

Journey to the East: the Re(Make) of Chinese Animation

by

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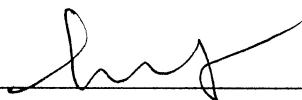
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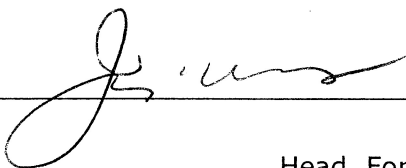
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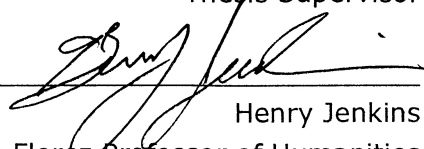
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## A Note on Translation and Transliteration

For the transliteration of Chinese names, I have generally followed the pinyin system and confirmed to the Chinese customary expression order of putting family names in front of given names. The exceptions are with the names of scholars who are already well known in the English language academia and published widely with their surnames put behind first names.

The transliteration of Chinese words and phrases also followed the pinyin system. In terms of translation, I have tried to use existent English translation where possible and supplied my own translation where there is no ready one.

For Chinese film titles, I also tried to use existent official translation when available, or referred to mainstream media or academic documentation for relatively official translation. But most Chinese films, especially the older ones, don't have an English title provided by the producers. Thus I provided my own translation.

All the passages quoted from Chinese sources were also translated by me.



# **Journey to the East: the (Re)Make of Chinese Animation**

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He Huang

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis attempts to look at how Chinese animation cinema has evolved over the years and how the Chinese nation is being constructed and contested through animation filmic texts and animation filmmaking practices as sites where national and transnational cultural and economic flows converge and contend. The unraveling of the intricate relations between animation cinema and nation is intended to shed light on the understanding of contemporary cultural, social and media scapes in China.

The Introduction addresses motivations and goals, critical questions, and over-riding theoretical framework and methodology. Chapter One explores the origin of the pursuit of a national animation style by investigating early Chinese animation cinema of the pre-reform period. It also serves as a backdrop against which the present discourse of revitalizing national animation cinema is being articulated. Chapter Two closely examines a commercial 3D feature-length animation production - *Thru the Moebius Strip*, as a case of “homemade” in the era of global capitalism, to look into modern nation-building both at the industry level and the filmic text level. Chapter Three closely examines another recent feature production, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*, which can be read as a new type of “national” film that inherited the heritages of the socialist cinema, but aims at revolutionizing the animation cinema. The Conclusion comes back to the core question of the national and the creative, which contemporary animation cinema centers on. I try to disentangle the relations between Chinese animation filmmaking and the state discourse of national, taking into account the broader political, institutional, economic and cultural situations.

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## Introduction

This thesis on Chinese animation stemmed from my contact with the Animation School of Beijing Film Academy. As a graduate research assistant at MIT working on the digital animation archive project<sup>1</sup> – collaboration between MIT and BFA, I have been able to get a glimpse of the intriguing animation filmmaking and animation education practices undertaken by a leading Chinese animation educational institution. This experience also served as a window through which I can take in a larger view of contemporary Chinese animation sector.

To write on Chinese animation is also to satisfy a personal nostalgia for the bygone Golden Ages<sup>2</sup> of Chinese animation. Born in the 1970s, a major source entertainment of my childhood was to go to the movie theater with my parents. As a reward for being good kids, we got to watch a short animated piece each time before the feature.

Conversations with the BFA animation students struck me with the fact that, born a decade later than me, these young people share with me the memories of watching exactly the same homemade animation films and television cartoons made in the early 1960s, late 70s and 80s as important rituals in their childhood. Watched in different contexts, though, these old animations have left similarly inerasable marks on different generations of Chinese. These memories, remembered for the sweetness they carry, are at the same time reinforced by the bitter fact that the glorious past of Chinese national animation cinema failed to carry itself over to the present, defeated and displaced by Disney cartoons and Japanese anime.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between the past and the present and the conflict between the national and the global, all packed in the memories of these old animations, make them more than just a list of films that are of personal significance. They also necessitate a critical study of contemporary Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Conceived and initiated by Prof. Jing Wang, head of MIT's Foreign Language & Literature Department, and Prof. Henry Jenkins, co-director of MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program, this animation digital archive project is first a showcase of the animation filmmaking and education practices at Beijing Film Academy, and second, a resource that aims to facilitate teaching and research in animation films.

<sup>2</sup> The first golden age of Chinese animation filmmaking is between 1956 and 1966; the second started in 1977 after the Cultural Revolution and ended in the late 1980s. These periods yielded a large number of short animation films and several feature length ones, which are interesting in the narratives, diversified in artistic styles and won many international awards.

<sup>3</sup> Japanese TV cartoon series *Astro Boy* was introduced to China in 1981, marking the beginning of the entry of foreign, mainly Japanese- and American-made, cartoons in the Chinese broadcast market.

animation through which inquiries about the past, the present and the future can be made and questions about the changing local mediascape and transnational cultural and economic conditions explored.

While English-language works such as those written by John A. Lent<sup>4</sup> and Giannalberto Bendazzi<sup>5</sup> have contributed in different degrees to the historiography of Chinese animation, and the article written by Mary Farquhar<sup>6</sup> has sufficiently explored the aesthetics of the “Chinese School of Animation”<sup>7</sup> in early Chinese animated works, little else has been written on contemporary animation films in China and on the broader social and cultural contexts within which these films emerge. The kind of attention Chinese live-action films have enjoyed in the academic sphere worldwide is not shared by animation films. The relatively small number of contemporary animation film productions and lack of access to such animated works account for such neglect in large part.

Similarly in Chinese scholarship, except for a few historiographic works such as Hui Yan and Yabin Suo’s *A History of Chinese Animation Film*<sup>8</sup> and sporadic academic articles by animation educators and industry practitioners, critical works systematically examining recent animation cinema are also scarce. This forms a contrast with the extended and heated debates in non-academic forums on the internet by fans about the “problems” with contemporary Chinese animation. In light of the above, I decided that by placing my gaze on the content,

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<sup>4</sup> John A. Lent, Professor of Communications at Temple University, Pennsylvania, has done a great deal of first hand historical, descriptive, and bibliographic research on animation and comic art in Asia. He has edited several books in that field, including *Animation in Asia and the Pacific* and *Illustrating Asia: Comics, Humor Magazines and Picture Books* and written many chapters on the early history of Chinese animation filmmaking. He is now actively engaged in the research of contemporary Chinese animation industry and is an advisory member at the Asian Animation and Comics Research Center at the Animation School of Communication University of China.

<sup>5</sup> Giannalberto Bendazzi, in his *Cartoons: one hundred years of cinema animation*, has devoted two of his chapters to animation in Asia and talked briefly about some Chinese works done in the Republican era and the pre-reform socialist era.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Farquhar, in “Monks and Monkey: A Study of ‘National Style’ in Chinese Animation” discussed how a national animation style related to genre, traditional arts and audience through close study of two animated films, *Havoc in Heaven* (1961-1964) and *Three Monks* (1980).

<sup>7</sup> From the 1960s through the 1980s, animation films produced by China were highly received in the international film arena for their distinctly non-Disney aesthetical and cultural implications. Thus, the term “Chinese School of Animation” was given by international animation organizations as an honor and recognition. It is generally considered as the adaptation of Chinese fairytales, myths and legends to animated forms using traditional art styles. See Lu Lu, “Duihua: Zhongguo Donghua Dianying de Kunhuo he Jietuo (Dialogue: the Quandary and Breakaway of Chinese Animation Film).” *Dianying Yishu* (Film Art). 1989, 11. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Yan, Hui and Yabin Suo. *Zhongguo Donghua Dianying Shi* (A History of Chinese Animation Film). Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe (China Film Press), 2005.

context and changes of Chinese animation films and probing into one specific aspect of the issues at stake regarding Chinese animation, I can make a unique contribution to this field of study. I feel especially lucky in this endeavor that MIT's collaboration with BFA Animation School has provided me access to ample filmic texts, educational materials and animation artists that are rarely known to a larger outside audience, as primary resources of study.

### Research Questions

What intrigues me most when I look into the nationwide impassioned movement of revitalizing the country's animation industry is the rhetoric used by policy makers, producers, critics and audiences. The most eye-catching word is "national," as appeared or implied in such phrases as "national style," "national industry," "homemade," etc. As China is striving hard to achieve modernization and the Chinese society is besieged in all possible ways by the waves of globalization, it is not hard to understand why a nationalist sentiment is on the high side. However, it is still worth examining the relationship between animation and nation by asking more nuanced questions. What does "national" exactly signify when it comes to animation? How and under what conditions is the "national" being produced and consumed in Chinese animation? How is the rhetoric of national actually related to the development of the nation's animation industry, if in any way? How clear is the line between the national and the foreign? Through the examination of both filmic texts and filmmaking practices in contemporary China, as sites where transnational networks of people, capital, technology and texts converge and interact, I attempt to disentangle the intricate relationship between Chinese animation cinema and the Chinese nation and to explore how the notion of nation is constructed and contested.

A good entry point to studying the discourse of Chinese animation cinema would be to look at a phenomenon in Chinese film exhibition, which exemplifies the problems faced by live action cinema and animation cinema alike. If you study the billboards hung at the ticket office of Chinese movie theaters or the movie sections of Chinese newspapers, you will find that films being announced are usually put into two major categories, *guochan*, meaning homemade and

*jinkou*, imported. These two terms are almost never omitted (only occasionally substituted by more geographically specific terms such as Hong Kong, French or South Korean) as indispensable modifiers in front of the word “film” when it is introduced to the audience; whereas other generic terms such as “drama,” “horror” or “comedy” are only casually inserted between “*guochan* film” or “*jinkou* film” as secondary and dispensable qualifiers. Indication of the geographic origin of the film can of course provide useful information for audiences to make their decisions. But the foreground of the dichotomy between *guochan* and *jinkou* in introducing films suggests that there is an implicit hierarchy between the market value of the two kinds of films besides their inherent cultural and aesthetic differences. What that hierarchy is and how it came into being is worth closer scrutiny.

The fear of *jinkou* films came with the official theatrical release of *The Fugitive* in 1994, which marked the return of Hollywood film after its many years’ disappearance from the Chinese screen.<sup>9</sup> This fear was then escalated by the government sanction of annual import quota of 10 mega films (*dapian*) from abroad through box-office-split deals in 1995<sup>10</sup> and climaxed with the box-office record setting release of *Titanic* in 1998.<sup>11</sup> It is out of this fear of Hollywood’s threat to the domestic film market that the dichotomy between homemade and imported films emerged and the discourse of a *minzu* (national) film industry rose.

Not entirely resembling the fate of live-action cinema, though, Chinese animation cinema took exactly the same terms “*guochan*” (homemade) and “*minzu*” (national) into the center of its discursive language, with a third one, “*yuanchuang*” (originally created or original creation), added recently. The usage of these terms as indispensable rhetoric is abundant first of all in the

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<sup>9</sup> “A report from July 1949 indicates that 130 American and British features were shown in Shanghai (roughly 63.7 per cent of the total exhibited) and their viewers were around 932,000 or 51.2 per cent of total attendance. By June 1950 audiences for Hollywood movies had dwindled to 270,000 or 14 per cent of total attendance.” In Yunzhi Du, *Zhonghua Minguo Dianying Shi* (A History of Cinema in the Republic of China). Taipei: Wenjianhui, 1998.

With the breakout of Korean War in June 1950, “Shanghai theaters began to suspend all screenings of US films in November 1950, and within a short time a nationwide boycott had terminated the long-time Hollywood domination of in China.” In Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 190.

<sup>10</sup> “After 1995, China Film (Export and Import corporation) was permitted to do box office splits on ten films a year. These ten films have taken over at least 60 percent of the local market, with off-record sources putting the figure as high as 85 percent. Conditions for China’s accession to the WTO in 2001 have only increased the pressure of imports on local producers, with the number of box-office-split imports being doubled to twenty films a year.” In Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar. *China on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> When *Titanic* was released in 1998 in China as one of the “ten big films”, it set an all-time box office record for the People’s Republic of US\$38.6 million, accounting for one fifth of that year’s total box-office revenue in China.

regulatory documents of the government departments. Realizing the severity of the loss of domestic animation audience to overseas productions<sup>12</sup> and the downfall of domestic animation production, Chinese cultural policy makers started to look for countermeasures since the mid 1990s. The first regulatory decree regarding television cartoons, *Notification of Strengthening Administration on the Importation and Broadcast of Television Cartoons*, was issued in 2000.<sup>13</sup> In this landmark document, the Chinese government, by agency of State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), stated for the first time that television broadcasters must acquire permits for the importation of “foreign” cartoons and that the broadcasting hours of such cartoons should not exceed 40% of the total hours of cartoon broadcast. In the ensuing years, a series of animation regulations were issued by SARFT, regarding questions ranging from the ban of imported cartoons lacking permits,<sup>14</sup> to the exclusion of imported cartoons during prime hours of TV broadcasting;<sup>15</sup> and from China-foreign co-production of TV cartoons,<sup>16</sup> to the promotion of the national animation industry as part of the country’s crucial tasks by aggregating the power of ten state departments.<sup>17</sup>

It has become almost impossible to talk about films without referring to one of the three

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<sup>12</sup> Audience polls often show that the majority of favorite cartoons and cartoon characters come from Japanese and other foreign productions. For example, a survey conducted by *Legal Evening Paper* showed that 68% of the audience’s favorite cartoons were Japanese. Quoted in “Foreign Cartoons Banned on Prime Time Broadcast, China-Foreign Coproduction Requires Permission.” *The Beijing News*. August 13, 2006. August 20, 2006  
<[http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2006-08/13/content\\_4954671.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2006-08/13/content_4954671.htm)>.

<sup>13</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. “*Guanyu jiaqiang donghuapian yinjin he bofang guanli de tongzhi*” (Notification of Strengthening Administration on the Importation and Broadcast of Television Cartoons). No. 139 (2000) Issued on March 20, 2000. Accessed May 5, 2007 <[http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2000/content\\_60451.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2000/content_60451.htm)>.

<sup>14</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. “*Guanyu jinzhi yi lanmu xingshi bochu jingwai donghuapian de jinji tongzhi*” (Emergent Notification of the Banning on Broadcasting Imported Cartoons in the Form of Introductory Programs on Television). Issued on September 13, 2005. Accessed May 5, 2007  
<<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/manage/publishfile/21/3294.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. “*Guanyu jinyibu guifan donghuapian bochu guanli de tongzhi*” (Notification of Further Administrating the Broadcasting of Imported Cartoons). Effective September 1, 2006. August 14, 2006  
<[http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2006-08/14/content\\_4958132.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2006-08/14/content_4958132.htm)>.

<sup>16</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. “*Zhongwai hezuo zhizuo dianshiju guanli guiding*” (Provisions on China-Foreign Joint Production of Television Series). SARFT Regulation No.41. Effective of October 21, 2004. Accessed May 5, 2007 <<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/manage/publishfile/20/2207.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> China. Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Information Technology, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Tax, State Administration of Industry and Business, State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, General Administration of Press and Publication. “*Guanyu tuidong woguo dongman chanye fazhan de ruogan yijian*” (Some Opinions on the Promotion of Our Animation and Comics Industry). State Council. No.32. (2006) Issued on April 25, 2006. Accessed May 5, 2007  
<[http://www.china-vr.com/vr\\_Print.asp?ArticleID=81](http://www.china-vr.com/vr_Print.asp?ArticleID=81)>.

above terms as the overarching frame of reference, either in praise of the promotion of national culture or spirit and the boosting of national film industry, or in lament of the loss of market ground to foreign movies. It is necessary to examine the three terms in more detail in order to unveil some of the underlying questions that connect animation cinema to the nation.

The three terms, *guochan*, *minzu* and *yuanchuang*, on first sight, all suggest a self-conscious differentiation of the self from the other, the national from the foreign, and are, in various degrees, associated with the common idea of China or Chinese, that is, the nation state or the nation people. Yet they need to be dissected to reveal the subtle distinctions in their connotations. “*Guochan*,” or homemade, is comprised of two words, “country” and “produce,” and literally means “produced in/by this country.” This term has been widely used in the past decades to describe all categories of made-in-China products, especially manufactured goods. It forms an antonymy with “*imported*” and stresses the intersection of products with trade and economic activities.

“*Minzu*,” or nation/national, probably has a longer history than the other two terms; but to be used in the sense of the English word “nation” as the closest Chinese equivalent only started around the turn of the twentieth century. *Minzu* in fact does not carry the implication of Western “nation” entirely. In the Chinese context, *minzu* is mainly used in two senses, the first is “race” or “ethnic groups” of different racial origins, as in the sentence “China has 56 *minzu*”; the second is “the nation people,” as used in the phrase “*zhonghua minzu* (the Chinese nation),” or “*minzu wenhua* (national cultural),” to indicate that there is a higher level of unity or common attributes among all the Chinese people. *Minzu* is used in the second sense when we talk about *minzu dianying* – national cinema.

“*Yuanchuang*” – “originally created” or “original creation,” is the newest among all the three terms, and became popular only in the past decade. This term is specifically associated with cultural products and is increasingly associated with internet culture where original and personal contents became prevalent with the proliferation of web 2.0. The first word in the phrase, “*yuan*,” which bears double reference to “origin” and “original,” is almost an exact



equivalence to the English word “original.” Resting mainly on the “*chuang*” part of the phrase – “create” or “creation,” *yuanchuang* stresses the creativity embedded in a cultural product to differentiate it from a copy or an appropriation of other’s idea. “*Yuanchuang*” can be used in the adjective sense as in phrases like “*yuanchuang wenxue* (original literature),” “*yuanchuang yinyue* (original music),” or “*yuanchuang dongman* (original animation and comics)”; or in its noun sense, such as a personal *yuanchuang*, national *yuanchuang*, or Chinese *yuanchuang*.

Placing their weight on different aspects of the production of cultural goods though, all three terms center on the notion of nation and the national. The frequent uses of these terms by contemporary filmmakers, critics, policy makers and audiences in the discussion of Chinese animation film and animation industry seems to indicate that there is a consensus among the state, the industry and the consumers that creating a Chinese “national” animation industry is the top concern of everyone. This raises the question why “national” is so central to the discourse of Chinese animation cinema and a set of questions derived from there.

- What does “national” exactly signify or what constitutes “nationalness” or “Chineseness”? In other words, what are the imaginations and realities behind such articulation of a national animation cinema/industry?
- How does a national animation cinema/industry relate to national identity?
- How and under what conditions is “nationalness” being produced and consumed in Chinese animation films?
- Is there really a clear line between the national and the foreign, the local and the global?
- Is there any disjuncture between the nationalness as articulated by the state, the filmmakers and the audience, and how does this impact on the animation films being made?

### Theoretical Framework

To answer these questions, we first need to sort out the meanings of a few key theoretical

concepts. That is, what does “Chinese” and “national” mean respectively in Chinese national animation cinema? In most circumstances, the word “Chinese” is being used without being problematized. “Chinese” is simply “people living in China” or “language spoken by people living in China,” and in its adjective sense, “of people living in China” or “of the language spoken by people living in China.” However, as Yingjin Zhang pointed out, “the very term ‘Chinese’ has been put under intense interrogation” recently in Chinese studies by film scholars and literature scholars at least. “Chinese” can be taken as an “ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political or territorial” marker.<sup>18</sup> This cannot be truer just to consider a personal challenge I encounter in describing my own identity to others when asked “where are you from?” As someone whose parents are from different geographic locations and diverse, or even contesting ethnic origins (namely, the minority Manchurian and the mainstream Han), who has moved across the country several times, often drawn to each regional culture with great amazement and who speaks mutually unintelligible dialects, I can fully appreciate the difficulty in pinning “Chinese” down to a set of clear-cut parameters. With many ethnical, cultural and linguistic differences coexisting under the umbrella term of “China,” “Chinese” is too heavily loaded with meanings and can be very ambiguous and contestable when used in the academic context. The unsettled political status of Taiwan in relation to mainland PRC, plus the recent return of former colonies, Hong Kong and Macao, which maintain their original capitalist economic systems, further complicated the question of “Chineseness.” Most Chinese film scholars chose to approach the studies of Chinese cinema by differentiating among the three “Chinas,” mainland PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong (Zhang, 2004; Lu, 1997; Berry and Farquhar, 2006). Knowing the inadequacy of such an approach, they call for the readers to “keep in mind all problematic or messiness – theoretical as well as geopolitical – surrounding ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’.”<sup>19</sup>

For this thesis, while keeping in mind the messiness surrounding the notion of “China” and “Chineseness,” I will focus my discussion on mainland China only. Neither do I want to exclude Taiwan and Hong Kong from the territorial and political boundaries of China; nor are they

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<sup>18</sup> Zhang, Yingjin. *Chinese National Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

irrelevant to my discussion of mainland China's animation cinema. But for the scale of my project, I can only concentrate on one geopolitical terrain, that is, mainland China, which has been exercising a relatively unified political economy throughout its domain since 1949. As far as animation and comics are concerned, Taiwan and Hong Kong are indeed connected with mainland China in quite sophisticated and intimate ways. For instance, a large number of Japanese anime and manga works entered the mainland market via Taiwan and Hong Kong. Those works have been given an extra layer of local cultural markers through translation and dubbing by Taiwan and Hong Kong distributors, which to a great extent shaped the perception and reception of Japanese anime and manga among mainland audiences. Moreover, the settlement of overseas animation processing business in China is largely a result of the secondary outsourcing attempts of Taiwan and Hong Kong animation studios. These studios work for US and European animation companies as first tier contractors; they then set up subsidiary processing companies in the mainland, where labor is even cheaper, and hand down the foreign contracts to them. The regional flows of commerce, capital and human resources have indeed made the three areas inseparable. However, while keeping the interconnections of the three Chinas in mind, the discussions of Chinese national animation cinema in this thesis will be situated solely in the specific economic, cultural and political terrain of mainland China, which I am more familiar with and which is more pertinent to my argument herein.

Leaving the muddy field of "Chineseness," we now enter another one, that of "nation" and "national." No theorist of nationalism has contributed to the studies of national cinema more than Benedict Anderson did with his theory of imagined community. He defines nation as "an imagined political community." "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>20</sup> Anderson's invention has contributed greatly to the understanding of nation by considering it as a historically and socially located construction. Two assumptions of Anderson's theory bear relevance to the study of cinema and

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 1991. 6.

nation. One is that nation is imagined through narratives and that “the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and aural,”<sup>21</sup> so that cinema plays an important role in the imagination of the nation.

The other is the assumption that “national identity is a radically novel form of consciousness”<sup>22</sup> that comes along with modernization. He attributed the possibility of people from diverse locales to “imagine” themselves as part of a single community to the spread of print media through the capitalist market – “[It is] print capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”<sup>23</sup> As pointed out by Duara, in privileging modern society as the only social form capable of generating political self-awareness, modernization theorists tend to ignore the power of the long history and complex civilizations such as that experienced by China.<sup>24</sup> It was not printing media, or at least not printing media in the sense of western modernization, that enabled Chinese people to develop a sharp sense of the Self and the Other. For example, ancient myths have provided a medium by which different groups could participate in a national culture even as they inscribed their own interpretation of the myth through either written or other forms of popular media. And it is with the cannons of the imperialist West that the Western idea of nation arrived at China and the old consciousness of national identity was challenged. Ever since then, there has been two contending strands of opinions among both Chinese scholarship and Western scholarship, one holds the Chinese nation as a relatively new development, the other sees the country as an ancient body that has evolved into present times. The split in the understanding of the Chinese nation will inform many of the challenges we face in the study of Chinese animation cinema and the nation.

One challenge we face when talking about nation in the Chinese context is to find an appropriate Chinese equivalent to the English word “nation,” which simply does not exist. One

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Duara, Prasenjit. “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation.” *Chinese Nationalism*. Ed. Jonathan Unger. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation,” 37.

interpretation can be *minzu* (nation-people), the other *guojia* (nation-state).<sup>25</sup> As explained earlier, the “*minzu*” adopted by contemporary discourse of Chinese animation cinema is being used generally in its second sense as nation-people, not the first sense, ethnic group. When used in this plural sense, *minzu*, just like *guojia*, suggests the idea of a “coherent unity” in a nation.<sup>26</sup> Seeing nation as a whole imagining itself to be the unified subject of history had informed many of the old “national cinema” studies. By this old model, writing about Chinese national cinema seems to be a rather linear and straightforward task:

Once, it might have been possible to produce a list of elements composing something called “traditional Chinese culture” or “Chinese national culture,” or even some characteristics constituting “Chineseness.” Then we could have tried to see how these things were “expressed” or “reflected” in Chinese cinema as a unified and coherent Chinese national identity with corresponding distinctly Chinese cinematic conventions. This would then constitute a “national cinema.”<sup>27</sup>

As international co-production of films is becoming a prevalent practice, the nationally based film industry is increasingly dependent on the export market and domestic audiences tend to draw upon foreign films in the construction of their own national identity,<sup>28</sup> “the national in Chinese cinema cannot be studied adequately using the old national cinema approach, which took the national for granted and as something known.”<sup>29</sup> Berry and Farquhar propose a new analytical framework that focuses on cinema and the national. This new approach abandons the old model of national cinema studies and “puts the problem of what the national is – how it is constructed, maintained, and challenged – at the center.”<sup>30</sup> Yingjin Zhang, when writing about Chinese national cinema, also suggests that instead of “being constantly apprehensive about the unsettling, multi-faceted Chineseness in Chinese national cinema, ... it is the ‘national’ as historically constructed, circulated and contested in Chinese cinema that demands our in-depth

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>26</sup> Berry, Chris and Mary Farquhar. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> Freiberg, Freda, “*China Nights* (Japan, 1940): The Sustaining Romance of Japan at War.” In John Witeclay Chambers II and David Culbert, eds., *World War II, Film, and History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 31-46.

<sup>29</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

investigation.”<sup>31</sup> Berry and Farquhar then take Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu’s insight of transforming national cinema study into transnational film studies<sup>32</sup> as a way into their own project of cinema and the national. As Lu pointed out, “Chinese national cinema can only be understood in its properly transnational context.”<sup>33</sup> The mechanism of filmmaking arrived in China as a foreign thing. From the very beginning of indigenous filmmaking practice, the Chinese were aware of the dominance of foreign films in the local market and consciously appropriated cinema as a weapon for resisting imperialism and Japanese invasion. Early years of the People Republic of China saw a process of “sinicization” of the cinema. While in recent years, China has become an active participant in the forces of globalization through coproduction and film exportation.

