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Feature

In Full Bloom: The Development of Contemporary Chinese Animation (1)

Fung Yuk-sung

Introduction

In the Chengxi district of Shanghai, couched between Jing'an Temple and Caojiadu, lies Wanhangu Road, which is around 2,000 metres in length, and used to be called Jisifei'er Road. A number of intellectuals of the Republican period – Hu Shi, Feng Ziyou, Zhang Zhiji – lived here. At the south end of the road is the famed Paramount, still well known today as the most glamorous nightclub of its era.

618 Wanhangu Road is a Western-style mansion designed like a cruise ship and was widely believed to be the property of the mayor of Shanghai during the Republic. Later it was combined with the mansion next door to the south, left behind by an Englishman, to form a film studio just over 10,000 square metres – the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. In the half-century or so, from the 1950s to the present day, this has been the largest studio for animation production in China, attracting the best people working in the industry. Although much has changed in the industry over the last 30 years since the Central Government's economic reforms, any study of its history and development will almost certainly focus on this mecca of Chinese animation film.

Dawn in the Northeast (1947–1950)

China began producing animations in the 1920s and 30s, but due to war and general social unrest, the industry lacked the ideal conditions to flourish. It was only after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power that the industry managed to develop independent systems of production, as well as animation works of a distinctive 'Chinese' character and style.

Lenin, who advocated the revolution of the proletariat, placed great emphasis on the power of the film medium to promote the revolution. The CCP inherited this belief and declared the arts as an important means to 'unite the people, educate the people, attack the enemy, destroy the enemy.' Animations formed a part of this arts strategy in the newly formed People's Republic of China, so the revolutionary message was genetically embedded in the medium from its birth.

The CCP reclaimed the northeast after the Sino-Japanese War. They took over the staff and facilities at the Manchukuo Film Association Limited (Man'ei), and established in 1945 the Northeast Film Company.

In 1946, the company's name was changed formally to the Northeast Film Studio, with its studios located in Xingshan. By then, there was already a cartoon department with nine members of staff. The first animated feature of New China was produced under the leadership of the Party Secretary of the studio, Chen Bo'er (leftist film actor from Shanghai in the 1930s who later went to Yan'an). This was *The Dream to be an Emperor* (1947), a puppet movie that satirised the Kuomintang. The studio also produced *Catch a Turtle in a Jar* (1948), which portrayed and celebrated the revolution.

The cartoon department was short of resources, with less than ten members of staff. One of its staff members was Fang Ming (or Mochinaga Tadahito), a Japanese employee from the studio's Man'ei days. Due to the war and other historical factors, Mr Fang became one of the pioneers of animation films in New China. He eventually returned to Japan in the early 1950s and created some of the first Japanese puppet films. He was devoted to advocating cultural exchange and dialogue between the two countries, and returned many times to visit his old friends in China. In the 1970s he was received with great respect and courtesy by Mao Zedong.

In 1949, the Northeast Film Studio moved to the city of Changchun, with a formal animation department established exclusively for filming animated features. The same year, a leftist comic book artist Te Wei was recruited from Hong Kong to head the department. Te Wei, who hailed from Zhongshan, Guangdong, was strongly influenced by leftist ideas and culture as a young man, and was determined to devote his comic book career to condemning social ills. During the Sino-Japanese War, he formed an anti-Japanese propaganda team with fellow comic book artists Ye Qianyu and Zhang Leping. Later, he founded the Human Art Club to further the mission of spreading the revolutionary message. The club consisted of some of the foremost contemporary artists in Hong Kong, including Huang Xinbo, Huang Miaozi, Ding Cong and Huang Yongyu. After being appointed as head of the animation department, Te Wei focused his efforts and attention on Chinese animation films for the rest of his artistic career. With his visionary leadership and ample talents, Te Wei made invaluable contributions to the field of Chinese animation. He led the industry into establishing what would become a distinctive 'Chinese' style of animation that is recognised worldwide. Indeed, Te Wei's position in the history of Chinese animation film is singular and irreplaceable.

During these years in the northeast, Te Wei's team included Jin Xi, member of a party cultural and arts troupe, as well as over 20 young people from the region, including Wang Shuchen, He Yumen, Duan Xiaoxuan, You Yong and Du Chunfu. They all devoted their lives to perfecting the art of Chinese animation.

