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The Digital Turn in Storytelling and Creative Industries in China: A report

Abstract In recent years, creative industries in China have had an important role both economically and socially, and the sectors of animation and video games have had the chance to develop significantly. Animation, as a form of storytelling, can have a strong educational power (Van Riper, 2011): this is the basis of the new industrial strategy adopted by China in the creative sector, as far as the animation field is concerned (Tan, 2006). Over a few years, the animation industry was able to achieve a great development with the creation of products mainly for broadcast on TV. Animation now represents around 220,000 minutes per year. For this reason, China became the number one producer of animation in the world in 2010. But to achieve this, the Chinese government had to encourage and try to structure the entire animation industry (Lu Bin, 2013). In the early 2000s, the animation industry in China increased the production of animation contents, thanks to the introduction of computers in industrial production, bringing about an increase in minutes and quality (Tan, 2006). This new technological condition was somehow facilitated by the government that pushed the major animation production studios to adapt to new technological standards and keep pace with other countries competing in this area (Qing, 2006). The digital turn in storytelling seems to have increased the capacity of the government to promote traditional values, rather than improving the chances of the independent authors and private studios to create new stories. The development of technology and the entry of computers in many Chinese homes also generated a change in the spread of animation products, as many users, especially students, began to watch online products made abroad. Moreover, it has created a new generation of authors, who, although few, have begun to create new stories and have a clear idea of how to use new technologies – even criticising, in some animations, the social situation of modern China. At that moment, there was still a predominance of foreign productions, mainly Japanese and American: almost the totality of the merchandise was in the hands of foreign companies (Lu Bin, 2014). The digital turn in storytelling has made propaganda productive: not a cost for the government but actually a profitable business to reach in few years. This article will relate the historical and technological development, government policies in favour of this industry and it will analyse the reasons of the theatrical feature animation films success, highlighting the most representative works produced over the past 15 years.

The Civilising Mission in History

Education and a civilising purpose inspired Chinese animation from its beginning, when China was suffering from the cultural and territorial invasion of foreign imperialism. Against this background, Chinese animation took on the

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responsibility for the education of common audiences of all ages. Marie-Claire Quiquemelle wrote that the Brothers Wan produced six “educative” and “patriotic” films for Lianhua before moving to Mingxing Film Company in 1933, where until war was declared in 1937, they made nine short films and lived “for the first time in comparative comfort and security” (Quiquemelle, 1991: 177). At that time, the ideological and moral education animations with strong patriotic themes included: *Citizens, Wake Up* (国人速醒, Guó rén sù xǐng, 1931), *Blood Money* (血钱, Xuě qián, 1932), *United Together* (精诚团结, Jīng chéng tuán jié, 1931), *The Leak* (漏洞, Luò dòng, 1933) and *The Year of Chinese Goods* (国货年, Guó huò nián, 1933). The overtly anti-Japanese propaganda films were: *Dog Detective* (狗侦探, Gǒu zhēn tàn, 1931), *National Sorrow* (民族痛史, Mín zú tòng shǐ, 1934), *New Tide* (新潮, Xīn cháo, 1936) and *The Motherland Is Saved by Aviation* (航空救国, Háng kōng jiù guó, 1933). There were also animations based on animal fables to educate people, including *Tortoise and Rabbit Have a Race* (龟兔赛跑, Guī tù sài pǎo, 1932), *Sudden Catastrophe* (飞来祸, Fēi lái huò, 1932) and *Locusts and Ants* (蝗虫与蚂蚁, Huáng chóng yǔ mǎ yǐ, 1932).

After 1949, animation films became an effective method to spread “enlightenment”: a large number of people need not only moral education but also scientific popularisation. Shanghai Animation Film Studio produced many animations at that time: *Zhu Bajie Eats the Watermelon* (猪八戒吃西瓜, Zhūbājiè chī xīguā, 1958), *A Clever Duckling* (聪明的鸭子, Cōng míng de yāzi, 1960), *Where Is Mama?* (小蝌蚪找妈妈, Xiǎo kē dǒu zhǎo Māmā, 1961), *Snow Kid* (雪孩子, Xuě hái zi, 1980), TV series such as *Sheriff Black Cat* (黑猫警长, Hēi māo jǐng zhǎng, 1983–1987) and so on. Shanghai Studio fully exploited enjoyable and educational animation features, and from then on, the educational mission became a very important part of the Chinese animation industry.

