

ANIMATION FILMS IN CHINA

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In beginning of 2011, Chinese animated movie, *The Dreams of Jinsha*, produced from Hangzhou, has been accepted for nominee to run for an Oscar award for the Best Animated Feature Film. It is very significant to Chinese animation industry since this is the first time in nation's history that an animated film has ever accepted by Academy™ to compete with those giant including Dreamworks' *Shrek Forever After* and Disney-Pixar's *Toy Story 3*. In May of 2009, the Fifth China *International Cartoon Festival* enticed 780,000 people from 38 different countries to the same city, a Chinese renowned animation metropolis Hangzhou. Among 1.3 billion Chinese, according to "2007-2008 Analysis and Investment Consulting report of China's cartoon industry", there are at least 50 million cartoon consumers.

However, the situation of the Chinese animation industry has not always been like that: although it was a Chinese who invented around 180 A. D. the first zoetrope– the so called “pipe which makes fantasies appear,” and although the first Chinese animated films were released in Shanghai in the 1920s with considerable success, the animation industry had difficulties in the last few years to assert itself on the domestic market: “Yet for all of the disruption of the Cultural Revolution, which plunged this country into severe political turmoil and international isolation from 1966 to 1976, China is not so much coming from way behind in the animation business as it is reviving a long vibrant tradition,” states Howard W. French in an article, published by *The New York Times* in 2004. In fact, since its very beginnings, the Chinese animation industry has to be seen in close connection to the political circumstances of the 20th century.

The hour of birth of animation movies in China was the year 1922: influenced by foreign animation movies shown in Shanghai, the brothers Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan began experimenting with animation techniques. They gained funding for these early “test phases” in doing some short cartoon advertisements for big companies. In 1926, they finally produced the first animation short in black and white called *Uproar in an Art Studio* running 10 to 12 minutes long. Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan considered the purpose of animation movies as rather to give thought-provoking impulses than to be pure entertainment. Above all, however, they wanted to set them apart from the American style and to create a unique Chinese trademark. In 1935, when Walt Disney was awarded the third prize at the *First Moscow International Film Festival* for his innovations – Disney had produced the first animation movie with sound in 1928 and the first in Technicolor in 1932 – the first Chinese

animation sound film was launched: *The Camel's dance*, created by Wan Laiming, Wan Guchan and Wan Chaochen, was based on Aesop's Fables and tells the story of a camel who is invited to a banquet given by a lion. During the festivities, a group of monkeys win applause for their dancing, which the camel also attempts but is booed off the stage. Six years later, despite very bad conditions due to both Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II, the Wan brothers, influenced by Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), produced in three years work (1938-1941) China's first animated feature film of notable length: the story of *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) is based on the famous Chinese folk tale *The Journey to the West*. Again, it was the Wan brother's wish to give their animation movie a typical Chinese touch. After three years work of 237 artists and 350,000 RMB of production costs, *Princess Iron Fan* was released in China's cinemas – against the background of political turmoil due to World War II and the Second Sino-Japanese war. The movie became Asia's first animated feature film and the 12th in the world. The story begins with the monk Tang Sanzang ("Tang-dynasty monk") and his three disciples passing the so-called Mountain of Flames on their way to the Buddhist holy land in the west. The only way to pass it is to find the magic palm fan of Princess Iron Fan, which can put out the fire. The Monkey King Sun Wukong, one of the monk's disciples, asserts to get the fan from the princess. After several exciting battles and fights, Sun Wukong finally overbears the enemies, erases the fire and the quadria continues the journey to the west.

The birth of animation movies coincidences with the crisis of modernity that engaged China after the May 4th movement 1919. According to Japanese Sinologist Takeuchi Yoshimi's theory, modernity of the oriental is not so much a process of spontaneity as a process of being forced, thus it could be regarded as a history of resistance to some extent. Therefore, to solve its crisis, China could not simply copy the Western system of values and ideologies. The resistance of the logic of Euro-American modernity is a very important aspect of Chinese revolution in the 20th century.