Sheldon Lu’s approach to Chinese national cinema also informs my study of Chinese animation cinema since animation cinema has gone through parallel developmental paths as live-action film did in Chinese film history. An acute consciousness of the real and imagined threat and suppression from foreign institutions felt by Chinese animation filmmakers is a key element that underlies their filmmaking practices throughout the course of Chinese cinema. This consciousness of the Other results in many distinct aesthetic, generic and narrative strategies of filmmaking that are adopted by Chinese animation filmmaker. It also stirred up a dynamic dialogism between the production and distribution practices of Chinese filmmakers and their foreign counterparts.

### Research Schema

In order to fulfill my goals of placing my animation studies in larger historical and theoretical frameworks of media studies and cultural studies, I intend to work with Ward’s concept of “discursivity” as the overriding methodological grid for my project. “Discursivity” as Ward defines it is a kind of relationship between things that are in dialogic relations with one another.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng, ed. *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997. 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ward, Paul. “Animation Studies, Disciplinarity, and Discursivity.” *Reconstruction: studies in contemporary culture*. Spring 2003: Vol. 3, No. 2. October 8, 2006 <<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/032/ward.htm>>. The term “discursivity” in the sense

Animation texts that are produced in China would operate as major “reference points” from which I set off my journey of exploring the broader political, economic, cultural, and media ecologies in contemporary China. These ecologies are shaping not only the animation film “texts”, but also the animation filmmaking practices.

Yet the first intricate relationship I have to address before I start talking about animation in a discursive manner is that between animation studies and film studies. It has been bitterly contended by many animation scholars that the art form of animation has always been treated unfairly by film theorists as an inferior, a childish and a “step-child” form as opposed to live action’s adult form.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, “animation studies” is hardly established as an academic discipline.<sup>36</sup> The reclamation of animation as an important and self-contained medium is based on the assumption that animation, equal to neither graphic art nor film art alone, has its own aesthetics and deserves its own critical language. For example, the language we use to write about live action films’ genre, shooting style, acting or editing, can hardly be applied to animations. My own experience of having a hard time finding a “taxonomy” that I can readily draw upon when working on the BFA animation archive has echoed with the claim that animation is distinctive as both an art form and an academic discipline.

For all that, my own approach to the study of Chinese animation seems to be a total disregard to the above claim since the very core concept I use in my discussion, “Chinese national animation cinema,” is itself adopted from the “Chinese national cinema” paradigms designed by Chinese film scholars such as Yingjin Zhang (2004) and Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006). Instead of struggling with the issue of “how animation co-exists/fights with/is subsumed by what they are, – rightly or wrongly – seen by many as its ‘parent’ discipline(s): Film/TV/Media etc,”<sup>37</sup> I choose to draw upon the Chinese film scholars’ treatment of their

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that Ward was using derives from Foucault (1981), but “the most immediately applicable use of the term” was found in Alvarado and Ferguson’s essay “The Curriculum, Media Studies and Discursivity.” In contrast to “discursivity” is what can be termed as “recursivity”, which describes the condition of being in dialogue with oneself. A “recursive” field tends to reflect more upon itself.

<sup>35</sup> Cholodenko, Alan. *The Illusion of Life*. Sydney: Power Publications, 1991.

<sup>36</sup> Pilling, Jayne, ed. *A Reader in Animation Studies*. John Libbey, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Ward, Paul. “Re: Animation Symposiums.” *Yahoo Animation Journal Group*. November 14, 2000. April 3, 2007  
<<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/animationjournal/message/920>>

subject for the propinquity of our intellectual goals. In his *Chinese National Cinema*, Yingjin Zhang takes a historical perspective to bring out the developments in the three Chinese cinemas and uses critical analysis to explore thematic and stylistic changes over time; he also pays great attention to industry research and market analysis to complement his quest for how China was projected in these pictures. Berry and Farquhar, on the other hand, in *China on Screen: cinema and nation*, explore how the idea of Chinese nation is being constructed and contested by movies from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Chinese diaspora from a cultural analysis perspective. Unable to achieve the same scope and depth as their studies have shown, though, I do find their formal, historical and institutional approaches very useful and pertinent to my own project. The bulk of my analysis will be centered on specific animation film texts in relation to their narratives, aesthetics and production practices. Formal analysis can help reveal what cultural values and artistic traditions are being celebrated in animation films; and institutional research will lead us to the social and economic contexts from which these films originated. Production practices are especially interesting to me because I see production as a dynamic site where capital, labor, technology, ownership and policy converge to forge a “national animation industry” and complex transnational interactions take place.

The clarity of my subsequent discussions will benefit from distinguishing among the three “animations,” animation, animation film/cinema and animation industry. “Animation” in the sense of an object as used here finds two relevant definitions in *Webster* dictionary:

a: a motion picture made by photographing successive positions or poses of puppets and other inanimate objects so that projection of the film produces a picture in which the puppets or other objects seem to move in a lifelike and realistic manner; b: aka Animated Cartoon, a series of drawings each of which shows a successive position of a figure or other object, the drawings being photographed on film or made directly on film so the projection of the film produces a picture in which the objects drawn seem to move in a lifelike and realistic manner.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “animation.” *Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*. Merriam-Webster, 2002. March 5, 2007 <<http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com>>.



No matter how hard *Webster* tries to modernize its definition of animation,<sup>39</sup> it still cannot avoid being ridiculed by animation artists and scholars that their folks should “attend an animation festival.”<sup>40</sup> It is true that with the advent and development of digital technology, what animation is has to be rethought in the contexts of ever-changing technology, which means that there might not be a fixed technical definition at all. No wonder ASIFA decided to revise its definition of animation to “anything that is ‘not live-action’”<sup>41</sup> in its 1980 statute. Many others tended to define animation by capturing its essence as a unique expressive mode. The best-known attempt was made by Canadian animator Norman McLaren, who said:

Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn. What happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame.<sup>42</sup>

Here McLaren wants to distance animation from fine arts or graphic arts by emphasizing the creation of movement through animation and that animation exists not for the drawings, but for the changes between the drawings. This definition indeed grasps the central attribute of animation which separates it from other visual expressive modes such as live action films, where the illusion of movement is created by reproducing movements happened in reality; whereas animation creates the illusion of life and movement by exerting human imagination and manipulation on inanimate things. For the purpose of analysis in this thesis, I will summarize animation as **a distinct form of visual expression that gives life and movement to inanimate forms and objects**. Here “life and movement” are used in a broad sense, referring not only to giving human-like life to inanimate, non-human objects, but also to giving motion to any material forms that are originally static, such as lines, shapes, and clay figures.

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<sup>39</sup> The definition I quoted here is different from the one, also quoted from Webster, by Philip Kelly Denslow in “What is animation and who needs to know?” In Pilling, ed., *A Reader in Animation Studies*, 1-15.

<sup>40</sup> Denslow, Philip. “What is animation and who needs to know?” In Pilling, *A Reader in Animation Studies*, 1-15.

<sup>41</sup> ASIFA is the acronym of French name of the International Association of Animation Artists. The earlier introduction to its statute stated that animation cinema crated events through different instruments which differed from actual reproduction as with live action cinema. quoted from Bendazzi, Giannalberto. *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*. London: John Libbey, 1994. Foreword.

<sup>42</sup> Solomon, Charles. ed. *The Art of the Animated Image: An Anthology*. Los Angeles: AFI, 1987. 11. Quoted from Well, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. 10.

Animation can exist autonomously as a form of art or technology. Only when the animation technique is combined with other artistic elements such as narrative, character, shots, camera movement, editing and sound, does an animated film come into being. It is necessary to differentiate animation from animation film for analytical reasons since “animation film” studies can be approached either from an “animation” perspective (to study the aesthetical and philosophical questions about animation as a medium) or a “film” perspective (in the way general film studies is carried out) with different critical languages and theoretical frameworks being called upon. However, I am not suggesting that the “animation” side of an animation film can be clearly split apart from the “film” side and tossed away even though I am more inclined to a “film” perspective borrowed from the Chinese national cinema paradigm. As a matter of fact, I find the two sides constantly interact with and inform each other throughout the course of my study. The question is how can I, then, foreground the medium of animation as a distinct expressive mode than live-action film, or in other words, negotiate between the specificities of animation with the discursivity of my research approach in this thesis project. There are two specific aspects about animation that will separate my discussion of “animation film and the nation” from that of “film and the nation.” First of all, as seen in the definitions of animation, what lie in the core of this expressive mode are the notions of imagination and manipulation. To give life and movement to inanimate forms and objects, you have to put in your imagination because you are creating things rather than duplicating existing things or reproducing action like live action film does. In this process of imagination you can exert as much agency as you want. This means animation as a distinct expressive mode can be used to tell quite different stories than live action films do. Second, animation is an art form that gets increasingly linked to technology nowadays with the application of computer techniques to animation filmmaking. Thus, how well a country’s animation film can appear becomes bundled with its technological or modernization level, to a certain extent. The advancement of its computer science in the U.S. (together with its highly developed filmmaking professions) is well manifested by the dominance of Hollywood 3D animation films in the global market. Thus, the connection that animation film has with

technology or modernization, explains partly why the rejuvenation of the national animation industry becomes such a critical task for the Chinese state.

It also needs to differentiate among different animated forms. Animated TV show, for example, is considered a lesser form of animation by animation scholars, for television “distorts the formal values of works made for the big screen”<sup>43</sup> with the delivery of fine lines and colors being greatly reduced. Moreover, the television market represents a different exhibition and distribution system than film and hence a different creative process, therefore, animated television cartoons do not “provide the economic conditions necessary to encourage a careful creative process,” and “are most appropriately discussed within a framework of the history and theory of television.” I am totally in agreement with Bendazzi in his efforts to differentiate the two forms of animation. However, whereas most of the major texts I’m going to study in this thesis are either short or feature length films made for theater display, other texts I refer to may come from an array of different formats such as TV series, since they together constitute the “national animation industry” which is a major focus of this thesis. In other words, I address animation here as an overriding mode of visual expression while paying due respect to the distinctiveness of the medium on different delivery platforms. I consider this occasional traverse across different media formats necessary when what I’m trying to reveal is the social and historical contexts within which this media technology operates. The idea of “animation industry” is, to certain extent, self-contradictory in that the word “industry” indicates a highly organized assembly-line-type of production mode whereas “animation” is bound to technical innovations and idiosyncratic creativity, as the Canadian and European animation practices have shown.<sup>44</sup> How to grapple with this inner contradiction of “animation industry”, especially with the notion of “creativity,” will become a major task for contemporary Chinese animation filmmakers.

To sum up, “animation,” “animation film,” and “animation industry” will be treated as

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<sup>43</sup> Bendazzi, Giannalberto. *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*. London: John Libbey, 1994. Foreword.

<sup>44</sup> In Canada, the National Film Board was established in 1939 to give strong government support to the creation of distinctively Canadian works and independent explorations. Throughout the years, this kind of exploration has been carried on and resulted in the assorted and unusual animation techniques in the many boutique animation companies. Independent animators sprung up through out Canada. This government support has continued to propel Canada's reputation of interesting and innovative animation techniques.

cascading fields of inquires in this thesis. My examination of animation examples is aimed at illuminating the broader debates regarding Chinese animation cinema and Chinese animation industry.

### Chapter Breakdown

My first chapter aims to give a historical review of the Chinese animation cinema. It concentrates on the pre-reform era in socialist China beginning from the early years of the People's Republic of China when a national animation school started to take shape, to the early 1990s, when original animation content production almost ceased due to internal and external forces. A national animation style is considered to be one that adapts traditional fairytales, myths and legends to animation using traditional art styles. It was pursued out of the concern that the country's animation cinema was overshadowed by Russian influence and lost its own identity on the international stage. I try to delineate the Chineseness of early Chinese animation films by focusing on five aspects of the art work, namely, art form, genre, aesthetics, theme and music, by relying mainly on the film texts of *Havoc in Heaven*, *Three Monks* and *Feelings from Mountain and Water*. Towards the end of this chapter I will touch upon the 1980s and the early 1990s when domestic animation production was in decline and intellectual debate on tradition and modernity on the rise.

Chapter 2 closely examines a recent computer animated feature film, *Thru the Moebius Strip*.<sup>45</sup> Made in collaboration with an international team and claiming to be the first made-in-China 3D blockbuster, *Moebius* serves as a good case of "homemade" to look into nation-building both at the industry level and the filmic text level in the era of globalization. With presumably Western story and Western characters and an allegedly Western crew that worked on it, *Moebius* challenges the notion of "homemade." It vividly exemplifies the complicated relations between domestic cultural production and international capitalism.

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<sup>45</sup> Directed by Glenn Chaika. Produced by Global Digital Creation Holdings (GDC) and its affiliated studio, the Institute of Digital Media Technology Ltd (IDMT). 2006.

In Chapter 3, another recent Chinese animation feature, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*,<sup>46</sup> made by faculty and students from Beijing Film Academy's Animation School, shows how a new "national" style is being explored and tested. The film tells the story of indigenous Chinese people's resistance to the Japanese invasion in the 1940s. Readapted from a 1960s "child hero" live action film, *Zhang Ga* is part of the movement of "red classic" revival. It exemplifies a continuation of the tradition of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism that early Chinese socialist cinema had engaged in. Yet a closer scrutiny of the dialogues it has with past and contemporary Chinese animation works, as well as with imported ones, will reveal to us a hidden ambition to revolutionize the animation medium.

With one gazing on the past and the Self and the other on the future and the Other, *Zhang Ga* and *Moebius* form an interesting contrast with one another and provide a gateway through which we can look into the question of animation and nation at a deeper level. In this chapter I will return to the meta question of why "national" is kept at the center of the Chinese discourse of animation industry. By adopting the discursive and the symbolic paradigm of Duara, I further explore the intersection of the national and the creative in Chinese animation filmmaking. This exploration will show both a discrepancy and a blurring between the state discourse of creativity and the non-state discourse of creativity.

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<sup>46</sup> Directed by Sun Lijun. Produced by Beijing Youth Film Studio. 2007.

## Chapter 1: Early Exploration of a National Animation Style

It is generally believed that Chinese cinema started to get the attention and recognition from Western audiences and Western academia with the works of the Fifth Generation directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige.<sup>47</sup> Now the Sixth Generation<sup>48</sup> is building their international fame by gathering awards from international film festivals as their preceding generation once did.<sup>49</sup> However, long before all these honors came by, Chinese animated films had enchanted the world with their refreshing styles and stories. From 1956 to 1999, 47 Chinese animated films snatched 72 awards from international film festivals.<sup>50</sup> The success of these films is attributed by many critics to their distinct “Chineseness.”<sup>51</sup> As Chinese film commentator Lu Lu said, “The great success of Chinese animation rests primarily on its exploration of nationality.”<sup>52</sup> A special term was bestowed on the aesthetic achievements of Chinese animation artists – “Chinese School of Animation (*Zhongguo donghua xuepai*),” as an acknowledgment of their distinctly non-Disney aesthetics.<sup>53</sup>

This chapter aims to reveal how the exploration of a Chinese style in animation originated and what characteristics can be identified from such a style – how the older generation animation artists approached the representation of nation through their works – by looking at five aspects of Chineseness in early animations. The discussion will be primarily focused on the

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<sup>47</sup> The term “Fifth Generation” was bestowed on a group of filmmakers, led by Beijing Film Academy Class of ’78 graduates, who began to rise in Chinese cinema in the mid and late 1980s. Recovering from the pains of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), this new generation of filmmakers chose to use their artwork as a tool of cultural reflection and historical criticism. Notable figures of the Fifth Generation directors are Zhang Yimou who directed *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Hero* (2002), and Chen Kaige who made *Yellow Earth* (1984), *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), to mention a few.

<sup>48</sup> The Sixth Generation refers to a younger generation of filmmakers some of whom came from BFA Class of ’89 or ’91. Unlike their previous generation, the Sixth Generation started from an edgy underground mode of production and cast their cameras on the lives of urban underdogs with a more realistic style of representation. Recent years have seen a rise of the Sixth Generation from their illegitimate status to a more tolerated existence by the authority.

<sup>49</sup> Jia Zhangke, with his *Still Life* (2006), won the Golden Lion Award for best movie at the 63<sup>rd</sup> Venice Film Festival. Wang Quan’an, took the Golden Bear Award for best film at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival with “Tuya’s Marriage”(2006).

<sup>50</sup> With only one award won in 1999, all the other awards were won before 1993. See Appendix II: International Awards Won by Chinese Animation Films, in Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*.

<sup>51</sup> Farquhar, “Monks and Monkey,” 5.

<sup>52</sup> Lu, Lu. “Duihua: Zhongguo Donghua Dianying de Kunhuo he Jietuo (Dialogue: the Quandary and Breakaway of Chinese Animation Film).” *Dianying Yishu* (Film Art). 1989.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* 34. From the 1960s through the 1980s, animation films produced by China and the former Yugoslavia were highly received in the international film arena for their distinctly non-Disney aesthetic and cultural implications. Thus, they were given the title “school”, - the Chinese School of Animation and the Zagreb School of Animation - by international animation organizations as an honor and recognition.

pre-reform socialist period and the early years of economic reform, namely, the period spanning from 1949 through the early 1990s.

In present day China, the cry for a national animation industry (along with cries for a national cinema, a national game industry, and so on) is loud. It is apparently a response to the intensifying globalization process, which has taken over the domestic market and taken away the producers, both virtually in terms of Chinese film directors trying to adapt to Western audiences' taste to promote exportation and physically in terms of talent drain to outsourcing jobs. Although globalization is relatively a new thing, the search for a national animation cinema is not. The history of Chinese animation can be described as recurring cycles of subordinating to and then breaking away (or attempting so) from foreign influence since the very emergence of this trade in China in the early twentieth century.

Chinese animation cinema owes its early glory to the dedicated brothers of the Wan family. Inspired by the screenings of American cartoons in Shanghai, the Wan brothers, Laiming (1899-1997), Guchan (1899-1995), Chaochen (1906-1992) and Dihuan (1907-), started experimenting with animation techniques in the 1920s.<sup>54</sup> Filmmaking, as a technique originated in Europe and standardized by Hollywood, when first introduced to China in the late nineteenth century, was a foreign thing,<sup>55</sup> which Chinese filmmakers learned by imitating. The Wan brothers' first work, *Uproar in an Art Studio* (1926) was reminiscent of Fleischer's *Out of the Inkwell* series,<sup>56</sup> featuring a character coming to life out of the artist's canvas. For more than ten years, the Wan brothers continued their practice by learning from Disney, German and Soviet traditions. But they also expressed an aspiration to develop an animation style that was uniquely Chinese. They stated in 1936 that "in a Chinese film, one ought to have a story based purely on real Chinese traditions and stories, consistent with our sensibility and sense of

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<sup>54</sup> My knowledge of the early history of Chinese animation is indebted to the following works.

Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*.

David Ehrlich and Tianyi Jin, "Animation in China." In John A. Lent, ed., *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2001.

Bendazzi, *One hundred years*.

<sup>55</sup> Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Max Fleischer's *Out of the Inkwell* (1920) series depict a clown who became alive out of the artist's drawing and had lively movement on the screen. See Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: the Animated Film 1898-1928*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982. 167-177.

humour.”<sup>57</sup> Partly as a response to Disney’s feature length animation *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and partly as an allusion to the Japanese invasion of China, the Wan brothers made their first feature animation film *Princess Iron Fan*<sup>58</sup> in 1941. The film retold part of the popular Chinese folk tale *Journey to the West*, specifically the fighting episodes between Monkey King and Princess Iron Fan who stood in the way of Monkey King and his master’s journey to the west. Both Chinese literary and art traditions, such as Chinese operatic mode, were employed in this film. So exquisitely made and so different from Disney productions, the film won wide acclaim in Asia and inspired the then 16-year-old Tezuka Osamu to become a comic artist, who was later praised as the “father of Japanese anime and manga.”<sup>59</sup>

### The Origination of the Chinese School of Animation

Upon the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, caricaturist Te Wei (1915-), a leading figure in the forming of Chinese national animation style, started an animation group at Changchun Film Studio which later moved to Shanghai and became the Shanghai Art Film Studio<sup>60</sup> in 1957. The Wan brothers also returned to mainland China from exile when the war was over and joined the studio. Chinese animation entered the era of socialist production. It walked down a path carved out of the Soviet model, until its course changed in 1956. At the 8th Venice International Children’s Film Festival, the Chinese animation short film “*Why Are Crows Black*” won an award. Instead of feeling proud and excited, the creators – artists from Shanghai Film Studio’s Animation Section – felt upset because the film was mistaken for a Russian

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<sup>57</sup> Quiquemelle, Marie-Claire. “The Wan Brothers and Sixty Years of Animated Film in China.” *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*. Ed. Chris Berry. Worcester: Trinity Press, 1991. 178.

<sup>58</sup> Ninety seven hundred feet in length and 80 minutes in running time, the film took more than 200 artists and 16 months to finish. It was produced by Xinhua Film and was introduced to Japan and Southeast Asian countries where the audiences were immensely fascinated.

<sup>59</sup> Tezuka Osamu, best known as the creator of *Astro Boy* and *Kimba the White Lion*, was accredited as the Father/God of Manga/Anime for his pioneering contribution to Japanese manga and animation industry. After viewing the film *Princess Iron Fan*, Tezuka Osamu, the then 16-year-old medical student, decided to pursue a life of a comic/animation artist. 40 years later after the release of *Princess Iron Fan*, Tezuka Osamu visited China and called on Wan Laiming, director of the film. They co-authored a comic drawing featuring Astro Boy and Monkey King (protagonist in *Princess Iron Fan*) meeting each other. See Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*, 20-21.

<sup>60</sup> The official translation for the name is now “Shanghai Animation Film Studio”, as shown on its homepage <<http://www.ani-sh.com/>>. However, I prefer to stick to the old translation “Shanghai Art Film Studio”, which better conveys the meaning of “*meishu*” in its Chinese name “*Shanghai Meishu Dianying Zhipianchang*”, meaning “fine arts”. In the early days of Chinese animation cinema, animation film was considered “art/fine art”, rather than “animated”. And this perception had informed the early animation artists’ approach to animation.



production. Incited by this, Te Wei, head of the Studio, hung a slogan on the studio wall that called upon his colleagues to explore “a national way” of animation.<sup>61</sup>

From 1956 on, a series of experiments started in exploring possible ways of nationalizing Chinese animation. The years between 1956 and 1966 before the Cultural Revolution saw the first “golden age” of Chinese animation. The second golden age came between 1977 and early 1990s after the ten-year Cultural Revolution, when the long-oppressed creative energy of the animation artists eventually found an outlet.<sup>62</sup> Both witnessed a proliferation of animation shorts<sup>63</sup> of different styles. A common feature of these works is the “adaptation of fairytales, myths and legends to animation using traditional art styles.”<sup>64</sup> Mary Farquhar, in “Monks and Monkey: A Study of ‘National Style’ in Chinese Animation” (1993), has given a well documented account of the Chinese “national style” through the reading of *Havoc in Heaven (Danao Tiangong*, two parts, 1961 and 1964)<sup>65</sup> and *Three Monks (Sange Heshang*, 1980)<sup>66</sup>. Her main argument is that the emphasis on a singular “national style” (which to a large extent is equivalent to “Chinese culture”) by many critics tends to overlook the ontology and the modern side of the animated form of film and “dismiss(ed) the contemporary audience as a fundamental determinant of film content and form.”<sup>67</sup> I want, along the lines of her formal analysis and borrowing from Shinobu Price’s summary on the Japaneseness of Japanese anime,<sup>68</sup> to give a fuller account of “Chineseness” through the reading of some early Chinese animated films. By doing so, I intend to familiarize my readers with the cultural traditions celebrated by the early

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<sup>61</sup> Lent, John and Ying Xu. “Te Wei and Chinese Animation: Inseparable, Incomparable.” *Animation World Magazine*. March 15, 2002. December 10, 2005. <[http://mag.awn.com/index.php?type=cat&category1=People&article\\_no=1340](http://mag.awn.com/index.php?type=cat&category1=People&article_no=1340)>.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., and Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*, Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.

<sup>63</sup> The annual output of animation films was not that huge in terms of running time, ranging from 200 to 300 minutes, but the vigor of productivity was remarkable, with nearly a hundred short films made between 1956 to 1966 and nearly two hundred pieces made between 1977 and 1990 (including animated cartoon, puppet, clay, paper cut animation). See Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*, Chapter 2, 27-90; Chapter 5, 101-124; Appendix 3, A list of Chinese Animated Films (1926-2005).

<sup>64</sup> Farquhar, “Monks and Monkey,” 5.

<sup>65</sup> Script by Li Keruo and Wan Laiming, directed by Wan Laiming and Tang Cheng, art design by Zhang Guangyu and Zhang Zhengyu, the film is a production of Shanghai Art Film Studio. With a total running time of 120 minutes, the first half of the film (50 minutes) was completed in 1961 and the second (70 minutes) in 1964. The film is sometimes translated as “*Uproar in Heaven*”.

<sup>66</sup> Directed by A Da, Shanghai Art Film Studio. 1980.

<sup>67</sup> Farquhar, “Monks and Monkey,” 5.

<sup>68</sup> Price, Shinobu. “Cartoons from another Planet: Japanese Animation as Cross-Cultural Communication.” *The Journal of American Culture* 24.1-2 (2001): 153-169.

animation artists.

Price argued that the Japaneseness in Japanese anime can be seen both on a surface level and a deeper level. Surface Japaneseness ranges from obvious signs such as kimono and chopsticks to not so obvious such as people wearing masks when they're sick. At a deeper level there are at least five signs of Japaneseness imbued in Japanese anime, which can be summarized as symbolic, folkloric, thematic, artistic, and audio. Japanese anime has a tendency to use symbols filled with cultural meanings and the emphasis on symbolism is simply part of the Japanese culture; it heavily incorporates ancient legend, myth and history into its stories with a contemporary twist; it often exploits Japanese-specific themes that reflect the very nature of what it is to be Japanese; it also adopts old artistic traditions in story-telling such as a lack of interest in Western style realism; and finally it uses culturally specific sound cues to illustrate certain actions and themes.<sup>69</sup>

### The Five Aspects of Chineseness

There are many overlapping traits between the Chineseness in early Chinese animation and the Japaneseness in Japanese anime due to the kindred relationship between Chinese and Japanese artistic and cultural traditions. However, the two do not resemble each other entirely and I would give Price's summary a twist by analyzing Chineseness from five slightly different perspectives: art form, genre, aesthetics, theme and music.

