

China Perspectives

THE HISTORY OF CHINESE ANIMATION II

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 analyzes 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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The History of Chinese Animation II

Edited by Sun Lijun

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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My thanks also go to Professor Zhu Yuhua at the New York Film Academy, Professor Cao Xiaohui at the Beijing Film Academy and Taiwanese animation expert Yu Wai-ching, who did their utmost to make this book possible.

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

**1978–1988 – Chinese
animation after the reform
and opening up (I)**



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1 Overview

1. The end of the Cultural Revolution

In October 1976, the Gang of Four was completely shattered, which ended the Cultural Revolution. A large number of film creators returned to the Animation Film Studios from *Gan Xiao*.¹ They actively invested in new animation creations with more enthusiasm. The Chinese animation industry began to recover at that time. In just two years, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS) launched more than a dozen animations. According to Yan Dingxian's recollection, "After the Cultural Revolution, the animators' enthusiasm and passion for artistic creation suppressed for 10 years were reignited. We were at the happiest time when we saw the SAFS recovered."

The animation works launched in 1977 include *Reed Little Heroes* (Director: Hu Xionghua, Zhou Keqin), *Goats Go Home* (Director: Hu Jinqing, Shen Zulei), *Two Little Peacocks* (Director: Yan Dingxian), and so on. The animation works launched in 1978 include *Watermelon Cannon* (Director: Jin Xi), *The Fox and the Hunter* (Director: Hu Xionghua), *Not Like Elephant* (Director: Tang Cheng; Screenwriter: Wu Qiang), *Songs Flying out of Wuzhi Mountain* (Director: Fang Runnan), *A Strange Patient* (Director: Pu Jiayang), *Little White Pigeon* (Director: Jiao Yeshong), *One Night at Gallery* (Director: A Da, Lin Wenxiao), *Fire Red Rock* (Director: Chen Zhengong), and so on.

2. The second creation climax

In December 1978, after the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the ideological guideline of emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts was reconfirmed. As a result, China entered a period of rapid economic development during the reform and opening up and Chinese animation ushered in the second creation climax. Animators deeply excavated national themes and contents rather than merely exploring them, which generated many kinds of animations, including the *Monkey King Conquers the Demon*. The themes and styles of animated short films became diversified, and their expression methods

and techniques became increasingly innovative. *Three Monks* realized the successful transition from formal beauty to role-making, which used skillful film lens language; the puppet series *Avanti* with ethnic characteristics adopted such techniques as montage's narrative, editing, metaphor, and so on, which gave the animation a strong sense of rhythm; the proficient application of brush strokes and ink-splashing styles in the ink-wash animated short film *The Land* enabled the creation of ink-wash animations to reach the peak of art, which had a great impact on the international community. The Chinese school became increasingly mature. From 1978 to 1988, more than 200 animations were created nationwide under the influence of "Hundred Flowers Campaign", among which a large number of animations were warmly welcomed by the audience, such as *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, *The Legend of Sealed Book*, *Nine-color Deer*, *Fruit of Immortality*, *Snow Kids*, *The Deer's Bell*, *The Land*, and so on. The TV-animated series *The Story of Avanti*, *Sheriff Black Cat*, *Dirty King Adventure*, and *Calabash Brothers* were also deeply loved by the audience.

As China begins the reform and opening up, the market competition has become increasingly fierce. The large-scale entry of overseas commercial animations exerted great impacts on China, so the SAFS gradually fell apart and China's second animation creation climax ended.

Note

- 1 A special school for intellectuals uprooted from their academic and research institutions to live with the peasants in the countryside under military control during the Cultural Revolution.

2 Creation and exploration

SECTION 1 CREATION CLIMAX

In 1956, Chinese animation was still in the exploratory stage and needed to imitate the animated styles from foreign countries. However, 30 years later, by 1987 this situation no longer existed.

Thirty years ago, the director of the SAFS Te Wei proposed the slogan at the time: “Exploring the Road with National Characteristics.” Now, there has been a gratifying return. Many Chinese animations have won awards for consecutive times at home and abroad. Especially after the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in December 1978, China’s film and animation creation entered the second climax, and various film types and animation production departments grew rapidly. Many animation works won different international awards in successive years. Therefore, the “Chinese School” became well-known all over the world.

1. Expression forms

The concept of animation creation in this period was mainly reflected in two breakthroughs. One was to break through existing expression forms to deeply explore the audio-visual language of films. The other was to look for new animation themes.

2. Audio-visual language

The concepts of creation in the Cultural Revolution, namely typification and three highlights,¹ already have disappeared after the reform and opening up. Animators have deepened characters’ personality in audio-visual creations and made use of audio-visual language to depict their psychological transition. For example, Xu Jingda’s *Butterfly Spring* has no dialogue throughout the whole animation, all changes of plots and contradictions are driven by music, and the liner style of decorative paintings is used in terms of the art style. The director of this animated film dealt with the scenario “Farewell” in the following way: in the beginning, we can see scenes starting

slowly downward the moonlight sky, then the panoramic view of the open world. In front of the twinkling scene stand a couple who are facing and confessing to each other under a big tree. The whole picture presents a pure silence. After the panorama, there are medium-range, close, and close-up scenes presenting to the audience at the same rhythm. The audiences are emotionally rendered. The young man takes out a small red flower and gives it to the beautiful girl. Lifting flowers, picking flowers, and holding each other, these three actions are superimposed on the original scenes, showing their first love is timid and heart-wrenching. Then, there appears a feature on their gaze followed by three scenes that change at the same rhythm: close-up, medium-range, and panoramic.

3. Creation themes

After the reform and opening up, animated films with different themes sprung up. For example, *Snow Kids* was adapted from the children's literature work which was themed at depicting friendship; *Butterfly Spring* was themed at extolling love; *One Night at Gallery* and *Super Soap* were aimed at satirizing real-life phenomena. *One Night at Gallery* satirized the arbitrary thoughts of blindly denying all arts in the Cultural Revolution between the 1960s and 1970s. The hats and sticks in the film symbolized the impression on the Cultural Revolution, and the art gallery stood for all artworks. *Super Soap* satirized some social phenomena in the 1980s.

The animation creation team boasted three generations of animators. The old generation of animators could provide guidance on creative ideas; the middle-aged generation of animators had new creative ideas and rich production experience. The younger generation of animators also had a strong passion for work. At that time, animation creation reached a peak. The main audiences were formed of teenagers and children who were interested in myths and legends themes. Therefore, most animations in this period used these themes.

4. Animated feature film and animation series

In 1979, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* directed by Wang Shuchen, Yan Dingxian, and Xu Jingda is China's first animated feature film in widescreen format. This film was adapted from the classical novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, which introduces the audience into a fascinating mythological world with rich imagination and successfully creates the image of a mythical and vivid juvenile hero called "Nezha." This film is greatly excellent in many aspects, such as animation techniques, scene design, and stunt photography. It can be viewed as a masterpiece that can represent the Chinese animation art.

In 1983, the animated feature film *The Legend of Sealed Book* directed by Wang Shuchen and Qian Yunda was based on the classical fairy tale *Subjugation of Demons*. The character modellings in *The Legend of Sealed Book* are exaggerated with national-style decoration that boasts of a high