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"The Chinese Animation Industry: from the Mao Era to the Digital Age"

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Abstract

Since the 1950's the Chinese Animation industry has been trying to create a unique national style for China. The national style of the 1950's and early 1960's was one of freedom, fantasy, and creativity. With the success of "Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland"/ 草原英雄小姊妹 (1965), the government administration, namely Jiang Qing of the "Gang of Four", demanded that all animation should follow specific guidelines based on Social Realism guidelines. This in turn, ushered in a new national style of animation during the Cultural Revolution(1966-1976). During this ten-year period government policies imposed strict restrictions on animators and cause a drain of creative talents—setting the industry decades behind internationally. When the Mao Era ended in the late 1970s the Chinese animation industry enjoyed a brief period of domestic growth. But new challenges occurred when China opened its doors to the world in 1985, which allowed Japanese animation to come in like a storm. For the next two decades, Chinese media was flooded with Japanese anime, and Chinese animation struggled for a place on tv until the early 2000's. This research asks the question of what factors have prevented Chinese animation from succeeding both internationally and globally. It also looks at how these factors have contributed both negatively and positively to the animation industry. The main factors attributing to China's struggle from the 1940s until today are as follows: government policies, national style, and the influence of foreign animation in China.

Key Words: Chinese Animation, Cultural Revolution, Social Realism, National Style, Communist Party

Introduction

Since the 1950's the Chinese animation industry has been trying to create a unique national style for China. In the 1950's there was a lot of freedom to choose what kind of animation they would create, but in 1964 this all changed. The national style of the 1950's and early 1960's was one of freedom, fantasy, and creativity. The government restrictions on animations were very lax, and the government only hoped animators would follow Communist policies, such as illustrating the class struggle. Many government officials were deeply involved in the arts including Zhou Enlai who would often have discussions with Te Wei, or brag about Chinese animation to the Japanese.¹ However, in the 1960's the Chinese Social Realism movement in animation began to play out. With the success of "Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland"/ 草原英雄小姐妹 (1965, Dir: Qian Yunda, Tang Cheng), the government administration, namely Jiang Qing of the "Gang of Four", mandated all animation should follow social realism philosophy. She argued that talking animals, spirits, and ancient things didn't hold to the core values of socialism. Animation that followed the realistic style would become the new national style of animation during the Cultural Revolution. The Communist Party deeply controlled what was coming out of Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the only animation studio at the time.²

When the Mao era ended in the late 1970s the animation industry seemed to be bouncing back domestically, but this all changed when China opened its doors to the world in 1985.

¹ John A. Lent and Ying Xu, "Chinese Animation Film: From Experimentation to Digitalization" in *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema*, ed. Ying Zhu and Stanley Rosen (Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, 2010), 134-136.

² Daisy Yan Du, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation 1940-1970*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 156-157.

China's government policy enforced a national style of mass production tossing aside the creative ideas of the past. While China was trying to catch up with the rest of the animation world, Japanese animation came in like a storm. Chinese animation was flooded with Japanese anime, and Chinese found itself struggling for a place on tv until the early 2000's. By this point many children had grown up watching Japanese animation and thought it was more appealing than the old Chinese style.

This research asks the question of what factors have prevented Chinese animation from being successful both internationally and globally? It also looks at how these factors have contributed both negatively and positively to the animation industry. The main factors attributing to China's struggle from the 1940s until today are as followed: government policies, national style, and the influence of foreign animation in China.

China and Japan's Transnational Relationship

Chinese Animation began in the 1920's with the Wan Brothers. Their works were incredibly successful within East Asia, and in 1941, during the Japanese occupation, their studio created "Princess Iron Fan"/ 鐵扇公主 (1941, Dir: Wan Laiming, and Wan Guchan) the first animated feature film in Asia. The film is based on a portion of "Journey to the West", by Wu Cheng'en, and was a huge inspiration to animators in Asia. It is this film that is said to have been a great influence on the Japanese artist Tezuka Osamu, "the God of Manga", to pursue a career in comics and animation.³ So would there be modern day anime without Chinese animation? "Princess Iron Fan" is not the only Chinese influence on Japanese animation. Japanese animation is also heavily influenced by Chinese traditional painting style. Animation was a medium used as a tool for war time propaganda, but at the same