#### Art Form

The national style of Chinese animation is first manifested by the adoption of many old art forms of China, such as paper cutting, shadow play,<sup>70</sup> puppetry, paper folding and brush and ink painting. Paper-cut animation, for example, was invented by Chinese animation artists based upon the thousand-year-old folk handicraft of paper cutting and performance art of shadow play. It took from paper cutting the technique of scissoring and carving for character

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Chinese Shadow Play is a popular ancient form of story-telling and entertainment using opaque, often articulated figures made out of animal skin or card board in front of an illuminated backdrop to create the illusion of moving images. It originated in Northwestern China and can be dated back to 2000 years ago. The performance is often accompanied by local music.

depiction and from shadow play the tricks of acting and performing on two-dimensional spaces. Wan Guchan, one of the Wan brothers, especially liked this art form and took the lead in experimenting with it. He completed China's first paper-cut film *Pigsy Eats Watermelon* (*Zhubajie Chixigua*) in 1958, a story spun off from folk tale *Journey to the West*. He then led a series of paper-cut projects and brought the style to its maturity.

Puppet show is also a popular folk art form that has been in existence in China for two thousand years. From there came out two new styles, clay animation and puppet animation. It is noteworthy that Chinese animators not only took the technique from their folk artists but also learned earnestly from their foreign counterparts. The former Soviet Union and East European countries, which excelled in the genre of puppet animation, had had a major influence on China. Animation director Jin Xi from Shanghai Art Film Studio had studied in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s with the puppet animation masters there.

The most "high-brow" traditional art form of all, brush and ink painting, is also technically the most difficult one to animate. "To make our national art of brush and ink painting move" was both a wish of the state leader and a dream of Chinese animation artists.<sup>71</sup> The experimentation with brush and ink saw its first fruit in *Where is Mama*,<sup>72</sup> a short film about a school of tadpoles' journey in search of their mother. Because of the technical complexity it involved, very few brush and ink animations were made. Another two were the 1963 *Buffalo Boy and the Flute*<sup>73</sup> and the 1982 *Deer Bell*.<sup>74</sup> Finally, with *Feelings from Mountain and Water* (*Shanshui Qing*)<sup>75</sup> of 1988, Chinese brush and ink animation culminated and ended. With its thoroughly refreshing aesthetic effect, which is soft in "touch," borderless in shape, fluid in motion and beautifully sad (or sadly beautiful) in emotion, Chinese brush and ink animation moved audiences both from home and abroad and played an essential role in establishing the international fame of Chinese School of Animation.

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<sup>71</sup> Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*, 66. Vice Premiere Chen Yi, when visiting Shanghai Art Film Studio in 1960, expressed his will that "it will be great if you can animate the paintings of our brush painting master Qi Baishi."

<sup>72</sup> *Where is Mama* (*Xiao Kedou Zhao Mama*). Directed by Te Wei. Shanghai Art Film Studio. 1960.

<sup>73</sup> *Buffalo Boy and the Flute* (*Mudi*). Directed by Te Wei. Shanghai Art Film Studio. 1963.

<sup>74</sup> *Deer Bell* (*Lu Ling*). Directed by Tang Cheng & Wu Qiang. Shanghai Art Film Studio. 1982.

<sup>75</sup> Directed by Te Wei, Shanghai Art Film Studio. 1988.

## Genre

In terms of genre (by which I mean story type, more or less along the lines of literature genre), early Chinese animation relied heavily on ancient legend, myth, folklore and history for its source of narrative. Classic folktale and novel *Journey to the West*, for example, has been appropriated again and again by different generations of Chinese animation artists and is still of great interest to today's animation artists from not only China, but also Japan and Korea. Fairytales and Chinese idioms and fables were other frequently represented genres in early Chinese animation cinema. This largely had to do with the perception of animation as a medium for the children, which thus should carry educational and ideological meanings.

## Aesthetics

What makes early Chinese animation further stand out from that of the rest of the world is definitely its distinct artistic traditions of storytelling. As the *Le Monde* comment on *Havoc in Heaven* goes, "It not only possesses the beauty of general Disney works, but also exhibits an aesthetics that Disney can never achieve – it is a total embodiment of Chinese traditional art style."<sup>76</sup> Thus I think it deserves more elaboration on how Chinese expressive conventions work together with old stories and old art forms to produce distinctly Chinese animations.

As noted by Mary Farquhar, the theorization of Chinese animation cinema in terms of aesthetics has mostly centered on the issue of expressionism and realism, which is far from adequate in rendering a comprehensive reading of these films.<sup>77</sup> I agree with her in suggesting that we should extend our focus to the issue of how modern cinematic elements and techniques are borrowed to tell traditional stories in traditional art forms. Still, I think exploring the question of expressionism and realism can be a good entry point to learn about the national style of Chinese animated films.

Expressionism, or *xieyi*, is a central concept to the making and reading of Chinese art, be it painting, calligraphy or traditional opera. In the Chinese context, expressionism is the philosophical principle of depicting reality by abstracting the essence of the reality, rather than

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted from Wan Laiming's personal narration. In Wan Guohun. *I and Monkey King*. Beiyun Wenyi Press. 1986. 168.

<sup>77</sup> Farquhar, "Monks and Monkey," 5-27.

giving it a naturalistic representation. Strongly influenced by Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, Chinese aesthetics has a distinctive view of nature. Daoism, for example, holds that nature runs on a set of its own rules, that is, the Dao or the way of nature, which keeps the world in harmony. The human ideal is to understand the Dao and become One with nature. For artists, they have to capture the *qi*, or “the breath” of things to participate in the creation of nature. Another assumption of Taoism is that words cannot completely transmit ideas, let alone convey the ultimate truth or Dao.<sup>78</sup> This largely accounts for another important aesthetic disposition of Chinese art and literature – openness and suggestiveness. This idea found a lasting expression in the dictum of Tang poet Sikong Tu (837-908) that poetry should convey “an image beyond the image” and “a scene beyond the scene” (*xiang wai zhi xiang, jing wai zhi jing*).<sup>79</sup>

The best example can be the stage set for the Peking Opera.<sup>80</sup> Usually what appear on the stage as the sets are nothing more than a table and two chairs, which can represent an officer’s office, an emperor’s court, or a scholar’s study. The settings and props are not there for the audience to discern, but for the actors to carry out their action and emotion. They do not even have to be there – the action of a girl crossing a single-log bridge can be brought forth by her ginger steps and terrified expressions, all on an empty stage. It’s empty, but also full. The rest of the meaning needs to be filled in by the theatrical performance and the imagination of the audience. Paintings, which aim at a depiction of “inner reality” (*zhen*) beyond “form” (*xing*), are supposed to have this suggestive, allusive, and finally poetic quality, leading to the well-known feature of Chinese painting that the empty space (*xu*) is more important, i.e., suggestively telling, than the painted substance (*shi*).<sup>81</sup>

Scenes in *Three Monks* best exemplify this expressionist technique of representation. The

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<sup>78</sup> The beginning sentence of the *Daodejing* goes like this: “The *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the eternal *Dao*”.

<sup>79</sup> Zhang, Longxi. *The Tao and the Logos*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992. 179.

<sup>80</sup> Wang, Yuzhen. “The Three Aesthetical Features of Peking Opera.” Home page of *Chinese Opera*. November 1, 2005. <<http://www.dongdongqiang.com/abc/040.htm>>.

<sup>81</sup> Lin, Yutang. *The Chinese Theory of Art*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967. 60f. Quoted in Karl-Heinz Pohl. “An Intercultural Perspective on Chinese Aesthetics.” *Proceedings Volume of the Intercontinental Conference of Frontiers of Transculturality in Contemporary Aesthetics*. Ed. Grazia Marchianò and Raffaele Milani. October 25-28, 2000. April 14, 2007 <<http://www2.unibo.it/transculturality/files/15%20pohl.PDF>>.

story of the film comes from an old saying, “one monk fetches water to drink, two monks carry water to drink, three monks have no water to drink.” It teaches a simple lesson of how to work together. Animators put a minimal number of things onto the canvas, all drawn in very simple black lines with color wash. When the little monk walks, he walks against an empty background, with only some dark pebbles indicating the ground and his relative movement. When the fat monk plays with the fish, we see no water but we know he is in the river. Inside the temple, only those things that have a role to play in the film are drawn – the statue of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy who smiles and frowns at the monks’ deed, the mice who cause the fire and force the three monks to work together to get water, and the water vat and pails. There are no walls, doors or windows that define the boundary of the space, only the characters and props move on the canvas to tell the story like Peking Opera artists acting on the wall-less stage. This kind of simplistic expressionist style was successful in delivering a story that has a very simple narrative (a rhyme of three lines), simple action and movement based on parallel and repetitive narratives (story revolves on the different scenarios of water-fetching by one, two or three monks each time, many of the walking and fetching water scenes use repetitive motions) and faces young children as its main audience.

*Three Monks* offers us one example of how traditional Chinese story and traditional aesthetics of expressionism are used by the medium of animation film; however, it should not be read to infer that expressionism necessarily means “sparseness or minimalism,”<sup>82</sup> nor that expressionism is inherently the opposite of realism. *Havoc in Heaven*, on the other hand, sets a good example to show the many other formal tropes that expressionism can imply. Expressionism and realism are, more often than not, but two different ways of representing the same reality. *Havoc in Heaven* again takes its story from *Journey to the West*. The film tells the earlier life of Monkey King before he joins the Tang Dynasty Monk in his journey to India to collect the Buddhist sutras. In the film, Monkey King travels across earth, sea and heaven with great agility and freedom and fought rebelliously against and eventually defeated the Jade

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<sup>82</sup> Farquhar, “Monks and Monkey,” 18.

Emperor and his followers, who rule Heaven. The film first of all borrows a lot of operatic conventions directly from the Peking Opera genre, for the same story has been adapted from novel to the operatic mode many times and has long been a popular opera piece. The Monkey King's action-packed encounters with other characters make the story fit into the military (*wu*) type of opera perfectly,<sup>83</sup> which is used to depict wars, fights and confrontations, and emphasizes the acrobatic skills of the actors. *Havoc in Heaven* takes advantage of this operatic tradition and successfully restaged the battle scenes with vibrantly animated gymnastics. However, as pointed out by Farquhar, many critics, such as Yihong Hu, have been inclined to classify *Havoc* as a more "realistic" film than *Monks*. Hu argues that in *Havoc* instead of leaving the background blank, the animators filled it with colorful paintings borrowed from Buddhist mural arts and other "decorative realist (*xieshi*) tradition;"<sup>84</sup> they also employed cinematographic techniques such as lighting and perspective to create a sense of "reality" that lives up to people's imagination of a fantasy world.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, *Monks* is a "better" film than *Havoc* by Chinese aesthetic standards which prioritize expressionism over realism in artistic representation.<sup>86</sup>

I would contend that the notion of "blankness" should not be taken as the sole criterion to judge a film's representational disposition and that a film does not necessarily have to be either expressionist or realistic, but not both. As illustrated before, some Peking Opera conventions were adopted and this adoption itself implies that a lot of expressionist devices inherent in the operatic mode might have been packaged into the film. One example is the use of the "painted faces" concept in the characterization in *Havoc*. The "painted face" character (*jing*) is one of the four character types in Peking Opera,<sup>87</sup> which features elaborate color patterns painted on the face. *Jing*, as a male character, usually entails a very forceful and adventurous personality. The over 100 variations of facial patterns and color schemes in Peking Opera are thought to be

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<sup>83</sup> The other type is civil (*wen*) opera, which often deals with everyday life.

<sup>84</sup> Farquhar, "Monks and Monkey," 5.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Hu, Yihong. "Donghuapian de shenmei tezheng" (The Aesthetic Characteristics of Animated Film). *Dianying Yishu* (Film Art). 125.2. (1983): 48-51.

<sup>87</sup> The other three are *Sheng*, the main male role, *Dan*, any female role, and *Chou*, the male clown role.

derived from traditional Chinese color symbolism and divination on the lines of a person's face, which are said to reveal personality. Red, for example, which is at the center of Monkey King's face, denotes uprightness, loyalty and courage. While green, in which the Dragon King's face is painted, represents fierce and treacherous qualities in the character. Although the animators did not strictly follow the rules of Peking Opera in pattern design but rather tended to simplify the designs, this characterization technique of using highly symbolic and abstracted signs is still adequately exploited to depict personality, psychology, and the good and evil relations between characters.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 1.1 *Havoc in Heaven* (1961, 1964): the Monkey King.  
(Copyright owned by Shanghai Art Film Studio)

The acrobatic battle scenes in *Havoc*, again, showed the non-realistic aspect of the film achieved by deploying Peking Opera conventions. Characters are often seen giving dramatic pauses (*liangxiang*) during the course of their movement. One of the core principles of Peking Opera action is to be suggestive, rather than imitative or mimetic. Thus every motion and gesture is carefully manipulated and stylized to act out intangible emotions and characters, with regular pauses to add accent. Even the way the heavenly guards stand still, or the fairies pick peaches or fly in the air, all demonstrate a dramatic gesture and body curve that is not to be found, and not intended to be found, in real life. Motion freeze, together with the use of percussion instruments, typical in Peking Opera gymnastic scenes, further enhances the sense of theatricality by giving rhythm and structure to the movements.

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<sup>88</sup> Farquhar, "Monks and Monkey," 15.



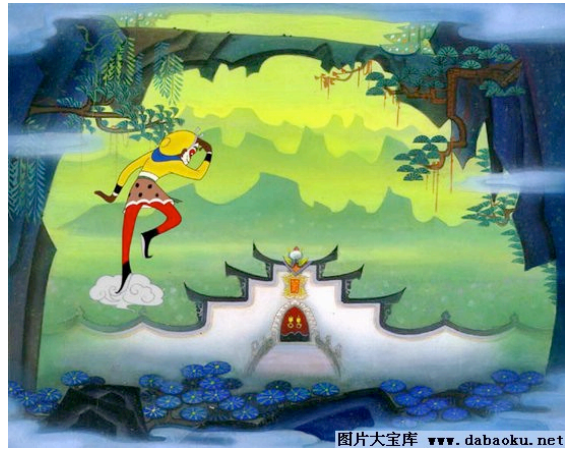


Figure 1.2-5 *Havoc in Heaven* (1961, 1964): from left to right, top to bottom, the Heavenly Palace, an immortal's abode, Monkey King consumes the delicacy prepared for a heavenly banquet, the fairies. (Copyrights owned by Shanghai Art Film Studio)

However, what expressionism, or *xieyi*, is really concerned about, is not to create a non-realistic illusion that fascinates the audience, though it's part of its goal, but rather to represent a different view of reality, "one that strips the material or imaginative world to its essentials and then energizes and harmonizes its depiction."<sup>89</sup> Thus in *Havoc* we see this juxtaposition of expressionism and realism that work together to depict characters in a way familiar to Chinese audiences and to give them access to a fantastic world that has been in their imagination for a thousand years.<sup>90</sup>

As audiences and critics do appreciate the expressionist aesthetics shown in these Chinese animation films and consider it a recognizable trait of "national style" that distinguishes

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>90</sup> The novel *Journey to the West* was written by Wu Cheng'en (1500-1582); the earliest version of the story originated a thousand years ago after the Tang Dynasty (618-907) monk, Xuan Zang made the voyage to the west.

the Chinese School from the rest of the world, it would be too narrow a perspective to examine a film by the terms of “national style” aesthetics and bypass other essential elements that make a film successful. In the case of *Havoc* and *Monks*, it is the perfect fusion of an engaging (and traditional) story with traditional art philosophies and modern cinematic language of animation that makes the films both recognizably Chinese and durably interesting. As with *Havoc*, without the medium of animation, which excels in the fabrication of imaginary and fantastic world and has the greatest ability in manipulating motion and movements, a story featuring monkeys, dragons, immortals and fairies who freely roam from seabed palace to heaven, would simply be impossible. Such scenes where the characters change their appearances as when Monkey King fights with the three-eyed God of Erlang,<sup>91</sup> or where props need to change their size or shape as Monkey King plays with his magic now-small-now-big golden staff, can be best depicted by animation technique that takes metamorphosis as its specialty. In *Monks*, the kind of succinct, humorous and satirical touch originally found in comic strip art, a new art form in China, has inspired the telling of a simple yet trenchant old story of three monks in the animated form.<sup>92</sup> A “national style” of animation thus emerged out of the fusion of tradition and modernity.

It is worth noting that while Chinese stories, Chinese art styles and Chinese operatic conventions, when used in animation films, can be viewed as specific “signs” showing the Chineseness; the practice of incorporating such “signs” in filmmaking should also be viewed as part of the larger project of Sinicizing cinema. The adoption of operatic devices in Chinese cinema (both animation and live-action), for example, has been in practice since the very first day Chinese people started to make movies. *Dingjun Mountain* (1905),<sup>93</sup> the first movie made in China, was a classic Peking Opera performance recorded for the screen. For the years that followed, opera film, together with other subgenres spun off from the operatic conventions, like martial arts film and opera within film, had maintained an important position in the early history

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<sup>91</sup> In the battle scene between Monkey King and the three-eyed God of Erlang, who tries to catch the former, Monkey King and the God of Erlang metamorphose into different animals that are predator of the other’s species in disguise.

<sup>92</sup> Similar to the early days of animation filmmaking in the United States and Europe, most of the early animation artists in China were also former caricaturists. A Da, the director of *Three Monks*, was a cartoonist before he joined the animation trade.

<sup>93</sup> The maker of the film, Ren Qingtai, was a photographer, who also owned a theater built in the teahouse style. He screened his film in the theater. See Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 55-57.

of Chinese film, even though Western-style realism did get explored and advanced at the same time. Tom Gunning's study of early American cinema and the recast of it as "a cinema of attraction" can be borrowed to explain the early cinema of China. He said,

To summarize, the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through and exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the early close-ups... or trick films... Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption.<sup>94</sup>

The operatic mode of film was a natural transposition of theatrical spectacularity to cinematic attraction. As an out and out Western technology, cinema had to rely on local cultural forms to find its vitality when it entered China. The very sites where the early Chinese films were exhibited, as Ren Qingtai's *Dingjun Mountain* was, were teahouses where other highly popular spectacles were also shown – slapstick, magic and opera. Thus, opera film became a site not only where opera and film interacted, but also where Western technology and Chinese culture merged. Berry and Farquhar note that in that sense, "the [operatic] mode is culturally nationalist."<sup>95</sup>

### Theme

If the so-called Chineseness of Chinese animation is relatively easier to identify from the use of traditional art forms, narratives and philosophical aesthetics, then the Chineseness more deeply rooted in Chinese cultural mentality may be harder to discern. A brush and ink painting animation masterpiece, *Feelings from Mountain and Water (Shanshui Qing)*,<sup>96</sup> for example, is considered by fans and critics home and abroad as the most "Chinese" piece, not only for the special aesthetic experience it brings with Chinese painting, but also for the distinctly Chinese metaphors it carries.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde." In Elsaesser with Barker, eds., *Early Cinema*, 56-62.

<sup>95</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 48.

<sup>96</sup> Script by Wang Shuchen, directed by Te Wei, character design by Wu Shanming and guqin performance by Gong Yi.

<sup>97</sup> *Feeling of Mountain and Water* was the only film from China that was chosen to be one of the "100 Films for a Century of Animation" at Annecy International Animation Film Festival in 2006.



Figures: 1.6-9 *Feelings from Mountain and Water* (1988): from left to right, top to bottom, the master and the young man, ferry boy's cottage, the master playing the *guqin*, the master giving his *guqin* to his disciple. (Copyrights owned by Shanghai Art Film Studio)

Directed by Te Wei, forerunner in the field of brush and ink painting animation, the film tells a story between an old and a young man set in an ancient time. The story never reveals to us the old man's profession. But Chinese audiences will have no difficulty in instantly recognizing him as an "ancient literati" – an artist (in this case, a musician), an intellectual and a thinker. He carries with him a *guqin*, an ancient style musical instrument, the art of which was considered by ancient literati as the first thing they needed to cultivate to become a true intellectual.<sup>98</sup> He is feeble and he falls from illness on the riverbank. He is taken good care of by the ferry boy and he stays to teach him play *guqin*. When he finally is ready to take off, he gives the *guqin*, his only belongings, to the ferry boy and disappears into the misty mountains.

<sup>98</sup> "Qin, Qi, Shu and Hua," that is, Guqin, Chinese chess, calligraphy and ink painting, were the four basic skills an ancient intellectual needed to acquire.

In this film we see a unique type of social and spiritual relationship important to the Chinese, that between teacher/master and disciple/apprentice. As the old precept goes, “One time your teacher, life time your father” (*yiri wei shi, zhongshen wei fu*).<sup>99</sup> The old man and the young man not only embody a teacher-student relation that is easily recognizable to Chinese viewers, but also a deeper emotional tie similar to that of father and son, as well as an intellectual succession of Chinese values from generation to generation. The old master passes his *guqin*, his artistic learning, his intellectual ideals, and a sense of crisis consciousness so characteristic of ancient Chinese literati, down to the young man before he continues on the rough road of search in loneliness.

With a strong belief in Taoist theory that the rules of the world are hidden in nature and that man should try to follow these rules, or the *Tao*, to attain the highest level of artistic mastery, the old master takes the ferry boy to the mountains and rivers to give him a “spirit journey” in which the artist’s inner spirit can roam out into the world. Such communing with nature is possible because we are within nature’s field of *qi* and by feeling the *qi* we learn the way of nature. Yet an artist also needs to achieve a unity between the scene (*jing*) and the emotion (*qing*), or nature and self, outer and inner, to become a truly fine artist. Towards the end of the film, when the young ferryman sees his master’s back diminishing into the depth of the mountains (the mistiness and uncertainty of which are materialized by the extraordinary brushwork and camerawork of the animation artists) and hears the harsh wind whistling by, he runs to the mountain top and starts playing a finale for his master. The music echoes in the meandering valleys and travels afar. The master looks back with a slightly detectable delight. He hears what he has tried to teach the young man, who now filled with human emotions and natural inspirations, seems to have learned the truth of the art.

Metaphors and significations, whether on a surface level or a deeper level, rely on the visual and audio devices of the medium of animation film to be made meaning of in the audiences’ minds. Throughout the film, no nondiegetic sound and dialogues are used, only the

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<sup>99</sup> Even if someone is your teacher for only a day, you should regard him like your father for the rest of your life.

natural sounds from nature – wind, water, animals, and the sound of the ferry boy’s flute and the master’s *guqin*. The profound emotions between the characters and between human and nature, is what Chinese literary men and artists believe to be “not speakable, but only sensible (*zhike yihui, buke yanchuan*).” Thus an expressionist way of representation was necessary for the story. Much of the artwork draws inspiration from traditional brush and ink landscape painting, which takes *yijing* (an ideographic realm, or a combination of idea and scene) as its core aesthetic value. Brush and ink painting technique is effective in creating a world that is serene, melancholy and spiritual, by using primarily different shades of ink to give contrast, depth and fluidity to the image and movement. Camerawork and brushwork together make the whole picture moving and flowing like water.<sup>100</sup> The harmony between man and nature – a highly valued concept in Chinese philosophy, and the harmony between art form and story, are accomplished at the same time. No audience has ever lived or seen such a pristine world in their life, yet Chinese brush and ink landscape painting effortlessly evokes such a world in their mind and a familiarity with the imagined material and spiritual world of ancient Chinese makes the film unquestionably and naturally Chinese to modern Chinese audiences.

### Music

*Mountain and Water* also serves as an example to show Chinese animation artist’s reliance on culturally specific sound, especially music, to amplify the effects of Chineseness. The sound of *guqin*, vigorous, deep and melodious, which has a close association with ancientness and with the spiritual realm of the ancient, effectively evokes in the viewer’s mind feelings towards that imagined ancient world and sets up a thoughtful tone for the movie. In *Three Monks*, different types of traditional musical instruments are used to give the three monks different signature tunes to signify their personalities. Buddhist-influenced music and wooden fish<sup>101</sup> beats are also used in the chanting scenes.<sup>102</sup> Peking Opera style instruments and music are

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<sup>100</sup> The brush and ink painting effect of the moving images on the big screen is largely a result of careful and onerous camerawork on regular drawings rather than a result of real brush painting, since there is no way for any painter to control the consistency of the intensity of shades. But static background and objects are truly produced by the brush and ink.

<sup>101</sup> Wooden fish is a percussion instrument made of a hollow wooden block originally used by Buddhist priest to beat rhythm when chanting scriptures.

<sup>102</sup> Farquhar, “Monks and Monkey,” 13.

markedly prevailing in *Havoc in Heaven* and many other animation films that borrow the operatic conventions.

### The 1980s and the 1990s

By parsing early Chinese animation films made between the 1950s and late 1980s from the five perspectives of art form, genre, aesthetics, theme and music, it has been made clear that it is primarily from tradition that Chinese animation artists drew their inspirations to establish the Chinese School of Animation. As a matter of fact, traditions are not always considered a great treasure by the people. The years during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,<sup>103</sup> for example, saw devastating assault and destruction of both historical reserves and artifacts and traditional culture and thinking. The used-to-be outstanding animation films, were considered “poisonous grass” for its depiction of “ghost and demon,” “cats and dogs” and advocacy of backward ideology that lacked class struggle consciousness. *Havoc in Heaven*, for instance, was interpreted as an “anti-socialist” work that used Jade Emperor to allude to party leaders.<sup>104</sup>

The Cultural Revolution is undoubtedly a period of extreme cultural disturbance under extreme social political conditions. But the debate about the value of tradition neither started nor ended there. The decade that followed, i.e., the 1980s, which constitutes an important era in Chinese intellectual history, took issue on modernity and tradition as well. It is a decade of great utopian vision and great disillusionment. The rather successful agricultural reform across the country since 1978 has heightened the expectation of a similar urban reform. The Chinese cultural elite partook in the state’s construction of a socialist modernization with strong enthusiasm which also marked their own agenda of enlightening the nation.<sup>105</sup> Their formula was not only a free market economy, but also political liberalization. In the later-banned TV documentary series aired in 1988, *Heshang* (River Elegy), the message was delivered loud and

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<sup>103</sup> Starting from 1966 and ended in 1976, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) was initiated by the then Chairman of China Communist Party Mao Zedong. The purpose of the GPCR, as stated in the “Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (also known as “the 16 Points”), is to eradicate the bourgeoisie influence and let the proletariat class take control and “use the new ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the proletariat to change the mental outlook of the whole of society.”

<sup>104</sup> Yan and Suo, *A History of Chinese Animation Film*, 94.