Morning in Shanghai (1950–1956)

Shanghai was the home of Chinese film, as well as the birthplace of Chinese animation. Te Wei was drawn to the cultural environment and the potential talent pool in Shanghai, so in the early 1950s, he displayed great foresight in drafting a paper discussing the possibility of moving the animation department. On 3 February that year, the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Film issued a swift order saying that ‘moving the animation studio to Shanghai will be best for its future prospects.’

Te Wei led his team of 22 from the northeast to Shanghai at the end of March, and established the animation department at the Shanghai Film Studio. Thus, Chinese animation formally entered into one of its most important periods of development.

The state has always been a staunch supporter of the development of animation films. In the early 1950s, it issued the direction that animations should target children, and focus on educational subject matters. This has been a principle that Chinese animators have never strayed away from, despite over the years, the industry has been influenced and challenged by all sorts of different ideas and trends.

During this period, the department produced 22 animation films. Some of the studio’s early style can be seen in productions such as *Thank You, Kitty* (1950, directed by Fang Ming) and *The Fishing Kitty* (1952, directed by Te Wei), although it is obvious that in both works, the animators were still finding their way and voice. In 1956, the studio completed *The Conceited General*. Te Wei was the director and he stated very clearly that the work was to ‘explore the path to developing a national style.’ *The Conceited General* is a 30-minute feature film based on traditional Chinese idioms such as *lin zhen mo qiang* (sharpening one’s spear only just before a battle) and *jiao bing bi bai* (pride comes before a fall). The design of the characters’ personalities and body language are inspired by Beijing opera. The skill with which such Chinese elements are woven so seamlessly into the animation suggests that the studio was quickly reaching artistic maturity. The positive and educational message that the film delivers also carries relevance for audiences today. The first animated feature to embody the newly developed ‘national’ style, *The Conceited General* is an important landmark in the history of Chinese animation. From then on, the animators in Shanghai were ever more determined and confident in their mission to explore and create a distinct, national style.

The Magic Paintbrush (1955), a puppet film directed by Jin Xi, is also heavily influenced by traditional Chinese culture. It features philosophical insights and artistic inspiration unique to Chinese folktales, and its innovation earned the film five international awards within two years.

Why the Crow is Black (1955) is China’s first colour animation film, directed by

Qian Jiajun, a member of the older generation of the nation's animators who joined the fold in the 1940s. Qian's role in the technical development of Chinese animation is considerable. He contributed greatly to a number of areas, including special effects, colour experimentation, as well as the water-and-ink style in the 1960s.

Te Wei was a far-sighted and enterprising leader, and he was keen to recruit talented animators from all over the country. He persuaded the brothers Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan, the forefathers of Chinese cartoons, to leave Hong Kong and return to Shanghai. A great number of other artists and animators also joined the animation department, including Ma Guoliang (chief editor of *The Young Companion* magazine in the 1930s), Jin Jin (children's literature writer), Yu Zheguang (puppeteer), and Lei Yu (a graphic artist from Hong Kong). In 1950, the department welcomed some younger members of staff, including Tang Cheng, Hu Xionghua, Zhang Songlin and You Lei. At the same time, it was also hiring graduates from the various art schools and colleges, such as Xu Jingda (alias A Da), Yan Dingxian, Dai Tielang and Lin Wenxiao from the School of Animation at the Beijing Film Academy; Zhan Tongxuan and Qian Jiaxin from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts; Fei Mingxiu and Jing Xiayun from the Suzhou Fine Arts College; as well as other young talents from Hong Kong and Macau, and those who were returning to China from abroad in the 1950s, such as Wu Qiang, Wu Yingju, Zheng Shaoru, Chen Yuguang, Xu Lianhua and Zhang Qin (Shi Min). These people would form an essential part of the second generation of Chinese animators.

By the end of 1956, the animation department at Shanghai Film Studio had expanded from 22 members of staff to 208. It had reliable, independent systems of production in place, as well as a stable staff structure. These factors laid a strong foundation for further development of Chinese animation.

In Full Bloom (1957–1965)

As China's economy and infrastructure progressed, Mao Zedong proposed a new cultural policy: 'let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend.' As a result, the second half of the 1950s saw great advancement in the country's arts and culture scene.

In 1957, the Shanghai Film Studio refashioned itself as a production company, with studios specialising in feature films, translated foreign-language films and science documentaries, as well as departments responsible for technical support and distribution. On 1 April 1957, what was formerly the animation department of the Shanghai Film Studio re-established itself as the independent Shanghai Animation Film Studio. Effectively, it was the first ever film studio entirely devoted to animation production in the history of Chinese film. From then on, Shanghai became the

spiritual home for Chinese animation films. The industry entered a period of great productivity and growth.