³ Yan Du, 63

time, it was also a bridging point between the two countries. When “Princess Iron Fan” was created the Wan Brothers wrote to a Japanese critic asking for advice on their film and explained techniques they used. Despite the war, animation brought these two countries together.⁴

Japanese animation didn't only take from China in the 1940's. In fact, many Chinese animated films created during the 1940's were actually created by a Japanese animator. From 1945-1953 Mochinaga Tadahito resided in Manchuria and played a huge role in the animation scene especially in the field of puppet animation. Tadahito went to work at Man'ei film studio which was located in present day Changchun. This film studio later became Northeast Film Studio after China regained control of Manchuria in 1949. Tadahito along with around 80 other Japanese animators stayed in China until 1953 and help to create the start of Communist China animation.⁵

The Journey for a National Style

In 1949, Te Wei was appointed by the Ministry of Culture, under Zhou Enlai's orders, to the head of the Northeast film studio in Changchun. In 1950, Te Wei and the other animators decided Shanghai was a better location and moved the studio. It was renamed the Shanghai Animation Film Studio/上海美術電影製片廠.⁶ Then in 1953, Shanghai Animation Film Studio became the national studio of China and held a monopoly over the animation industry and forced other studios to shut down.⁷

⁴ Stephen Teo, *The Asian Cinema Experience: Styles, Spaces, Theory*, (Routledge:New York, 2013), 76-77

⁵ Yan Du, 68-75

⁶ Lent, John A. and Xu Ying. *Comics Art in China*. (Jackson: University Press Mississippi, 2017)159-162.

⁷ Yan Du, 117.

Despite restrictions 1950's animation had a lot of creative freedom. Animators were able to try a lot of different animation techniques, although the government offered suggestions that didn't strictly enforce what was coming out of the studio.⁸ Chinese animation drew a lot of inspiration from animation in the west, but the 1950's was a time when China wanted to define animation as uniquely theirs. Wei Wu, the author of *Chinese Animation, Creative Industries, and Digital Culture*, mentioned, "Most Chinese animation lost in the parody of overseas work, could not find its own voice at that time, and had to imitate them to seek an outlet."⁹ By the late 1950s Chinese animators were on a quest to find a national (minzu) style trying to free themselves from foreign influences by creating something that was uniquely Chinese. Animators believe it was ok to learn from foreign techniques, but they need to create their own techniques as well. China wanted their animation, art, and films to be unique and recognized as Chinese."¹⁰

According to Lent and other scholars of Chinese animation, the situation was made worse when the film "Why Crows are Black" / 乌鸦为什是黑的 (1956, Dir: Qian Jiajun and Li Kewei) allegedly won a prize at the Venice Film Festival but was mistaken as a Soviet Film.¹¹ In response, Te Wei decided to create an animation that illustrated a unique Chinese characteristic. He created "The Conceited General" / 骄傲的将军 (1956, Dir: Te Wei, and Li Kewei) which used a movement style similar to the Beijing Opera.¹² In her recent publication, Daisy Yan Du, checking into research done by Sean Macdonald, author of *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media*, debts the truth behind the national style story. Although "The Conceited

⁸ Stephen Teo, 76-77

⁹ Weihua Wu, *Chinese Animation, Creative Industries, Digital Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 25

¹⁰ Ibid, 26

¹¹ Lent, John A. and Xu Ying. *Comics Art in China*.