<sup>105</sup> Wang, Jing. *High Culture Fever*. California: University of California Press, 1996.

clear: "Old China can only revive its dying culture by modernization and westernization."<sup>106</sup> I remember watching the documentary as an eighth grader. Not quite clear of what was going on, I was nonetheless stunned by the narration full of new ideas that I had never heard of. Now twenty years later, when revisiting this period of history, I am struck by the fact that the visual image of the turbulent yellow of the Yellow River colliding with the transparent azure of the Pacific at the mouth of the ocean is still vividly clear in my memory. The eager tone of the narrator, calling upon the Chinese people to turn their back to the yellow culture, an allegedly backward agrarian culture represented by the Yellow River, and to face the blue culture, a maritime civilization of the West, which leads to democracy and modernity, still echoes in my mind.<sup>107</sup>

Chinese filmmakers, without exception, were also on board in this nationwide intellectual movement. The Fifth Generation cinema embarked on a "cultural critique" of the "deep structure" of the Chinese nation.<sup>108</sup> But on the other hand, their historical and cultural reflection (*lishi/wenhua fansi*) also implied a "search for the roots" (*xungen*) and a return to the source of Chinese culture. Thus two contradictory and interrelated strands of film styles emerged. One is the "anguished, self-reflexive, slow-paced, scathing" critique of entrenched patterns of traditional Chinese culture, as represented by Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and *King of the Children* (1987); the other is a reach deep into the roots of China in an attempt to "rehabilitate and establish a new subjectivity of the Chinese nation" as represented by Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1988).<sup>109</sup>

The "New Era" (*xin shidai*) (the late 1970s to 1989) in Chinese intellectual and cultural history also left a mark on animation cinema, not a very legible one though, precisely because animation was believed to be a province specially reserved for the children. In the immediate years after the Cultural Revolution, there occurred some animation works that sought to critique

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>107</sup> Waldron, Arthur. "Representing China: the Great Wall and Cultural Nationalism in Twentieth Century." *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity*. Ed. Harumi Befu. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1993. 49.

<sup>108</sup> Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng. "National Cinema, Cultural Critique, Transnational Capital: the Films of Zhang Yimou." In Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 105-136.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 108.



and reflect upon the totalitarian discourse of the Gang of Four with scathing cartoonish film language, such as *A Night in the Gallery*.<sup>110</sup> Science fiction emerged as a new genre in Chinese animation during this period. The first sci-fi piece, *Dingding Fights the Monkey King*,<sup>111</sup> ironically puts Dingding, a kid who holds the golden key to scientific knowledge, against Monkey King. The unconquerable Monkey King, a long-time beloved character to the old generation animation artists, loses his battle this time and asks Dingding to teach him science. However, this genre never grew into a big one and cultural critique on Chinese tradition in animation cinema did not take place at this moment. The majority of the animation cinema remained occupied by fairytales and myths. Exploration of traditional narrative and artistic style continued. *Feelings from Mountain and Water*, for example, with its outright embrace of Chinese art, music and philosophy, appears to be so against the grain of the 1980s enlightenment movement if we consider the fact that it was made in 1988, the same year as the broadcast of *Heshang*.

*Mountain and Water* may be read as an innate and intuitional cling to tradition by those artists who were trained and have lived in that art tradition for their whole life. Or maybe the film can be read as a participation in that heated cultural enlightenment, only when it was about to come to a dystopian ending in the summer of 1989. If so, this is a participation not in the sense that it collaborates with the “wholesale Westernization” preach of the 1980s cultural elite, but rather because it bespeaks the psych of modern intellectuals with the story of an ancient one. Behind *Mountain and Water*’s deeply melancholy visuals and audios, lies a somber, discouraged, yet persistent heart of an ancient literati man. The old master comes with nothing else but a *guqin*, symbolic of the intellectual class; he passes all he possesses to the younger one and he goes back into the deep mountains, a tortuous road ahead. He always carries a solemn complexion in contrast with the young boy’s lighted face, yet he carries on. One has to wonder where he is from, where he is going and what he hopes for. Ancient Chinese scholars, officials, artists and poets formed the unique social class of literati who distinguished

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<sup>110</sup> Script by Lu Bing, Bao Lei and Zhan Tong. Directed by A Da and Lin Wenxiao. Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1978. By animating the totalitarian Gang of Four into two ridiculous characters, a Hat and a Stick, the film lampooned their irrational oppression on the people during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>111</sup> Directed by Hu Jinqing. Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1980.

themselves from the rest of the society by a strong “sense of crisis consciousness.” They were anxious about the destiny of their country, the welfare of their people and their own fate of how they could contribute to the nation. This consciousness of crisis finds its root in Confucianism which places the emperor and his rule at the center. An ancient intellectual man was filled with a compelling urge to put all his learning into the service of the emperor and the people. Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) scholar/official Fan Zhongyan (989-1052)’s famous verse, “to worry before the people worries and to rejoice after the people rejoices,”<sup>112</sup> best voices the literati class’ deep commitment to their social responsibilities. However, as it happens all the time, the transformation of cultural eliteness into political power is always a tough task. In that sense, the fate of the old master in *Mountain and Water* epitomizes that of the 1980s intellectuals who, very soon would have to accept the disillusionment of their utopian vision that they could steer the direction of the state’s modernization project.

All in all, animation cinema could not be immune to the larger intellectual, cultural and economic ecologies around it. Entering the *houxinshidai* (post-new-era) after the demise of the 1980s, Chinese animation cinema would have to face the unprecedented challenges posed by a consumerist society where economic reform was in full swing. Acknowledged as the best piece of Chinese animation film, *Feelings from Mountain and Water* also marked the end of the early exploration of the Chinese national animation style – art for art’s sake was to be confronted by the rules of the market. The old art studio production model held by Shanghai Art Film Studio for over forty years could no longer meet the demand of television, a medium becoming prevalent in the late 1980s. Content-wise, the “blue wave” of Japanese and American Television animations, which started to pour into the country since the early 1980s, took over the Chinese market almost entirely by the mid 1990s before the local production mode could make a transition from film to television.<sup>113</sup> Worse yet, foreign animation studio’s outsourcing contracts arrived in volume looking for cheaper labor. Local work-for-hire studios boomed to

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<sup>112</sup> Fan, Zhongyan. “A Narration on Yueyang Tower.” 1046.

<sup>113</sup> Zhu, Buchong. “Yichang mianmu mohu de katong kuanghuan” (A Fuzzy-Looking Cartoon Carnival). *Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan* (Lifeweek) May 6, 2006. August 1, 2006 <<http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2005-06-19/0000412135.shtml>>.

meet this need, and animation artists from public-owned studio flocked to these private studios looking for a better pay. With local TV cartoon producers still struggling to compete with Disney and Anime with sporadic, low-quality “original” works, animation film artists almost became extinct and animation films totally retreated from the big screen.

## Chapter 2: Homemade in the Age of Global Capitalism



Figure 2.1 *Thru the Moebius Strip* (2006): Jac on the poster (Copyright owned by GDC)

It might be a little abrupt to pull my readers out of the pristine 1960s and 1980s animation films and throw them right into the new millennium in front of a 3D computer generated fantasy movie – *Thru the Moebius Strip*. Except that these movies all bear the same label of “made in China,” nothing else serve as perceptible clues to link the former to the latter, a film that is reminiscent of Hollywood inside out. The choice of this movie for my case study is based on two considerations. First, the rather big temporal distance between my case analyses corresponds to a production gap in Chinese animation cinema. Because of the talent drain in film studios and the shrinking of the domestic film market, animation film production declined drastically since

the mid 1980s. Short film production continued into the late 1980s, but mainly to feed the television market, until it was totally replaced by the broadcast production mode. Feature film production halted after *Golden Monkey Conquers the Demon* in 1985 and did not resume until 1999, when *Baolian Deng* (Lotus Lantern) was made. Secondly, among the very few theater-released animation films after *Lotus*, *Moebius* has been a controversial one for various reasons, serving as a good example of looking into the complexity of national cultural production in an age of transnational economic and cultural flows at both industrial and textual levels. The purpose of this chapter is to show that the meaning of “national” has become as fluid as the border-crossing flows of people, capital, text and idea and no clear criteria can be drawn to define the “national.” Both the audiences and how the national appears are conditioned by the economic and industrial structures that are simultaneously national and transnational.

*Thru the Moebius Strip* tells about the coming of age of Jac, a resourceful 14 year old boy who grew up refusing to accept the loss of his father. Out of the strength of his conviction, he reaches Planet Raphicca, 27.2 million light years away, to find his father imprisoned in a kingdom of giant aliens who believe in magic and a medieval code of chivalry. In the midst of a raging battle between good and evil, Jac rescues his father, his new found family of aliens, the planet of Raphicca, and ultimately, the Universe.<sup>114</sup>

From the synopsis, it is already safe to make the judgment that, well, this does not look like a Chinese film. As the degree of internationalization on the levels of film production, distribution and consumption increases, to locate a film like *Moebius* is indeed becoming a great challenge. Produced in Shenzhen, China by the Institute of Digital Media Technology (IDMT), the film was financially backed by its parent company, Global Digital Creations Holdings (GDC), founded by the Neoh brothers in Hong Kong. In the middle of the production, GDC was taken over by Shougang Concord Grand (GROUP) Ltd., a company registered in Bermuda but controlled mainly by Shougang Group (Capital Steel) from Beijing and Cheung Kong Limited from Hong Kong.

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<sup>114</sup> Zhang, Rui. “*Thru the Moebius Strip*: A 3D Animated Coup for China.” *China.org.cn* June 2, 2006. October 12, 2006 <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/2006/Jun/170204.htm>>.

The story and character design are based on the ideas of renowned French comics artist Jean Moebius Giraud, who is better known in the US and China for his work in blockbuster movies such as *Alien*, *The Abyss* and *The Fifth Element*. The screenplay was written by Jim Cox, author of *FernGully: the Last Rainforest* (1992). Director Glenn Chaika is American; he was effects animator on *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and director for *The Adventures of Tom Thumb & Thumbelina* (2002). A group of Hollywood artists appeared in the credit as the leading animators while the majority of the animation was done by 400 local Chinese employees.<sup>115</sup> Music was composed by European musicians and performed by a Czech orchestra. Finally, with “Westerners” being targeted as the main audience when the film was conceived, it ended up being shown only to the domestic audience.<sup>116</sup>

### Fake Homemade

After the film was released (briefly) in the summer of 2006 in mainland China under the claim of “the first computer-generated 3D animation film made by China,” contradictory reviews and heated debates flooded the media. Criticism seemed to get the upper hand which drew on the issue of whether or not it was a genuine “homemade.” By judging the film from such aspects as character, narrative, filmic world and production crew, the final conclusion was, “it is fake.” A blunt news headline goes like this, “Domestic Animation’s Foreign Flavor Found Detestable.”<sup>117</sup> A typical comment after watching the film is, “They say it is made in China, but the foreign flavor is so heavy, I see the shadows of *the Lord of the Rings*.” An employee of Beijing New Movie Theater Chain commented that “It’s not positioned correctly. A homemade is made into a foreign-made, how can it get the audience recognition?”<sup>118</sup> As it is curious why people do not like a Western-flavored film if they like *the Lord of the Rings* and *Titanic* so much (which might

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<sup>115</sup> The publicity site for *Thru the Moebius Strip*. [www.sina.com.cn](http://www.sina.com.cn). 2006. December 10, 2006 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/f/tms/>>.

<sup>116</sup> Xie, Lan, and Zhendong Dai. “Liangshi xiongdi bantuerfei de CG Chuangyemeng” (The Halted CG Dream of the Neoh Brothers). *Xinwen Chenbao* (Shanghai Morning Post) August 13, 2006. August 20, 2006 <<http://www.jfdaily.com.cn/gb/node2/node17/node33/node92322/node92336/userobject1ai1432599.html>>.

<sup>117</sup> Cao, Xiaofang. “Guochan donghua yangwei’r zhaorenxian, mobisihuan quefa xiangxiangli” (Domestic Animation’s Foreign Flavor Found Detestable, *Moebius* Lacks Imagination). *Fazhi Wanbao* (Legal Evening). August 7, 2006. August 17, 2006 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2006-08-07/10111189934.html>>.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

indicate that the lack of “Chineseness” is not the sole reason for the poor domestic reception of the film), it is still necessary to elaborate on the non-Chinese side of the film to show the basis on which the judgment is made. The so-called “fake homemade” argument is shored up by the fact that *Moebius* features Western character, narrative, visual, language and a Western crew.

The main characters of the film, Jac and his parents, who all have English names and speak (American) English, come from a futuristic human society that is close to Chinese people’s imagination of today’s United States – they live in a technologically developed planet and reside in wood cabins on a huge farm. To Chinese audiences, the character’s facial look appears Caucasian, though Western audiences may not willingly agree. Other characters from the alien world, Planet Raphicca, are not particularly Western but possess exotic traits that made some Chinese viewers “break down,”<sup>119</sup> – bluish skin, big flat face, three nostrils and four fingers.



Figure 2.2-3 *Thru the Moebius Strip* (2006): Jac the protagonist (left) and Ragis, Prince of Raphicca (right).  
(Copyright owned by GDC)

In terms of narrative, the film has several story lines intertwined, – the coming of age of teenager Jac, he and his family’s adventures in an alien world, Raphicca, and a Hamlet-style revenge story between Prince Ragis and his evil uncle, King Tor of Raphicca. I would not say that these plotlines are distinctly Western, similar stories also existed in Chinese literary tradition. But definitely they are more visibly Western to Chinese audiences when played out under the Western skin and set in science-fictional, magical and medieval worlds. As mentioned

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<sup>119</sup> Anonymous. Personal interview. August 14, 2006.

earlier, science-fiction has never grown into a major animation genre in China since the “thought emancipation” era of the 1980s. The futuristic science-fictional special effects and fantastic epical scenes typical of Hollywood blockbusters pull the film closer to the category of “Western.” As Beijing Film Academy professor and director Zheng Dongtian commented, “The chase scene resembles that of *Star Wars*, the city design resembles that of *The Fifth Element*, and the war scene resembles that of *The Lord of the Rings*.”<sup>120</sup> The only sign of Chineseness, Kung Fu, was thrown in as an ingredient to give bits of Chinese taste,<sup>121</sup> but never plays a significant and convincing role in the narrative. The abundance of “Chinese symbols” (such as the image of the dragon) embedded on the sets, props and attires were jarring or meaningless when taken out of the Chinese context.

One example of catering to Western audiences at the expense of domestic audiences is the use of language and dubbing. Unlike traditional Chinese films, *Moebius* was written and dubbed in English first, and then translated and dubbed into Chinese. Two things resulting from this annoyed the Chinese audiences in particular. First, as it always is, English lines that come out of a (supposedly) American context simple do not translate into Chinese easily. Perfect spoken English dialogues, when translated into Chinese, can sound very formal or theatrical. The Chinese dubbing by seasoned voice actors such as Tong Zirong, who had done a lot of dubbing for translated films with his signature theatrical voice, only constantly reminds Chinese audiences of the foreignness of the film, further removing them from it. Second, the process of making an animation film is such that when you animate, you need to match the mouth shape of the characters to the dialogues. Obviously, the motion of the mouth that was made after English dialogues is out of sync with the Chinese-dubbed version. Thus the film looks somewhat weird to Chinese audiences, most of whom could not figure out why.

What annoys Chinese audiences even more is the credit list that comes at the end of the

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<sup>120</sup> Chen, Bin. “Mobishuan chule touzi haiyou shenme shi zhongguo de?” (What Else is Chinese except for Capital in *Moebius*). *Beijing Wanbao* (Beijing Evening News). July 27, 2006. August 14, 2006 <<http://ent.qianlong.com/4543/2006/07/27/2500@3332533.htm>>.

<sup>121</sup> According to Xu Ling, general manager of IDMT, “Local elements were added to give it a little bit of a Chinese feel,” a technique that IDMT picked up from Japanese anime guru Hayao Miyazaki. Quoted in Zhang Rui, “*Thru the Moebius Strip: A 3D Animated Coup for China*.”



film – it is all foreign names, especially the director, screenwriter and some major technical personnel. The 400 or so Shenzhen based Chinese employees of IDMT are believed to play a somewhat apprentice type of role in this production, doing a variant contracted work for the West, even though China is the sole copyright owner of this film.

### Outsourcing

The concern and repulsion of Chinese audiences, animation professionals and ordinary fans alike, for Chinese artists' engagement in contracted "processing" work for Western animation companies is rooted in the negative impact of such offshore outsourcing practices on the Chinese animation industry. Traditional 2D animation is a trade that combines art, technology and mechanical production in its production process. The less creative and more labor intensive mechanical production part of the job (in-between, color, clean-up, etc) is suitable for outsourcing purely for economic reasons. In the mid 1980s, the newly opened-up China became an ideal country where US, European and Japanese animation companies relocated their processing jobs to take advantage of low labor costs. Hong Kong or Taiwan animation companies played a major role in bringing in US or European business by setting up subsidiary processing studios on mainland China; whereas many local businessmen set up private studios to handle Japanese contracts.<sup>122</sup> It is almost overnight that animation artists working for Shanghai Art Film Studio, the country's backbone, state-run original content producer, all took off for higher-paid posts in the work-for-hire studios of the coastal areas.<sup>123</sup> This devastated the indigenous animation industry, not only in that it physically took away creative artists from local studios, but also in that it endangered local creativity by training local artists into professionals who were more familiar with pre-defined foreign designs and expressive techniques. Animation artists complained that drawing Western characters make them forget how a Chinese character should move. If a Chinese man shrugs in an animation, he may be animated by someone who has worked a lot with American studios. Recent Chinese

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<sup>122</sup> Unknown. "Zhongguo donghua jiagong de lishi yu zouxian" (The History and Trends of Chinese Animation Processing). *Chinain.com* September 26, 2005. August 3, 2007 <<http://www.chinanim.com/dh1/newsxx.asp?newsid=9577>>.

<sup>123</sup> Zhu, "Yichang mianmu mohu de katong kuanghuan."

animation productions exemplified the homogenizing effect with their easily identifiable foreign traces. *Lotus Lantern*<sup>124</sup> and *The Butterfly Lovers*<sup>125</sup> picked up a Disney flavor while others, such as TV series *Music Up*,<sup>126</sup> demonstrated a more obvious touch of Japanese anime.

However, the impact of foreign outsourcing to China is more complex than it appears and often brings blessings and curses to both sides. One of the positive aspects of doing contractual job for others is that Chinese artists strengthened their skills in certain production phases and mastered the relatively well-developed production workflow. On the other end of the spectrum, offshore outsourcing practices also backfired on foreign animation studios. One challenge is that today's contractors may become tomorrow's competitors. Local processing companies are ambitious in transforming themselves from apprentices into masters, from doing lower end mechanical jobs to getting more involved in the creative process. The past few years have seen many Chinese processing companies attempting such transformations.<sup>127</sup> Japanese studios in particular are very much concerned about the withering of the profession of animator (those who are responsible for drawing the key frames and animating characters), since it takes years of experience of doing the lower end in-between jobs to prepare someone as a good animator. But contracting in-between jobs to other countries is obviously depriving Japanese artists from accumulating the much needed experience; therefore, they now have to open up vocational schools to train personnel to ensure high quality in-house production throughout the entire process.<sup>128</sup>

After all, offshore outsourcing is a natural outcome of transnational economic flow, where lower labor costs and a competitive edge is always being sought after. In recent years Chinese

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<sup>124</sup> *Lotus Lantern* (Baoliandeng). Dir. Chang Guangxi. Shanghai Art Film Studio. 1999. Side characters were added in the film that remind people of Mushu and Cri-Kee in *Mulan*, pop style music was extravagantly used but failed to fuse with the narrative.

<sup>125</sup> *The Butterfly Lovers* (Liangshanbo yu Zhuyingtai). Dir. Cai Mingqin. Taiwan Central Motion Picture Corporation and Shanghai Art Film Studio. 2003.

<sup>126</sup> *Music Up* (Wo Wei Ge Kuang). 52 episodes. Dir. Hu Yihong. Shanghai Art Film Studio. 2001. Featuring a group of music-loving high school students' campus life, the TV series is regarded imitative of Japanese manga and anime *Slam Dunk*. Its character design also resembles those of Japanese anime with tall and slim body and colorful hairs.

<sup>127</sup> Shanghai Fantasia Animation was initially only involved in contractual works with French televisions. But starting from *Martin's Morning*, a 26 episode TV series, it's getting involved in the financing and directing part of the co-production and has gained much independent reputation for the company. Dalian Afanti International Animation Company and Shenzhen Rupert 3D Animation Ltd. are just two of the many other successful business examples.

<sup>128</sup> Japanese Economy Division. "Japan Animation Industry Trends." *Japan Economic Monthly* 15 (2005): March 26, 2007. March 26, 2007 <[http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/market/trend/jem/0506\\_jeme.pdf](http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/market/trend/jem/0506_jeme.pdf)>.

animation studios also started to contract their labor intensive jobs to North Korea or Vietnam. Its impact on the fledgling Chinese animation industry and the yet-to-be-existent local animation industry of the other developing countries may worth further study, but in a different project.

### Genuine Homemade

In the old days of the 1960s, or even as late as the 1980s, defining a Chinese animation work did not stand out as a “problem.” Everything was clearly and sufficiently Chinese – the story, the style, the theme and the crew. But this is no longer the case in the new millennium when localizing and globalizing tendencies are growing simultaneously. The national-cultural identity of a film in transnational production and consumption practices can be very elusive. As pointed out by Klein in her discussion of the diasporic production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the identity of a film depends on whether one looks at “studio ownership, sources of financing, production locale, the ethnic and legal identity of the cast and crew, audiences, narrative and cinematic style, or thematic concerns.”<sup>129</sup> *Moebius* may be less puzzling a case than *Crouching Tiger*, for at least its source of financing and copyright are indisputably Chinese.

According to the “Provisions on China-Foreign Joint Production of Films”<sup>130</sup> issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), joint production takes three forms, co-production (*hezuo*), collaborative production (*xiezu*) and commissioned production (*weituo*). Co-production requires that both sides share the burden of financing, shooting, risk and revenue; collaborative production is solely financed by the foreign party but shot within the territory of China with Chinese labor, equipment and facilities involved; commissioned production is contractual work which entails the Chinese side to do only local shooting for the other party. Among the three modes of joint production, only co-production produces “Chinese” films, for once a film passes muster with censorship, it will be cleared for theater release, whereas the other two categories will “leave the country” (and go back to their motherlands).

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<sup>129</sup> Klein, Christina. “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: A Diasporic Reading.” *Cinema Journal*. Summer 2004; 43, 4. 18-42.

<sup>130</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. “*Zhongwai hezuo shezhi dianyingpian guanli guiding*” (Provisions on China-Foreign Joint Production of Films). SARFT Regulation No.31. Effective of August 10, 2004. Accessed May 5, 2007 <<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/manage/publishfile/20/1995.html>>.

Hence there are more detailed specifications governing the practice of co-production, such as the requirement that foreign actors shall account for no more one third of the total cast and that co-produced films shall have Mandarin versions.

This regulation offers some useful criteria to decide the national identity of a film from the perspective of production. By these standards, *Moebius* is undoubtedly a Chinese film. However, when examined from the cultural perspective, *Moebius* may not be sufficiently qualified as a genuine Chinese film. Another government decree regulating China-foreign joint production of television series provides some clues which illuminate the definition of a film's cultural identity.

Article 18 of "The Provisions on China-Foreign Joint Production of Television Series"<sup>131</sup> stipulated in particular that "Any China-foreign jointly produced Television cartoons that represent themes with Chinese characteristics will be broadcast in the same status as domestic productions." What are the themes that contain adequate "Chinese characteristics?" As explained by Zhu Hong, official from the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, there are three types of them.

First, those that reflect China's opening up and reform and its modernization cause, as well as the realistic life, familial and companionate love and ethics and morality of the Chinese people. Second, those that depict in particular the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation-people, such as diligence, courage and intelligence. Thirdly, those that are aimed at building brand images of Chinese animation. The above three aspects can be described by six "Chineses", that is, "Chinese characteristic, Chinese story, Chinese image, Chinese style, Chinese vigor and Chinese spirit." These six "Chineses" congregationally construe the "Chinese characteristics" in the Provision.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. "Zhongwai hezuo zhizuo dianshiju guanli guiding" (Provisions on China-Foreign Joint Production of Television Series). SARFT Regulation No.41. Effective of October 21, 2004. Accessed May 5, 2007 <<http://www.sarft.gov.cn/manage/publishfile/20/2207.html>>.

<sup>132</sup> Zhu, Hong. Quoted in "SARFT's Zhu Hong Interprets the New Provisions on the Importation and Coproduction of Television Cartoon." *China Radio, Film and Television Magazine*. November 2004 (first half of the month). May 5 2007 <<http://www.pinglun.org/chuanmei/2006/5650.shtml>>.

The Six "Chineses" have appeared earlier in "Some Opinions on the Promotion of Our Country's Animated Film and Television Industry," a milestone government ordinance issued by SARFT in April 2004 that shows the state's resolution to revive its animation industry.

Possessing any one of these six attributes will qualify an animated film to be Chinese. Still, this interpretation is not satisfyingly clear and each of the six terms entails even more explanations. We can ignore the circular interpretation of “Chinese characteristics” with “Chinese characteristic” and focus on the other five terms. Chinese story, Chinese image and Chinese style may be distinctly identifiable as the early socialist works have shown, but Chinese vigor (*qipai*, which might be better translated as “an air of vigor”) and Chinese spirit are such idealized and airily vague terms that they offer less applicable definitive criteria than uplifting ideological guidance. Still, these terms, despite their ambiguity, are already lucid enough to foreclose *Moebius* from the category of “homemade.” It was made very clear by an official from the Film Department that, “*Moebius*’ mode (financed by China and created by the foreign party) is not what we campaign for... it lacks national characteristic.” As a result, “It won’t get the special funds from SARFT and it can’t win the Huabiao Award,” the highest honor to Chinese film which is sponsored by SARFT.<sup>133</sup>

### Why *Moebius*

Only a week after *Moebius*’s premier in Chinese theaters in August 2006, it retreated quietly, leaving some audiences complaining that they have not been able to watch it and others vigorously lampooning its miscalculation of the market. With a total investment of RMB130 million<sup>134</sup> (about US \$16.25 million), *Moebius*’s first weekend Beijing box office is only RMB142,000<sup>135</sup>, whereas *Garfield II*, which premiered on the following weekend, snatched RMB2 million within its first three days in Beijing.<sup>136</sup> Leaving competition aside, *Moebius*’ box office failure can be accounted for by a lack of imagination in story and a weakness in characterization, except for its ostensible “Westernness,” which curiously was always the first comment audiences and critics gave.

