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A Window to the Nation A Welcome to the World

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A poster for the animated short *Ship Down the Well* from the animation series, *Yao—Chinese Folktales* (2023), which includes eight stories featuring monster-like characters, or *yao* in Chinese. (Photo courtesy of Shanghai Animation Film Studio)

The National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) kicked off a series of exhibitions to mark its 60th anniversary on May 23, 2023. The shows include not only its large collection of traditional Chinese masterpieces but also international works to showcase cultural exchange.

Chinese President Xi Jinping commended the work of NAMOC over the past 60 years and encouraged it to develop into an art venue enjoying worldwide prestige. Xi delivered the remarks in a reply letter to veteran experts and artists at the museum. In the letter, he also expressed his hope that the museum will strive to improve the quality of its collection, promote the utilization of artworks, and provide better services for the public. A national-level art gallery founded in 1963, NAMOC has become one of the most important venues for China's art collection and display as well as public art education.



Visitors admire an exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, May 24, 2023. (Photo by Qin Bin/China Pictorial)



Performers prepare for a show at Yotkan Ancient City in Hotan Prefecture, China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, May 17, 2023. (Photo by Duan Wei/China Pictorial)

Construction of tourism infrastructure, public service facilities and smart tourism has been promoted in Xinjiang in recent years. The quality of local tourism services and the tourist satisfaction rate have improved comprehensively, said Elijan Anayat, spokesperson for the Xinjiang regional government. The government has approved 412 major investment projects in the cultural and tourism industries of Xinjiang, with a total investment of 182.7 billion yuan (US\$27 billion).

During this year's five-day May Day holiday, the region received more than eight million tourists, marking a year-on-year increase of 140.81 percent, according to local authorities. Total tourism revenue generated during the holiday surpassed 6 billion yuan (US\$869 million), up 192.18 percent year on year, according to the regional culture and tourism department.



A still from *The Seagull* at the Beijing People's Art Theater in Beijing, May 1, 2023. (Photo by Li Chunguang)

From May 1 to 26, 2023, a revival of *The Seagull* was staged at the Cao Yu Theater under the Beijing People's Art Theater. For Chinese audiences, *The Seagull* is arguably the best known of Russian writer Anton Chekhov's plays. It was first adapted by the Beijing People's Art Theater in 1991. Featuring a venerable cast of veteran Chinese performers including Pu Cunxin, Xu Fan and Yang Lixin, the 1991 production was directed by Oleg Efremov, chief director of the Moscow Art Theater. The play was so well received that it continues to inspire Pu Cunxin.

With the Beijing People's Art Theater's young actors and actresses, Pu directed the new revival. "Reading *The Seagull* was like a decoding process," Pu said. "Thanks to my life experience since, I had a different understanding of it than I did back then." He hoped to bring new resonance and power to spectators with a different interpretation of the classic.

China saw 382 new museums registered in 2022, bringing the total number of museums in the country to 6,565, according to data from the National Cultural Heritage Administration (NCHA) released on May 18 this year, which marked International Museum Day.

In 2022 alone, Chinese museums welcomed 578 million visits to approximately 34,000 offline exhibitions and nearly 230,000 educational activities. Statistics showed that about 10,000 online exhibitions and over 40,000 online educational activities were organized by museums nationwide last year, drawing nearly a billion views.

"A modern museum system with diverse categories and subjects universally available to the public has taken shape in China," said Li Qun, head of the NCHA.

Children visit the "Ancient China" exhibition at the National Museum of China in Beijing, May 6, 2023. (Photo by Qin Bin/China Pictorial)



Chinese Animated Shorts Grow Taller

Text by Chen Lianhua
Photos courtesy of Chen Lianhua

Increasing numbers of young viewers have fallen in love with animated shorts, further enriching the soil for the development of this genre in China.



The author is an independent animator and cartoonist. He teaches at the Animation School of Beijing Film Academy.

In September 2005, I was invited to attend the Ottawa International Animation Festival in Canada. Within a few days, I had seen almost every animated film shown at the event, including a lot of animated shorts from Europe and Canada. To my surprise, animated shorts targeting niche audiences were distinctive in both form and content, leaving a deep impression in my mind. I realized that animation could also be poetic and that "aesthetics" is about much more than just "beauty." This discovery excited me and pointed me in the right direction in terms of animation creation.