¹² Lent and Ying, *Comic Art in China*, 163

General” clearly marks the founding of a National Style in China, it was not a reaction to “Why Crows are Black” winning an award and being confused as a Soviet Film. After contacting the Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Yan Du discovered there was no record of the film ever winning an award. Therefore, the film’s fabricated story was probably just used as a means to promote the studio’s new purpose of creating a national style.¹³

In connection with creating a national style, the government funded the animation industry under the “double hundred policy” in 1956. The policy was implanted by Mao as a way to encourage intellectuals to follow the cause. The slogan of the cause was as followed: “Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend.”¹⁴ When this policy was in place animators had more freedom on what types of stories were created, but politicians still made suggestions and had influence. For example, a government official requested a film be made representing the works of the famous Chinese modern painter, Qi Baishi.¹⁵



"Where's Mama?" (1961)



The Buffalo Boy's Flute"(1963)

The film was a wash-brush art film called “Where’s Mama?”/ 小蝌蚪找妈妈 (1961, Dir: Te Wei, Qian Jiajun, and Tang Cheng) based off artwork done by Qi Baishi. The film was very

¹³ Yan Du, 121-122

¹⁴ Rolf Giesen, *Chinese Animation: A History and Filmography, 1922-2012*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015),24

¹⁵ Giesen 33-34

beautifully done, and it along with “Buffalo Boy’s Flute”/ 牧笛 (1963, Dir: Te Wei, Qian Jiajun) are one of the few films created using the water brush technique. “Where’s Mama” was a film created for a child audience with a political message praising frogs. According to Yan Du, from 1958-1962 there was a campaign to get rid of the four pests, but frogs were one of the animals the government encouraged children to protect. Frogs helped to get rid of harmful insect.¹⁶

Puppet animation and papercut also flourished during this time in addition to regular cel animation. Perhaps one of the most iconic and beloved films to come out of this era however is the two-part film “Havoc in Heaven”/ 大鬧天宮 (1961,1964, Dir: Wan Yiming, Tang Cheng), which is still considered to this day to be one of the best Monkey King films which won both domestic and worldwide recognition. This era is considered by many to be the First Golden Era of Chinese animation and is fondly remembered by Chinese who grew up during that time.¹⁷

However, The time of the “double hundred” policy was short, and a government that had encouraged people to speak out was now taking action against those who had supposedly spoken against government policies. Actions taken against rightist took place as early as fall of 1957, but the anti-rightist movement that hit Shanghai Animation Studio in 1964 resulted in Te Wei beginning attacked for his film “The Buffalo Boy’s Flute”, and other films the studio had created during 1949-1964 which were considered to not highlight the ideals of Maoism. In Lent and Ying’s article, “Cartooning and China’s ‘Cultural Revolution’”, Te Wei reflects on his experiences in the following quote:

¹⁶ Yan Du, 140- 141

¹⁷ *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*. Directed by Marie-Claire Quiquemelle and Julien Gaurichon. Filmmakers Library, 2007.
https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C1784822

“They demanded that I write self-criticism, not only pertaining to my own film, but all the films they thought were not right, because I was, after all, the director of the Studio at that time. I really did not understand what they were after and why.”¹⁸

The effects of the Mao Regime didn’t end here however, and more attacks against the studio and its animators would continue throughout the 1960s as the Red Guards invaded the studio, and Jiang Qing’s ideals of what animation should be would become a reality.

Realism vs Fantasy: Jiang Qing’s grip on the Animation Industry

The freedom of the 1950’s soon ended as the Cultural Revolution closed in. In the documentary “The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios”(2007, Dir: Marie-Claire Quiquemelle and Julien Gaurichon) Te Wei recalls the period stating, “We lived through so many good times. It was a booming period, overflowing with enthusiasm. It's a shame that politics put a brake on our momentum.”¹⁹ The politics he is mentioning are those that started in 1964 with the banning of the film “Buffalo Boy’s Flute”. This film, which is a story of a boy’s search and recovery of his lost water buffalo, was criticized as not including the class struggle.²⁰ When the studio tried to argue it did include class struggle, communist politicians tried to find other reasons for why the film didn’t fit communist values.²¹ Animation at this point was on a pivot for change, and most of the change was based on policies that Jiang Qing put into place.

As to why Jiang Qing was important, we need to situate politics and animation. There were two schools of thought on how animation should be created. One believed children’s film and literature belongs in the realm of fantasy where they can escape from reality, but still learn valuable

¹⁸ Giesen, 50

¹⁹ *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*

²⁰ Giesen, 45-46.