The newly established Shanghai Animation Film Studio had workshops and soundstages focusing on three different strands: animations, puppet films (including silhouette animations) and paper cut-out animations. The film studio was well-equipped and fully staffed with personnel in screenplay creation, musical composition, cinematography, sound recording, film editing, production management and distribution. It was second only to the Soviet Union and the United States in terms of size and scale, surpassing even Japan.

Te Wei remained the head of the new film studio, assisted by two deputies, Wan Chaochen (in charge of the technical side of the business) and Lu Yihao (in charge of administrative matters). To Te Wei, his number one priority was not the technical equipment and facilities in the film studio, but building a strong team. During this time, young talents such as He Yumen, Wang Shuchen and Qian Yunda (who had returned to China from his studies in Eastern Europe) were taking up directorial duties. The film studio also recruited many young graduates from leading arts colleges and schools in China in the 1960s, such as Yan Shanchun, Qu Jianfang and Qin Yizhen from the northeast; Zhang Shiming, Ma Kexuan, Li Rongzhong and me from Hangzhou; Huang Wei, You Yang, Yue Huimin, Hu Yongkai and Wang Genfa from Beijing; as well as Ling Shu, Li Dongming and Wu Yunchu from various other schools. In the early 1960s, the Shanghai Film Academy ran two animation courses with the support of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. The courses trained many distinguished animators, including Xiong Nanqing, Chang Guangxi, Zhang Jingyuan, Zhu Kanglin and Wang Borong. They would become the core group of third-generation animators at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio.

This period saw the expansion of the film studio from 200 or so staff members to over 380. By this time, the creative team had established smooth, well-oiled technical systems and procedures, as well as its unique working rhythms and flow for producing animations. A total of 91 works were released, covering a wide range of topics and genres, and showcasing a great variety of visual styles. They were clearly the products of a studio at the height of its creative power.

The creative personnel at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio were greatly encouraged by the ‘hundred flowers’ policy. It was an inspirational and exciting time for the young animators. They formed a creative team to film *The Little Carp Jumps Over Dragon Gate* (1958) and *The Story in the Fresco Painting* (1959), works which reflected the spirit of the times; *Golden Dreams* (1963), a political fable satirising imperialism and capitalism; and the puppet film *Who Sings Best* (1958), etc.

With the support of the state and the Ministry of Culture, the Shanghai

Animation Film Studio formed a research group on water-and-ink animations, consisting mostly of young people. The group was headed by the young and talented A Da and Duan Xiaoxuan, under the guidance of the technical expert Qian Jiajun. After several months of tireless work, the group successfully developed the technical means to produce water-and-ink animations. It reported the good news to the state on 1 October 1960. The technology was subsequently classified as a state secret. It paved the way for the success of *Where is Mamma?*, co-directed by Tang Cheng, A Da and others, with Te Wei serving as consultant. The animation brought to life the animals and little creatures painted by Qi Baishi, one of the foremost contemporary Chinese painters. *Where is Mamma?* was a hit on the big screen, and was immensely popular with both the state leadership and the people. Not long after, in 1962, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio received financial support from the state to invest in a costly animation (200,000 RMB) which took two years to produce. *The Cowherd's Flute* was a landmark water-and-ink animation that impressed audiences worldwide. The director, Te Wei, based the story on the ink paintings of Li Keran, and created a graceful, elegant work of great subtlety, timeless in theme and beautiful in its use of poetry, visuals and music. The film fully deserves its reputation as a magnum opus and milestone of Chinese animation history.

Around this time, the full-length *Uproar in Heaven* (Parts I & II), directed by Wan Laiming, was released. It had been Wan's life's ambition to adapt the classic Chinese folktale, *Journey to the West*, as an animation for the big screen. Mr Wan has long been revered as the father of Chinese animation. He started developing animation technology with his twin brother Wan Guchan and fourth brother Wan Chaochen on an independent basis in the 1930s. In 1941, they made the first full-length cartoon in China, *The Princess with the Iron Fan*. However, due to political and social unrest, in early 1949 Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong, where they worked as art directors for films until 1955. They returned to Shanghai after receiving warm invitations from industry leaders in China and Te Wei, head of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, where they began afresh their careers as animators.

