

China Perspectives

THE HISTORY OF CHINESE ANIMATION I

Edited by
Sun Lijun



The History of Chinese Animation

China has been one of the first countries to develop its own aesthetic for dynamic images and to create animation films with distinctive characteristics. In recent years, however, and subject to the influence of Western and Japanese animation, the Chinese animation industry has experienced several new stages of development, prompting the question as to where animation in China is heading in the future.

This book describes the history, present and future of China's animation industry. The author divides the business's 95-year history into six periods and analyses each of these from a historical, aesthetic, and artistic perspective. In addition, the book focuses on representative works, themes, directions, artistic styles, techniques, industrial development, government support policies, business models, the nurturing of education and talent, broadcasting systems, and animation.

Scholars and students who are interested in the history of Chinese animation will benefit from this book and it will appeal additionally to readers interested in Chinese film studies.

Sun Lijun, Professor, Vice President of Beijing Film Academy and President of China Animation Institute of BFA. He was appointed as the Vice President of BFA in 2012. Sun Lijun is one of the experts who receive State Council special allowance. He has directed several animated feature films, such as *The Little Solider*, *Happy Running*, *Legend of a Rabbit*, and *Harvest*, among others. Since 2005 his animated feature films have been screened internationally, including at the Berlin International Film Festival, Annecy Film Festival, Ukraine International Film Festival, Seoul International Film Festival, and more. His films have won many top awards both domestic and abroad, such as the Best Animated Film of 28th and 29th Golden Rooster Awards, which are the top awards given by Chinese government to the most outstanding and talented artists.

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Edited by Sun Lijun

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TRANSLATED BY
SHI YI AND LI JUNTING

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Preface

As practitioners of animated film, we have the responsibility to grasp the cultural inheritance function of animation and film. And in this regard, what we should do first is to respect history.

Film and animation are a kind of art; therefore, we should first respect such art and realize and insist on their function of cultural inheritance and transmission. Animation creation also carries the function of cultural inheritance and transmission and animation acts as the nourishment for the mind that delivers our long history and national culture to younger generations.

Facts have proved that the power and achievements generated by any art form, such as film, animation or painting, in combination with its own national cultural tradition or national spirit, are so influential and meaningful that they cannot be ignored even in the western countries with their advanced animation technologies.

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The book is selected in the program of 2019 "China Book International", and has attracted attention of people of all circles around the world. Here, we'd like to express our special thanks to the New York Film Academy for its huge support and contribution to the making of the book.

Sun Lijun

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Part I

The embryonic stage and birth of Chinese animation (1920s–1930s)



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1 Overview

Chinese people are born with a strong sense of dynamic images. But it takes thousands of years to bring their sense of animation from embryonic stage to birth till maturity. The origin of China's earliest sense of animation can be traced back to the Stone Age, even before the birth of writing. Those early paintings, such as the rock paintings of Yinshan Mountains in Inner Mongolia during the late Paleolithic Era, the rock paintings of Cangyuan county in Yunnan Province during the Neolithic Era, and the painted pottery basin of Majiayao Culture, reflect our ancestors' examination and primitive experiments towards "beauty of movement" in a variety of activities. Afterwards, the innovative combination of "image" and "movement" constantly pursued by people has brought us leather-silhouette play, puppetry, hand shadow play, and human shadow play, which were quite popular among the Chinese common people. Among them, the leather-silhouette play developed into an ethnic story telling form with chanting, singing, and dubbing, using stage and light to add atmosphere. It has greatly influenced later forms of animation art in China, and even bred the "paper-cut cartoon." While the Chinese were still enjoying a variety of visual tricks, daguerreotype, photography, and projection had been invented successively in the 19th-century Europe, leading to a photographic revolution. In 1895, the first public screening of the film clips by French Lumière brothers marked the birth of films. This was a time when capitalism expanded rapidly to the world. The movie, a novel invention in capitalist countries, spread all over the world along with colonial footprints, reaching China the second year (1896) after its birth. Movies were shown by foreigners who came to China. The door to Chinese film-making had not been opened until the shooting of Peking Opera *The Battle of Mount Dingjun* performed by Tan Xinpei as *laodan* (old woman) to celebrate his birthday in 1905. It was shot by the Beijing Fengtai Photo Studio. Soon afterwards, those early cinematographic work including the first narrative short film and feature-length film were all published consecutively. Modern cinemas were also built at that time. All these have provided necessary technical support and a favourable environment to the birth of animated movies. The Wan brothers loved dynamic imaging since they were children. It was the inspiration they obtained from films