²¹ *Ibid*, 50.

or relevant information. The other school of thought believed animation and literature should be realistic. It should tell realistic stories that portray daily life so that viewers can learn something pragmatic and useful for how to live their lives.²²

Jiang Qing was an advocate for the realism view. In 1960, she came out with a group of her supporters to express her opinion against the views of Chen Bochui, a famous children's writer, who felt things created for children should hold elements of fantasy and be told with the heart of a child in mind. Jin Xi, known as the master of puppet animation and contributor to around 23 animated productions, like Chen Bochui believed that animation wasn't the place for realism. Jin Xi believed that the types of realistic elements that people hoped to portray through animation could only be done with real actors. If reality is portrayed through animation it would have to also incorporate fantasy, or fantastic elements. Jiang Qing was heavily influenced by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, who was also a strong advocate that children's stories should be based on realism rather than fantasy.²³ Jiang Qing openly opposed the ideas of human-like animals, such as Donald Duck, and associated them with western capitalism.²⁴ Jiang Qing had morphed the way the whole film industry worked. Real life films became more like Beijing Operas and animation replaced the role that once belonged to real life films²⁵

The realistic film era in Chinese animation was relatively short lived and mostly took place during the Cultural Revolution. The first realism films were created in the late 1940s, but none were very successful until the production of the 1964 film, "Heroic Sisters of the Grassland." It

²² Yan Du, 156-157.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid, 152-180

was with the success of this film that the Realism era went into full swing, and the elements of fantasy faded away from the animation world for around twelve to fourteen years.

“Animators and Animation of the Revolution”

According to Yan Du of Chinese animation, Pre- Cultural Revolution animation is considered to end with “Buffalo Boy’s Flute” and Cultural Revolution animation starts. with “Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland”.²⁶ Both films were created in 1964, but the Communist government viewed them very differently. “Heroic Sisters of the Grassland” was praised greatly as being an ideal film for the times, while “Buffalo Boy’s Flute” was used as an excuse to persecute animators that worked for Shanghai Animation Film Studio. Heroic Sisters of the Grassland is a tale based on true story of two sisters who nearly died trying to protect a herd of sheep. The characters in the film were even drawn to resemble the girls in real life. This is the first animation honoring Mao, with a picture of him in the opening credits. This would be one of the few films that were allowed to be shown during the first few years of the Revolution. It is also in this film that the role of animals starts to become



The two sisters were drawn based off real life portraits of them using a technique known as rotoscoping.

²⁶ Ibid, 152-180

downplayed, and humans become the center focus.²⁷ Cultural Revolution animation mostly focused on the struggles of children, and how following in the ways of Mao led them to be successful. The children were all heroes in their tales and were often aided or rescued by Communist Forces. Although, Cultural Revolution animation for some may be seen as a period wasted of propaganda films, much can be learned from studying these films. A viewer can understand the roles that children were expected to take up at that time, and the struggles animators went through while producing them.

The Cultural Revolution was a difficult time for anyone who was an artist or an intellectual. According to Lent and Ying, “Traditional teaching were tossed out, artistic and cultural production virtually stopped, and artist and intellectuals severely punished—tortured, jailed removed to the countryside, all the time stripped of their creative right.”²⁸ This policy caused a huge issue in studio production as much of the talent was sent away between 1966-1972. During these five years only four films were released. The films include “New Sprouts in a Village”/ 山村新苗 (1966, Dir: Zhang Chao), “A Great Statement”/ 伟大的声明 (1968, Dir: unknown), “The Battle Song of the 10000-ton Water Hydraulic Forging Press”/ 万吨水压机战歌 (1972, Dir: Hu Jinqing), and “After School”/ 放学以后 (1972, Dir: Yan Dingxian). Out of these four films only “After School” is easily accessible online.