The animation suitable for television made in China at the end of the 70s and 80s has features of storytelling very similar to the previous ones, but the new technologies and the easy access of Chinese families to television were changing the way of telling stories. In fact, Chinese products were becoming more and more similar to the international standards giving less importance to the educational aim (Qing, 2006). An outstanding example of the change is *Sheriff Black Cat* (1983–1987). This change in storytelling and the globalisation of the canon were to be even stronger in the productions of the digital age.

The First Stage of Chinese Animation Development

According to the Bluebook (2015 edition), government policies implemented over the past 15 years boosted the investment and production of animation with new

private Chinese investors and encouraged those businesses that were still in their early growth phase. The established studios started focusing on industrial production in some way, in many cases abandoning artistic content and creating animations with global and commercial content (Tan, 2006; Bluebook Animation, 2015).

In order to counter the entry of foreign animation films into the market and to develop the domestic animation industry, the Chinese government has enacted and created several laws to support the companies in the production with new technologies and the storytelling that has the educational and traditional content of the Chinese culture.

In line with these new ideas, in 2000 the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT)¹, on behalf of the government, issued regulations focusing on broadcasting cartoons on TV in order to help Chinese animation producers. One of these rules stated that every television channel had to submit all foreign animation products for approval to SARFT before their broadcasting. In addition, the approved products could be aired only if broadcast in the same proportion (expressed in minutes) as Chinese cartoons.

In the *Tenth Five-Year Development Plan* issued in 2002, the government demanded that companies operating in the animation sector create a television channel devoted to the broadcasting of original animations made by the same companies.

In August 2003, SARFT invited the provincial and local governments to support and encourage development policies focused mainly on the animation industry (Qing, 2006).

In 2004, thanks to these policies, there was a 15% growth in the production of animation with an increment of 7 percentage points over the same period in the previous year. Despite this successful growth, about 70% of productions were still of foreign origin, in particular Japanese productions, which had about 50,000 broadcasting minutes against the 23,800 minutes of original Chinese animations. According to official data published in the same year, it was estimated that the total demand for animation products for TV was about 260,000 minutes, highlighting that this area had potential for development in China.

The main aims of the government policies were not only economic but also ideological and moral: this is one of the important aspects for the Chinese government, which aimed to improve the education of the younger generation. To

1 The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT or SARFT, 国家广播电影电视总局, Guójiā Guǎngbō Diànyǐng Diànshì Zǒngjú), is the government institution that checks and manages all media in China.

receive government funding, producers had to ensure that their animations had educational and moral content in their storytelling (Tan, 2006).

From this period (2000–2004), one of the most significant productions following the aim of the government is *Magic Umbrella* (可的魔伞, Kèkè de mó sǎn, 2000), which used 2D and 3D in a mix of animation and real sequences (Bluebook Animation, 2013), produced by the Chinese government-controlled Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS), which is also the oldest still operating animation studio in China. Equally interesting is the animated TV series *Wars of Millennium Bug* (大战千年虫, Dà zhàn qiān nián chóng, 2001), in part publicly funded and considered as the answer to famous American TV series such as *Rugrats* (1991–2004), *Histeria* (1998–2000) and *The Simpsons* (1989–present). This animated series was made with the cooperation of Beijing Green Olives Animation, Animation Chang'an Beijing and Shanghai Red Dragonfly Animation, and aired on CCTV² in 2001.

From a technical and narrative point of view, this series is interesting not only for its stylistic level, far from the Chinese school of animation, but also because it deals with topics close to a global culture rather than purely Chinese ones (Deng, 2011). The animated series *Music Up* or *Crazy for the Song* (我为歌狂, Wǒ wèi gē kuáng, 2001) deals for the first time with the topic of pop stars, referring to typical Japanese animation style such as that of *Ai Shite Knight* (1983–1984) or the American series *Jem* (1985–1988). *Music Up* is made up of 52 episodes and it is a co-production between SAFS and Shanghai TV, broadcast on CCTV in 2001. The series is remembered mainly because of its high production cost of 18 million yuan (about two million euro), and also because it was only moderately successful in China. Later, the series performed well, financially speaking, thanks to its successful merchandising policy (Lu Bin, 2015).