In the summer of 2008, my partner An Xu and I completed the animated short *The Winter Solstice*. We sought to express

a kind of feeling that cannot be described with words in the production. We told a figurative story that can be interpreted from multiple perspectives using touching imagery. *The Winter Solstice* was a milestone in my career as an animator: It was my first work to win a prize at a major international animation event—the Annecy International Animation Festival. It was also included on a foreign DVD of animated shorts.

Later, we created a series of animated short films themed around the 24 solar terms. The traditional Chinese lunar calendar divides the year into 24 solar terms for the 24 particular occasions indicating seasonal changes. We hoped this series would inspire emotional resonance among



Poster for the animated short *The Loach* (2022).



A still from the animated short *The Winter Solstice* (2008), which won the Best Short Film award at the 2009 Annecy International Animation Festival.



A still from the animated short *The Six* (2019), which won the Best Experimental Short Film award at the 15th FIRST International Film Festival.

Chinese people by combing the debris of history. Such changes also happen in life. The fragments of the stories of everyday Chinese people are sewn together to form the history of the entire nation. By 2022, nine episodes of the series had been produced.

Animated shorts have a glorious past in China. Back in the 1950s, Shanghai Animation Film Studio began to produce animated shorts and called them *meishu-pian* (literally "cartoon films"). The

high aesthetic value and distinctive styles of those films drew world-wide attention.

By the 1990s, however, the Chinese government no longer financially supported production of animated short films. Consequently, animation studios including Shanghai Animation Film Studio had to "earn a living" on their own. Some survived by taking outsourcing work from international animation studios. During that period, although many

Chinese animators made money, China lost the soil to nurture independent animated shorts.

The situation continued until the early 21st century. But the arrival of personal computers and introduction of Adobe Flash to China opened the door for millions to produce animation at home. Many joined the industry including cartoonists, illustrators, and artists in other fields. They were dubbed Flash animators.

Following the age of Flash


animation was a tide of personal animation creation. Some animators began to produce serious works with distinctive individual styles. Instead of seeking economic returns, they focused more on self-expression and animation exploration. Around 2005, they began to conduct frequent exchanges with their foreign counterparts. As a result, knowledge of global animated shorts spread fast across China,

and the form gradually became a popular genre of art.

Around 2010, animated shorts began enjoying rapid growth in China, with some Chinese works reaching the global stage and winning awards at international animation festivals. This encouraged more and more young people to engage in animated short creation. Some young Chinese people chose to study at overseas animation schools. By

leveraging skills acquired there, their works started showing great potential. Around 2015, the first wave of graduates from those schools returned to China, fueling a boom of animated shorts.

Several animation events such as the China Independent Animation Film Forum and the Feinaki Beijing Animation Week were born. Most were first launched by animation enthusiasts before gradually attracting participation from more professionals as their influence expanded. Such events brought the latest outstanding foreign animated shorts to China and also empowered exceptional Chinese works to reach foreign screens through cooperative exhibitions. Moreover, the quality of animated films screened at the events has continued improving. At first, most events screened films for free before eventually selling tickets. Now, tickets tend to sell out fast.

Many students at domestic animation colleges have been showing great promise. Each year, they produce a heavy volume of high-quality works, including graduation projects. Meanwhile, increasing numbers of young viewers have fallen in love with animated shorts, further enriching the soil for the development of this genre. I have witnessed this wondrous process. I was lucky enough to direct an episode of the animated series *Yao—Chinese Folktales*, which premiered online earlier this year and drew widespread attention. It became another milestone in the history of Chinese animated shorts. 

Gandhara Heritage



On March 16 this year, “Gandhara Heritage along the Silk Road: A Pakistan-China Joint Exhibition” featuring 203 artifacts from Pakistan and China’s Palace Museum officially opened to visitors. “Gandhara was a transportation hub on the ancient Silk Road, and witnessed the collision and fusion of multiple civilizations such as Greece, Persia, and India,” said Luo Wenhua, director of the Institute of Tibetan Buddhist Heritage at the Palace Museum. “Gandhara art is so vibrant and creative due to continuous exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations along the Silk Road. Such exchanges promoted the development and rise of Buddhist sculpture art and also played an important role in introducing and localizing Buddhism in China.”