In the following years, the Wan brothers portrayed not so much topics from Chinese literature history but rather reflected ongoing sociopolitical circumstances and current topics – the Japanese invasion, opium, imperialism – in most of their animation movies. Some of the movies of that time can therefore even be considered as documentary-type: *The Dream of the Emperor* (1947), for example, written and directed by Chen Bo'er, China's 1st female animation director, used puppets in an exaggerated way to expose corruption of the Kuomintang party. The film was produced in the Northeast China Film Studio at Xingshan (now Chanchun) in Manchuria, which was established by the Communist Party in 1946. In

1950, the studio moved to Shanghai and became part of the Shanghai Film Studio. In 1957, the central government of China began sponsoring the studio that was now called Shanghai Animation Film Studio, making it the nation's first and official animation factory. Under the tenure of print cartoonist Te Wei, who came to the Changchun studio in 1949, moved with it to Shanghai and remained there as director until 1984, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio climbed to the peak of the animation world, exhibiting very high levels of aesthetics and experimentation, while also taking on national characteristics, employing Chinese artistic techniques, and adapting stories from China's literature, folklore and proverbs.

The following three decades were affected by an intensive quest for a Chinese model; Chinese filmmakers started henceforth to develop a unique Chinese style not only concerning the plot, but also concerning the form: experimentations with content, techniques and raw materials accelerated.

The central government's financial support of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, however, has to be seen as an extension of Mao Zedong's anti-rightist movement of the 1950s. In May 1956, seven years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Mao postulated: "Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend." Using this rhetorical device – he referred on the time of the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) – it was his intention to stress that although China was amidst a fight against the old, feudalist system and ideas that have been passed on, one should learn from history. Within this process, new art forms – like the animation movie industry – were strengthened and promoted by the party's central committee. Te Wei's cel animation *The Conceited General* (1957) plays an important role: while working on the movie, Te Wei proclaimed the slogan "Road to Minzu Style". The term "minzu" refers in this context to a Chinese ethnic respectively national style connected with socialist ideology. The official announcement of the "Road to the Minzu style" provoked the introduction of a new phrase in the Chinese animation industry: "meishu film" replaced henceforth the western-derived terms "cartoon" and "animated image" and it caused the disappearance of these terms in Chinese language for many decades.

Within the history of Chinese animation, the hand-drawn cel-animated movie *The Conceited General*, signifies a historical moment – not only because it was the first Chinese animation movie in Technicolor: produced in 1957, it marks the beginning of the systematic implementation of arts in politics, which means the combination of the emerging nationalism with animation aesthetics. The less than 30 minutes long film tells the story of a general who returns home after a victorious military campaign. With upraised breast, he proudly enters the imperial court and demonstrates his power in front of the royal suite. Convinced that the

enemies wouldn't dare to come back and meet their death, he begins enjoying his victory: he drinks and eats a lot, lives a careless life in glover, and lets himself being celebrated as the "greatest hero under heaven". Meanwhile, mice start nibbling on his weapons, to which he doesn't care any more. Due to his slothfulness, the general loses his power and becomes unable to use weapons. When suddenly a messenger delivers the news that the enemy has come back, he gets in panic and desperately tries to escape, but two guards deter him. His own arrogance made him unable to defend the people and led eventually to the decline of a whole nation.

The most famous example of this period is the paper-cut animation movie *Zhu Bajie Eats the Watermelon*, directed by Wang Guchan together with Chang Zhenghong and Hu Jingqing in 1958. It was Wang Guchan's idea to use the paper-cut method, which he took from traditional Chinese shadow plays and folk art. When Wang Guchan approached Shanghai Animation Film Studio's director Te Wei with the idea of making a paper-cut animation movie, he received full support. So early in 1957, Wang Guchan and his paper-cut animation experimental team set to work. Although their first test shot failed, they started another try. After one year work, their experiment finally succeeded and the first Chinese paper cut animation movie was successfully released in September 1958.

Though with time, the political circumstances of the late 1950s would prove to be a major setback to the Chinese animation film industry, as it was by now exploited as a tool for propaganda reasons only. Those who did not conform to these ideological requirements were humiliated – they either had to accept re-education or would be sent to prison. Most of the animators were not allowed to draw and forced to do labor work. In spite of these once again very awkward circumstances, the Wan brothers created an animation movie that should become not only the brother's most famous movie, but also one of the most influential films in all of Asia, animation or not: *Havoc in Heaven* (1961-1964) is – like *Princess Iron Fan* – based on the famous Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*. The film, which consists of two parts, makes strong use of Peking Opera motifs and received at that time even approval from the party. The movie made of a special Chinese flavor can first of all be identified in a strong influence of a traditional Chinese art form: Peking Opera music conducts the whole movie – especially during the various fight scenes; besides this, the Wan brothers also copied movements and gestures of their animated characters from this art form. According to Mary Ann Farquhar's study *Monks and Monkey: A Study of National Style in Chinese Animation* (1993), *Havoc in Heaven* marked the rise and maturity of Chineseness in the history of

Chinese animation. With their film, the Wan brothers gained international recognition and received numerous awards; it was the height of Chinese animation industry.