In the early 2000s, CCTV broadcast 3D productions of foreign origin. This period was also marked by productions that had relatively high production costs and little success, both at the box office and on TV. According to scholars, this failure was due to the low quality of many of these productions such as *Platoon Urbano* (城市野战排, chéng shì yě zhàn pài 2001), an animated series of 26 episodes produced and broadcast by CCTV. Among the successful animations is *Zetrix* (2004), in high-quality 3D, made by Hong Kong-based Imagi Studio. It is a 3D

2 China Central Television (中国中央电视台, CCTV) is the Chinese public TV company, which owns 45 channels, such as CCTV 14 devoted to animations and children's programmes and CCTV-Shinco Animation (CCTV-新科动漫), which is a pay channel.

animation with no Chinese cultural characteristics distributed in many countries, including Japan, Germany and the United States (Lu Bin, 2012).

On 26 February 2004, the Communist Party's Central Committee and the State Council drew up a document entitled "Recommendations on further strengthening and improving of the ideological and ethical construction of Minors", which clearly stated a willingness to help companies in the production of original animation, "following it step by step, for the formation of national cultural characteristics which must be suitable for minors".

In particular, the document states:

First, strengthening and improving the ideological and moral construction of minors is an important and urgent strategic task.

Children are the future builders of the socialist cause with national characteristics. At present, minors under the age of 18 are about 367 million. Their moral condition is directly related to the overall quality of the Chinese nation, tied to the country's future and destiny. The Government gives great importance to education and training of the next generations and strives to improve their ideological and moral quality. It is right to pass on the fine tradition of our party to children because they will be an important guarantee for our country.³

Furthermore, the document stresses the importance of the creation and production of products for children to achieve these goals:

Strengthening the creation and production of films and television for children, actively supporting the creation of domestic animation, filming, production and broadcasting, and gradually forming a national character, with features suitable to minors, showing the fine tradition of the cartoon series of the Chinese nation. It is necessary to actively develop the socialist market economy to improve the distribution of films for children.

The achievement of these objectives was primarily related to a series of actions carried out by the government in order to improve the situation of the sector and to protect the market and culture from the "invasion" of foreign products.

On 20 September 2004, SARFT issued the "Regulations of the Drama Review", stating that the creation of audiovisual products such as fiction (including TV cartoons) had to meet certain mandatory requirements established by the regulations and, in addition, that all the pre-production material (synopsis, test boards, titles and dialogues, subtitles, songs etc.) had to be delivered to the local institution (office of SARFT) for approval. With this initiative, SARFT wanted to establish

3 中共中央 国务院 关于进一步加强和改进未成年人 思想道德建设的若干意见 (2004年2月26日), http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2004/content_62719.htm, last visited Aug. 31, 2015.

control over the national cartoons in order to ensure their educational aspects and content (Lu Bin, 2011). In October of the same year, the central government approved a document stating it would have to “support the industrial development of animation and video games” because that was considered a “special and strategic job”. In this document, the Ministry of Culture was commissioned by the central government to put in place a strategy for the improvement of the “National Animation and technical quality of the Games” (Document 2004 SARFT).

In the same year, to address the foreign cultural and economic influence, SARFT issued a law regulating the broadcasting of foreign-origin products, the share of which should not exceed 40% of total prime time programming because 60% had to be covered by Chinese original animation⁴ (Cooper-Chen, 2010).

In 2004 and 2006, in order to speed up the educational aim and create places devoted to the development of the sector, the Chinese government appointed the cities of Guangzhou, Chengdu, Beijing and Shanghai as the “basis for the development of the national network of the industry of game and animation”⁵.

On 20 January 2005, SARFT introduced a new regulation concerning the licensing for broadcasting cartoons of Chinese origin on television: it stated that from 1 July 2005 all domestic cartoons (new productions and even those already broadcast) had to apply for a licence before being broadcast on TV. These new regulations encouraged the production of new cartoons that aimed to educate children and strengthen ideologies. In addition, they were given more TV broadcasting time; the national television channels were almost forced to pass domestic animations as they could not show more than a certain number of foreign animations in their daily programming (Tan, 2006).

One of the animation products directly or indirectly related to the new government policies described above is *DragonBlade: The Legend of Lang* (龙刀奇缘, *Lóng Dāo qí yuán* 2005), produced in 3D by China Film and DCDC Studio in 2005. The film was made in Hong Kong because the Chinese studios did not have the right technology for 3D animation products. For this reason, the first Chinese 3D animations were co-productions with Hong Kong.