Forbidden City
April 2023

New Vision of *Journey to the West*



The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) novel *Journey to the West* is based on folklores handed down over generations. The inspiration for the classical novel was Tang Dynasty (618-907) monk Xuanzang, reputed to have brought Buddhist scriptures back from India. After generations of adaptations, the story gradually became a classical Chinese mythology book.

Since the 1970s, artists represented by screenwriters from China and Japan have been attempting to adapt *Journey to the West* into TV series and movies. Remastered versions of the novel have been boldly adapted to conform to new values and aesthetics. The story has broken through its inherent cultural environment to bloom in new soil.

Chinese Heritage
May 2023

Jade Age



Chinese people’s fondness for jade has been passed down from ancient times to the present. In 1922, modern geologist Zhang Hongzhao first proposed the concept of a “Jade Age” in ancient China. The term “Jade Age” once again emerged in the archaeological circles in recent decades, but with a new definition: The transitional period between the Neolithic Age and the Bronze Age, five to six thousand years ago, is commonly referred to as the “Copper Age” in world history. From this period to the era of the Longshan Culture when bronze became popular around 4,000 years ago, the development of jade culture in China peaked. This is now considered the “Jade Age,” parallel to the “Copper Age.”

Sanlian Lifeweek
May 15, 2023

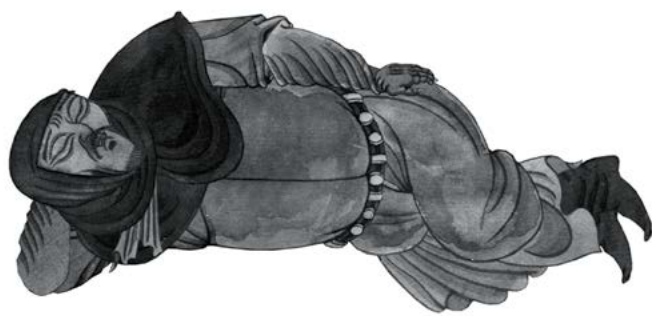
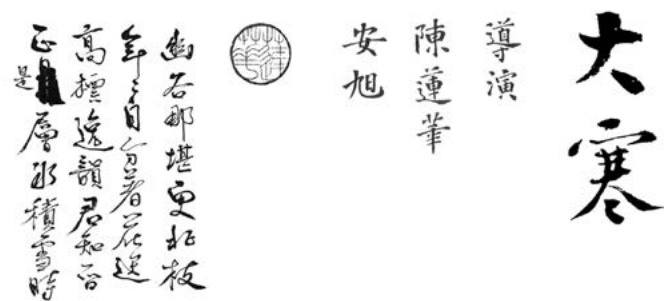
Partner-style Social Life



Nowadays, young Chinese people can live without a relationship, but they still need a partner of some sort. The definition of “Da Zi” offered in *Shanghai Dialect Dictionary* goes: “A person with a common interest in something, similar to a partner.”

“Da Zi” is a lightweight social activity that maintains a sense of boundaries, reduces the burden, and requires minimal social connections. There are roughly four types of ties for human society: kinship, geographical affinity, work relationship, and shared interests. Against the backdrop of the gradual loss of traditional social ties, the rise of partner-style interactions through social networks has provided effective emotional compensation for new generations of digital natives.

New Weekly
May 15, 2023



从容斋 CONGRONG FILM
“节气”系列作品第六号 Solar Term No.6

Poster for the animated short *The Poem* (2015).

Chinese Animation: Tradition as Root Innovation as Soul

Text by Jin Cheng

A poster for the animated film *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), which received highly positive reviews from critics and moviegoers for its distinctive characters, stunning images and unique Eastern charm. (Photo from Douban)

Young Chinese animators have been integrating more traditional Chinese cultural elements into the characters and stories, which creates strong momentum for original Chinese animation to go global.

After a century of development, Chinese animation has evolved from silent film to talking pictures, from black and white to color, and from 2D to 3D. The long journey followed the paths of different times.

The first Chinese animation

was a cartoon advertisement for the Shuzhengdong Chinese typewriter, produced in 1922 by the Wan brothers, the founders of Chinese animation. The short kicked off a century of development of animation in China. Two subsequent releases in 1924, *The Dog Entertains the Guest* and *Chinese*

New Year, exerted little impact. The first animated short to gain real influence was *Uproar in the Studio*, also produced by the Wan brothers two years later. It ran 10 to 12 minutes in black and white. By 1935, the Wan brothers had presented their first animation with sound, titled *The Camel's Dance*.