Of all the films I’ve viewed that were created during the Culture Revolution, “After School” is the most interesting in that it gives viewers a look into what was expected of a typical elementary school student at the time. It illustrates beautifully the values of communism. The film starts with Li Guo Hua, the little red guard leader, encouraging his classmates to “study

²⁷ Ibid, 60

²⁸ John A. Lent and Xu Ying, “Cartooning and China’s ‘Cultural Revolution.’”, 89

hard”, “learn from each other,” and “study hard for the revolution.” Then the film proceeds to go to the opening credits where the students are seen doing military training, doing scientific experiments and working in the countryside. In the film some younger children are influenced by a capitalist supporter, but with the help of Li Guo Hua and the little red guard the supporter is criticized, and publicly shamed. Following the criticism, the true values of communism again reigned through-out the school.

Just as the capitalist supporter suffered in the film, the five-year period was a difficult one for many who lived in fear of being criticized and visited by the Red Guard. Houses, workplaces, and people’s lives were invaded. Shanghai Animation Film Studio also went under investigation at this time. In 1967 the Studio was renamed the Red Guard Film Studio and remained so until June 15, 1977 when Te Wei was restored as director and the propaganda team was expelled.²⁹ During the five years many animators were sent to the countryside. Yan Dingxian, an animator who later became the head of the studio from 1985-1989 shared the experience as followed:

“For eight years from 1965-1973, we couldn’t do animation. We were laboring, separately often in different parts of the countryside. My specialty was feeding the chickens and Lin’s (his wife) was planting vegetables. We were afraid of being criticized. We worked for one year, separately far from Shanghai and then came back to work, separately again in the countryside outside Shanghai. When we were first sent out, our young son was only six months old, our older daughter was eight. For two years, others were taking care of our children. We could come back to Shanghai from the countryside every month for a day or so to see them.”³⁰

Te Wei’s recollection of his experience was much more gruesome. He reported:

“Once they made me stay awake for three days with no sleep, and they kept forcing me to ‘tell the truth’. I could not tell them nothing different from what I had already told them, so they demanded I kneel down. When I refused to do so, they hit me in the knees. I fell down, my teeth struck the ground and fell out and my mouth bled. Another time, they put a chair on my neck and head and leaned on it until I lost my breath. One person laughed

²⁹ Wu, 31

³⁰ Giesen, 50

and sat on the chair. I fought to stand up. More people came in to watch and they said this old man was fierce. Then they left, laughing among themselves. I could not even think of ever drawing a film. I only wished I could become a bird to be able to fly freely out.”³¹

It seemed the more well-known or powerful someone was the harsher and longer their punishment would be.

In 1973, animators slowly returned to a studio controlled by the Red Guards and were forced to create films to fit government approval. Some of the main slogan themes encouraged by the Red Guards were, “ ‘Never forget the class struggle’; ‘To rebel is justified’; ‘Sweeping away all the monsters and demons’; ‘Destroy the four old’s and establish the four news’; ‘Eulogize Mao; and frequent quoting of Mao’”.³² When the animators returned they didn’t dare to object, or discuss what happened while they were away. It was as if they were prisoners trapped within their own studio.



From Left to Right: “The Little 8th Route Army” (1973), “The Little Trumpeter” (1973), “Little Sentinel of the East China Sea” (1973), and “Children Arrows with Firecrackers” (1974)

The works following the animators return from 1973-1974 included “The Little 8th Route Army”/小八路 (1973, Dir: You Lei), “Never Owing the People Half a Penny”/不差半分(1973,

³¹ Lent and Ying, “Cartooning and China’s ‘Cultural Revolution.’”, 97-98

³² Lent and Xing, “Cartooning and China’s ‘Cultural Revolution’”, 89

Dir:Ang Lee, and Yan Pingxiao), The “Little Trumpeter”/小号手 (1973, Dir:Wang Shuzhen, Yan Ding Xian) “Little Sentinel of the East China Sea”/东海小哨兵 (1973, Dir:Hu Xionghua), and Children Arrows with Firecrackers/带响的弓箭(1974 Dir:Hu Jinqing). These mostly focused around children helping the Red Army and fighting against landlords, Nationalists, tsars and Japanese during these years. One important discovery by Yan Du about these films was that although andromorphic animals were absent from the films, many of the villains were given names such as “Polar Bear” in “Children Arrows with Firecrackers” and “The Wolf in the Forest” in “The Little Trumpeter”. Villains were always adult males, and the main hero characters were represented as young children around 8-14 years old.³³