4 This law also regulated prime time advertising and, if an animation product had a duration of more than 60 minutes, prescribed only two commercial breaks, one at the beginning and one at the end of the broadcast.

5 “Basis for the development of the national network of the industry of game and animation” 我国部分城市国家级动漫产业基地的发展模式, “国家动漫产业振兴基地”, Beijing Cultural and Creative Network, http://www.iccie.cn/web/static/articles/catalog_ff8080813165bac4013165cf01d10020/article_2c909489318dca5b01318dca77ac0037/2c909489318dca5b01318dca77ac0037.html, last visited on 29 August 2015.

In line with the previous animation is the film *Thru the Moebius Strip* (魔比斯环, mó bǐ sī huán, 2005), made in Shenzhen by the Institute of Digital Media Technology in co-production with the United States. The animation technique and language are very similar to those of American series but the narrative structure is very complex. This may be one of the reasons why the film was not very successful (Bluebook Animation, 2013).

To cope with the strong foreign influence, CCTV and Beijing Golden Pinasters Animation Company produced an animated series (26 episodes of 20 minutes each) called *The Dreaming Girl* (梦里人, Mèng lǐ rén) in 2005. It can be considered as the first television adaptation in the form of animation of the comic *Dream Men* (梦里人, Mèng lǐ rén, 2005) by Yao Feila (姚非拉), which is very famous in China. The series was produced with the specific aim to address a teenage audience using the language of Japanese cartoons, much loved by the young generation in China (Sun, 2011).

The Chinese animation industry was growing because, thanks to state contributions and support from the central government, production of animation became more interesting in terms of income. For the production houses, selling their products to CCTV was not only a opportunity to gain visibility for their products throughout China but also a way to achieve better financial results.

In this period, there was the change from the production of individual products to a more industrialised production characterised by the realisation of animation developed in a large number of episodes. An early example of this change is *Century Sonny: The Adventure of the Extra-Galactic Prince* (精灵世纪, Jīng líng shì jì, 2006), made up of 105 episodes of 18 minutes each. It is a high-definition 3D animation that cost about 1.1 billion yuan (150 million euros) and was able to make big profits because it was broadcast first on CCTV, Beijing TV and Shanghai TV and then on 500 other TV stations throughout China (Xinmin Weekly, 2006).⁶

Also worth mentioning is another animation titled *SkyEye* (天眼, Tiān yǎn, 2005), a series of 500 seven-minute episodes with a total production cost of 15.6 million yuan (2.5 million euro). Its production involved the participation of three prominent media leaders: CCTV, the Central Academy of Dramatic Arts and the Beijing Film Academy.

The year 2005 saw the birth of a series dedicated to young audiences: *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* (喜羊羊与灰太狼, Xǐ Yáng Yáng yǔ Huī Tài Láng). Considered the most important production of all time in China, *Pleasant Goat* was

6 Xinmin Weekly (2006), 新民周刊, Editions 1–25, Xinmin Weekly Club, 新民周刊社.

produced by Creative Power Entertaining.⁷ The series, made up of 1,500 episodes lasting 25 minutes each, is still in production. There were also cinema films based on the television series, which were successful for eight consecutive years. Made with Flash animation, with simple graphics and simple stories, *Pleasant Goat* is a cartoon that does not have particularly interesting aspects: from the aesthetic point of view, it does not present any Chinese cultural features, and it has been designed as pure children's entertainment with a moral ending. Children are attracted by the ease of language and by the aesthetic features of the characters, all accompanied by traditional music suitable for children. *Pleasant Goat* was able to obtain government funds despite the lack of traditional Chinese features. It also represents a real turning point for Chinese animation because, for the first time, a domestic production was able to generate the kind of revenue achieved until then by foreign productions only⁸ (Lu Bin, 2011).

On the contrary, the film *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (小兵张嘎, Xiǎo bīng Zhānggǎ, *Zhang Ga or The Soldier Boy*, 2005) by director Sun Lijun (Deputy Director of the Beijing Film Academy) is a film with Chinese cultural features made entirely with private funds. Based on a true story, the film tells the life story of little soldier Zhang who fights against the Japanese army. The original story was modified to attract younger audiences and was later released to theatres in 2005 to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the end of the war against Japan. To lower the production cost, which were about 9.2 million yuan (1.2 million euros), the director used the contributions of Beijing Film Academy's students. Although it is not a propaganda film, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* revived the idea of nostalgic films like *Red Star*, that is those films with communist propaganda as their main topic (Jiu, 2008).

