



# Art and Ethics in ATLA

*How a Nickelodeon animated series used cultural allusions, musical artistry, and architectural details to deliver a compelling narrative on civilization.*

BY NAVYA POTHAMSETTY | ILLUSTRATIONS BY XIAOTIAN WANG



In a 2013 lecture, novelist Neil Gaiman stressed the important role fiction plays in fostering children’s empathy. Like novels, animated stories can convey diverse perspectives, ethical challenges, and powerful messages. Most children’s cartoons don’t meet this lofty goal. However, critics and viewers of all ages have extensively praised one Nickelodeon show for doing so: *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (ATLA). The show takes place in an intricately designed fictional world where some people can manipulate or “bend” the four classic elements: earth, water, fire, and air. One person born every generation, the Avatar, can bend all four elements. The Avatar is tasked with maintaining peace between the Earth Kingdom, Water Tribes, Fire Nation, and Air Nomads. ATLA begins when Aang, the next Avatar, awakens amidst a Fire Nation quest for world domination. To create a complex world embroiled in conflict, creators Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino worked with a large team to leverage artistic and cultural influences from diverse, mostly non-Western sources. The result is a beautiful, thought-provoking show that viewers of all ages can appreciate and, importantly, learn from.

ATLA tackles some heavy topics, such as militarism and genocide, in a way that’s appropriate and understandable for children and interesting to adults. Cultural allusions, musical artistry, and architectural details help illustrate the profound loss accompanying imperialism’s consequences, such as an entire civilization’s destruction. For example, Fire Lord Ozai used excessive military force to destroy the Air Nomads, a peaceful community whose clothing and philosophy resembled Tibetan Buddhist monks. While the Fire Nation military was often accompanied by strong, bellicose, and foreboding music, the score accompanying Air Nomads ranged from playful and upbeat to slow and meditative — never sinister or aggressive.

In addition to visual and musical characterization, the ATLA team developed its fictional civilizations using large and small-scale design elements. While most shows’ architecture are simple backdrops, the ornate temples, palaces, and cities in ATLA often take center stage. Showcased with panoramic shots and majestic scores, many buildings bear a detailed resemblance to real-life locations. For example, the Western Air Temple was inspired by the ancient and ethereal Pagoda Forest in China’s Shaolin Temple.

In addition to building civilizations structurally, the ATLA creators developed them culturally by working with experts. One consultant, Dr. Siu-Leung Lee, was approached for his expertise in Chinese calligraphy. Lee took care to ensure that the writing viewers saw in ATLA was an accurate reflection of the characters’ literacy level and time period. The lettering on a grocery merchant’s sign would noticeably differ from inscriptions on bronze war vessels, he explains. Lee also mentioned that he created new characters for the show based on the four classical elements, used in ATLA’s temple inscriptions and ancient scrolls. The multidimensional, beautiful calligraphy inspired many viewers; some even created websites interpreting all the writing seen in the show. Creating such a rich culture precipitates viewers’ awe and appreciation for people they’ll never meet and places they’ll never visit — and a feeling of sincere loss upon their destruction during conflict.



ATLA's creative and detailed world-building style parallels its character development process. According to ATLA consultant Edwin Zane, including young, strong characters who survived trauma or live with a disability is part of what makes the show's world reflect ours. He cites the example of two such characters, Prince Zuko and Toph, both of whom are instrumental in the Avatar's quest to save the world. Zane describes Prince Zuko as his favorite example of how culture shapes our ethical frameworks. Zane explains that viewers who watch the first episode think he's a bad guy, but those who see Zuko's entire arc know he's a victim of his anger and a survivor of his father's abuse. Before banishing his son from the Fire Kingdom, Fire Lord Ozai burns and scars Zuko. The scar is often mentioned in Zuko's pivotal character development scenes, as it signifies two core aspects of his identity: banishment and dishonor. For example, when choosing between helping the Avatar or capturing him to gain Ozai's respect, Zuko remarks: "Lately, I've realized I'm free to determine my own destiny, even if I'll never be free of my mark." In a commentary episode, DiMartino explains that dramatic shots alternating Zuko's scarred and unscarred profiles were added in this scene to convey the Prince's dual nature, "keeping it ambiguous what [side] he was going to choose until that [last] moment." Thundering taiko drums punctuate the alternating profile shots, mimicking the pounding heartbeat of viewers at the edge of their seats, who hope that Zuko will finally make the choice to join Team Avatar.

Creative animation and directing also contributed to enhancing all the characters' portrayals—not just Zuko. The ATLA team used various strategies to highlight these individuals' different perspectives on the show. For example, Toph, an earthbender who is blind, "sees" with her feet. Instead of having her verbally explain her perceptive experience, ATLA creatively illustrates how Toph can seismically anticipate and counter-attack. The scene quiets down, loses color, and plays out in slow motion. Viewers see Toph sensing the attacker's movements, portrayed as glowing, white concentric circles depicting the shockwaves created by even the slightest movement. Toph's cool and collected demeanor juxtaposes with her opponent's anime-like exaggerated facial expressions. Zane mentions that he hopes characters like Toph and Zuko empower viewers, especially children, who navigate similar familial and accessibility challenges. "And for people who haven't had these experiences," he concludes, "I hope it helps them understand where others are coming from."

In addition to using its artistic arsenal to foster empathy, ATLA illustrates the importance of mindful and ethical action. While gratuitous violence is prevalent in many shows, ATLA uses it strategically. To defeat enemies, Aang and his friends often use clever tricks and schemes accompanied by lively music and playful animation. When they *do* fight, the scenes are elegantly choreographed numbers inspired by real-life martial arts. Furthermore, ATLA's protagonists are

often confronted with the moral implications of hurting or taking advantage of others, even as a means to an ethical end. For example, Aang is repeatedly told that killing Ozai, an action that conflicts with his moral principle of nonviolence, is the only way to end the war. An overwhelmed Aang escapes to a mysterious island, where he meditates and turns to previous Avatars' spirits for guidance. The spirits also advise Aang to ignore his moral compass and prioritize the greater good. Frustrated, Aang throws himself into a deeper meditation, and his journey transforms from being slightly supernatural to totally sublime. He discovers the island isn't an island at all: it's a lion-turtle, a larger-than-life majestic creature who has some wisdom to offer Aang. The lion-turtle's photo-realistic animation and mammoth scale make it seem more like a living temple than an animal. In a commentary episode, Konietzko explains that the lion-turtle was drawn enveloping the entire background to exude a significant and almost otherworldly quality. Unlike the past Avatars, the lion-turtle does not *tell* Aang what action to take, just that it is important to be true to himself. While most children, and adults, will not be burdened with the fate of the world – or of a country under siege – everyone will be faced with a tough decision. When we feel pressured to make a choice that might compromise our integrity or hurt others, learning to look inward, not externally, for a path of action that feels true to ourselves, is an invaluable lesson.