Photographer Wang Shirong (left) works with his colleague to create *Havoc in Heaven*, using celluloid for photography, 1956. (Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive)

In 1941, China's first feature-length animated film, *Princess Iron Fan*, was released.

In 1957, Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS) was established. A group of ambitious animators forged ahead with major efforts to innovate, which laid a solid foundation for the country's animation industry. A philosophy of "exploring and pursuing an artistic style with Chinese characteristics" proposed by Te Wei, the first head of the studio, inspired many. Guided by this goal, SAFS released a string of classic works such as *The Proud General*, *Havoc in Heaven*, and *The Three Monks*. Throughout the process, Chinese animators engaged in exchange with the rest of the world. Sino-foreign communication in animation during the period was particularly inspiring.

Back in the 1940s, the Wan brothers' *Princess Iron Fan* also became the first animated feature to be screened in Japan. Globally,

it was the fourth animated features ever after *Snow White*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Pinocchio*, all produced in the United States. *Havoc in Heaven*, the first Chinese color animated feature after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, greatly surprised Osamu Tezuka, creator of *Astro Boy* who is dubbed "the father of Japanese animation." He made a special trip to China to learn about Chinese animation and later created a world-leading business pattern in Japan's animation and comic industries.

Typical Chinese cultural symbols such as ink painting, paper-cutting, and other art forms have often been employed in the creation of Chinese animation. With distinct styles and unique techniques, these art forms enjoy lofty reputations globally. Both early Chinese animation and contemporary works are rooted in traditional culture, whence they evolved to form an innovative

fashion that conforms to contemporary aesthetics and promotes the spread of Chinese culture. In 2018, I went to Belgium to attend an exhibition themed "A Panorama of Chinese Comic Strips—Connected Images from Abroad" as a curatorial consultant. Works displayed included original sketches of *The Winter of Three Hairs* by Zhang Leping, *Great Changes in a Mountain Village* and *Xiao Erhei's Marriage* by He Youzhi, and *Moon over the Willow* by Feng Zikai. They all resonated strongly with the European audience.

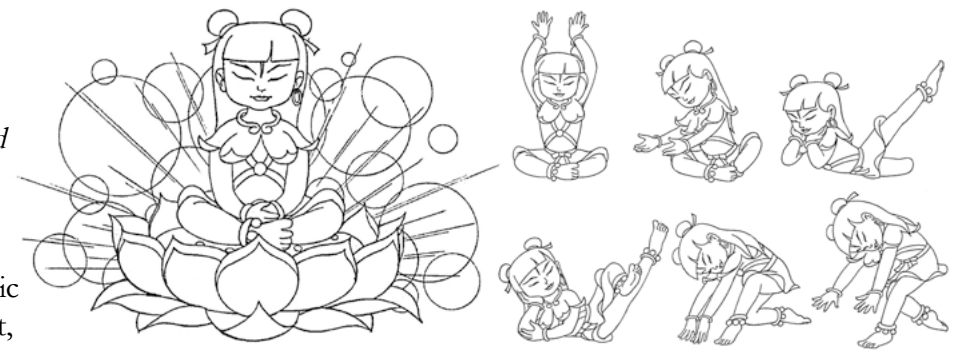
In 2019, Chinese cartoon artist Lin Dihuan and I curated an exhibition of animation and comics from China that toured Osaka, Kobe, and Nara in Japan. This exhibition



Yan Dingxian (right), the designer of the animated *Monkey King*, collaborated with Osamu Tezuka to create the cartoon *Monkey King and Astro Boy Shaking Hands* during his visit to Tokyo, Japan in 1981. (Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive)

featured China's traditional ink-and-wash masterpieces and included Chinese animated works such as *Feelings of Mountains and Waters*, *Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mother*, and *The Reed Pipe*. These works, representative of Chinese animation and symbolic of a persistent craftsmanship spirit, cast a far-reaching influence on Japanese animation. Original art now popular in China was also displayed at the exhibition. Exhibits by young Chinese artists including Nie Jun, A Geng, and Zao Dao attracted extensive attention and became highlights. Through such cross-cultural art activities, Chinese animation has built a bridge for cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world.