One of the latest 3D animations created in this period is *Tortoise Hanba's Stories* (憨八龟的故事, Hān bā guī de gùshì, *Tortoise Hanba's Stories, The Story of Hanbagui or Hanbagui*, 2006), consisting of 500 episodes of 13 minutes each (still in production), broadcast by CCTV and other national and local networks. Produced by Shenzhen Toonring Animation, the animation became famous for its main character, a turtle, which is still very popular in China. Even in this case there are no Chinese cultural references in the animation. The educational aspects of this animation are very simple, such as respect for others, friendship and love, and general themes that in some way can be found in many other animations.

7 In 2012, the rights for the series were purchased by Toon Express Group.

8 In fact, Chinese animation films had never achieved as significant revenues as foreign animations.

Government Commitment & New Policies in Support to the Sector

In China the new digital era has led the government to indirectly intervene on storytelling through the SARFT control over projects and scripts. Only those companies that followed the guidelines, the stylistic and narrative canons dictated by the government could receive funding. This strategy has led many companies to create propaganda products with no relevant educational content in order to access to funding and financial incentives dedicated to the sector.

Since 2006 the government has been committed in supporting Chinese animation with a series of interventions such as tax breaks given to companies dealing with animation. Furthermore the Ministry of Culture was appointed to take care of the animation industry considered important for the “ideological education and moral construction of minors”.⁹ The Ministry of Finance was appointed to create special funds for the sector. As mentioned before, the Chinese government tries to support the animation industry since it is considered important in the formation and orientation of education of the youngest generation.

For this reason the government has entrusted the television broadcasts to control the series and animations in order to cut out any cultural content in opposition to the national cultural identity.

To strengthen the Chinese culture and its animated products the government issued a new regulation in August 2006 that prevented all broadcasters to air Chinese animations from other countries in the time slot from 17:00 to 20:00 (Tan, 2006), starting from the 1st of September of that year (Tan, 2006; Qing, 2006; Lu Bin, 2013).¹⁰

According to statistics released by the State Administration for Industry and Commerce and by SARFT in 2006, sector interventions by the public institutions, started in 2000, have promoted the birth of 447 universities offering animation courses in China and more than 5000 animation production companies.

9 Official data at <http://www.gapp.gov.cn/caiwusi/oldcaiwusi/contents/2981/137488.shtml>, last accessed on 22 November 2014.

10 In addition to the funds allocated to the production, the government set an animation transmission prize for original productions. The award consisted of 1,775 yuan (about 230 euro) for each minute broadcast on CCTV and 926 yuan (about 120 euro) for each minute broadcast on channels that were operating in cities and provinces that had joined this initiative.

Thanks to these laws, in 2006 there was a boom of cartoon production for national TV, with a total of about 81,000 minutes, while in the previous year there were only 42,000 minutes¹¹.

Worthy of mention is the animation *Rainbow Cat and Blue Rabbit* (虹猫蓝兔七侠传, Hóngmāo Lántù qī xiá zhuàn, *The story of Hongmao and Lantu*, 2006), a series of 108 episodes of 15 minutes each aired on CCTV for a few years with the aim to educate and entertain the young but recently suspended because considered too “cruel, violent” and eliminated from CCTV Children’s Channel. Based on the series, broadcast by 800 TV stations, there were also several video games, 20 comic books, novels and eight different CDs. With the sale of the books based on the comic (Changchun Film Studio 2007) alone, Hunan Greatdreams Communications Studio (湖南宏梦卡通传播有限公司, Hunan hóng Meng kǎtōng Chuanbo yǒuxiàn gōngsī) gained 16 million yuan (2 million euros).¹²

Another film from this period is *Monkey King vs Er Lang Shen* (孙悟空大战二郎神, Sūnwùkōng dà zhàn Èrlángshén, 2007), made for the cinema with a cost of 6 million yuan (800,000 euro) by the producer and director Yuan Cheng Liang Hansen (China Film Press 2009).¹³ The film is very innovative and therefore interesting from a stylistic point of view because it uses 3D animation with the traditional art of puppet animation: here, the producers’ aim to refer to Chinese culture is clear.