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<sup>133</sup> Ma, Rongrong. “Xiayibu guochan CG dapian zai nali?” (Where is Next Homemade CG Mega Film) *Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan* (Lifeweek) No.395. August 7, 2006. April 10, 2007 <<http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2006-08-16/0002916014.shtml>>.

<sup>134</sup> Official site of *Thru the Moebius Strip*. GDC Entertainment Ltd. 2006. <<http://www.moebiusstrip.net>>.

<sup>135</sup> Cao, “Guochan donghua yangwei’r zhaorenxian.”

<sup>136</sup> Yi, Dongfang. “Donghuapian mohuan piaofang candan” (Moebius Strip’s Box Office Fiasco). *Jinghua Shibao* (Times) August 15, 2006. April 10, 2007 <[http://epaper.jinghua.cn/html/2006-08/15/content\\_528344.htm](http://epaper.jinghua.cn/html/2006-08/15/content_528344.htm)>.

Good reviews mostly focus on the visuals of the film. Every detail on the backgrounds and the sets was carefully designed with imagination; special effects, especially the battle and chase sequences, were professionally done. As it is reported, “‘Stunning’ became the most frequently used word by experts,” – filmmakers and film scholars who attended a pre-screening followed by a discussion session.<sup>137</sup> Most exports exclaimed at the technical attainment of the animation artists. Professor Yin Hong from Tsinghua University said, “For an animation film, technique is the pass to the international market. This film is totally comparable to some mega animations in the West.”<sup>138</sup> Ironically, technique is exactly what others relentlessly debunked – technical skill is being privileged at the expense of story and character. Professor Wang Qiang from Peking University argued in the same discussion forum, “For any animation film, technique is undoubtedly important, but story is the soul that holds all elements together, it is also what can really animate all the mechanical elements of a film.”<sup>139</sup> *Moebius*’ narrative is all too predictable and stereotyped, especially when it is too easily reminiscent of sequences from films of the same genre. Even though my analysis of early Chinese animation films has shown that spectacles or scenes (*jing*) are often being sought after by Chinese artists in their artistic expression, it has to be noted that emotion (*qing*) is equally important and scenes do not make much sense without being fused with emotion. It is interesting that none of the reviews in Chinese newspapers mentioned whether or not the audiences liked Jac and other characters in the film, but only that they hated the Westernness. The only explanation I can find is that the characters have simply failed to be inscribed on the audiences. Inadequate psychological depiction distances audience from the inner world of the character. For example, why Jac’s mom never attempts to look for her husband during his seven years’ disappearance and little Jac has to take up this mission when he grows up, and why Ragis so easily turns against his best friend and his teacher on the basis of groundless accusation, is not quite satisfyingly laid out.

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<sup>137</sup> Zhu, Yuqing. “3D donghua mobisihuan zhenhan zhuanjia, zhizuo jishu kancheng yiliu” (3D Animation *Thru the Moebius Strip* Stunned Experts, State of the Art Production Technique). *Zhongguo Dianyingbao* (China Film). July 26, 2006. April 10, 2007 <<http://bt.acnow.net/Ent/2006/7/26/716043.shtml>>.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

Why was a Western-looking and a not-so-interesting-Western-looking film made in the first place, what's more, by a Chinese company? Behind the film was the Neoh brothers' dream to become a global player in computer graphics industry. Hong Kong businessman Raymond Neoh (*Liang Dingxiong*) used to run a computer graphics business in the US. Witnessing the great success of Hollywood CG films in the international market, he was instigated to start a CG business in China to tap into the lower operational costs and gain a comparative edge with Hollywood counterparts. His attorney brother, Anthony Neoh (*Liang Dingbang*), who once served as chief consultant to the China Securities Regulatory Commission, joined him in founding Global Digital Creations Holdings (GDC) in Hong Kong in 2000. They set up a mainland subsidiary, Institute of Digital Media Technology (IDMT), in Shenzhen right away and started working on *Thru the Moebius Strip*. French comics artist Jean Giraud's reputation as the creator of the art work in many Hollywood best-selling blockbusters must have played a key role in their choice of the story. But a question at the basic level is, for whom is this film made. A common dilemma faced by film industries around the world is that for any big-budget blockbuster to recoup its investment, it has to rely on the Western, especially the United States, market. The world's largest population of China does not automatically make the country the world's most profitable film consuming market. Thus, a story that is understandable to Western audiences and acceptable to Hollywood media conglomerates who dominate the world film distribution system is more desirable. *Thru the Moebius Strip* was then conceived as a piece that aimed to please the "world" audience, but not necessarily the Chinese.

It might have been a good idea to work on something like *Moebius* back in 2000, when the fantasy movie genre was still new. But the problem was, nobody in China knew how to make a computer animation film. There were computer graphic artists at most. IDMT had to start by opening up 3D animation programs to train and recruit staff (which turned out to be a more profitable side business of the company); by watching the credit titles of Hollywood animation films to decide what departments needed to be set up; and by hiring Hollywood animation artists to ensure the quality of work. By the time they figured out how to do everything, CG films

and films in the similar genres of adventure, fantasy, epic, and science fiction had already teemed onto the big screen, such as *the Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), *Shrek I & II* (2001 and 2004), and *Finding Nemo* (2003), to mention but a few. IDMT staff had to cut off sequences they had been working on for months that resembled other's films, but they still could not avoid the accusation of being "imitative" and "clichéd."

### The Power Relations

The film was finally completed after five years of hard work by four hundred animators. It was first released in 2006 in China rather than in the overseas markets as originally planned. One explanation offered by IDMT was that "it is difficult to find a Hollywood distributor who doesn't demand too much."<sup>140</sup> While that might be true, a more genuine explanation was later articulated by Jin Guoping, president of IDMT and former director general of Shanghai Art Film Studio, who succeeded the Neoh brothers after they retreated from the project in late 2004. Jin acknowledged that, partially on the basis of poor domestic box-office performance,<sup>141</sup> "We now have a more objective view on the film and a subdued market expectation. It needs to be shown for it's the fruit of four hundred people's hard work. But once it's shown, it should be wrapped up and we need to march on with our new projects."<sup>142</sup>

Predicting the film's international reception on the basis of its domestic performance seems totally contradictory to the filmmaker's initial demarcation between the national and the international. This contradiction in part can be attributed to the transfer of management. *Moebius* gives me the impression that it is devoid of an "auteur" or leader in both its production and distribution. Jean Giraud provides the blueprint of character and story, but has no further involvement; Glen Chaika owns the title of director, but local art director Chen Ming acts as the

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<sup>140</sup> Xu, Ling. Quoted in Zhang Rui. "Thru the Moebius Strip: A 3D Animated Coup for China."

<sup>141</sup> Box office revenue of *Thru the Moebius Strip* for the first weekend of its release in Beijing was RMB 142,000 yuan, while the week's box-office champion, *Mission Impossible III*, seized a total of RMB 957,000 yuan in the first weekend. A domestic low-budget production, *Crazy Stone*, scooped in 253,000 yuan. Statistics from Cao, "Guochan donghua yangwei'r zhaorenxian."

<sup>142</sup> Xie and Dai, "Liangshi xiongli."



real director who has devoted more time and work to the film;<sup>143</sup> the Neoh brothers are to a large extent responsible for the conceptualization of the film, but their passion seems to exceed their experience in the art and business of animation film; Jin Guoping is a seasoned animation artist, but he only stepped in when the film was almost completed. It is true that computer animation, unlike live-action film and traditional 2D animation, gives less room for auteurship and demands more teamwork, partly because of the heavy involvement of (intractable) computer technology. But IDMT's inconsistency in market evaluation is more reflective of its miscalculation of both the national and international audiences. The over-emphasis on the "homemade-ness" of *Moebius* and the simultaneous failure to corroborate that "homemade-ness" are what put IDMT at an awkward position. A different packaging and positioning strategy in China might have led to totally different reception result.

Likewise, *Moebius* may or may not sell in the West, depending on how it will be pitched and marketed. In the fiercely competitive global entertainment field, taste is to a large extent the product of power relations and marketing strategies. Global Hollywood has demonstrated this tellingly more than anything else. For a film like *Moebius*, the moment it starts to show on the big screen, it automatically enters into a global competition with international adversaries even if it is shown only at home. Premiered in the same week as *Mission Impossible III* and *Superman Returns* and immediately followed by *Garfield II* and *Cars* in the following week, and in front of a audience who has been pampered by many cinematic spectacles in *Titanic*, *the Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, *Moebius* has to rethink the boundaries between national and international markets and audience tastes. Leveraging on the cultural specificity and inserting truly innovative imaginations into the product may be a viable strategy for local media businesses to compete in both the local and the global markets.

From defending its Westernness by arguing that "it is not made for the domestic audience" to acknowledging that "it's not worth the money to do overseas marketing given the domestic

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<sup>143</sup> Zhong, Liang. "Chen Ming: 1.3 yi touzi mobisihuan zhi." (Chen Ming: Moebius Is Worth 130 Millions). *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan* (Southern People Weekly) September 11, 2006. March 3, 2007 <<http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/rwzk/20060901/gg/200609130135.asp>>.

reception,” IDMT has indeed come through a painful process of learning, resisting, realizing and maturing, all sort of predestined by the intricate push and pull relations between the localizing and the globalizing tendencies of cultural production under globalization.

The power relations between the dispossessed and the powerful can be seen clearly at the industrial level. The very act of making a film like *Moebius* is in itself an appropriation of the Hollywood blockbuster concept. And *Moebius* is not alone in this kind of practice. Zhang Yimou made the first Chinese attempt to emulate Hollywood blockbuster model with *Hero* (2002/2004) in all possible ways, from casts, costumes, special effects, to financing and marketing strategies. *Hero*'s overseas box office success made it a model case of “resistance as the achievement of agency through appropriation and submission.”<sup>144</sup> This kind of resistance is often regarded as derived from the ambition to become not merely consumer, but also producer of the international entertainment cinema, given the domination of imported Hollywood mega films (*dapian*) in Chinese market since the “box-office-split” practice in 1995.

In the case of *Moebius*, “appropriation” of and “submission” to Hollywood is more tellingly exemplified by IDMT's ambiguous relationship with Hollywood animation artists. Different from how the general public have imagined, these American animators (director and other technical personnel such as art director, special effects artist and visual effects artists) were not hired as supervisors that led the project and trained the team, but rather functioned as consultants and quality controllers.<sup>145</sup> Most of them were only on one-year contract with IDMT. They did make significant contribution to the making of the film by guiding the rookie Chinese animators through technical mire and setting up a high standard of quality. But out of the total length of 87 minutes of the film, only 15 seconds were done by direct participation of these consultants; the rest was figured out by IDMTers themselves. Foreign experts' role in the film is important but not overwhelmingly decisive. The reason why a lengthy list of English names of these consultants lavishly appears in the credit title and is highlighted in all publicity materials as if

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<sup>144</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 211.

<sup>145</sup> Zhang, Wenbo. “Bentu donghupian *mobisihuan* he *xiaobing zhangga* de jiannan zhilu” (The Rough Road of Domestic Animation Films, *Thru the Moebius Strip* and *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*). *Xinjingbao* (Beijing News) July 22. 2006. August 10, 2006 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2006-07-22/13561168225.html>>.

they are the power engine of the film is merely a marketing strategy to impress distributors, American and Chinese alike. Zhang Yimou has also resorted to the same strategy when promoting his *Hero* in the US market.<sup>146</sup> Quentin Tarantino, who does not really have much to do with the film, is listed as the US presenter for the film for his well-established reputation in the film circle. It is exactly this kind of appropriating with a purpose of resisting that further blurs the boundaries between nation-states in international coproduction and makes it harder to locate a film like *Moebius*. The issue of resistance also becomes more elusive. If there is no longer a clear line between the resister and the aggressor, then is it still a resistance, which is based upon the premise of separation between two bodies? Thus Berry and Farquhar prompt us to rethink the idea of resistance and suggest that “resistance under transnational conditions needs to be understood not as rejection, but through ambivalent metaphors of exchange ranging from theft, poaching, and appropriation, to paying a price.”<sup>147</sup>

### Paying a Price

But for *Moebius*, is it too high a price that is paid? The official number of budget for *Moebius* is RMB130 million yuan (about US \$16.25 million), which might not be very big compared with real Hollywood CG blockbuster such as *Toy Story* (1995) with a budget of US\$30 million, *Shrek I* (2001) with US\$60 million and *Shrek II* (2004) with a production budget of US\$75 million and a marketing budget of US\$ 50 million; plus the 130 million yuan also includes expenditure on infrastructure such as office space and computer workstations. However, Chinese blockbusters are bound to be different from those of America’s in their financial scales. Compared with the year’s box office winner, live action film *Crazy Stone*, which cost only RMB 3 million yuan (about US\$375,000) to make, *Moebius* is indeed an expensive film. It is also based on these numbers that critics, mainly those from within the industry, criticize IDMT for prioritizing technology over creativity and story. It is true that the core creative ideas of the story and character was preset

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<sup>146</sup> Meng, Jing. “dapian zhimi” (The Myth of Mega Film). *Sanlian Shenghuo Zhoukan* (Lifeweek) October 10, 2006. February 10, 2007 <<http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2006-10-19/0000116654.shtml>>.

<sup>147</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 205.

by others, but to *Moebius* producers, the execution is equally important and even more crucial at the moment. If we consider the fact that when the project started in 2000, only a handful Chinese people had an idea of what CG meant, and by the time the film was finished, a thousand highly competent CG animators had graduated from IDMT; as well as the fact that 99 percent of the film was made by people who had never worked on a film, not to mention a 3D computer animation film, then maybe it is fair to say that IDMT did create something.

As contended by Jin Guoping, "*Thru the Moebius Strip* is an irreplicable case occurred under a very special circumstance." It should not be ridiculed as a sad failure, but rather valued as a rare expedition through which a Chinese CG film production mechanism is being tested and established. This echoes with founder of IDMT, Anthony Neoh's earlier statement that no matter how the global market treats his first feature-length foray into 3D computer animation, commercial success is not the most important thing. "This film is more of a calling card for us," said Anthony Neoh, "our goal, within 5 to 10 years, is to be much less involved in the production side, and much more on the creative side, in order to really get this industry off the ground in China."<sup>148</sup> Ever since *Moebius*, IDMT has indeed established itself as a flagship CG company in China and even Asia, attracting many new clients. It also made quite a few other original short pieces that extraordinarily combined 3D technology with traditional arts. Zhang Tianxiao, president of Shanghai Fantasia Animation, expressed similar view. After many years of engagement in contractual works with French televisions, Fantasia is now getting more involved in the financing and directing parts of co-production and thus gaining much independent reputation. For Zhang Tiaoxiao, coproduction is a large step forward than working for contract, even though they may appear similar to outsiders. This echoes with the Chinese government's definition on homemade through the regulation of three types of joint productions. "Coproduction gets you into the inside of the trade and this is even dearer than profit."<sup>149</sup> One animation artist that I interviewed brought the idea of colluding with Western capitalism to its

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<sup>148</sup> French, Howard W. "China Hurries to Animate its Film Industry." *New York Times* December 1, 2004. January 20, 2007 <<http://www.fantasticfilmsinternational.com/nyt-article.html>>.

<sup>149</sup> Zhang, Tianxiao, quoted in unknown, "Zhongguo donghua jiaogong de lishi yu zouxiang".

extreme by suggesting that the fastest way for a Chinese CG company to grow is to get acquired by a foreign magnate.<sup>150</sup> “Yes we may have to submit our pride to their disposal, but as soon as we grow up, we can pursue our own dreams,” said the young man.

These entrepreneurs see their practice as a means of learning before they can compete in the international film market. Subjecting to and colluding with global capitalism is intended for the larger project of boosting the national animation industry. Transitory submission to the West is going to be succeeded by self-reliance sooner or later. Here the nation is imagined not through the text of the film, but rather through the context of the film – the production experience, the technology, long-term business opportunity, and their implication on national cinema.

### An Ambiguous Hybrid

In the above sections, I have discussed how the national identity of an animation film is complicated in international coproduction; on the cultural and textual level, *Moebius* also struggles hard to define or identify its own identity.

The film embodies “the most basic inner contradiction of globalization, namely, the push and pull between the local and the global.”<sup>151</sup> On the one hand, the logic of global entertainment forces local artists to produce homogenized cultural products that “can be effortlessly consumed by audiences from all over the world” (meaning the West in particular). On the other hand, films artists also feel compelled to hold on to local tradition and culture to maintain a linkage to their own cultural roots and identity. In *Moebius*, although the characters and the world were pre-designed by foreign artists, they came to IDMT only in very simple sketches. The modeling of the characters, attires and sets and props was in the hands of Chinese animators. They attached the image of the dragon – a symbol that most visibly and adequately represents China – onto the city gate, the clothing and weapons of the soldiers, the battle scenes and the crowd celebration scene. On one of the posters of the film, Jac poses in a

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<sup>150</sup> Anonymous. Personal interview. August 20, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> Lu, Sheldon H. “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Bouncing Angels: Hollywood, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Transnational Cinema.” *Chinese-Language Film : Historiography, Poetics, Politics*. Ed. Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. 231.

classical Chinese Kung Fu stance – both he and his father are avid fans of Chinese Kung Fu, practicing it as a sort of personal hobby, which is somewhat weird and embodies a utopian idealism that in the future Chinese martial arts, or maybe even Chinese culture as a whole, will become a common practice among all human beings. Another instance of incorporating martial arts elements into the film, where Jac trains Prince Ragis' troop to play Kung Fu in preparation for the imminent battle with the evil King, only appears to be unnatural if we ask how much this is going to help in a medieval style war where weapons such as swords and fireballs as in the film, play a bigger role in the fight than boxing and kicking. Here the motif of Kung Fu is used more as a cultural symbol to satisfy the artists' search for their own roots than as a cultural spectacle to satisfy the Western audiences' thirst for oriental content.

On the global stage of cultural exchange, as noted by Jenkins, there has been this new phenomenon that multinational conglomerates “no longer define their production or distribution decisions in national terms but seek to identify potentially valuable content and push it into as many markets as possible.”<sup>152</sup> *Moebius* on the other hand, is a different and more ambiguous case. As a media business, it has never been nationally or locally established before it starts the exploration of the international market. Instead of extending a national success into an international one, IDMT works right into the international from onset with a text like *Moebius*. It curiously leaves the national out, as if there is a clear-cut line between the two and the national does not constitute part of the international. A business decision (which is its very first) based largely upon the premise of low national operational costs and high international profit margin makes it vulnerable to accusations of clinging to the “work-for-hire” mentality and placing the international above the national. As other national or regional producers see the global circulation of their products as both “expanding their revenue stream” and as “a source of national pride,” primarily by exporting culturally specific contents, IDMT has neither quite figured out how to “expand the revenue stream” with an overt neglect of the globally coveted China market, nor how to play with the issue of national pride in its first 3D foray, a project standing

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<sup>152</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: NYU Press, 2006. 110.

somewhere in between a contractual job and an original production, a Western story and a Chinese desire.

Contrary to the idea of colluding with global capitalism in a certain sense, *Moebius* can also be read as retaliation to Americanization/Westernization of Chinese narratives, such as *Mulan* (1998), by Disney. From a different angle, it embodies the artists' belief that to be international one does not have to be national. Unlike Japanese manga and anime artists who furiously protested against Disney's appropriation of Japanese anime series *Kimba, the White Lion* for its *Lion King*<sup>153</sup> without giving due credit to Osamu Tezuka, the creator, the Chinese reaction to Disney appropriation is more complex. There is of course the discontent towards Disney's willful distortion of a long-cherished Chinese story; on the other hand, there is also a mixed feeling of admiration for its skillful execution of the story and self-criticism for not being able to make a real Chinese film of our own out of it. These mentalities have urged some Chinese artists to produce better Chinese stories than the foreigners do and inspired others not to be confined to Chinese narratives in their creation and feel comfortable about appropriation. Obviously the appropriation of the *Moebius* story is not a very comfortable experience for Chinese artists, who yet have a hard time balancing between telling a Western story in the Western way and weaving Eastern agency into a Western story.

When talking about corporate hybridity, a business practice in which a national media industry absorbs and transforms elements from another cultural space, Jenkins notices that different from the "hybridity" in its traditional sense "as a strategy of the dispossessed as they struggle to resist or reshape the flow of Western media into their culture," corporate hybridity indicates "a position of strength rather than vulnerability or marginality, one that seeks to control rather than contain transcultural consumption."<sup>154</sup> *Moebius*, however, is a different species of hybridity – its source material is taken from the West but not transformed in a significant way to become East, and not intended so. It is only filtered through the hands of semi-autonomous

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<sup>153</sup> Price, Shinobu. "Cartoons from another Planet: Japanese Animation as Cross-Cultural Communication." *The Journal of American Culture* 24.1-2 (2001): 162. *The Lion King* resembles *Kimba, the White Lion*, a 1960s Japanese TV show in many ways, including name of the protagonist, plot and even camera angle.

<sup>154</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 112.

Eastern artists who are not supposed to and do not have the power to exert much cultural agency on it before it is thrown back to the West (as the plan was), but only do so when they can not help. This hybridity does manifest an aspiration on the part of IDMT to gain such a position of strength, but only betrays its vulnerability and marginality for in reality it is standing at an inferior position. Until a media producer is more confident in and has more control of the audience and the market, it is very hard for it to explore the so-called corporate hybridity strategy which entails the capability to wield cultural agency on traditions from two different origins. For a young company like IDMT, whose employees have never worked on anything closer to a CG film, things are definitely harder.

### The Japanese Lesson

The disjuncture between Chinese artists' contradictory perceptions of their duty – to tell a Chinese story or to tell whatever a story – raises the question of how important it is for local artist to tell local story. When commenting on *Moebius*, Liuxiao Lingtong, the most popular impersonator of Monkey King on TV screen, expressed a concern that “if we know only how to copy Western things, Chinese animation film will end up in a dead end.”<sup>155</sup> Underestimating the creative agency of artists, though, Liuxiao Lingtong nevertheless gives voice to a deep sense of crisis among Chinese artists. The above disjuncture also raises the question of to what extent how a story is told shall be determined by to whom it is told – is there a reception gap between audiences of different cultural origins and if yes, how to fill that gap. In this respect the adventure of Japanese anime in the US market serves as a good parallel case for us to look into cross-cultural reception and communication. Since it is so hard to pinpoint Japaneseness in Japanese anime down to clearly definable traits that we are often tempted to conclude that there is not any attempt to retain Japaneseness or that Japanese artists have the world audiences in mind so that they avoid showing any cultural traces of Japan. One characteristic

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<sup>155</sup> Wang, Lu. “Mobisihuan yin zhengyi, Liuxiao Lingtong: zhaoban shi tiao sihutong” (*Moebius* Raises Controversy, Liuxiao Lingtong: Copying Leads to Dead End). *Chongqing Wanbao* (Evening) August 3, 2006. April 10, 2007 <<http://ent.tom.com/1002/1011/200683-206277.html>>.



shared by many Japanese anime characters is the large-eyed, slim- and tall-figured and colorful-haired image. None of these traits is true to the biological attributes of the Japanese or any other race on this planet. The subject matter of anime also covers as many genres as there are, ranging from romance to adventure, fantasy, science-fiction, fairytale, pornography and soap operas, set in all kinds of real or imagined time and space. However, as Shinobu Price has sufficiently summed up, there are at least five signs of Japaneseness imbued in Japanese anime at a deeper level. Anime is indeed made in Japan by Japanese artists within a Japanese context, and with only the Japanese audiences in mind.<sup>156</sup>

As pointed out by Allison, during the early days of Japanese anime's arrival at the US market, they simply did not sell very well if bearing too strong a cultural "odor."<sup>157</sup> As a result, all cultural products from Japan had to go through the so-called "de-odorization" process to strip off culturally specific images or ideas that would conjure up the place in the minds of the consumers.<sup>158</sup> But what Allison discovers from her research is that the degree of Japaneseness does not necessarily affect the reception of Japanese TV programs in the US (make it less popular). What matters most to audiences on both sides of the Pacific is the story and the character, whether or not they can be easily identified with by the audience and at the same time take them into a fantastic imagined world.<sup>159</sup> And then, from a decade or even a bit longer ago, came a shift in taste and marketing strategy from both Japan and US. There occurred a "global fad for Japanese products that has now come to value, even fetishize, their 'Japaneseness',"<sup>160</sup> resulting in the mythical success of Japanese cultural products around the globe.

This seems to reconfirm my early proposition that what tanks *Moebius* is not its overt

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<sup>156</sup> Price, "Cartoons from another Planet," 156.

<sup>157</sup> Iwabuchi, Koichi. "Return to Asia? Japan in the Global Audiovisual Market." *Media International Australia* 77 (1995): 94-106. Koichi Iwabuchi, has coined the expression "culturally odorless products" (from the Japanese *mukokuseki*, "no nationality") to characterize how Japanese audiovisual products (including singers, idols, musical groups, and television programs) are marketed in intra-Asia by overtly removing any traces of their origins. Quoted from Anne Allison, "A Challenge to Hollywood? Japanese Character Goods Hit the US." *Japanese Studies* 20.1 (2000): 70.

<sup>158</sup> Allison, Anne. "A Challenge to Hollywood? Japanese Character Goods Hit the US." *Japanese Studies* 20.1 (2000): 67-88.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Allison, Anne. In "Millennial Monsters: An Interview with Anne Allison," a personal interview by Henry Jenkins. *The Official Blog of Henry Jenkins*. February 22, 2007. <[http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/02/in\\_the\\_book\\_you\\_draw.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/02/in_the_book_you_draw.html)>.

Western-ness or poor fusion of Eastern-ness with Western-ness, but rather its poorly imagined and executed story and character which fail to pull the audience in and take them away. A film that cannot move the local audience is instantly faced with the challenge of how to move the world audience. Maybe in this sense, to be international does entail to be national first. It is exactly why people are more concerned with the issue of “non-Chineseness” than with the real issue of “creativity” that makes this film interesting, a question I will return to later in this thesis.

The Japanese anime’s success around the world also offers Chinese animation artists another lesson – a country’s cultural exportation capability is after all connected to its economic strength over others. No one would contend that Japan’s ability to influence others through the attraction of their culture, values and ideas, i.e., its soft power,<sup>161</sup> is not derived from and powered up by the rise of Japan as a regional and global economic superpower, i.e., its hard power.