With growing confidence about their own national culture, China's young animators have been integrating more traditional Chinese cultural elements into the characters and stories, which creates strong momentum for original Chinese animation to go global. Literary classics, myths, and folktales are all valuable legacies created by China's 5,000-year history. They need to be better absorbed, understood, and utilized to promote the sound development of the animation industry and to build a healthy industrial chain. However, the rapid development of the animation industry and its growing production capacity have created new challenging goals for Chinese animators. They need to work harder to break through the limitations of traditional styles, realize technological upgrades in the production process, and adapt to the digital animation era to




Lin Wenxiao's design of the reborn Nezha incorporates elements of Dunhuang art, Buddhist sculpture, and dances, along with the delightful innocence and playfulness of childlike movements. (Photos courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive)



Images and a poster for *Nezha*, a 2019 animated fantasy film. The revamped Chinese mythology tale became China's highest-grossing animated movie. (Photos from Douban)

establish contemporary animation aesthetics and enhance the artistic appeal of their works.

The creation concepts for Chinese animation give the art both root and soul. Exploration has shown that being deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture does not confine a work to it. The current

direction and goal of the Chinese animation industry is to create great art for the times by applying an innovative spirit in the new era. 

The author is an animator and deputy director of the Animation Arts Committee of China Artists Association.

Tracing the Rise of Chinese Animation



Pause (1923)

It is considered the curtain-raiser on the development of modern Chinese animation.

Pause is the earliest known Chinese animated short film. Unfortunately, no video of this animation has been preserved. Pictured is Yang Zuotao, the producer of *Pause*.

Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive

The Camel's Dance (1935)

It is China's first animation with sound.

The Camel's Dance, produced by the Wan brothers, is a narrative about an attention-seeking camel: The camel thinks he knows everything and dances in public at a banquet of animals. He ends up making a fool of himself and getting kicked off stage. The animated film completely solved problems hindering the synthesis of light, picture, and sound in animation. From that point on, Chinese animation entered the era of sound.

Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive



Princess Iron Fan (1941)

It is China's first animated feature.

Princess Iron Fan, also created by the Wan brothers, was adapted from the story of the Monkey King borrowing the Palm-leaf Fan from Princess Iron Fan in the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. The art design of the film absorbed the traits of makeups in traditional Chinese operas and brought Chinese landscape paintings to life on the screen. The film, also released in Japan and Southeast Asia, became an instant hit at home and abroad.

Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive

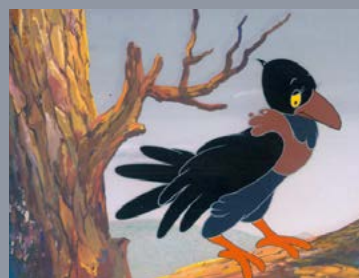


Crow Black-Coated (1955)

It is China's first color animated film.

In the early 1950s, Chinese animators began producing movies in color, and *Crow Black-Coated* became the first success. In 1956, the film was submitted to the 8th Venice International Children's Film Festival in Italy and won the grand prize. However, at first the judges mistakenly thought it was a Soviet animation. In the early days of the People's Republic of China after its founding in 1949, people in many sectors looked to Soviet experience for reference, including Chinese animators. Subsequently, many Chinese animation practitioners began self-reflection and called for "exploring a national style of animation," which began an exploratory course for Chinese animation.

Photo from Douban



Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mother (1961)

It is China's first ink-and-wash animated film.

Little Tadpoles Looking for Their Mother is a groundbreaking work marking the creation of China's unique ink-and-wash animation. It also marked the formation of a national style of Chinese animation. The film won many international awards and successfully sealed the status of the "Chinese school" of animation on the global stage.

Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive



The Legend of Sealed Book (1983)

It marked a pioneering effort in the modern transformation of Chinese animation.

The Legend of Sealed Book is an animated feature film adapted from the classical Chinese novel *The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt*. The film broke through the long-standing model of rote following of the content of traditional literature by injecting the modern artistic characteristics of entertainment, humor, and carnival in its narrative. It is a pioneer of the modernization of Chinese animation.

Photo from Douban

Monkey King: Hero Is Back (2015), Big Fish & Begonia (2016), Nezha (2019), and more

The past decade has witnessed vigorous development of China's animation industry.