In *Uproar in Heaven*, director Wan Laiming and screenwriter Li Keruo have created an unforgettable Monkey King – a rebel against feudal traditions and values and an embodiment of the revolutionary spirit of the times. The art directors of the film were the brothers Zhang Guangyu and Zhang Zhengyu, contemporary master craftsmen. They took inspiration from a wide variety of sources, including ancient Chinese bronze sculptures, lacquerware, Dunhuang frescoes, traditional New Year pictures (*nianhua*), traditional temple architecture, as well as Indian and Persian art. These elements were fused together to create an impressive and elegant Chinese

national style that was at the same time both traditional and innovative. *Uproar in Heaven* was completed after four years of hard work from everyone at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. It received widespread acclaim both internationally and domestically, and is now regarded as one of the enduring classics of Chinese animation.

In 1958, director Wan Guchan and his colleagues Hu Jinqing, Shen Zuwei and Liu Fengzhan combined traditional Chinese shadow play and paper cutting with animation techniques to create a new genre: paper cut-out animations. The first paper cut-out animation was *Piggy Eats Watermelon* (1958); and in 1963, Wan Guchan directed yet another beautiful and poetic full-length paper cut-out film: *The Golden Conch*. The assistant director of the film was Qian Yunda, who would move on to creating other paper cut-out animations of very distinct styles: *A Silk Belt* (1962) and *Red Army Bridge* (1964).

In 1963, Jin Xi directed the first full-length puppet film. *Princess Peacock* was based on an epic poem from the Dai tribe, and its high production values reflected how the Shanghai Animation Film Studio had attained a great level of mastery over its puppetry techniques.

In a wave of enthusiasm and innovation, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio held the first Conference on Animation Film, in the attempt to review and study the conventions and characteristics of this unique art form. At the same time, film repertoires on Chinese animations were held in eight other cities, including Shanghai and Beijing. The response to the repertoires was overwhelmingly positive.

In 1962, a Chinese animation exhibition was held at the Hong Kong City Hall. The opening ceremony was attended by many famous stars and celebrities, such as Ng Cho-fan, Hsia Moon, Kung Chiu-hsia and May Fung Lam. It was considered to be a major cultural event in Hong Kong, and newspapers such as *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wah Kiu Yat Po* published detailed reports of the occasion.

From 1957 to 1966, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio made over 100 animation films, many of which won a great number of international awards. Although animation is often considered a minor film genre, it has brought much glory and honour to our country. The staff of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio were united by their sense of passion for the medium and for their mission to ‘explore the path to developing a national style.’ It was truly a golden age where a hundred different flowers were allowed to bloom and flourish.

Two Heroic Sisters of the Grasslands, co-directed by Qian Yunda and Tang Cheng, was completed in 1965. The film was based on a true story of two Mongolian sisters who bravely protected their herd of sheep through a stormy night. As a Chinese animation, it broke new ground in creating a high level of realism in its

characterisation. Audiences were deeply moved by the collectivist, self-sacrificing spirit of the protagonists. *Two Heroic Sisters* signified to Chinese animators the great potential of realism and non-fantastical genres. However, it was to be the last animation to be released before the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

Ten Years of Storm Clouds (1966–1976)

As we all know, between 1966 and 1976, the influence of the extreme left swept through China for a full decade. They were a disastrous ten years for the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, as well as other cultural and arts organisations in the country. Overnight, chaos descended and things were never the same again.

During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese animation, with its 17 years of illustrious history, was branded as a ‘poisonous weed’. Many animation classics were denounced. *The Conceited General* was condemned as a prelude to a large-scale attack on the party by the right wing; the Monkey King in *Uproar in Heaven* was seen as anti-CCP and anti-Mao Zedong; *The Cowherd’s Flute* was criticised as anti-socialist spiritual opium that was a waste of the people’s good money. Animators and creative staff who had devoted the past 17 years to Chinese animation were all denounced, and animators of the older generation – including Te Wei, Wan Laiming, Qian Jiajun – were imprisoned. Younger animators were sent down to farming villages by the sea to work in the fields.

During the 1960s, most Chinese animations were produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. However, many other animation workshops were set up during this period, such as the Changchun Film Studio, Beijing Science and Educational Film Studio, Shanghai Science and Educational Film Studio, August First Film Studio and Nanjing Film Studio. The animation units in these film studios and organisations were all criticised and denounced during the Cultural Revolution.

(Translated by Rachel Ng)

Part two of this essay will be published in the next issue (August 2014).

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Further reading:

Bao Jigui, ‘The Wan Brothers and the Cinema of Chinese Animation – A Tribute to Wan Laiming on the 100th Anniversary of His Birth’, *Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter*, Issues 12 & 13, May & August 2000.

<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/en/4-4-12.php>

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