As an animation film, *Thru the Moebius Strip* may not be as successful as its contemporary counterparts in the market place. As a text and an industrial practice, however, it is intriguingly rich and tells a lot about the conditions of domestic cultural production under globalization. As the degree of internationalization on the levels of film production, distribution and consumption increases, some local media producers, in sharp contrast with their predecessors of the 1960s through early 1990s, vigorously explore new texts, new markets, and new means of production. These new practices not only further blur the national and cultural identities of a media product and the boundaries between the national and the foreign, but also bring challenges to the national media industry. From *Moebius* we already see a disjuncture between the policy maker’s and the media producer’s notions of “homemade.” Where this disjuncture originates and where it leads to will be further explored in what follows.

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<sup>161</sup> The term soft power was first coined by Harvard professor of international politics, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., in the second half of the 1980s. He further developed the concept in his 2004 book *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*. In his words, “The basic concept of power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three major ways to do that: one is to threaten them with sticks; the second is to pay them with carrots; the third is to attract them or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks.” He argues that hard power and soft power together are responsible for the rise and decline of states.

### Chapter 3: New Revolutionary Realism as the National



Figure 3.1 *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (2006): Zhang Ga in a soldier's uniform.  
(Copyrights owned by Beijing Youth Film Studio and Forbidden City Film)

In contrast to the previous chapter, this one may drag my readers back in time to the chaotic days of revolution and war. *Xiao Bing Zhang Ga* (Little Soldier Zhang Ga), the case I am going to study in this chapter, is an animation based on a 1963 live action film about a child hero in the anti-Japanese war in the 1940s. Again, this is one of the very few animation films made in recent years. The film is an interesting appropriation of the old “Red Classics”<sup>162</sup> text and a continuation of the socialist realistic tradition of Chinese national cinema. It is at the same time a bold attempt to subvert the old national school of animation and to explore a new national style based upon innovation and creativity. By delineating the dialogisms *Zhang Ga* engaged in with its past and contemporary counterparts, this chapter aims to reveal the intricate relationships between the people and the state and between the ideology and the market in regard to cultural production. The ambiguous identity of *Zhang Ga* testifies that even when economic liberalization is in full swing in China, the socialist impact is far from subdued. Initiated and directed by Sun Lijun, professor and dean of the Animation School of Beijing Film Academy,

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<sup>162</sup> “Red Classics” is a post-Cultural Revolution phrase which is usually believed to be devised in the late 1990s to refer to revolutionary novels produced in the 1950s and 60s. It was soon borrowed by nostalgia-driven people to refer to any classical narratives including literature, film, music and photography, that depict the glorious social political movements carried out by the Chinese people and the life of Chinese workers, peasants and soldiers in the pre-socialist and socialist eras under the leadership of the Communist Party.

the film shows how one man's dream is linked to that of a nation.

*Little Soldier Zhang Ga* is adapted from a popular children's novel written in the early 1960s<sup>163</sup> and a 1963 live-action film<sup>164</sup> based on the former. Based on the life story of a real soldier, the novel and the film tell about young boy Zhang Ga's adventure during the Resistance War to Japanese invasion in the 1940s. Both the novel and the film are set in a real place in Northern China, Baiyangdian Lake area, where the original story took place. Zhang Ga's grandmother is killed by the Japanese right in front of Zhang Ga when she tries to protect a wounded and wanted guerrilla soldier. Filled with agony and rage, Zhang Ga is determined to have his vengeance. He sets out for a journey in search of the anti-Japanese guerrilla led by the Communist Party, aspiring to become one of them. After overcoming much hardship, he finally grows into an excellent boy scout and brings victory to his family and his people.

In sharp contrast with *Thru the Moebius Strip*, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* is a film that features a distinctly Chinese place, Chinese time, Chinese heroes and Chinese history. Also different from the early Chinese School works which relied heavily on traditional themes of myth and folklore, *Zhang Ga* takes up the theme of patriotism and revolution and falls into the category of "Red Classics," a literary tradition which thrived fifty years ago and is coming back in great force to the terrain of contemporary popular entertainment. With a dual sense of nationalism in it – resistance to Japanese invasion on the screen and resistance to Western invasion in the Chinese animation market off the screen – the film appears more nationalist than national. Has it been assimilated into the nationalist propaganda scheme of the state, or in other words, is it a state-supported "main-melody," or mainstream film?<sup>165</sup> Well, maybe yes, maybe no. Through the following analysis, I would like to propose that we understand Sun and his practice as a unique instance situated between the public and the private, the mainstream and the

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<sup>163</sup> Xu, Guangyao. "Xiaobing Zhangga (Little Soldier Zhang Ga)." *Pingyuan Liehuo* (Raging Flames on the Plain). Written in 1958, published in 1961.

<sup>164</sup> Directed by Cui Wei and Ouyang Hongying. Script by Xu Guangyang. Beijing Film Studio. 1963.

<sup>165</sup> Sometimes referred to as "leitmotif films", "main melody films" are those that are financially subsidized and politically supported by the state. They usually depict historic moments in the communist revolution, lives of important communist leaders, and stories of model worker and cadres. There are overlaps between "Red Classics" and "main melody" in themes. The difference is that the former refers to works done before 1976, the end of Cultural Revolution, while the latter refers to contemporary works depicting either early revolutionary histories or, in many cases, contemporary "heroes" in the socialist construction.

avant-garde, and the national ideology and the market.

The emergence of a film like *Zhang Ga* at this moment in history requires a closer analysis of at least two questions. First, why Red Classics? What is *Zhang Ga* trying to construct or deconstruct with an old text? Red Classics, as a special genre of literary and art work produced under centralized ideological control and consumed with great fervor by the populace during its heyday in the 1950s and 60s, deserves careful critical examination in itself. On a different level, the revival of Red Classics in twenty-first century China, where people have gained more control over what cultural product to make and consume and cultural production has become a much commercialized activity, is puzzling and interesting. To look into the history of Red Classics will illuminate the socio-political contexts within which the modern *Zhang Ga* is situated and help us understand its production better.

On a second level, why the Red Classics genre and moreover, a war film for an animation? Whereas a cartoon is capable of communicating all kinds of messages, including political propaganda,<sup>166</sup> it is usually the fun and fantastic aspects of the medium that are exploited in today's commercial animation industry. A realistic war, on the other hand, is a grave topic. There seems to be a mismatch between the form and the content. There is also a mismatch between the character and the story – it is not only a war film, but a children-in-war film. *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* is not the first animation film that puts children and war side by side – there has been the Japanese animation film *Grave of the Fireflies*.<sup>167</sup> Unlike *Grave of the Fireflies*, in which children appear as victims of the war, *Zhang Ga* has the child directly involved in the war as a fighter. This is especially difficult for Western audiences to understand.

The nature of Red Classics as texts of revolutionary history implies a distinct tendency toward realism in its subject matter; the same realism had also informed the socialist realistic cinema significantly. The old cinematic realism (mostly in live action cinema) and its new representation in today's animation cinema, as well as the implication of realism for the

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<sup>166</sup> An example of this kind of practice can be Disney's war-time propaganda shorts. *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi*, for example, is an anti-Nazi animation short released in 1943.

<sup>167</sup> *Grave of the Fireflies*. Dir. Takahata Isao. Studio Ghibli, 1988.

modernization of Chinese animation cinema will be the main entryways into my examination of *Zhang Ga*.

One thing noteworthy is that since its completion in 2005, the animated film of *Zhang Ga* has gone through tremendous difficulties in getting commercial release. Only at the time of this writing (April 2007) did *Zhang Ga* finally get shown in theaters to young students with free admission, which we call “public service screening.” The screening lasts only a week and reaches approximately 300,000 primary and middle school students, which is far from the market scale Sun Lijun anticipated for his first feature film. Since I have not been able to watch the movie in theater or on DVD, my analysis of the film is based upon a range of secondary sources. These sources include: two production books in which the filmmakers painstakingly describe their production process with images and texts, and cover issues of screenplay, character design, technology, financing, etc.; a live action film of the same title made in 1963 on which the animation is based; and a number of interviews with the filmmakers done both by the media and myself. These secondary materials have provided me with a reasonable amount of information regarding the visual appearance, plotline and behind-the-scene production matters. Without doubt, the lack of experience of watching the film “live” hinders me from getting more subtlety in the analysis of the text. The fact that a Red Classics film (which usually enjoys the red tape administrative promotion) can not get commercial release easily is itself an interesting topic of inquiry.

### Red Classics

The origin of the term “Red Classics” is beyond scholar’s knowledge. One thing for sure is that it was not born with the Red Classics texts themselves some forty or fifty years ago, but was coined very recently upon their return to the realm of popular entertainment. One view holds that it originated from the pop music industry where some very imaginative producers remixed the revolutionary songs with pop style accompaniment and vocal. This remix turned out

to be extremely salable and soon grew into a big genre of Red Classics music.<sup>168</sup> A more widely accepted view holds that the term originated from the “Red Classics Series” of the 1950s and 60s novels republished by People’s Literature Press in 1997.<sup>169</sup> The term is generally used to refer to literature, music, theater and photography works on revolutionary themes produced in the 1950s and 60s. In a broader sense, it also refers to any such creations between 1921, the founding of the Communist Party of China, and 1976, the end of the Cultural Revolution.

The examination of the revival of Red Classics first involves temporal issues. The main body of the texts, the 1950s and 60s literature and films, are devoted to the 1930s and 40s revolutions against the Japanese and the Nationalists. *Zhang Ga*, for instance, is a story happened in the year of 1943, written in 1958 and filmed in 1963. The present revival of Red Classics solicits a retrospect not on the original events of the revolutions per se, but rather on the texts produced at a later time and the social and cultural conditions surrounding those texts.

The idea of devoting art and literature to political ends can be traced back to Mao Zedong’s 1942 speech on Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature. Mao asserted that art and literature should serve the masses, namely, the workers, peasants, soldiers and petty bourgeois, with a clear goal of promoting the cause of proletarian revolution. This speech has since been used as a cultural policy guideline throughout Mao’s era and beyond. Thus, the “Red Classics” texts were, without any doubt, created under the authoritarian regime of the Communist Party as part and parcel of the national ideological campaign to solidify that regime in the early days of its founding. Huang Ziping summarizes the canonization of the revolutionary history as the follows:

To narrate prescribed historical events within the limits of prescribed ideologies, so as to achieve the goals of the prescribed ideology – they (Red Classics) are charged with the task of canonizing the freshly foregone “revolutionary history,” of narrating the original myth, heroic romance and ultimate promise of the revolution. In doing so, it is to hold together the great hope and great fear of the contemporary people, to attest to the legitimacy of contemporary reality, to construct the nation people’s subjectivity within the

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<sup>168</sup> Chen, Chong. “An Essay on ‘Red Classics’”. *Free Discussion of Literature* (Wenxue ziyou tan). 2004. Issue 4.

<sup>169</sup> Wang, Chunyan. “‘Hongse jingdian’ yanjiu zongshu” (A Summary of Studies on “Red Classics”). *Hainan Shifan Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Hainan Normal University) Vol.19, Issue 1. (2006): 27-31.

new order established by this revolution, through nation-wide writing and reading.<sup>170</sup>

Here the term “canon” is used in a distinctly different sense than in a Western context. In the West, the term canon is typically used to encompass what are generally recognized as the most important works in a particular artistic tradition. Here in this thesis, however, I am using the term “canon” more or less interchangeably with “classics” as in “Red Classics.” They are the same word in Chinese, “*jingdian*,” referring to a body of revolution-themed texts growing out of the socialist propaganda tradition. In a broader sense, this canon can be any work that praises the Communist cause and glorifies the proletarian people. It is an officially sanctioned and encouraged type of cultural production. Thus, not surprisingly, many “canons” were created to be canons, or, from the very moment they were created, they were canons already.<sup>171</sup> As illustrated by Huang Ziping, the process of “canonization” is not to choose from a wide body of works the best ones, but rather to literature-ize or mythify the “canonical” history of revolution. In a narrower sense, some of these original “canons,” through a process of consumption, selection, and inheriting, become truer canons that are considered to have higher literary or aesthetic values by critics and layman.

In the years that followed the Cultural Revolution, literary criticism bombarded these so-called canons, questioning their artistic values, attacking on their degradation into instruments of ideological propaganda. This is part of the 1980s intellectual movement in China. The rise (roughly from 1949 to 1976) and fall (roughly from 1976 to 1997) of Red Classics indicates a round of ideological combat in China when the country transformed from Mao’s era to Deng’s, yet the revival of Red Classics in the twenty-first century is far more complicated than its previous rise and fall. The “re-canonization” of Red Classics, either by way of rereading old texts or adapting old texts into new ones, is believed to be pulled by the still strong ideological control of the party on one hand and pushed by media producer’s lust to make easy and safe

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<sup>170</sup> Huang, Ziping. *Huilan zhong de xushu* (Narration in the Lime Circle). Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe (Shanghai Weiyi Publishing House), 2001. 2.

<sup>171</sup> Yang, Jingjian. “Hongse jingdian, zai xiandaixing xushi zhong lijie he chanshi” (Red Classics: Understanding and Interpreting within the Discourse of “Modernity”). *Dongyue Luncong* (Dongyue Tribune) Vol.27, Issue 1. (2006): 105-111.



money on the other – collusion between the state propaganda scheme and the market-driven economic motivation. On a cultural level, the spiritual vanity and psychological anxiety caused by the fast changing social conditions and the overthrow of the proletariat utopianism can be responsible for the hunger for this seemingly obsolete genre. The spiritual vacuity needs to be filled in and the old values need to be reconfirmed through rereading of old revolutionary classics. *Zhang Ga*, as noted by film artist Yu Lan, is a piece that has “impacted three generations.”<sup>172</sup> The three generations as I understand it are, the old generation who had gone through the revolutionary era of the 1930s and 1940s themselves; the middle-aged generation who grew up in the 1950s through the 1970s in the bombardment of the revolutionary media texts, and the younger generation of the 1980s and 1990s who are distanced from the history and the canons and need to be educated about it. Sun would fit into the middle-aged group; his target audience is mainly the third generation, but also includes the nostalgic first and second generations.

To me, the revival of the Red Classics is also, to a large extent, magnified or intensified by the development to new media technologies. As far as my personal experience goes, many of the old canonical texts have never really retreated from the mainstream propaganda sphere. Not a single year of my primary, middle and high school and college (mostly during the 1980s and the early 1990s) went without having some sort of school-wide ceremony singing revolutionary songs together. It is the prevalence of tape recorder in the late 1980s and the early 1990s (the old-fashioned kind with loudspeakers) that gave the remix of revolutionary songs a market and transformed it into a form of popular entertainment. The current fever to readapt Red Classics films or model operas into television drama is another example of the media change. Consequently, the revival of Red Classics is not only a simple revisit to the old texts, but always involves modernization of these old texts through the filter of new media.

It is the remake of the old canons that makes Red Classics an issue of critical debate. Since Red Classics is the narrative formed along the construction of a “modern nation-state,”

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<sup>172</sup> Yu, Lan. Quoted from Sun, Lijun, *Shiming: Xiaobing Zhangga zhizuo da jiemi* (Mission: the Art of Zhang Ga). Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe (China Film Press), 2006.

the way one interprets and evaluates it is indicative of how he or she interprets, evaluates and envisions the construction of a modern nation-state, which is exactly what makes the issue of remake controversial and delicate. Two tendencies in the modernization of Red Classics are particularly irritating to loyal defenders of classical revolutionary texts. One is the overt commercialization and vulgarization of Red Classics; the other is the spoof of Red Classics. The former is seen in the prevailing practice of adapting revolutionary novels or films into television dramas, an easy and safe way for producers to make profit. Accompanying the adaptation is always either unscrupulous tampering or melodramatization of the original texts. The story of Zhang Ga was also made into a 20-episode TV series in 2004, which was rigorously criticized by battlefield comrade of real “Zhang Ga”<sup>173</sup> and fans of the original film for its lack of authenticity. The latter is represented by the incident of “*Sparkling Red Star*” spoof. Innocent heroes in the film were appropriated to satire the corruptions behind CCTV’s Young Singer Contest.<sup>174</sup>

### Socialist Realism

What sets *Zhang Ga* apart from China’s past feature animations<sup>175</sup> and most of the world’s is a strong taste for revolutionary realism characteristic of Red Classics. Socialist realism was a dominant mode in Chinese national cinema between 1949 and 1978. However, in the socialist animation cinema, realism was not as prevailing as the fantasy genre of myth, folklore and fairytales, even though realistic subject matter was also animated for propaganda purpose. *The Heroic Sisters of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan yingxiong xiaojiemei*, 1964), for example, is an

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<sup>173</sup> The archetype of Zhang Ga has a different name.

<sup>174</sup> Created by someone called Hu Dao Ge, apparently a parody alluding to Hu Ge, who mashed up Chen Kaige’s blockbuster film *Promise* and ushered in the internet spoof age in China, a short video entitled “Pan Dongzi Goes to CCTV Young Singer Contest” caused a buzz on the internet before the 2006 kickoff of the Contest. Pan Dongzi, the little hero in the original film, was recast into a shameless speculator who wants to gain fame and wealth through participation in CCTV’s Young Singer Contest. He achieved his goal by bribing the judges with money and his mother’s sex.

<sup>175</sup> Feature length animation films that are over 60 minutes long include *Princess Iron Fan*, directed by Wan Brothers, Xinhua Film, 1941; *A Piece of Tapestry*, directed by Qian Jiajun, Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1959; *Havoc in Heaven*, directed by Wan Laiming, Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1961, 1964; *Nezha Conquers the Sea*, directed by Wang Shuchen, et al. Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1979. *A Tale of the Heavenly Book*, directed by Wang Shuchen and Qian Yunda, Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1983; *Golden Monkey Conquers the Demon*, directed by Te Wei, Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1985; *Lotus Lantern*, directed by Chang Guangxi, Shanghai Art Film Studio, 1999; *The Butterfly Lovers* (*Liangshanbo yu Zhuyingtai*), directed by Cai Mingqin, Taiwan Central Motion Picture Corporation and Shanghai Art Film Studio, 2003. All these films are based on Chinese mythology, legends and folktales.

animation film based upon the real story of real heroes.<sup>176</sup> However, this genre did not carry over to the contemporary date because of its overt propaganda tone and oftentimes over-emphasis on class struggle.

Which is more kindred to *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* might be Japanese anime *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), written and directed by Isao Takahata of Studio Ghibli. Also centered on war and children, the film is an adaptation of the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Akiyuki Nosaka, intended as a personal apology to the author's own sister who died of famine during World War II. Takahata is said to have been greatly affected by Italian Neorealism and French New Wave films during the 1960s, whose influence is evident in the amount of attention to detail he pays in displaying everyday mundane events.<sup>177</sup>

Animation artists that I have talked to (mostly from BFA Animation School) never hide their admiration for Japanese animation artists and admit that the realistic tendency seen in their works, such as those by Isao Takahata, Hayao Miyazaki,<sup>178</sup> Mamoru Oshii<sup>179</sup> and Katsuhiro Ōtomo<sup>180</sup>, has had a great influence on them. They also expressed a wish to create something like that. Li Jianping, an animation director at China Central Television's Animation Section, has made a TV series *People in My Dream (Mengli ren)*, which relied on realistic subject matter and a realistic style. Another young animator also wished that she could make stories about things happening around her, "with dreams woven in at the same time."<sup>181</sup> But it would be too hasty to conclude that Chinese animation artists, including Sun Lijun, have acquired the realistic tendency from Japanese anime. In my view, Chinese realism, or the realism of *Zhang Ga* to be more accurate, and Japanese realism come out of different traditions. It might be helpful to look

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<sup>176</sup> It tells the story of two Mongolian sisters, one 11 and the other 9, who, in order to protect the sheep flock of the commune, fought with a blizzard heroically.

<sup>177</sup> "Isao Takahata". *Wikipedia*. March 9, 2007. Wikipedia Foundation, Inc. April 5, 2007 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isao\\_Takahata](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isao_Takahata)>.

<sup>178</sup> Hayao Miyazaki, born January 5, 1941, is a director of animated films and a co-founder of the animation studio and production company Studio Ghibli. Miyazaki is the creator of many popular animated feature films, as well as manga. His best known works are *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*, etc.

<sup>179</sup> Mamoru Oshii, born August 8, 1951, is a Japanese animation and live-action film writer and director famous for his philosophy-oriented storytelling.

<sup>180</sup> Katsuhiro Ōtomo, born April 14, 1954, is a Japanese manga artist and director. He is perhaps best known for being the creator of the manga *Akira* and its anime adaptation, which are extremely famous and influential.

<sup>181</sup> Anonymus. Personal interview. June 15, 2006.

back into the history of Chinese cinema to trace the realistic convention in more depth. By history, I mean not the history of animation only, but the larger history of Chinese cinema, which centered more on live action film. I want to pull the realistic genre out of the context of animation and place it into a larger consideration of the socialist realism movement, which marked Chinese national cinema in the 1950s and the 1960s.

The discussion of socialist cinema overlaps with that of Red Classics in many ways since the former is a historical and generic component of the latter, both situated in the same socio-political ecology. Therefore, I will gloss over the contextualization and concentrate on the specific issue of cinematic realism, its implication on and connection to the animation film under discussion.

Cinematic realism has a long tradition in China and was hailed as “the dominant mode of twentieth-century Chinese cinemas for ideological reasons that link realism, modernity and nationalism.”<sup>182</sup> Emerged in the 1930s, Chinese cinematic realism was initially linked to national crisis brought about by imperialist threats and was constructed as the aesthetic counterpart of the quest to make China a modern nation-state. It had been shaped by shifting political terrains in the past century. Before socialist realism was established as the official aesthetics in Mao’s China, there had been social realism and critical realism. Social realism in film is a reformist aesthetic based upon evolutionary change and liberal-democratic nationhood. Critical realism is distinguished from the former by political alignment to pre-1949 revolutionary nation-building. These two aesthetic projects had exhibited a contention between different views of national transformation and survival, namely, a struggle between the ideologies of Marxism-Leninism and Social Darwinism.<sup>183</sup> Socialist realism took its heritage from critical realism and was modeled on that of the Soviet Union. Yingjin Zhang divides Chinese socialist cinema (1949-1978) into three phases. The first three years of the socialist cinema was a time of nationalization in terms of ownership of filmmaking institutions. Old private film facilities were seized into the socialist propaganda mechanism. The second phase (1953-1965) was a period

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<sup>182</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 76.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

of the establishment of the socialist realism mode. The rest of the socialist cinema was mostly spent in the Cultural Revolution when filmmaking practice was almost totally ceased.<sup>184</sup>

Realism is a term that evades definition. The assumption that realism depends on a natural relationship of the artwork to the world or that realism is the depiction of subjects as they appear in everyday life without embellishment or interpretation, has been attacked by both critics and artists. The big variety of styles represented by art works, which yet can all be classified as “realistic,” contradicts those assumptions. As has been revealingly illustrated by Thompson who studied cinematic realism using the Neoformalist approach, realism, as a set of formal cues, is a relative concept that needs to be understood in its historical context.<sup>185</sup> What is consistent about realism is that it has often been employed as an effective device to depart from the norm of popular, classical, familiar cinema, usually Hollywood, which is “equated with fantasy and escapism.” Realism is a set of defamiliarizing cinematic traits which can be perceived as more realistic than the prevailing norms of the day. This cycle of defamiliarization and automatization goes on as new realistic traits come to the forefront and old ones become the norm.<sup>186</sup> A realist cinema can also take a very different form when set in a specific national and cultural context. Italian Neorealism (1943-1952), for example, initially arose against “telefono bianco” (white telephone) American-imitative films dominant in the 1930s.<sup>187</sup> French New Wave Movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s also positioned itself as a rejection to the revival of classical French film form and explored youthful iconoclasm.

Following the route of the former Soviet Union, Chinese socialist realism also became part of the state propaganda scheme, which took ideological transformation and education of the people in the spirit of socialism and communism as its major task. After the founding of new China, socialist realistic cinema soon established a set of new cinematic norms that replaced

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<sup>184</sup> Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 189-224.

<sup>185</sup> Thompson, Kristin. *Breaking the Glass Armor, Neoformalist Film Analysis*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988. 197-217.

<sup>186</sup> The term “defamiliarization” comes from Russian Formalists, which refers to an artistic technique that aims at making objects “unfamiliar”, making forms difficult, and increasing the difficulty and length of perception in order to reinforce the process of aesthetical perception. Automatization occurs when the defamiliarizing device is used over and over and the defamiliarizing power diminishes. See Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor, Neoformalist Film Analysis*.

<sup>187</sup> Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997. 462.

the old ones held by pre-socialist, especially social, realism. Under the principles of praising the party leadership and glorifying the proletariat's struggle toward socialist progress, socialist realistic cinema upheld class consciousness as its core ideology, and depicted the life and struggle of workers, peasants and soldiers in the settings of factories, mines, farms and military camps. The typical plot usually ended with the triumph of the public over the private, the revolutionary over the reactionary. Typification was the principal method of idealization that transformed individual characters into certain types to eliminate any possible political ambiguity. The goal of socialist realistic cinema was to solicit audience's subjection to the communist cause of the nation.<sup>188</sup>

One characteristic of Chinese socialist realism is the intriguing combination of "revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism," as praised by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1959.<sup>189</sup> In Western traditions, realism is heavily against romanticism. The former, believing in unaffected objective reality, became prominent in the nineteenth century mainly as a reaction to the idealism of the latter coming out the eighteenth century European literary tradition. For Chinese people, European romanticism could be very useful in that it could help them to shed the thousands-year-old shackle of Confucian conformity. Individual imagination could then be liberated. Thus realism and romanticism came hand in hand with a common defiance of tradition. However, under the political condition of socialist new China, romanticism had to take a new form and evolved into what was "active, utopian and imaginary of China's future."<sup>190</sup> Typification and glorification of proletarian characters in socialist cinema can be viewed as an instance of romanticism blended into realism. A memorable and typical scene on the socialist realistic screen would be a low angle medium shot or medium close-up of the hero or heroine, who displays a countenance that is unyielding, heroic, confident, and triumphant. The lack of psychological depth and the flattening of personality were what provoked criticism of socialist

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<sup>188</sup> Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 202-203.

<sup>189</sup> ZDYZZ and ZDZ ed. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Films, 1977-1994*. Beijing: ZDC, 1995. Quoted in Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 2004.