Another important series (still being aired in its fifth season with over 100 episodes of 21 minutes made), is *Qin’s Moon* (秦时明月, Qín shí míng yuè, *The Legend of Qin Dynasty*), in high quality 3D. It is an adaptation of a novel by Wen Shiren dating back to ancient China. The animation was translated into seven languages (Italian, Spanish, English, German, French, Arabic and Russian) and was distributed in 37 countries, including Italy, the US, France, Spain, Canada, Russia etc. (Sun, 2011).

Another film in line with Communist ideology and propaganda is *Sparkling Red Star* (闪闪的星星之孩子的天空, Shǎnshǎn de hóng xīng: háizi de tiān kōng, 2007) directed by the famous director Dante Lam from Hong Kong and produced by Puzzle Animation Studio, one of the most famous production companies based

11 The productions in 2006 were still subject to the laws and regulations of the 2000–2005 period because an animation series or a 3D movie requires a processing time ranging from 3 to 5 years.

12 Changchun Film Studio (2007), 电影文学 (Literature of Film), Editions 7–12, 长春电影制片厂 (Changchun Film Studio), page 164.

13 China Film Press (2009), 中国电影年鉴 (Cinema Yearbook 2009), 中国电影出版社 (China Film Press), pages 191, 491–2.

in Shenzhen. Made during the Cultural Revolution, the animation tells the story of a boy and his friends who want to help the Red Army. *Zhang Ga* and *Sparkling Red Star* represent a return to communist culture by the animation.

According to data reported by the 2008 *BlueBook*, China had more than 2,000 television channels, 25 channels dedicated to children, 289 TV programmes offering a section dedicated to children, 123 million users who had access to the internet and 430 million people using mobile phones (Bluebook Animation, 2008) in 2007.

Here is a short list of the significant measures implemented by the central government:

- From 1 May 2008, all television stations, including the local ones, could not broadcast any kind of foreign animation between 5pm and 9pm.
- In 2009, the Ministry of Culture stated that companies producing animation could enjoy five tax breaks, including VAT exemption.
- On 12 October 2009, SARFT announced that it would strengthen control on animation broadcasting and that, from the 1st of January 2010 onwards, the amount of time dedicated to Chinese animation had to increase; from 5pm to 10pm, only Chinese animations could be broadcast.
- In November 2009, SARFT allowed Jiangsu TV to create a channel for children on the satellite TV called Cady (优漫卡通卫视, You Man kätōng Weishi).

Thanks to all these incentives and government measures, in early 2009 the number of children's channels increased to more than 34. In 2009, the production reached 322 titles, or a total of 170,000 minutes, an increase of 31% when compared to the previous year.

Among the most significant animations of this period is *Storm Rider Clash of the Evils* (风云决, Fēng yún jué, 2008), directed by Dante Lam who preferred, again, issues related to Chinese culture. Produced by Puzzle Animation Studio and Shanghai Media Group, the film is based on a popular series of Wuxia Manhua (China martial arts comics) entitled *Fung Wan* (风云, Fēng yún, since 1989) by the Hong Kong author Ma Wing-shing (马荣成, mǎ Róngchéng) and uses a Japanese animation technique that manages to seamlessly integrate 3D into 2D in the same scenes.

An animation with original content is *Ming Kee* (茗记, Míng jì, 2008), produced by L-Key Studio. Its topic is the student life and romances of high school students in the 1990s in a small Chinese town. The series consists of three episodes with three separate stories: *Ming Kee – second life* (茗记 – 2nd Life, Míng jì: 2nd Life, 2006), *Ming Kee – Weaving Love* (茗记 – 初织恋, Míng jì: chū zhī liàn, 2008) and *Ming Kee – Trade-off* (茗记 – 取舍, Míng jì: qǔ shě, 2010). The author has

shown that even Chinese artists are able to tell stories of teenage love in a deep and delicate way, taking as inspiration the Japanese animations from both stylistic and narrative points of view.

Internet and New Productions

The use of new technologies and new software has allowed many artists to express themselves and to tell stories without being censored, at least for a limited period. As Internet platforms such as Google, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook cannot be accessed in China, other platforms were created that are very similar to the original ones and sometimes even better. For example, Youku is a video hosting service platform that replaces YouTube; Weibo is similar to Twitter, Renren to Facebook.

