefer to live in groups, and have a characteristic of being weak and small in strength. “Sparrows” symbolize the small figures living at the bottom and on the edge, depicting different types of vivid citizen images who dare not speak out their anger under the oppression of KMT agents, but are full of expectations for the Chinese Communist regime.

## 4. The Value Embodiment of Animal Imagery

The 1930s were a period of internal and external troubles for China. Internally, there were consecutive years of natural disasters, while externally, invaders were eyeing the country with menace. Commercial films such as martial arts and fantasy films, as well as those of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School, could no longer satisfy the audience’s demands. Progressive filmmakers began to use films as a megaphone to call for people to rise up and resist. Films featuring animal imagery that emerged during this period, such as “The Bloody Battle at Wolf Mountain” and “Spring Silkworms”, often constituted and exhibited national narratives, endowing animal imagery with metaphorical and symbolic meanings from an ideological perspective. Directors used the metaphorical function of animal imagery in storytelling to convey their social, political, and moral beliefs to the audience. These films, which originated from traditional Chinese fables, were more likely to evoke indignation and resonance among the Chinese people. “Image shots” - the composition of frames as a “representation” of

human thoughts and emotions - are not strictly “linguistic units” in the strict sense, but still belong to “communicative units” and possess “discursive” attributes.<sup>[12]</sup> In the film “Spring Silkworms”, speculative merchants and capitalists made a fortune by exploiting silkworm farmers, while rural silkworm raisers still lived in poverty even after a bountiful harvest. The animal image of “silkworms” here is not only a realistic representation in a given environment, but also symbolizes the old customs and constraints of feudal society, as well as the invasion of foreign capitalism leading to the collapse of small-scale peasant economy.

The animal imagery in movies is not merely a character setting, a movie prop, or an optional environmental rhetoric, but also an important visual representation, a visual production rooted in human imagination about animals.<sup>[13]</sup> The use of animal imagery in early Chinese films largely aligned with China’s social, political, and cultural trends at that time. “In the development process of contemporary Chinese films, the existence of animal/non-human characters has been instrumental rather than ontological for a considerable period of time.”<sup>[14]</sup> In early Chinese films, the use of animal imagery served as a tool to express the oppression endured by the people or to awaken people’s solidarity against foreign enemies. Compared to modern animal-themed films, it did not focus on observing animals themselves. It embodied a realistic style combining realistic and symbolic techniques. Early filmmakers used rich and colorful animal imagery to showcase the real life conditions of ordinary people in turmoil, depicting the tragic experiences and unequal status of the lower-class individuals. The sources of these animal imagery can be roughly divided into three categories: metaphors based on direct animal characteristics, symbolism through totemic symbols with ancient cultural memories, and animal images formed through people’s accumulated life experiences as society develops.

## 5. Conclusion

In his book “Psychotypes,” Jung posited that “the collective unconscious represents a psychological sedimentation of billions of social activities since the inception of human existence, or even the existence of organisms. It is transmitted to individuals through racial heredity.”<sup>[15]</sup> Reflecting on early Chinese films, the historical tradition of “writing with words” was inexorably applied to this emerging medium, with the collective unconscious forming the deep structure of the national spirit. Early filmmakers utilized animal imagery to convey the national spirit of “patriotism,” which was a cultural product that quickly aroused national cohesion. Therefore, for a nation-state to pursue unified integration and operation, it must rely on the shared imagination of national consciousness, and these various animal imagery rooted in traditional culture serves as a carrier for conveying national consciousness. The animal imagery in early Chinese films allows people to experience the historical representations of a special era. Through the combination and arrangement of these images, various character images are shaped, depicting various survival states. These rich and complex images of light and shadow interpret national interests, national life, and national soul, constituting vivid episodes of China’s past.

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