“The Little Trumpeter” in particular is noted as a film that embodied many of the slogans the Red Guards hoped to promote. The film displays a classic example of class struggle, with the young Little Yong rebelling against his landlord. The story begins with Little Yong being brutally hit by the landlord, and then rescued by the commotion caused by the Red Army’s arrival. Noticing the landlord’s evil ways, the Red Army drives the landlord out of town. The landlord joins the nationalists. Grateful to the Red Army Little Yong talks with a soldier from the Red Army who encourages him and eventually convinces Little Yong to join as the trumpeter for the army and follow the path of Mao. In the end Little Yong helps the Red Army defeat both the Nationalists and his former landlord.

By 1975 the Cultural Revolution was beginning to slow down, and the amount of animation production was increasing. In 1976, films with less realistic elements began to appear, but overall the films still promoted the ideals of the time. The films that were released between

³³ Yan Du, 167-170

1975-1976 included, “Before Set Out”/ 出发之前(1975 Dir: Zhou Keqin and Qian Jianxuan), “The Night of Tide Flood”/大潮流之夜(1975 Dir: Tang Cheng and Qiang Qiang Wu), “The Ferry”/渡口(1975, Dir:Hu Yumen), “Horses Galloping”/ 骏马飞腾(1975, Dir:Yu Xi and Liu Huiyi), The Major Course/主课 (1975, Dir: Chen Zhenghong) “Bamboo Shoot Growing in the House”/长在屋里的竹笋 (1976 Dir: Hu Jinqing and Zhou Keqin), “The Story of Big Oar”/大橹的故事(1976, Dir:You Lei), The Golden Wild Goose/金色的大雁(1976 Dir:Te Wei and Shen Wei), “Trial Voyage”/ 试航(1976 Dir: Yan Dingxian), and “Seedlings Shumiao” 树苗(1976, Dir: Fang Runnan).³⁴

“The Golden Wild Goose” was released shortly before Mao’s death in 1976 and marks the beginning to the end of Cultural Revolution cartoons.³⁵ The animation is about the story of a grasshopper plague in Tibet and Mao’s promise to send a helicopter to help save the Tibetans from the pest. During the film the children have a dream where they travel on a wild goose from Tibet and collect a white lotus flower to present to Mao when they fly over the great wall to greet him. According to Yan Du, “The boundary between the fantastic and the realistic in ‘The Golden Wild Goose’ is blurred by the relationship between the magic golden wild goose and the helicopter. The goose is associated with both the primitiveness of Tibet and the helicopter as an icon of socialist modernity, challenging ten years of visual dominances of machines.”³⁶

³⁴ “Chinese Animation 1947-1979”; many of the 1975-76 films are located in the China Film Archive in Beijing and difficult to gain public access to, especially for foreigners.

³⁵ Yan Du, 171-173

³⁶ Ibid, 172

According to Yan Du, it was with this film that animals, and the fantasy associated with them, began to return to animation, and a new era of animation would begin.³⁷

Mao is Dead, the Gang is Gone, Now we are Free

In 1976 Mao died and the Revolution technically ended, but the animators didn't feel truly free until the rest of "Gang of Four" were arrested a year later.³⁸ Once the "Gang of Four" were behind bars the animators safely began production of "One Night in an Art Gallery/画廊一夜. (1978, Dir : Xu Jing and Lin Xiao) " It represented overcoming the troubles of the Cultural Revolution, and of being able to create freely once more. Lin Wenxiao, wife of Yan Dingxian, said that when the Cultural Revolution ended, she was still afraid to return to the studio, but once the "Gang of Four" was captured she was relieved. She exclaimed, "In our studio!... When began 'One Night in an Art Gallery', we were not afraid. We thought the Gang of Four were in prison and we didn't believe they could rise again. After all that happened to us in the Cultural Revolution, we were not afraid. Nothing could have been worse than that."³⁹ With the creation of "One Night in an Art Gallery" animators could let go of pressures and resentment that had felt during the Cultural Revolution and express their feelings. Until Deng Xiaoping took office in 1981, animation, and all arts, were free. Animation and art created during this period were often referred to as "Scar Art", coined from the story "Scar" by Lu Xinhua, that reflected upon the horrible experiences of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid, 171-173

³⁸ Lent and Xing, "Cartooning and China's 'Cultural Revolution'", 122.