In the same year 1965, when both parts of *Havoc in Heaven* were shown for the first time together, however, Shanghai Animation Film Studio was closed by a government declaration – a decision that was already part of the Cultural Revolution. During the following decade, almost no animation movies were allowed to be shown anywhere in China. This means that Chinese animation industry was quasi inexistent until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, when Te Wei regained his position as head of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio; he remained there until 1984. In this period, China experienced another heyday in the animation movie sector. The movies produced in this post-Cultural Revolution period are until today considered among China's strongest achievements in this medium. A Da's animation movie *Three Monks* was one of the first of the genre. It shows the rebirth and continuation of "Chineseness" in these years. *Three Monks* was not only prize-awarded in China, where it won both the outstanding film award at China's Ministry of Culture and the Best animated film prize at the first Golden Rooster Awards in 1981, it also won four international awards, including a Silver Bear for Short Film at the 32nd Berlin Film Festival in 1982. Due to its universal language – the movie goes without any dialogues, but uses rather three different music instruments to bring out the different characters of the three personalities – it was also much appreciated by foreign audiences. The reason for avoiding dialogues in the movie was, however, not only to make it internationally understandable: it was also intended as an allegory for the lack of communication between neighbors during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1980s, China began a new movement of reform and opening police. In the following two decades, film industry had to find ways to meet market demand and to make productions profitable. The animation industry moved by then into new directions of commercialization – caused first of all by globalization and capitalism. In 1996, Shanghai Animation Film Studio spent 21 million RMB (about US \$2.6 million) and four years for producing the animation film *Lotus Lantern*. The production acquired over 150,000 animation cels and more than 2,000 painted backgrounds.

Since the opening door to the world and outsourcing opportunities coming in, younger animators get used to making simple TV cartoon programs or work for foreign company. Seldom can they spend enough time to create products in purely artistic way. Because of mismatch between the budgets and the amount of work needed to be done for quality works,

animators have to trade quality with speed of getting jobs done quicker, which means quality becomes the lower priority.

In the initiating digital age, numerous state-of-the-art computerized studios put their focus on visual effects through computer animation techniques. This, however, opened the market to independent animators. Animation of new media form was getting popular on the Internet. Internet domains such as chinanim.com (Chinese Animation Association) and www.chinacomic.com.cn (China Animation Network) offer channels uploading independent animations and acting in many ways for promotion of the industry.

Going into the international animation movie market, however, China's position moved far behind that of America and Japan. Although China with its 370 million children is considered one of the world's largest animation markets, the biggest amount of the revenue flows straight out of the country. *GoGo Top*, the first biweekly Chinese comics magazine, carried out a survey in 2004, showing that of Chinese youngsters' top 20 favorite cartoon characters, only one – the Monkey King – is Chinese. Studies show that 60 percent of the young Chinese prefer Japanese cartoons, 29 percent prefer Americans, and just 11 percent favor those made by Chinese mainland, Taiwan or Hong Kong animators. Cartoon films from overseas charm Chinese children – a fact that made parents worry about and to call for Chinese-originated animation movies. The TV show *The Legend of Nezha*, produced by CCTV in 2003, was a first successful step in the re-establishment of Chinese animation in the domestic market. The show combines traditional Chinese stories about the girl Nezha with several other famous mythological figures, whose myths were changed for the purpose of propagating values and morals for today's Chinese children to learn and follow.

Two years after *Nezha*, another Chinese TV show related Children all over China, and these stories about *Happy Sheep and Grey Wolf* provided the basis for the 2009 released animation movie *The Super Snail Adventure*. It broke the domestic box-office record for a Chinese animated film. The second movie *The Tiger Prowess* was launched with even more prosperity in 2010 in Chinese cinemas. The third one *The Moon Castle* is on the theater everywhere in China during the premier time of the Chinese Spring Festival and boosted the box-office. Like every single episode of the TV show, the three movies are mainly about the quarrel between sheep and wolves, especially between the two protagonists Happy Sheep and Grey Wolf. Novels on sheep and wolves are very popular in Chinese literature. The book "Wolf Totem" was named as one of the "Ten Best Chinese-language Books of 2004" by international newsweekly Asia Weekly, Recipient of the first Man Asian Literary Prize, in November 2007.