Over the past more than 10 years, 30 to 40 Chinese animated features have been released yearly, boosting the development of "national-style animation." Key works include *Kuiba* (2011), record-breaking *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015), national blockbuster *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), *The Legend of Hei* (2019) which swept across Asia, China's current highest-grossing animated film *Nezha* (2019), and *Deep Sea* (2023) that represents the pinnacle of animation technology in China. Today, Chinese animation is entering a golden age.

Photo from Douban



Havoc in Heaven (1964)

It is China's first full-color animated feature film as well as the most influential Chinese animation in the world.

Havoc in Heaven, adapted from the novel *Journey to the West*, stunned domestic and foreign animation circles after its release.

The animated film was screened at 18 international film festivals and won many awards. It was exported to 44 countries and regions and is still regarded as a classic of Chinese hand-painted 2D animation today.

Photo from Douban



Lotus Lantern (1999)

The animated film redefined the production system of Chinese animation.



Lotus Lantern was adapted from an ancient Chinese myth about how Chenxiang saved his mother. The animated film became a huge success when it premiered. It adopted international standards of production and strengthened promotion to the point of organizing a complete marketing system offering VCDs, video tapes, and licensed stationery products

and toys. The practice effectively improved the industrial chain of China's animation market.

Photo from Douban

Drawing a Century

Text by Li Zhongqiu

The past century of Chinese animation was highlighted by the perseverance of Chinese animators, the vigorous development of the information industry, and the charm and vitality rooted in rich Chinese culture.

About a century ago, *Uproar in the Studio* (1926), produced by the Wan brothers, became the first Chinese animated short to gain real influence. Throughout the history of animation, science and technology have always been a major driving force. They create new communication carriers for animation and empower creators to produce higher-quality works more efficiently.

In the 1980s, the animation industry entered a stage of industrialization and globalization. The popularity of television set a new standard for higher-level production and efficiency at a lower cost. Anime (Japanese-style animation) became mainstream while the “art animation” advocated by Shanghai Animation Film Studio faced a dilemma. A large volume of talented animators flowed to southern China, where many overseas studios resided. China

A kaleidoscope of classical animated characters produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio. (Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive)



became the largest animation outsourcing destination in the world.

The introduction of the first 3D animation workstation to China in 1989 heralded a new era for Chinese animation technology. Digital scanning, coloring, and compositing quickly replaced manual line drawing, color painting, and lighting photography. China's animation industry merged into the fast lane. A group of Chinese animation outsourcing service providers took the lead in switching to computer animation, cultivating a base of new technical professionals in China. In 1997, China Central Television adopted the first domestic online filming technology developed by Beijing Disen Digital Entertainment Co., Ltd. It enabled larger production capacity by outsourcing to studios scattered around the country. Animated TV series including *Journey to the West*, and *Romance of Three Kingdoms* were produced as a result—a prelude to the revival of China's domestic animation.

At the turn of the 21st century, the Chinese government began to greatly support the creation and production of domestic animation and established a joint meeting mechanism involving 10 ministries and industry experts to guide the development of Chinese animation. With the implementation of a series of supportive policies, many former outsourcing service providers shifted to producing domestic animated works. Meanwhile, professional animation education in China blossomed, and dramatically changed the model of animation training. Previously, it

was dominated by apprenticeships and never listed as a major program in post-secondary educational institutions in China. Beijing Film Academy expanded its animation program, which started in 1952, into a full-time undergraduate animation major and gradually introduced relevant master's and even doctoral degrees. Jilin Animation Institute, known as the world's largest animation school, boasts nearly 13,000 students, of whom approximately 4,000 major in animation.

The development of the internet has brought both opportunities and challenges to the Chinese animation industry at a faster pace. As China emerged with the largest internet and mobile internet user base, considerable domestic and international capital has been injected into the digital content industry. Online platforms have noticed the huge demand in the teen-dominated market and have accordingly invested heavily in animation. At the same time, advanced technologies such as digital animation, virtual reality, and real-time engines have been rapidly and immensely applied in the animation industry.

Favorable timing coupled with geographical and human conditions jointly contribute to the arrival of a new era of Chinese animation. *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, *White Snake*, and *Legend of Deification*, which represent high quality and comprehensive strength of Chinese animated films, have



Yan Dingxian, a Shanghai Animation Film Studio artist, working on animating characters in the 1960s. (Photo courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive)



An animated character created with the help of artificial intelligence. (Photo courtesy of Li Zhongqiu)

all notched extraordinary box office numbers.