<sup>190</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 80.

cinema. There were calls from critics for more “humanism” and less “sublimation.”<sup>191</sup>

Socialist film artists also explored new genres and made stylistic innovations, among which war or military film became a big genre and dominated the socialist screen.<sup>192</sup> According to an estimate, military and war films accounted for about half of the 200 or so feature films produced during the 1950s and the early 1960s. These war films can be put into two categories: Communist hagiographies and military strategies. The former deals with the life and death of patriotic heroes who devoted their lives to the anti-Japanese war or anti-Nationalist war. The latter can be further divided into four sub-groups: major military campaigns featuring decision making from a high command level, ingenious military stratagems, guerilla warfare that exemplified Mao Zedong’s war strategies and the wisdom of the nation-people at the grassroots, and finally, war films specifically targeting the children as protagonists and audiences. Live action film, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*,<sup>193</sup> is considered an example of the last sub-category. Other examples are *Letter with Feather (Jimao xin, 1954)* and *Red Children (Hong haizi, 1958)*. *Sparkling Red Star (Shanshan de hongxing, 1974)*, which was made later during the Cultural Revolution, also falls into that category.<sup>194</sup>

### The Animated *Zhang Ga*

Clearly enough, Sun’s choice of *Zhang Ga* as his first feature film demonstrates a continuation of the socialist realism tradition characteristic of Chinese socialist cinema, fitting into the war film genre in particular. Yet Sun is very much aware of the challenge he has to face in recasting a 1963 war film into the twenty-first century medium of animation. How to stick to “realism” in a medium that is widely accepted as “fantastical?” How to present a war in front of an audience of children? And how to play with the notion of “romanticism?”

One of Sun’s strategies is to enhance the feel of “humanism.” As he said in an interview, “I

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<sup>191</sup> Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 203-5.

<sup>192</sup> Zhang, Yingjin. *Screening China*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Center for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor., 2002. 182-5.

<sup>193</sup> In Zhang’s book, the film title was translated as *Zhang Ga, a Boy Soldier*. I will stick to my translation, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*, which is how the film is “officially” presented on mainstream English-language media of China.

<sup>194</sup> Interestingly enough, *Sparkling Red Star* is also under transformation into the animated form by a private animation studio in Shenzhen in collaboration with August First Film Studio, the original creator of the live action film.

see this film not as about war, but rather about humanity, about a boy's coming of age in a time of war."<sup>195</sup> The negation of humanism in old Red Classics is also what other adapters want to correct but have failed miserably. Whenever they try to make the character "fuller" and more "human" by letting them commit a mistake or fall in love, they get criticized for distorting the images of "heroes." Sun, as he is working with the film medium, not television, is less vulnerable to that type of pitfalls special to the long format of TV drama. Still, he has challenges.

The 1963 live action version of *Zhang Ga*, to be fair, is rather successful in characterization than many other war films of the same period. And that is exactly why it weathers the test of time and is considered a real canon. Gazi, nickname for little hero Zhang Ga, is depicted as brave but also "ga," meaning intractable, clever but also mischievous, heroic but also childlike. He is more of a human than the usually typified protagonists in war films. The animated version takes advantage of this and makes great efforts in depicting the "happiness, anger, sorrow and joy" of the characters, i.e. bringing out the deeper emotions of them by meticulously nuanced drawings and attention to detail. But the stylized manner of acting of the old film is abandoned for a subdued degree of sublimation.<sup>196</sup> An example of attending to detail to reflect the psychological status of the character can be the scene of Gazi's grandma cooking for the wounded guerrilla soldier. She has three eggs only, which are very precious to her; she picks two of them for cooking. Her eyes rest on the third one for a second and she picks it up as well.

The live action film reaches its climax towards the end when Gazi, all by himself, manages to burn down the Japanese troop's turret, a task that has irked the guerilla for months, and brings about the long-awaited victory to the people. This sequence is obviously over-sublimating the boy into a superhero at the cost of simplifying other characters. The adapters take out this sequence and replace it with a more believable heroic deed in which Gazi helps to blow up the enemy's train. It is more "believable" because Gazi uses the same little trick (blocking up the chimney) he uses earlier in the film when fighting with his pal, to fulfill his

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<sup>195</sup> Sun, Lijun. In an interview by Mars CG. Unknown. "Donghua yu shiming tongxing: Sun Lijun fangtan" (Animation and Mission: an Interview with Sun Lijun). Huoxing Shidai (Mars CG). Nov 10, 2006. Issue 15. 64-83. <www.hxsd.com.cn>.

<sup>196</sup> Ma, Hua. "Donghua dianying *Xiaobing Zhangga* de juben gaibian" (The Script Adaptation for Animated Picture *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*). *Beijing Dianying Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Beijing Film Academy). No 5 (2006): 36-47.



goal – a continuity of his character. Moreover, it is more “believable” because this time the task is even harder to fulfill and Gazi has to overcome many difficulties. It is not a mission that Gazi can easily accomplish with a stroke of luck but nonetheless he ends up winning the final victory. In other words, the animators do not bring Gazi down from the lofty altar of hero to make him more human, but rather take efforts to make him more believably a hero by giving the plot a humanly credibility. By so doing, except to make the story more intense and engaging, Sun is firmly adhering to the principles of revolutionary heroism to evoke a romanticized revolutionary sublimity in his audience. To him, this is what separates his film from the old Shanghai school works, which “lack empathic power and creativity, lack moral guidance and knowledge of the market.”<sup>197</sup>

Adapters add a new sequence to the animation film to give a touch of fantasy to reality, which at the same time also advances the plot in a meaningful way. On the eve of Gazi’s first battle with the Japanese troops, he gets so excited and anxious that he can not go to sleep. He sits on the bed with all his clothes on, staring alertly into the darkness. The light changes and the day is broken. The Japanese ship enters into Baiyangdian Lake. All of a sudden, the guerrilla soldiers jump out of water and start to shoot. Gazi is among them. His little wooden pistol shoots out real bullets that can chase the enemy; the leaves of the reed turn into bayonets and stab into the enemy; fish nets trap the Japanese soldiers in the water; Gazi’s half-bitten ear of corn becomes a grenade that blows the Japanese ship off ... This turns out to be a dream, and Gazi, who oversleeps because of his insomnia, has missed the real war.

In the original novel, there is a sequence where the author used a series of metaphors to depict the war scene.

In a split second, sorghum turns into bayonets, millets becomes bullets. The bayonets glisten in the sun, the bullets pierce through the wind. Soldiers jump out of the barley field, rushing forward.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Liu, Qiong. “Donghua *Xiaobing Zhangga zhengchuan sange diyi*” (Animation Film *Little Soldier Zhang Ga Strives for Three “No.1s”*). *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily). July 27 2006.

<sup>198</sup> Xu, Guangyao. *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*. Quoted in Ma, “Donghua dianying,” 45.

The adapters realize that this is what a live action film can not represent but animation can. Woven into the plot as a dream, this sequence not only produces a reasonable fantasy, but more importantly, helps build the character of Gazi. As a kid who is so keen on fighting in a real battle to win a real gun, Gazi anxiously anticipates the battle that he dreams of it. Yet because of the dream, he misses the real battle and he falls into despair. He has to look for another chance.

Except for the above changes, the animated version of *Zhang Ga* does not subvert or revive the live action version in a significant way. It only manages to make very limited breakaway from the original text in terms of the narrative. This is partially because the original version is almost perfect in characterization and plotline that little revision is needed. All the classical plot sequences in the original film, which are so well written and performed that are still remembered by the audiences today, are kept intact in the animation. A further reason for limited subversion is that Sun wants to refrain from tampering the mood of the classical text. They have tried to make the movie into Q-style, meaning cute style, which is popular nowadays in Chinese cartoons. This can help play up the animation medium's specificity of being imaginative and exaggerative. But they vote against it because it will overshadow the realness of war and render the animation into an untruthful representation of the revolutionary history. Ma Hua, the screen writer, explains their rationale:

[If we make it into Q-style,] the 1963 *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*'s profound feel of the national earth, and its revolutionary romanticism and pristine realism, will all be gone, to give place to stunts and gags. The most shining part of Gazi's life will be worn away by the frolics and plays. Most importantly, the weight of the original text that has touched us will be lost in a falsified peace and cuteness.<sup>199</sup>

Given this, it can also be put this way – the classical text does not give the adapters much room to play with the animation medium in terms of theme and narrative, nor the acting and style. Sun's artistic energy is largely devoted to the safeguard of realism, including the realism

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<sup>199</sup> Ma, "Donghua dianying," 38.

of the material world of *Zhang Ga*, which is seen in the film's art style. In "The Director's Statement" in his book *Mission*, Sun says, "To make innovations in art style is a mission bestowed on us by history. Only when a new creative road with national characteristics is carved out, can the rejuvenation of Chinese animation be realized."<sup>200</sup> The art style of the new *Zhang Ga* is going to serve revolutionary realism and romanticism. A "pristine" realistic feel is specially sought for. Characters are not particularly cute or "nice-looking," but plain and simplistic in design with slight exaggeration and true to real proportion. In set and background design, the artists meticulously reference to reality to make sure that their design of the material objects, from a train to a broom, from a lake to a pair of shoes, is truthful and historically concrete representation of the reality in its revolutionary era. Artists have visited Baiyangdian, the lake where the original story took place, many times to get both a visual and an emotional shock wave of the history.



Figure 3.2 *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (2006): Baiyangdian Lake. (Copyrights owned by Beijing Youth Film Studio and Forbidden City Film)

Artists also resort to color symbolism to evoke realism and romanticism. "Sunshiny bright" (*yangguang canlan*) is set as the major tone of the film to highlight the romantic side of a little

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<sup>200</sup> Sun, *Shiming* (Mission).

hero's life in the time of war. Three colors are used as the base colors, green, earth-yellow and iron-gray. Green implies the vitality of the lake area. Earth-yellow is representative of the Northern China Plain area and can best “bring out the weight of the times.”<sup>201</sup> And iron-gray, such as that used on the train, is symbolic of the depression of war. Sun is not confined to traditional Chinese aesthetics of expressionism in his art design. On the contrary, he takes advantage of modern computer technology and brings realism to its utmost – he adopts 3D animation technique in background and sets design.



Figure 3.3 *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (2006): the train station (Copyrights owned by Beijing Youth Film Studio and Forbidden City Film)

The art work of *Zhang Ga* probably will be what deserves more credit than the narrative, especially for those who already know the story, mainly for its unfamiliar aesthetics that is rarely seen in early animations. The romanticized beauty of the water-colorly landscape, old houses and villages, which is absent in the old black and white live action film, not only gives the audience an aesthetic feast, but also successfully evokes a feeling towards the “pristine” old world of China. The romanticized art work is what I personally like the best about the film. The

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

heaviness of the photo realistic scenes, on the other hand, constantly reminds the audience of the authenticity and realness of the war. With quite a number of night scenes (which is rather unusual in animation) and painstaking manipulation of lighting, the film often presents a feel of live action film. The pursuit of a natural relationship of the artwork to the real world is not necessarily symptomatic of Sun's objection to traditional Chinese aesthetics highly valued in old Shanghai school works, but rather because the film requires him to do so. To Sun, this is exactly where the vitality of Red Classics lies, "for it unites tightly with reality."<sup>202</sup>

However, the over-realism of the movie may become a setback since it seems to negate the specificity of the animation medium. Again, this has to be justified by the content of the film. From a different perspective, then, the choice of animation as the medium for a war film, or rather, the choice of a war story for animation, is to complement what live action film can not do on the one hand, and moreover, to make the film more suitable for a younger audience on the other. The cruelty of war is not shunned away, but goriness is. Explosion and fire are lavishly depicted, while direct representation of bleeding and beating are avoided through cinematographic maneuvers. In a new millennium when some of the old propaganda means have been questioned but ideological control through the media still remains strong, it might be a better idea to put a drawn kid than a real kid into war after all. The simultaneous realism and non-realism of the medium of animation is what justifies the remediation of *Zhang Ga* for today's young audience as a good patriotic educational text. Satisfying the nostalgic senior and middle-aged audiences and educating the younger generation are the main purposes.

The animated *Zhang Ga*'s limited subversion of the original film text indicates that the real purpose of animating *Zhang Ga* is less about reviving the live action film, but more about revolutionizing the form of animation film. Seen within the context of animation, Sun's appropriation of the realistic mode, echoing with Thompson's theory of relative realism, subverts all previous conventions of the early Chinese animation, from *Havoc in Heaven* to *Lotus Lantern*, and to the overly kiddy-oriented styles and themes dominant in today's television

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<sup>202</sup> Liu Qiong, "Donghua Xiaobing Zhangga."

cartoons. And the adoption of the realistic mode is intended to open up the animation market to a wider audience, not only the young kids. Sun's next feature film, *A Full House of Joy* (*Huanxiao Manwu*), also written and produced by his graduate students, is a representation of their own experience of life today in China. With a heavy use of "exaggeration, jokes, and gags," the film is nonetheless realistic because it is based on the most "real" realities of China – events and popular culture incidents happening right now and here. And it targets the young and even the older generations. Thus the realism of contemporary China's animation cinema advocated by Sun can be described as "telling stories based on reality with different degrees of fantasy woven in." This realism does not have to be photo realistic, but shall be loyal to the logic of life and thus attract more mature audiences. "Realism embodies a beauty between likeness and unlikeness and is closer to our life,"<sup>203</sup> said Sun. This realism, whose effects yet need to be tested by the market, might be an alternative strategy to steer Chinese animation into a more viable developmental route. Thus, Sun is giving revolutionary realism double senses through *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* – a revolutionary story which is at the same time a revolutionary attempt to explore new style and new genre of animation.

### The Identity of *Zhang Ga*

Although when Sun started making *Zhang Ga* in 2000, Red Classics was barely a recognized phenomenon; his remake of *Zhang Ga* into an animation film nevertheless fits into the surging trend of reanonizing old canon. Behind this trend is not so much nostalgia for the history depicted in the old canons, but rather nostalgia for a spiritual satisfaction and sublimity prevalent in the early socialist days. Sun's personal love for a revolutionary text like *Zhang Ga* is what directed him to it when he plans his first feature film.

As an animation filmmaker and educator, Sun's motivation to make a Red Classics film has to be different from producers of other media and is not merely based on the fact that *Zhang Ga* is a proven well-knit text for film. What urges him to make a Red Classics is another animation

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<sup>203</sup> Sun, *Shiming* (Mission).

film released in 1999 by Shanghai Art Film Studio, *Lotus Lantern* (Baolian Deng). The first piece of the studio after fifteen years of recess from feature production, *Lotus Lantern*, on the one hand, still clings tight to the Shanghai tradition of exploiting traditional story resources (the story is taken from a well-known legend); on the other hand, there is an evident effort to emulate Hollywood style and Hollywood mode of production. The film is successful in box office. But in Sun's view, it is a failure in that it looks at Western models for its source of breakthrough and depends on Disney conventions to establish a modern look. Sun's feeling towards the studio is a complex one mixed with expectation, admiration and disappointment. So he decides to invent a modernity of Chinese animation film of his own, one that can stand in contrast with *Lotus Lantern* in every possible way. By doing so, Sun is positioning himself as an intellectual critic against Shanghai Art Film Studio, a veteran, public-owned film studio who has been the industry leader for decades.

Sun looks for inspiration from a different type of canon than myth – the Red Classics. By recreating a Red Classics piece, Sun is not necessarily against commercialization. He actually has very high expectation of the market turnover. He rather sees *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* as an experiment in three fields, industrial, pedagogical and academic. Making a film like this is his own dream, but it is also done for his students and his fellow animation filmmakers, to show the unexplored possibility of animation and to test out the market grounds. He wants to challenge the logic of entertainment with his invention which appears to be the least entertaining. If *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*, a story that is most unlikely to be animated, can be animated, then there is nothing the artists shall not try.

The institutional identity of *Zhang Ga* the animated film is indeed a myth. *Zhang Ga* began basically as an independent project initiated by Sun Lijun and started with private funds of a few animation artists at BFA. The film was produced under the name of Beijing Youth Film Studio, an affiliated studio of BFA, which was set up mainly to accommodate BFA faculty and students' experimental works. Except for making the red tape procedures simpler for the project, the Studio did not provide any substantial support. Financing has been a problem since the first day

of the production. Many have questioned Sun's motivation of making an animation on Red Classics. The common view is that a "Red Classics" is more likely to get financial, administrative and promotional supports from the Chinese government, like many leitmotif (or main melody) mega films have experienced. In 1987, the central government set up a special committee supervising the production of films and television dramas based on major revolutionary historical events and set aside special funds for subsidy. In the wake of Tiananmen Incident, the Party increased investment in leitmotif films, which constituted an intensified, prolonged ideological drive to reinstall patriotism and nationalism in the population, especially the younger generation.<sup>204</sup> In 1996, the "9550 project" set an annual quota of ten "excellent" leitmotif films in the ninth five-year plan and encouraged state studios to compete for government subsidies.<sup>205</sup>

Although Sun never admits that he speculates in Red Classics to gain state favor, he does insist that the government should give as much support as possible, not only to somebody like him "who is fed by the state, but more importantly, to those young people with creative energies."<sup>206</sup> Not millions, but billions are needed, "only that way can we catch up with America and Japan as quickly as possible." Ironically, Sun's first 4 million yuan came not from the government, but a Chinese-American businessman who was simply moved by his devotedness and determination to make an animation of Zhang Ga. This further attests to the power of Red Classics. In 2004, Beijing Forbidden City Film Studio,<sup>207</sup> together with the Propaganda Department of Beijing Municipal Party Committee and Beijing Television, instilled a second 4 million to *Zhang Ga*. *Zhang Ga* did get recognition and financial support directly from SARFT as well. Besides a half million special funds, it won the 2005 Huabiao Awards for Best Animation Film and a prize of one million; it also ended up on the government's list of "recommended films." But in face of the fiercely competitive market, government sanction simply appears

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<sup>204</sup> Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 259.

<sup>205</sup> Yin, Hong. *Chinese Film and Television Culture in the Transition Period of the Century*. Beijing: Beijing Press, 1998.

Quoted in Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 282.

<sup>206</sup> Sun, interview by Mars CG, "Donghua yu shiming."

<sup>207</sup> Forbidden City was set up in 1997 with state money from four government units: Beijing Television, Beijing Television Art Center, Beijing Film Company and the Beijing Culture and Arts Audio-Visual Press. Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 284.



powerless. After spending a total of 12 million yuan in production, *Zhang Ga* finds itself stuck on its way from studio to theater – no more money to give it a final push to the market. This further exemplifies *Zhang Ga*'s somewhat awkward middle position between the public and the private, the politics and the commerce. It has neither the statist backup many main melody films had enjoyed from the very early planning phase through the marketing phase, nor the corporate backup a commercial production usually gets from the media magnates. One of *Zhang Ga*'s major investor, Forbidden City, is a studio of public ownership aiming at producing “high quality main melody films,” but it is also highly profit-oriented. It has successfully produced and distributed many commercial films and “commercialized” many leitmotif films over the past ten years. The fact that *Zhang Ga* can not get extra financial favor from it in marketing might indicate that the invisible hand of market is wielding a larger power than the invisible hand of politics. For distributors, *Zhang Ga*'s profitability is rather questionable for they believe that an animated war film shall ultimately target children only and is consequently “non-commercial.”<sup>208</sup>

As stated by Duara, “Nationalism is rarely the nationalism of the nation, but rather represents the site where very different views of the nation contest and negotiate with each other.”<sup>209</sup> Sun Lijun, by positioning himself as a critic of other commercial animation practices in China, including that of the imitation of Western mode and the overly kid-oriented productions, is proposing a different avenue for the development of Chinese animation, although the above players are all participating in the same campaign of reviving the nation's animation industry. Another difference between Sun and the other contemporary animators is that he aligns himself closer with the state by partaking in its ideological campaign with a Red Classics movie. In a country like China where socialism has never been left behind and commercialism is also on the rise, the line between the public and the private is indeed blurry. The distribution quandary of *Zhang Ga* shows that collusion with the state is not enough, a closer alliance with the market

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<sup>208</sup> Liu, Jinfeng. “Sun Lijun pilu *Xiaobing Zhangga* faxing kunjing” (Sun Lijun Discloses the Distribution Quandary of *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*). *Xinjingbao* (Beijing News) June 07, 2006. August 8, 2006  
<<http://www.591ac.com/make/pl/200606070023.htm>>.

<sup>209</sup> Duara, Prasenjit. “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation.” *Chinese Nationalism*. Ed. Jonathan Unger. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 32.

might be more desirable in the time of full market economy. Thus he can not help complaining and soliciting more political favor, “Animation industry is not an economic industry only, but rather a political economic industry. The state must give policy and financial support.”<sup>210</sup>

Behind Sun’s dual revolutionary attempts, his sense of mission as a contemporary intellectual is at work in the making of *Zhang Ga* more than other kinds of motivations, whether economic or ideological. The huge-fonted Chinese characters “*Shi Ming*,” meaning “mission,” that appears on the cover of his book, “*Mission: the Art of Zhang Ga*,” against the background of a full-page-large red star, betrays his larger ambition to revive the nation’s animation industry. His film is made for the audience and the student, but is more so for the yet fledgling “industry,” a cause of the nation, and ultimately, the nation. In this sense, his practice is not so much different from that of the *Moebius* producers, who decisively asserts that “we have to let our government know that China is capable of making world-class animation film.”<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Liu, Jinfeng, “Sun Lijun pilu” (Sun Lijun Discloses).

<sup>211</sup> Zhang Wenbo, “Bentu donghuapian *mobisihuan* he *xiaobing zhangga* de jiannan zhilu.”

## Conclusion

To many readers, the two cases I studied in previous chapters may appear to be extreme examples on two polar ends of the continuum so that they are not really representative of the wider range of works being produced, distributed, and consumed in China. As I state earlier, my purpose of studying these cases is to look into the intricate relations between the animation cinema and the nation, and how the very notion of nation is constructed and contested through the former. In this sense, *Thru the Moebius Strip* and *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* are very much “representative” in that they embody the dilemma and challenges every contemporary Chinese animation production faces in its endeavor to open up the domestic market and to compete in the global one, to negotiate with the state control on cultural production, and to grapple with the glorious past of Chinese animation. Admittedly, the two films’ “representativeness” of contemporary Chinese animation cinema is a limited one, considering that the pool of animation films which they represent is extremely small. The total number of feature animation films produced and distributed since *Lotus Lantern* is but four. Except *Moebius Strip*, the other two are *The Warrior* (Yongchuang Tianxia, 2006, by Guangzhou Tongyi Digital Ltd.), a hybridity of myth and martial art hero story, and *The Magic Boy of West Mount* (Xiyue Qitong, 2006), a sequel/remake of Shanghai Art Film Studio’s 20-year-old half-finished puppet animation. A few more are under production.

Clearly, one challenge of studying contemporary Chinese animation cinema derives from the fact that this is not a “lively” field at all. The scarcity of “texts” can make any film chosen for case study appear “unrepresentative” since there is not even a body to represent. For those films that do get produced and distributed, the actual number of audiences they can reach is also very limited. The four recently released feature animations, with the exception of *Lotus Lantern*, are not only watched by very few, but also known to very few. A large portion of the box office revenue of *The Magic Boy of West Mount*, for instance, came from local Shanghainese who are more familiar with the prequel and are within easy reach of Shanghai

Art Film Studio's marketing campaign. The limited level of consumption makes it hard to discuss these films from the perspective of reception. Yet the very issue of "unliveliness" and the ongoing transition from "unliveliness" to "liveliness" are what motivate me to study contemporary Chinese animation cinema. Statistics of 2004 showed that a total of 14 feature animation films were under production then.<sup>212</sup> *Moebius* and *Zhang Ga* seem to be both riding on the tide of exploiting the commercial animation market.

The unliveliness of the Chinese animation cinema in part owes to the specificity of the medium. Compared with animation film, other media in the family of animation or related with animation, such as television cartoons, online video games, and internet flash movie, display a higher level of vitality. Being on different distribution platforms, they enjoy various advantages. TV cartoon is financially less demanding, flash is technologically less sophisticated and easy to get circulated, and video game has a more readily applicable profit model. The discussion of animation cinema in China is to some extent overshadowed by the larger discourse of animation industry which gives much attention to other forms of animation.

### Distribution Bottleneck

The stagnancy of Chinese animation cinema is largely due to the distribution bottleneck which *Zhang Ga* has experienced. This distribution hardship is not uncommon to other Chinese films, animation or live action alike. In recent years, roughly only one-third of all films made can make their ways to the cinema.<sup>213</sup> As a film market, China is disproportionately small given its large population. A Chinese person goes to the cinema once every five years. The Chinese film industry has not fully recovered from the impact of the arrival of television and other new media. Furthermore, the notion of "marketing" is relatively new to many Chinese filmmakers. It is not until the success of *Hero* in 2002 that Chinese filmmakers began to recognize the power of promotional measures. Now even a leitmotif film needs to resort to the devices of marketing to

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<sup>212</sup> Yin, Hong and Wang Xiaofeng. "2004 Zhongguo dianying chanye nianbao" (2004 Chinese Film Industry Annual Report). *2004-2005 Zhongguo meiti chanye fazhan baogao* (2004-2005 Chinese Media Industry Development Report). Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe (Social Science Documentation Press), 2005.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

maximize its revenue.<sup>214</sup>

But marketing often proves to be as expensive as production. For animation films, the huge amount of production funds is already hard to come by, so to spend a large sum on distribution is usually unimaginable. Insufficient promotional and packaging efforts account in part for *Moebius Strip's* transient theater release and poor box office. For *Zhang Ga*, with a fundraising-as-you-go production mode, marketing is a concern that has to come after production. According to the market projection for *Zhang Ga*, a 3 million yuan marketing budget will generate approximately 9 million yuan box office revenue, of which the producer gets a third – meaning no loss, no gain. To spend more than 3 million yuan on marketing in order to make a surplus is beyond what Sun can afford.

The recently opened up film distribution market<sup>215</sup> is rapidly getting controlled by the newly arrived private distributors. “Profitability” becomes the first and foremost concern in the film market. The old distribution model which relies on state subsidy no longer exists. Within the producer-distributor duo, the former, whose fate is at the disposal of the latter, is often put in a disadvantage. A distribution manager’s remark is indeed thought-provoking. When she heard IDMT’s decision to release *Moebius* on August 4, 2006, a slot roughly coinciding with the release of several Hollywood blockbusters, she asked, “So it’s August 4th. Are you sure your film is more interesting than *Garfield*, your story is more engaging than *Mission Impossible*, and your special effects are more professional than *Superman Returns*? You’d better think twice. It is fine if you don’t want to make money, but I don’t want to lose money with this deal.”<sup>216</sup> What she reveals is not only a distributor’s stark pursuit of profit, but also the fierceness of competition exacerbated by the Hollywood presence in the domestic market, and an undisguised distrust of the market value of Chinese animation. Before more confidence in Chinese animation film can be built among audiences and distributors, Chinese animation filmmakers will continue to grapple with the adverse conditions.