In 2005, the first 3D CGI movie from Shenzhen, *Thru the Moebius Strip* was debuted. Running for 87 minutes, it is the first 3D movie fully rendered in mainland China to premiere in the Cannes Film Festival. The film was financially backed by "GDC Entertainment" in Hong Kong and rendered in Shenzhen, China by the Institute of Digital Media Technology (IDMT). The project began with 200 animators in 2000 and grew to employ more than 400 by the end of production. Unlike traditional Chinese films, the movie was dubbed into English first. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in December 2005 and received good reviews.

In November 2006 an animation summit forum was held to announce China's top 10 most popular domestic cartoons as *Century Sonny*, *Tortoise Hanba's Stories*, *Black Cat Detective*, *Sky Eye*, *Lao Mountain Taoist*, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, *Wanderings of Sanmao*, *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*, *The Blue Mouse and the Big-Faced Cat* and *3000 Whys of Blue Cat*.

In the 1980s the TV series *Calabash Brothers* was one of the most popular animation in China. The TV series was even translated into 7 different languages. While it has been praised as much as *Havoc in Heaven* domestically, the film version was released in 2008 at a point when the Chinese animation industry was in a relatively downed state compared to the rest of the international community. The episodes were produced with a vast amount of paper-cut animations lead by Zhou Keqin who became the director of paper-cut animations in 1975.

The *Magic Aster* (Ma Lan Hua) again was made by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. It is adapted from an ancient Chinese fairy tale, with a hope that will achieve success over Disney's *Mulan*. The \$2.19 million cost of film released on June, 2009 by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, Xiamen Shangchen Science and Technology company and the Shanghai Chengtai investment management company. For Chinese-speaking viewers, the animation's star-loaded vocal seemed attractive: the voicing credits including Houston Rockets center NBA star Yao Ming, Taiwan supermodel-actress Lin Chiling, and Hong Kong actor-singer Leon Lai. Some 3D technology has been integrated into the movements, however, the figures generally look flat. The art direction favors a pastel color palette and draws on Chinese ink brush painting to create some pretty, dreamy natural scenery. Overall the oriental aesthetic is not distinctive, and makes one nostalgic for the stylishly abstract early classics made by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, like *Uproar in Heaven*.

Although the producers seem to pick up the age-old wish of the Wan brothers – to create an animation movie with a unique Chinese style, it reflects very well the current situation of the animation industry in China: what counts first and foremost are the box-office results, which means that marketing has become even more important than aesthetical

and artistic components. A wide range of derivative products continuously came out such as DVDs, network authorization, film books, toys, products, food and beverages etc.

China's animation industry finally draws international attention by sending an animation film *The Dreams of Jinsha* to attempt for a nominee of 83 Academy Animated Feature Film Awards in 2010. Using traditional hand-drawn cartoon animation techniques and returning to the core values of courage and love, new feature *The Dreams of Jinsha* is filled with the filmmaker's hope to impact young people in China and across the world. The film is about the selfish boy Xiao Long, who in a dream, travels back in time to 3,500-years-ago ancient China. In a place called Jinsha Kingdom, there is mysterious evil energy trying to destroy the kingdom, Xiao Long finds he has a natural super power and works together with Princess Jinsha and an elf to fight the dark energy and help Jinsha Kingdom to maintain peace. He also learns love and courage through the process. Choosing not to employ modern special effects or new animation technology, *The Dreams of Jinsha* is a purely hand-drawn film, the film took five years and 80 million yuan (\$11 million) to finish. Apart from using hand-drawings for the film, the team decided to use a large number of traditional Chinese landscapes as backdrops. It went to several international film festivals, including Cannes in May, 2010.

10 recommended Chinese animation films

1. *PRINCESS IRON FAN* (WAN Guchan and WAN Laiming, 1941)
2. *THE CONCEITED GENERAL* (TE Wei, 1957)
3. *ZHU BAJIE EATS THE WATERMELON* (WANG Guchan, CHANG Zhenghong, HU Jingqing, 1958)
4. *HAVOC IN HEAVEN* (WAN Guchan and WAN Laiming, 1961-1964)
5. *THREE MONKS* (A Da, 1980)
6. *LOTUS LANTERN* (CHANG Guangxi, 1999)
7. *THRU THE MOEBIUS STRIP* (Glenn CHAIKA, Kelvin LEE, 2005)
8. *CALABASH BROTHERS* (Keqin ZHOU, 2008)
9. *THE MAGIC ASTER* (YAO Guanghua, 2009)
10. *HAPPY SHEEP AND GREY WOLF* (ZHAO chongbang, 2009-2011)

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