³⁹ ibid

⁴⁰ "Scar Art" *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*, 2011, https://contemporary_chinese_culture.academic.ru/673/Scar_art



"Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" (1979)

In addition to “One Night in the Art Studio”, another notable film during this period was, “Nezha Conquers the Dragon King”/ 哪吒闹海(1979 Dir: Yan Dingxian, Wan Shuzhen, and Xu Jingda). The story of Nezha, the film’s main character, dates back to ancient Buddhist

and Taoist texts about a rebellion within China. In creating this film director Wang Shuchen took some liberties. For example, Nezha didn’t go to seek revenge on his father as he had in the original tale. The director chooses to mainly focus on the fight between Nezha and the four dragons, which is interpreted by scholars as a metaphor for a fight against the “Gang of Four”.⁴¹ In the film Nezha kills the son of one of the dragons. The dragon is then determined to seek revenge. The dragon threatens to report the incident to the Jade emperor, however, the Jade emperor is absent. Does his absence represent the current absence of Mao? Many allegories can be found in this film, and it remains one of China’s classic masterpieces. It is the full turning point back into the world of fantasy.⁴²

This return to fantasy is considered the Second Golden Age of Chinese Animation. In a surprising turn of events, Te Wei actually praised the Cultural Revolution for helping Chinese animation to achieve new heights in a 2001 interview. “Because all of the artists were oppressed during the 'Cultural Revolution' and collected much energy and wanted to do something, the

⁴¹ Sean MacDonald, *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 136-173

⁴² *ibid*

level was much higher. All of them wanted to make their best works and worked hard during that time. After the 'Cultural Revolution,' animation films were revived; it was the best period.”⁴³ However, any benefits the struggle of the Cultural Revolution may have had on the industry were short-lived. By the end of the 1980's the Second Golden Era was coming to a close, and Japanese animation would become the front runner in the country.

Is the Cultural Revolution to Blame?

The ending of the Cultural Revolution was soon followed by China opening its doors to the outside world. In doing this China gained a lot, but some blows were dealt as well. One of the biggest was competition from other countries in the animation, film, comic, and other industries. 1990's television was filled with Japanese cartoons which China's TV stations were given for free. The station had to pay for animation that came out of Chinese studios. This made competition fierce for Chinese animation which had to fight to get a spot in front of China's viewing public. For every Chinese animation there were around six or seven Japanese ones aired per day. Japanese animation controlled the market and formed the aesthetic of what the next generation of Chinese youth could expect from cartoons.⁴⁴

In addition to competition from outside the country, the 1980's saw a time of other studio's work emerging, noticeably Beijing Science and Educational Film studio, and the reopening of the Changchun Film Group Corporation in 1984. Government control was fairly loose for animation throughout the 1980's, but just as Japanese animation was coming into the country the Communist Party again put regulations into place on what types of animation could

⁴³ Lent and Ying. “*Cartooning and China's 'Cultural Revolution'*”, 117-118

⁴⁴ *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*

be created.⁴⁵ According to animator Li Lekang of the Changchun Film Group Corporation, “After 1990 and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations, the Communist Party took art creation ‘more seriously, strengthened control, and changed animation to a commercial basis, resulting in no more artistic works.’”⁴⁶ Despite this, Japanese animation still flourished until 2005 or 2006, when the government decided to limit the amount of foreign shows on TV to 40%.⁴⁷

China struggled hard to create the market economy, but its open-door policy now meant but they were ill-equipped for it in the animation industry and perhaps other industries as well.