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<sup>214</sup> Forbidden City Film sets some good examples of commercializing official films into box office winners.

<sup>215</sup> A 2004 regulation on the entry into film production, distribution and exhibition business expanded the chance for private distribution companies to participate in market competition.

<sup>216</sup> Cao, Hui, General Manager of IDMT. Quoted in an interview by Zhang Wenbo. “Bentu donghua.”

### The Discursive vs. Symbolic

Sheldon Lu has succinctly summed up the intricate relation between Chinese cinema and the Chinese nation, “The life-and-death struggle of China’s national film industry is isomorphic with the plight of China as a national-state in the twentieth century. Modernity, nation-building, nationalism, anti-imperialism, antifeudalism, and new gender identities are among the central themes of such a national cinema. Chinese national cinema necessarily becomes part and parcel of the forging of a new national culture.”<sup>217</sup> Admittedly, a mechanical graft of existing film theory onto animation is dangerous and often unconvincing, and the Chinese animation cinema has not really dealt with the same themes in its works. Still it is useful to draw a parallel between live action cinema and animation cinema simply because, like the former, the latter also functions as a meeting ground where different ideologies collide. In the past eighty years, Chinese animation cinema also participated in the historical movement of forging a new national culture through its changing aesthetics, styles, themes and production practices. The exploration of a national animation style in the early socialist days involved a relatively introspective process relying heavily on traditions and the notion of “national” was easier to define. The 1980s and beyond is a period when the question of the national is increasingly complicated by the trends of modernization and globalization. The meaning of the very term “national” becomes as fluid as the border-crossing flows of people, capital, texts and ideas. No single and fixed criterion can be applied to the definition of “national” and national animation cinema has to be understood in its dialogical relationship with transnational currents.

The cases I studied reveal many different ways filmmakers can make meaning of “nation” through the material production of the film texts. There is always the tendency in the filmmakers to return to traditions or hold on to the national Self, either in the choice of story, art form, or mode of expression. On the other hand, they attempt to make innovations, by inventing the new or reinventing the old. Here the national is intimately tied to the modern and realized through the appropriation of the Other. These trends are increasingly inseparable from each other within a

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<sup>217</sup> Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 4.

single film, making it harder and harder to define the national and cultural identity or origin of the text.

It is easier for people to link the national with the traditional rather than draw an equation between the past and innovation. The issue at stake is agency. In the case of *Moebius*, viewers criticize the lack of Chineseness in the story, even though no one has refused to watch *Shrek* or *Finding Nemo* because they are American. Thus the real sentiment of the public is less about the Westernness of the film, but more about the Chinese artists' act of working on a "Western" film, and worse yet, claiming it to be a Chinese film. The apparent non-Chineseness of the character and story makes it hard for the audience to connect the creative works to the Chinese artists and the mediocrity of the story gives people a good excuse to berate it. The subjectivity of the nation, which is crucial in international coproduction, is not easily discernable from the text of this film. And the audience felt betrayed.

There are at least two motives conspicuous in the Chinese government's propagation of a national animation industry: one is the maintenance of the cultural identities and ideological values, the other is the transformation of culture into commodity and the stimulation of a cultural economy. Here I want to borrow Duara's concept of "discursive meaning" and "symbolic meaning" to further explore the tension between an economic practice and a cultural practice within the meaning-making activities of animation. When talking about "meaning" – what the nation means to the people or on what different basis the notion of nation is being articulated, Prasenjit Duara identified two categories of them, discursive meaning and symbolic meaning.<sup>218</sup> Discursive meaning includes "such subjects as language-as-rhetoric and ideology – subjects that have traditionally fallen within the scope of the intellectual historian." In this sense, the nation is a product of the rhetoric and ideas of nationalist intellectuals and politicians. The realm of the symbolic meaning includes "the ensemble of cultural practices of a group such as rituals, festivals, kinship forms, and culinary habits – traditionally subjects of the social historian or anthropologists." In other words, the nation is "an embodiment of the cultural marks of its

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<sup>218</sup> Duara, "De-Constructing the Chinese Nation."

distinctiveness.”

In the discursive realm, the meanings of the nation are produced mainly through linguistic mechanisms, such as the narrative, the signifying chains of metaphors, metonyms and binary oppositions that give meaning to the nation and vice-versa. The Chinese government’s enthusiastic pursuit of a national animation industry first gave birth to a set of such narratives, presented in a considerable number of government regulations and policies issued since 2000.<sup>219</sup> Within this official discourse there has been much binary opposition rhetoric and advocacy for works with Chinese “characteristics,” despite the vagueness of such terms. A most striking example of the creation of a binary opposition is the recent decree issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) on “Prime Time Ban on Foreign Cartoons.” It requires that “Every day between five and eight pm, no foreign animation, or programmes about foreign animation, can be broadcasted.” Sino-foreign joint productions will need approval from SARFT to get shown during the three-hour period as well.<sup>220</sup> Homemade cartoons shall account for no less than 70 per cent of all cartoons shown on TV networks. This kind of preferential policy and quota system is by no means unique to China. In South Korea, similarly, the state has implemented the quota requirement to restrict the importation of Japanese anime, which has helped dramatically for the growth of the local animation industry.<sup>221</sup> Whereas protectionist measures may be beneficial to the development of the local cultural industry, prescriptive measures may be less promising.

The “Provisions on China-Foreign Joint Production of Television Series” I discussed earlier had laid out a set of criteria such as the six “Chineses” to define what constitutes “Chinese characteristics” in a cultural product. The vagueness and idealism of those terms has made them less definitive criteria and more uplifting ideological guidance. Any attempt to drill down the notion of nationalness to a set of “attributes” is bound to fail for the very notion of nation defies generalization; and such prescriptions are neither practical nor instructive to the real

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<sup>219</sup> For a detailed list of them, see the bibliography.

<sup>220</sup> Wang, Shanshan. “Foreign Cartoons Banned from Prime Time.” *China Daily*. 14 August 2006. <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-08/14/content\\_663889.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-08/14/content_663889.htm)>.

<sup>221</sup> Liu, Jinfeng, “Sun Lijun pilu” (Sun Lijun Discloses).



practice of animation filmmaking. As claimed by a young animation fan and scholar, “The emphasis (from the top authority) on ‘national,’ is in itself a big problem!”<sup>222</sup>

By the state standards, *Moebius* is not privileged as a distinctly national cultural practice, as the government official has expressed. The general populace has been more or less misguided by the state discourse’ emphasis on the importance of “Chineseness.” The lack of a Chinese story hinders the audience from attributing any merits of the film to the nation of China. The media also shows an inclination to embrace the “national” since negative reviews seem to outnumber positive ones. Even supporters of *Moebius* have to refer back to the national discourse to defend the movie – “*Moebius* is not un-Chinese.”<sup>223</sup> The state policy maker’s national discourse has indeed succeeded in steering the public opinion.

The Neoh brothers, who had conducted their business mostly in Hong Kong and the U.S., are presumably less familiar with the state prescription for national content and may also care less about it since they originally targeted the global market. For them, filmmaking is purely a market-driven industrial practice. Other local filmmakers, whether publicly or privately owned, also base their business decisions as much on government policy as on market demand. If we look at the recent commercial productions, both the released ones and those under production, with the exception of *Moebius*, all stay more or less in tune with the prescriptions for “nationalness.” *The Magic Boy of West Mount* capitalized on the audience’s nostalgia for an unfinished puppet animation show that premiered twenty years ago. One film scheduled to be released in the summer of 2007 is *Warrior* (Yongshi) (a different one than *The Warriors* by Guangzhou Tongyi) by Shanghai Art Film Studio, which tells the revenge and love story of an ancient Mongolian hero. The theme of Chinese ethnic minorities is also taken up by another animation film under production, which is based on Tibetan folklore. Several other new productions belong to the martial arts genre. Another noteworthy feature animation is the remake of a 1974 Red Classics film *Sparkling Red Stars* by Shenzhen Puzzle Animation in

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<sup>222</sup> Inside. “On the Issue of Nationality in Animation Themes”. *Inside’s Blog*. October 25, 2006. March 10, 2007 <<http://inside9999.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!44D9DB26FEC889E9!167.entry>>.

<sup>223</sup> Wang, Jun. “Mobisihuan: bingfei bu Zhongguo” (*Moebius* is not un-Chinese). *Shenzhen Tequ Bao* (Shenzhen SEZ Daily) August 10, 2006. August 15, 2006 <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/r/m/2006-08-10/14511195051.html>>. In this article, the author argues that *Moebius* is still Chinese, only that it gazes at the world.

collaboration with August First Film Studio, which specializes in military-themed productions and is the producer of the original live action version of *Sparkling Red Stars*. Chinese animation audiences can be divided into two major types: one is fascinated with the old “Chinese School” animations and is deeply nostalgic, the other is growing up in the inundation of Japanese and American animations who may need something different. Thus, to be “national” can be a good strategy for filmmakers to appeal to both audiences, who very often are blended into one. The ministry-driven discourse of nationalness and the industry-driven discourse of animation filmmaking find a common ground, both playing into the national sentiment of the people who yearn for the brilliant past of Chinese animation cinema as much as they do for a brilliant future of Chinese animation cinema. The question is to what extent this common ground can contribute to the development of Chinese animation industry. When “nationalness” becomes an indispensable prescription for domestic productions, it is at the same time the boundaries of creativity.

On the other end of the spectrum, *Zhang Ga* might be a favored practice of the state, with its close alliance with the nation in ideological goals. Yet its distribution frustration has revealed the rising power of the market. This is not to say that *Zhang Ga*, with limited subversion or revival of the original socialist propaganda text, is not intrinsically interesting or potentially marketable in itself, but rather that from the very beginning of its conception, it has failed to grasp the logic of capitalism firmly. Sun conceived the project with an ambitious number of audiences in mind – three generations of the Chinese populace. Yet as an academia/educator/artist, he lacks the power to execute his business ideals into reality. They did not take into consideration the expense of distribution and marketing from the onset of the project.

### The National and the Creative

*Moebius* and *Zhang Ga* raise more questions than they answer: how is the Western style animation industry based upon the ideas of imagination, creativity and entrepreneurship, going

to come to terms with the ministry-driven idea of nationality? How is the politically conservative content going to negotiate with the profit-driven logic of the market? And is the rising discourse of cultural industry, or better yet, creative industry, the answer?

The nationwide movement to revitalize the Chinese animation industry is part of the state discourse of “cultural industries” which has been officially advocated since 2001, with much caution, though.<sup>224</sup> Yet when the antinomy between public ownership and commercialization of the cultural sector is not fully resolved, in the more recent state documents Chinese cultural policymakers have started to ponder the applicability of a “creative industries” discourse in the Chinese context. The city of Beijing, for instance, passed new ordinances to facilitate the construction of an agreeable environment for creative industries to grow in its territory.<sup>225</sup> With regard to the animation sector, the Chinese government has made unprecedented efforts to congregate the power of ten major state ministries to give China’s animation and comic industry an extra boost.<sup>226</sup> The ten ministries administering state affairs in such diverse fields including finance, education, technology, culture and intellectual property rights jointly issued “Some Opinions on the Promotion of Our Animation and Comics Industry,” in the spirit of promoting the animation industry as a creative cause. In the joint decree, the animation and comic industry is defined as based on the idea of “creativity” and therefore a major supportive measure shall be the endorsement of “*yuanchuang*” practices.<sup>227</sup> As I mentioned earlier, *yuanchuang* has double references to “original” and “origin.” Literally meaning “original creation,” *yuanchuang*, when used in the Chinese discursive context where the goal should be to promote “the outstanding culture of the Chinese nation,”<sup>228</sup> and to build “animation brands with both Chinese

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<sup>224</sup> Wang, Jing. “Framing Policy Research on Chinese ‘Culture Industry’: Cultural Goods, Market-State Relations, and the International Free Trade Regime.” Presented at *MIT Critical Policy Studies of China International Workshop*; November 16, 2003; Cambridge. <<http://web.mit.edu/chinapolicy/www/conference1/jingwang.pdf>>.

<sup>225</sup> Beijing Municipal Commission of Development and Reform. “*Beijingshi cujin wenhua chuangyi chanye fazhan de ruogan zhengce*” (Some Policies on the Promotion of the Cultural Creative Industries of Beijing Municipality). Issued October 31, 2006. Accessed May 5, 2007 <<http://www.bjpc.gov.cn/zewj/sfgwwj/200611/t142805.htm>>.

<sup>226</sup> Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Information Technology, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Culture, State Administration of Tax, State Administration of Industry and Business, State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, General Administration of Press and Publication. “*Guanyu tuidong woguo dongman chanye fazhan de ruogan yijian*” (Some Opinions on the Promotion of Our Animation and Comics Industry). State Council. No.32 (2006) Issued on April 25, 2006. May 9, 2006 <[http://www.china-vr.com/vr\\_Print.asp?ArticleID=81](http://www.china-vr.com/vr_Print.asp?ArticleID=81)>.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 1 and 2.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 1.

characteristics and international reputation so as to make China into an animation super power,”<sup>229</sup> becomes inseparable from such qualifier like “national.” An “original” creation has to find its “origin” in the nation. Thus the very term *yuanchuang* the state discourse advocates implies a certain degree of tension between ideological requirement and freewill creation. The unproblematic Western notion of creativity cannot be taken for granted in the Chinese context.

Just like the concept of nation, creativity also originated in a Western context and when imported to China, poses questions. As described by John Howkins, creativity is basically a set of defiant and subversive capabilities. He said, “We need to be original, skeptical, argumentative, often bloody-minded and occasionally downright negative – in one word, creative.”<sup>230</sup> This may appear a novel idea to the Chinese. Thousand-year-long Confucian indoctrination has inscribed the idea of conformity and deference into the minds of Chinese people. Taoist philosophy may have fostered creativity in a certain sense, at least in the field of aesthetics, which despises imitation as a lesser goal of artistic pursuit. But since the “creative” we talk about in today’s context of “creative industry” is primarily involving the generation of new “ideas” or “concepts,” rather than, although not excluding, the generation of a new style or aesthetics, the Confucian teaching seems to be commanding a larger impact.

Despite the constraint of traditional doctrine, the years since the opening up and reform have witnessed a rise of individualism in China. The “post 80s generation” (*80 hou*) – the generation born after the 1980s – is more inclined to personal expression and individual distinctness. Many young animation audiences and artists find the repeatedly represented themes of myth and folklore in Chinese animation films and cartoons annoying, which they refer to as “no creativity.” The vast variety of styles and themes represented by the animation shorts submitted to the annual Animation Academy Awards hosted by BFA’s Animation School<sup>231</sup> defies categorization and has demonstrated a great potential in the post 80s to subvert old norms. The flourish of short Flash movies on the web is another good example. Originally

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., Article 4.

<sup>230</sup> Howkins, John. Quoted in John Hartley, ed. *Creative Industries*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 1.

<sup>231</sup> Since 2001, the Animation School of Beijing Film Academy has hosted annual Animation Academy Awards for six consecutive years. The event has attracted more and more young animation students and amateurs from all over the country to participate. Each year the event culminates in a final awards ceremony taking place on BFA campus.

designed to facilitate interactive web-development, Flash was “reinvented” by computer graphic lovers into a tool of personal expression. The number of “flashers,” or “*shanke*” as we call them in China, those making short movies with Micromedia Flash, had reached a million by the year 2004. Mostly very young, these flashers are full of passion and expression, which can finally be released through the internet. Hundreds of short flash movies are made and put onto the web every day, which attract millions of viewers. Some of the more audacious flashers, in contempt of the non-creative current productions made by the so-called “professional” animators, started to make their own animation series for circulation on the web. Lao Jiang, a famous flasher, who is the maker of *Baby Disha* series, is one among them. In his statement to the online audiences, he claimed that, “clueless and fearless amateurs” though, he and his fellow flashers, may know better what the audiences really want to see.<sup>232</sup>

On the other hand, the post 80s generation, who is growing up in the inundation of imported animation but is also familiar with the old school Chinese animation, has increasingly realized its responsibility to carry over traditional culture down to the generations after them. This echoes with the older generation’s view on creativity. Li Jianping, a cohort of Sun Lijun’s generation, for example, contends that the vast repository of traditional stories has not been adequately explored. He believes in the power of transmedia storytelling, which should be better tapped into. The question is how to make old stories new, and that gives much room for creativity. The post 80s generation is still not so confident in innovation since they consider themselves “too young to have a deep understanding of Chinese culture.”<sup>233</sup> Thus, “imitation becomes a necessary stage before creation,” expressed some young artists. There is a simultaneous absence of tradition and belief in tradition’s role in creation.

Sun Lijun has invented his own theory of creativity through his pedagogical practices. He developed the concept of “subversive” talents. On many different occasions, he has asserted that the Animation School of BFA should take as its goal “cultivating subverters of the Chinese

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<sup>232</sup> Lao Jiang. “Disha Wawa” (Baby Disha). *Shanke Diguo* (Flash Empire). May 5, 2007  
<<http://www.flashempire.com/theater/cate.php?id=1744>>.

<sup>233</sup> Anonymous. Personal Interview. August 21, 2006.

animation and comics industry.”<sup>234&235</sup> At the core of his subversive talents theory is the idea that “we shall not be steered by the market, but rather that the market be steered by us.”<sup>236</sup> Specifically speaking, what Sun wants to subvert are mainly two things, the stark imitation of Western styles and production mode, and the over reliance on kid-oriented contents. The first tendency is put the merits of the old Chinese School of animation at danger and Chinese creativity does not have to be based upon the abandonment of Chinese traditions. However, animation artists shall also avoid taking the term “national” at its face value, but rather place their attention on the form and content of their production – to draw inspiration from tradition and integrate it into popular entertainment.<sup>237</sup>

The latter tendency is reflective of the lack of attention to reception characteristic of contemporary Chinese animation artists, especially TV cartoonists. Seen from a pedagogical point of view, during the pre-reform socialist period, the education of animation artists, the production and consumption of animation were seamlessly clinched together. The centralized political and economic systems had facilitated a favorable working environment in which the artists could transfer their learning to their artistic creation and be entirely devoted to it without worrying about the market. However, in today’s China when the socio-economic conditions have changed drastically, cultural and ideological values are no longer the only values that a cultural product should aim for, but also the entertainment and economic values. It is against this background that Sun advocates for a close integration of pedagogical and industrial practices. His subversion of the above two tendencies, namely, the imitation of Westerns practices and the inadequate consideration of the audience and market, will help maintain the Chinese traditions on the one hand and expand the domains of creativity on the other.

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<sup>234</sup> Li, Bin. “Donghua dianying de xin xueyuanpai yundong: fang beijing dianying xueyuan donghua xueyuan yuanchang Sun Lijun” (The New Academy School Movement of Animated Film - an Interview with Sun Lijun, Dean of the Animation School of Beijing Film Academy). *Beijing Dianying Xueyuan Xuebao* (Journal of Beijing Film Academy) 5 (2006): 14-20.

<sup>235</sup> Unknown. “Peiyang Zhongguo dongmanjie de dianfuzhe” (To Cultivate Subverters of the Chinese Animation and Comics Industry). *Wenhua Chanye Zhoukan* (Cultural Industry Weekly) June 11, 2005. May 5, 2007  
<[http://games.enet.com.cn/article/A4620050611001\\_2.html](http://games.enet.com.cn/article/A4620050611001_2.html)>.

<sup>236</sup> Li, Haiyan “Peiyang dongmanjie de dianfuzhe” (To Cultivate Subverters of the Animation and Comics Industry, an interview with Sun Lijun). *Website of Animation School of Beijing Film Academy*. December 3, 2006. May 5, 2007  
<[http://www.bjanimation.com/2006-12-03/L0001012\\_1193.html](http://www.bjanimation.com/2006-12-03/L0001012_1193.html)>.

<sup>237</sup> Unknown. “Peiyang Zhongguo dongmanjie de dianfuzhe”

Sun's main approach to implement his subversive talents theory is to create a trinity of "industry, education and research."<sup>238</sup> This has been clearly demonstrated by the case of *Zhang Ga*. The challenges posed by the remake of *Zhang Ga* are many-folded. It involves transmediation and transcendence of the old classic text, and the balance between ideological ideals and market values key to a Red Classics piece. Sun is as much motivated by an academic incentive as by a personal dream. He uses *Zhang Ga* as a test filed to try out his theories and get his feet wet in the market place. By building up the project from nothing, Sun also sets himself as a model to encourage his students to dare dream. Given the unique goals Chinese animators have in mind in their subversive practices, the criteria of "creativity" for a Chinese film are bound to be distinctly Chinese as well. *Zhang Ga* may not be particularly inventive in comparison with the original live action film or with foreign animations story-wise, but the audience survey conducted on the test screening day among children of different ages, which shows that 98% of them "liked" the film,<sup>239</sup> may make it safe to say that *Zhang Ga* does present something specifically new to the audiences.

If we add a third dimension to the Chinese government's ambition to revitalize its animation industry, besides the cultural and the economic incentives, it is the motive to boost technological innovations. This is especially clear in the state's heavy investment in the video game industry. Thus technology becomes another common ground both the policy makers and the artists desire to make innovations in. *Through the Moebius Strip*, which is considered by many audiences as non-imaginative, won the "Most Influential Local Yuanchuang Work" for its technical achievements at the 2006 YACA's (Young Animation & Comics Association) Yuanchuang Animation & Comics Award sponsored in part by the State Administration of Press and Publication. Thus, technical exploration also counts as the creative.

As shown above, animation artists have found many different ways of interpreting and executing "*yuanchuang*." These practices do not always have to do with the "national," but are

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<sup>238</sup> Li Bin, "Donghua dianying de xin xueyuanpai yundong."

<sup>239</sup> Unknown. "Animation and Mission: an Interview with Sun Lijun." *Mars CG*. Nov 10, 2006. Issue 15. 64-83. <www.hxsd.com.cn>.

very often close to what “creativity” means in the Western context. And aligning themselves with the Western notion does not necessary imply an oppositional stance to the national; on the contrary, all the different animation practices by private, independent and amateur artists are contributing to the national animation industry in various ways. That is why all these different approaches to “*yuanchuang*” are more or less tolerated by the state, making the stringent-looking national cultural policies more like an obligation for the policymakers to put down, than what for the cultural practitioners to follow.

Still, “creativity” has many challenges in China. How can we begin the discussion of “creative industries” in a country where “creative imagination and content is subjugated to active state surveillance?”<sup>240</sup> As has been pointed out by Wang, the Chinese government maintains a tenacious hold of the cultural sector even though it has vigorously pushed the agenda of privatizing media institutions and commodifying cultural goods. A question at the basic level is: how the free will of exploiting any topic and style is to confront censorship.

As it is undeniable that the communist regime has many sensitive nerves that forbid touch or tampering, I believe it is always a matter of testing and pushing the limit. The over-reliance of Chinese animation on legend, myth and fairytale is more or less a habitual act of risk-avoiding. The entrenched belief and practice of treating animation as educative materials for the younger generation that originated in the early socialist cinema is able to stay dominant today precisely because it provides a safe haven for the animation artists to be immune from ideological charges. And worse yet, the younger the audience it targets, the easier it is to make. Thus the avoidance of political risks has evolved into a creative idleness.

Maybe the boundaries of ideological control are real. But my talks with animation artists have revealed that still a lot can be done within that limit so that the limit ceases to exist for them. Li Jianping’s *People in My Dream (Mengliren)* series, for example, is the first one to target high school students – the adolescent. Sun Lijun’s *Zhang Ga* is conceived as a film for “three generations.” Sun’s next feature film, “*A Full House of Joy*” (*Huanxiao Manwu*) also takes

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<sup>240</sup> Wang, Jing. “The Global Reach of a New Discourse: How Far Can ‘Creative Industries’ Travel?”. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. Vol.7, No.1 (March 2004), 9-19.



primarily the adolescent and potentially the adult as target audience. A commonality of these new experiments is their disposition to realism – to tell stories that are based on real life incidents with different degrees of fantasy woven in – to appeal to the audience’s need to identify with the narrative.

It is also noteworthy that the line between the nation-state and the nation-people is not always that clear cut and it is not always the state that is acting out the policing job. Consider a recent incident about the “Rainbow Cat and Blue Rabbit” series, a domestic Kung Fu theme television cartoon. The show has been quite popular among young kids and is promoted by many television stations, including CCTV, as a “good” homemade product. Unfortunately, the fighting scenes and some of the apparently too “adult” dialogues between the cats and rabbits have worried some parents greatly. They wrote to the television stations and complained about the violence and bloodiness of the show, which is not appropriate for children. Very soon, the show was pulled off the air. This has aroused a hot debate among producers, angry fans and parents about by who and on what grounds a program shall be judged. Maybe this only shows the necessity of setting up a rating system, which is not in existence in China, but it nonetheless exemplifies the complexity of the power dynamics between the nation-state and the nation-people.

By concentrating on the aesthetics of the early socialist animation works and the production practices of two contemporary films, I have tried to deliver a sketchy historical account of the animation cinema of the People’s Republic of China. My study shows that animation cinema, as part of the nation-people’s cultural practices, has vigorously participated in the construction and strengthening of the Chinese national identity. The advent of modernization and globalization following the opening up and reform of China has increasingly complicated the notion of national. The case of *Moebius*, for example, has shown that both the audience and the way the national appears are conditioned by economic and industrial structures that are simultaneously

national and transnational.<sup>241</sup> *Zhang Ga*, on the other hand, unveils the tensions between ideological and economic pursuits, and the public and the private.

I want to return to Duara's theory of hard and soft boundaries to conclude my discussion of Chinese animation cinema and Chinese nation. Duara sees cultural practices as potential boundary markers of a community, or soft boundaries. When a master narrative seeks to define or mobilize a community, it usually does so by privileging a particular cultural practice, such as language, race or common history, as the constitutive principle of the community. What occurs, then, is the hardening of these practices into boundary markers.<sup>242</sup> The history of Chinese animation cinema shows that, in the past 50 years or so, traditional Chinese cultures and values have gone through several softening and hardening processes because of the shifting ideological needs and socio-economic conditions. Starting from *Moebius* and *Zhang Ga*, technological innovation and original creation are used to different extent by both the state and the people to strengthen their nationalist agenda. Chinese animation cinema, standing in between tradition and modernity, the national and the international, will continue to negotiate with the past, the state, the market and the global impact to find its way of survival and growth. (the end)

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<sup>241</sup> Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen*, 213.

<sup>242</sup> Duara, "De-Constructing the Chinese Nation."

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