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that motivated them to develop Chinese animations. Early animations were often associated with commercials. The first animated advertisement produced by the Wan brothers was *Shuzhendong Chinese Typewriter* which was made in Shanghai in the 1920's. Its birth laid a foundation for the production of the first animated short. In 1924, Chinese Film Company produced the animation *Dog Treat*, while Shanghai Tobacco Company produced *New Year*. The two were the earliest animated shorts in China. But neither of them had much influence. Inspired by cartoons like *Popeye*, *Betty Boop*, and *Out of the Inkwell* shot by Max Fleischer brothers, the Wan brothers produced *Uproar in the Studio* which was the first non-commercial Chinese animated short. Since then, the Wan brothers produced *A Letter Sent Back* in 1927 and *Paperman Makes Trouble* in 1930. Both cartoons, along with *Uproar in the Studio*, were considered to be the first three animated films in China. Later, the Wan brothers was lauded as the "fathers of Chinese animation" both in China and in Asia as a whole because they served as the first generation of Chinese animation directors. They not only produced the first animation with sound, titled *The Camel's Dance*, after overcoming technical difficulties but also produced the first animated feature film, titled *Princess Iron Fan*. This ushered modern China into its history of animation.

China's early animation works draw on various forms of artistic expression and image language. On one hand, traditional Chinese fine-art drawings bring a lot of inspiration to animators on their techniques of expression; on the other hand, the film shooting technology introduced from the West allows animators to learn how to use lens for narration. In the 1920s, Chinese animation had conducted numerous experiments and explorations on its painting and shooting technology. Such explorations mainly focused on the transformation from traditional painting to film painting, forming an animation production system with originality, converging painting, line drawing, colouration, and shooting in one. The artistic style pursued the realism of action and the coherence of movement.

2 The embryonic stage and birth of Chinese animation consciousness

SECTION 1 THE THREE STAGES OF ANIMATION CONSCIOUSNESS

Animation emerges along with a long history of culture. From the view of animation history, animation consciousness comes into being even before animation itself, which germinates animation. Our ancestors had developed the animation consciousness long ago. During the archaeological excavations, it was discovered that they had begun to use a variety of paints in the form of painting to record their daily life of production and labour. All the images were drawn with varying degrees of dynamics. From this point, the emergence of animation consciousness could be divided into three stages: embryonic, emergence, and maturity, and ultimately leads to the birth of animation.

1. Embryonic

The first stage is the germination of consciousness, which is mainly embodied in prehistoric paintings and coloured pottery paintings. During this period, human beings had developed somewhat ignorant consciousness towards dynamic images. However, they did not know how to use images to express motion. Instead, they had drawn a few more legs to represent their running.

2. Emergence

The second stage is the emergence of consciousness, which is mainly reflected in the hand shadow performance. Using the simple scientific principles of light and shadow to project dynamic images, humans created illusions of animals, such as pigeons, horses, and dogs, in concert with the ventriloquist performance. A folk-art form thus took shape. The human shadow play appearing later also casted shadows through applying the same principles with lamp and people, along with musical instrument performance, to form various types of song and dance performances. This was one form of the palace performances of ancient China. Though animation consciousness had already appeared in the above-mentioned performances,

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there were neither characters nor a storyline. Leather-silhouette play and puppetry came into being at almost the same period, and were typical of the emergence of animation consciousness. They assembled elements of dynamic image performance including artificial light, shadow, stage, curtain, dialogue, lines, musical instruments, plot, and character movements. All the elements of a film or animation were ready at this period, but the traditional animation technology and equipment had not been applied yet. This is a detailed manifestation of animation consciousness.

3. Maturity

The third stage is the maturity of animation consciousness. In the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), movies used to be quite rare when introduced from the West to China. Early movies had been equipped with all the characteristics gained through the modern scientific exploration on image, as well as with much more matured technical means. At that time, people had developed a sense of movie watching and accepted that they should pay to watch movies. Therefore, under the conditions of relatively matured technology and awareness, animation began to step up from merely consciousness to real creation. Movie, such exotic goods, is the best practical inspiration for the Chinese to learn and study dynamic images, which has laid a scientific foundation for the development of animation. However, the maturity of animation consciousness is not equal to the birth of animation. A landmark event – the experiment and creation of the Wan brothers – is also indispensable.

SECTION 2 THE EMBRYONIC STAGE OF ANIMATION CONSCIOUSNESS

Animation originated from ancient paintings, which were the earliest manifestation of human life. Before the birth of writing, human beings had been using paintings to record important events. It is not rare to find the traces of our ancestors from many archaeological pictures. These paintings could throw light on their lives. The dynamics of those paintings at that time could well be considered the embryonic stage of animation consciousness.

1. Rock paintings of Yinshan Mountains in Inner Mongolia

In recent years, Paleolithic rock paintings have been discovered in Yinshan Mountains, Inner Mongolia, which pushes the origin of Chinese painting into the Paleolithic age. The painting is presumed to depict the religious or sorcery acts and images of people's working and sacrificing at that time. These images record shapes of the animals' standing and running, which is the earliest breakdown drawings of animal movements. At that time, people had formed some figurative symbolic features towards all kinds of natural and animal images. These symbolic features have subtle effects on future writing and art.