

Panel A4

Sala Emiciclo

National Experiences in Animation I: the Far East

Shaopeng Chen

Industrial Transformation and Aesthetic Exploration: China's New Generation Cinema Animation



My proposal examines full-length Chinese cinema animation works produced from 1995 to 2015, and analyses the significance of characteristics, such as the cultural background, technical features and different production modes of animation. The cinema animation works in China were being purchased and then sold by the state-owned China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation Company for a long period. Under this system, Chinese animation can be considered as a part of China's collective cultural undertakings in the context of a planned economy, rather than a real sense of an animation 'industry'. In 1995, the government authorities suspended the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation Company's exclusive sales rights of cinema animation, and since then the animation industry in China began its marketization process. In the past two decades, the production and operation mode of domestic cinema animation has changed dramatically, thus providing an opportunity for the industrial transformation and upgrading of the Chinese animation sector.

In comparing with the above creations and its pre-1995 counterparts, I find that the changes, in both aesthetic and industrial terms, are always entangled with continuities between them. Regarding this matter, I would prefer to call the Chinese cinema animation works which are produced after 1995 as the 'new generation' for the purpose of not only differentiating them from their predecessors, but also clearly illustrating the historical connection between the two categories. Therefore in this project, the 'new generation cinema animation in China' refers to 2D and 3D animated theatrical feature films produced by Chinese animation companies independently, or co-produced by Chinese companies and their overseas counterparts after 1995.

The aim of this proposal is to identify key developments in Chinese cinema animation over the last two decades, and the reasons behind particular critical and commercial success or failure, in order to provide a strong theoretical understanding of a neglected field in Film Studies. The key analysis should include case-studies on *Boonie Bears* series (2014, and its sequel 2015, 2016), *Kuiba 1* (Wang Chuan, 2011), *The Tibetan Dog* (Masayuki Kojima, 2011), and *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (Tian Xiaopeng, 2015).

I choose these films for particular reasons. For example, the serialized and broad-based Chinese cinema animation, like the *Boonie Bear* series, is an important link of the animation value chain. The animated film products are characterised by the imaginative re-creation of its parent brand in cinematic language while features more ambitious narrative structure and more characters. Accordingly, the above works can be regarded as a form of derivatives. In most cases, the derivatives films, which share the similar targeted children audience, have not only achieved commercial success in regard to box office returns but have also served as the advertisements of other products from the same entertainment franchise. At the same time, the above derivatives films have certain limitations on several aspects, such as the hasty creation of a new work and the audience's aesthetic fatigue.

The completely original Chinese cinema animation works, like *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog*, have fallen into a dilemma between reputation and commercial performance. For most of them the box-office revenue is too low to cover the production costs until the end of theatrical screening despite the relatively high-reputation both online and offline. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. Admittedly, Chinese animators still do not produce films which fully meet audience expectations. In other words, there is still a large gap between original Chinese cinema animation (even those which enjoy relatively positive feedback) and its Japanese and American counterparts. The original products are also being dragged down by the disreputable image of Chinese animation that is created by its previous cinema and TV series counterparts which are produced in a rough and slipshod way. Nevertheless, this embarrassment of original Chinese cinema animation works have slowly changed since the box office smash of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*.

This proposal also focuses on the changing style of contemporary animation, the influence of government policy on the Chinese animation industry, and the emergence of a new generation of animation in China. During my initial research, I discovered that partly due to the explosive growth of multi-screen cinema in China, Chinese cinema animation is currently undergoing a high-speed of development, presenting a series of new features. This proposal is thus timely in charting significant new areas of Chinese cinema animation, a field that is badly in need of theoretical support.

Biography

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Shaopeng Chen is a Film Studies PhD student in University of Southampton (UK), and he is sponsored by China Scholarship Council (CSC). He is supervised jointly by Dr Michael Williams, Dr Corey Schultz and Dr Malcolm Cook. His doctoral thesis analyses feature length Chinese cinema animation from 1995 to 2015. This thesis argues that the Chinese cinema animations which were created between 1995 and 2015 can be categorised as a sort of 'hybrid cultural product', which intertwines and mingles the traditional and the modern, the domestic and the exotic experiences. This project also demonstrates that the 'Chineseness' in the above works was never easily recognisable and stable. Instead, the present day Chinese cinema animation is characterised by the ongoing multidimensional exploration of visual design. The absence of a distinctive 'national style' forces many domestic creators to reference the exotic styles and elements that are mainly from Japanese and American animated works which have been proved as successful and competitive products.

Shaopeng Chen holds a MA degree in Animation Arts from Nanjing University of the Arts (China), but his research covers both Chinese animation and live-action Chinese film. Previously, He taught animation production courses at Nanjing Normal University of Special Education. In 2010, his paint-on-glass-animated short film *The Pipe* is being included in *Animated Short Film Creative Practice*, which is the selected teaching material in Jiangsu Province (China). This film also won Excellence Award in The Third Animation

and Comics Design Match for College Students in Nanjing City. In 2012, he travelled to Japan to investigate the local anime and manga industry.

He has written some articles on Chinese film industry, Chinese film marketing and Chinese animated film in both Chinese and English languages. He has also presented at several international conferences and symposia, including *British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS) conference 2016: Trans/media: Trans/national Screen* in University of Reading (UK), *Transnational Screens Conference: Volatility and Compounding Transnational Traffic* in De Montfort University (UK) and *Animation and the Comic Book Symposium* in Canterbury Christ Church University (UK). His research interests include style of animation character, general aesthetics in animation, film industry in China, government policy of Chinese creative industries, the cartoon brand in the Chinese animation industry, and new generation cinema animation in China.