Youku is one of the favourite platforms of young artists, and it is the first video platform that also allows for a certain independence from the government. It is sometimes possible to find very interesting documents that might, in some way, irritate the government.

A very important artist of this new trend is Pi San, who since 2005 has been analysing the Chinese modern society through his animations and the problems related to social policies adopted by China in recent years. For example, in the animated series *Kuang Kuang Kuang*¹⁴ (囹囹囹, Kuāng kuāng kuāng, 2009) there is a sort of criticism with biting irony against the school system of the 1980s in China. Some episodes uploaded to Youku still survive but others such as *Kuang-kuang, The Little Rabbit* (小兔子囹囹, Xiǎo tùzi kuāng kuāng, 2011)¹⁵ were immediately censored after their release on all sites across China. In fact, the episode *The Little Rabbit* recounts the scandal of contaminated milk powder. The Hutoon studio by Pi San now produces many series; some, such as *Miss Puff*, are funded directly by Youku, and in some cases are broadcast on the public television CCTV.

The period from 2009 to 2014 is the most productive for China in the field of animation. Since 2010, China has been holding the world record for producing animation, ahead of Japan. In this new production context, there are two interesting films: *Lee's Adventures*¹⁶ (李献计历险记, Lǐ Xiànjì lì xiǎn jì, 2009)

14 Please see the website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p04oJUTVYZo>, last accessed on 11 February 2016.

15 Please see the website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNzjClqE1pY>, last accessed on 11 February 2016.

16 Please see the video in Chinese at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2elRiYNwgkk>, last accessed on 11 February 2016.

and the film called *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* (猶太女孩在上海, *Yóu tài nǚ hái zài Shànghǎi*, 2010).

The first film is very important because it was created as an independent animation and shows a new way to tell a story, far from the classical patterns of Chinese animation. The director Li Yang¹⁷ wanted to experience new languages by adapting the film to the new Chinese social context. The video, posted on the internet, was very successful with the young audience and was awarded as the Best Animated Short at the Tudou Video Festival. Later, it was made into a 90-minute live action film based on the original story and directed by Li Yang and Frant Gwo.

The second film *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* is also worth mentioning; it is based on Wu Lin's comic and directed by Wang Genfa and Zhang Zhenhui. The film tells the story of the Jewish ghetto in Shanghai where, during the Second World War, Chinese people helped Jews to escape from Nazi persecution. The main characters are three children, who fled from Europe because of racial persecution, living in Shanghai occupied by the Japanese allied with Hitler. The characters establish a great friendship with the locals and try to reject the Japanese army in the city.

In 2011, there was another interesting film released entitled *Little Big Panda* (熊貓總動員, *Xióng māo zǒng dòng yuán*), considered the first Chinese 3D animation film.¹⁸ *Little Big Panda*¹⁹ is a co-production between China, Germany, France and Belgium, and it is a film with a moral dedicated to children (50 million euros) (Bluebook Animation, 2013).

The technique used to achieve 3D vision is very original; the characters' animation was drawn by hand using traditional Chinese painting technique and the 3D illusion was created by powerful animation software. The backgrounds were created using traditional ink painting. The production of this film took about five years.

The animation called *The Dreams of Jinsha* (夢回金沙城, *Mèng huí Jīn Shā Chéng*, 2010) is also remarkable for its great artistic quality and narrative. It deals with educational themes that speak about respect for nature. A distinctive feature

17 Li Yang graduated in ICT sciences in Germany and studied at the school of animation at the Academy Film in Beijing.

18 CNTV "China and Europe making 3D panda film", September 15, at http://china.org.cn/video/2010-09/15/content_20933354.htm, last accessed on 22 May 2013.

19 Considered as the answer to the great success of *Kung Fu Panda* created by Dreamworks in 2008, it was the first animation movie to earn a revenue of 100 million yuan in China, a record reached by no other film.

of this film is the choice of 2D and B2K as a standard resolution, and it is considered one of the best quality digital films showing in cinemas during that period.²⁰

Sweetheart Princess (甜心格格, Tián xīn gé gé, 2011) is an animated series that uses irony to tell the story of a princess who helps everyone. The series presents certain cultural aspects of Chinese tradition.