Qu Jiangfang explains the reasons for Chinese animation’s struggles as followed:

“We got pushed back 20 years in terms of television and the international market. In the 1980s, foreign companies rushed here to have work done. We were not creating then; we had to learn mass production, mass consumption, but no creativity as we had to face the challenges of the market. Sure, we had a glorious past in animation, but we have to change. But we don’t have to change our culture to have a market economy.”⁴⁸

During this time many young animators were lured away from Chinese studios to go work for foreign companies for higher pay. The Chinese government tried to help Shanghai Animations Film Studio survive by having animators work in collaboration with foreign companies on animated shorts. These project took up most of the young animator’s time and they were unable to freely create and hone their talents with their own creative ideas. Animation after 1986 was focused more on money and less on creativity. And perhaps this is why China struggles to make animated features that are uniquely Chinese and popular. The government pushed for quantity over quality when it came to works created by local animators, and most of what was created

⁴⁵ Lent and Ying, *Comic Art in China*, 180-183

⁴⁶ Ibid, 162

⁴⁷ Giesen, 82

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 81

didn't hold a candle to animation made pre-1985.⁴⁹ Noticing the hold of foreign media on Chinese youth the government finally acted. They took great effort in trying to promote homegrown products by limiting the amount of foreign programs that could be shown on TV.⁵⁰

The 2004 cartoon series “Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf”/ 喜羊羊与灰太狼 (2004-Present), a slapstick-coyote-and-roadrunner-like cartoon, became a huge success in China. Pleasant Goat and his goat pals became culture icons for China, and a powerful soft power tool in foreign relations. The show was not only popular with children, but surprisingly adults as well.⁵¹



Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf (2004-Present)

However; in 2013 the show was banned for being too violent, after two boys imitated a scene from the show, and would not be allowed back on TV until adjustments were made. The show was criticized and banned during a crackdown on violence and pornography in all cartoons and children's stories within the country⁵² It seems anytime the animation industry starts to have something successful happen the Chinese government has to put a stop to it. Luckily for

⁴⁹ Lent and Ying, *Comic Art in China*, 180-183

⁵⁰ Giesen 81-88

⁵¹ “Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf: a sinister influence on society”, *Understanding Modern China*, February 13, 2014, <https://uosm2018.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/pleasant-goat-and-big-big-wolf-a-sinister-influence-on-society/>

⁵² Lily Huang, “Pleasant Goat not so pleasant anymore”, *The World of Chinese*, <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2013/10/pleasant-goat-not-so-pleasant-anymore/>

“Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf”, it has been allowed back on TV since 2016, but how the censorship has affected the viewership will have to wait to be seen.⁵³

Conclusion

The history of Chinese Animations struggle to the world stage is a fascinating one. China has had many ups and downs in the industry, and most of the downs have been a result of Communist Party policies, and censorship that has been put into place since the Cultural Revolution. As the world becomes more digital, undergrown artists now have a chance to produce works and have the freedom to create without the governments or a studio’s approval. Despite Chinese freelancers now having more room to create the industry still struggles. For China to be able to receive notoriety in the animation industry as Japan and America do, they will need to create animation that is successful in the box office, and not just for daily television or YouTube viewers.

“Monkey King: Hero is Back/西游记之大圣归来” (2015, dir:Tian Xiaopeng) was a promising film for the Chinese animation industry. Though some reviews on IMDB were slightly critical bringing back the old hero “Monkey King,” seems to be a successful strategy for Chinese animation.⁵⁴ However, the question needs to be asked does China have any new stories to be told that will be successful? Perhaps it’s time for China to go back to its animation routes from the 1950’s and start creating art films again instead of hoping to make “Big Money.” For now, I’ll be on the lookout for a Chinese studio that can make Chinese animation great again.

⁵³ A 2017 release of the show can be seen here. I wasn’t able to find an article stating when it was allowed back on TV. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCthhysOTvhG-DJRRixYR2HQ>

⁵⁴ “Monkey King: Hero is Back”, *IMDB*, accessed April 10,2019, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4644382/reviews>

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