Thanks to its cultural, aesthetic and innovative features, the series *Rainbow Sea* (西游记, Xīng yóu jì, 2011) is an important product – it uses both 3D and 2D techniques. The series was produced by KAKU TV, a private television funded by advertising (99%), and You Yang Beijing Culture Media Co. (北京优扬文化传媒有限公司) (Shenzen Yearbook, 2009).

Another film with Chinese traditional content is *The Legend of Rabbit* (兔侠传奇, Tù Xiá chuán qí), released in July 2011 and produced by Tianjin Film Studio and Beijing Film Academy. It is an animated 3D film made in response to the great success of Disney's 2008 hit *Kung Fu Panda*. Sun Lijun, the film director and director of the school of animation at the Beijing Film Academy, said that “this film has achieved a moderate commercial success, but there is still some way to go” for the industry of Chinese animation.

Unlike previous films, *Kuiba* (魁拔, Kuí bá, 2011) uses 2D and 3D animation typical of Japanese animation but tells a story that refers to traditional Chinese culture.

An independent production with new narrative content and distributed on the internet is *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes Big Film* (十万个冷笑话, Shí wàn gè lěng xiào huà, 2015), released in China at the beginning of 2015. It is a funny story full of cyberlanguage which soon became popular among young people. The series even spread to Taiwan where Taiwan's ETtoday evaluated it as the Chinese version of *Gintama* (ぎんたま, gintama). It is remarkable because it is an adaptation of an internet animation series. On 26 March 2013, *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* started its crowdfunding project on the web, asking for a hundred thousand ordinary people to fund the movie. Thanks to the internet, this project attracted more than 5,000 investors and 1.3 million yuan.

In the same year, Geng Xue (耿雪), a student at the school of animation at the Academy of Film, created *Mr. Sea*²¹ (海公子, Hǎi Gōngzǐ, 2014), a very original independent horror animation that is very successful on the internet. The animation short film *Mr. Sea* is based on the traditional Chinese horror story *Mr. Sea*,

20 The film can be shown on a 30-metre screen preserving its full colours and its soft lines.

21 Please see the website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64WfOYr09AY>, last accessed on 11 February 2016.

which is about a young man's quirky experience being lured by a beautiful hooker (a snake spirit, actually) and attacked by a huge snake (Mr. Sea, actually) on a desert island. The attraction of this animation film lies not only in the interesting story but also in its special style, a stop-motion animation using Chinese ceramics.

A short note is also needed for the independent animation *A Prequel of the Assassin*²² (刺客聂隐娘前传, *Ci kè Niè Yǐnniáng qián zhuàn*, 2015) created by Weng Jie (翁劫), who was successful especially for his narrative style and Chinese element. It is based on a Tang Dynasty legend story about a little girl who was stolen and trained to be an assassin.

Finally, the role of the government policies introduced in 2000 to support the production of films and animation series with an educational and cultural purpose was decisive for the production of animation in China because prior to this, animation was considered one of the minor industries of the audiovisual sector in China.

As far as the creative factor and the creation of stories: SARFT cannot change the storytelling productions but it can decide which of these products can benefit from the contributions and support of the institutions. As mentioned above, animations wanting to obtain financing should respect the narrative and stylistic canons (even the possible opportunities of economic success) defined by the government guidelines. In fact, SARFT has to select scripts, storyboards and the estimated costs that companies are obliged to deposit before the production phase.

Following a long period of funding for majority companies, SARFT began a new campaign in 2011, funding only those companies or projects that managed to achieve important quality standards and exhibited a high level of educational and entertainment (edutainment) content.

According to the government, the use of animation as a tool for education is very important because the simple language used by animation films can catch the attention of new generations and hence form them in the Chinese tradition and the culture of modern China. In addition, the government aims at animation because this sector can create new jobs for people with a great intellectual and creative ability. Finally, there is another important goal that is purely economic: since the market is occupied mostly by productions from North America, Japan and Europe, the Chinese government aims at winning over a part of this market with new strategies.

22 Please see the website <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3p79oGwxZZo>, last accessed on 11 February 2016.

The introduction of new technologies has mostly favoured a change in the production of animations useful for educational purposes, but the government uses them as a means of propaganda and industrial development rather than as a creative means. In this new context, new generations aim to tell new stories with different points of view and, thanks to new technologies, today they are able to create their stories and find internet platforms for dissemination, managing to reach the international public and displaying the new point of view of modern China.

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