Contrasting the prosperous era of Chinese art animation, most popular Chinese animated works in recent years are adapted from widely read web novels and distributed online after being produced by a skilled animation

team and enjoying heavy promotion. More importantly, they all carry profound Chinese historical culture and classical literature genes.

With the great success of the Sino-U.S. co-production *Nezha and Transformers* and the authorized animation IP

Deer Squad, produced with cooperation from international animation giants, and the internationalization of animation games, more paths are being explored to advance Chinese animation into the international market. Global buyers are also looking for opportunities to identify high-quality original projects including Chinese works through professional animation platforms such as the Asian Animation Summit, which seeks greater success in the international animation market through investment and distribution support.

The past century of Chinese animation featured the perseverance of Chinese animators, the vigorous development of the information industry, and the charm and vitality rooted in the rich Chinese culture.

At the moment, the “metaverse” is bringing contemporary animation into an interactive era and expanding a brand-new market. Virtual humans and artificial intelligence (AI) will kindle a new round of revolution for the animation industry. Baidu’s AI anchor, for example, debuted at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, bringing China into the digital animation era. Chinese animation is welcoming booming development following its centennial anniversary. CP

The author is vice president of the International Animated Film Association, founded in 1960 in Annecy, France.

Deep Sea Dreams

Text by Li Zhuoxi
Photos courtesy of Jin Dayong

Deep Sea, which took seven years to produce, represents an important step towards industrializing Chinese animation and fostering the craftsmanship spirit in Chinese animators.

Imagine the painting *Water Lilies* by French impressionist Claude Monet slowly unfolding before your eyes.

The water lilies in the pond are in full bloom. Across the shimmering water surface, the reflections of pond-side plants emanate a dreamlike atmosphere. The boundaries of light, water, and air gradually blur. Viewers can only see the trembling strokes and flickering colors, which creates a fantasy setting of a summer night. Then everything

in the picture begins to move.

The same fascination inspired by similar abstract impressionism can be found in the original Chinese animated feature *Deep Sea*, which brought a visual spectacle to China’s big screens.

The success of the animated fantasy was supported by the hard work of 1,478 Chinese animators across seven years.

No Innovation, No Film

Seven years of hard work facilitated the studio’s evolution from producing *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* to the quality of *Deep Sea*.

The 2015 film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, inspired by the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, made director Tian Xiaopeng and executive producer Jin Dayong famous and earned

In the animated film *Deep Sea*, a little girl named Shen Xiu falls into the sea and embarks on an amazing underwater journey.

A still from the 3D animated fantasy movie *Deep Sea*. China’s animation industry strives to make new technological and storytelling breakthroughs.

major profits. It was deemed a milestone in the rise of Chinese animation. The production team could have presented a series of sequels using the same intellectual property to continue capitalizing on that success, but they instead refused to repeat and chose a more challenging path to create *Deep Sea*.

“Director Tian called innovation his only pursuit and the greatest driving force of his directing career,” said Jin. “Even if innovation is accompanied by



risk, we still want to try, and we're not afraid of failure."

Taking risks proved worth it. *Deep Sea* was a hit with viewers and critics alike and scored big at the box office. The blockbuster has so far earned around 919 million yuan (US\$130 million), placing it among the five highest-grossing Chinese animated films ever. It was also selected to be screened at the Berlin International Film Festival's youth-focused sidebar Generation selection, the first time that an original Chinese 3D animation was shortlisted for the festival.

Long Climb to the Top

"*Deep Sea* is a special project," said Jin Dayong.

The film tells the unusual story of a little girl grappling with her parents' divorce and new family. While on a cruise, she falls into the sea and embarks on an amazing underwater journey. The fantasy focuses on digging into the meaning of life.

One unprecedented visual effect stood out in particular as cutting-edge Chinese animation: particle ink painting. It was used to achieve the dazzling and immersive images, showcase the mood and vitality of the protagonist, and hammer home the huge contrast between the brilliance of the dream and the darkness of the real world. Animated films are asset-heavy, requiring a huge investment in technologies comparable to science fiction films. Nowadays, the speed of new technology development has made

animation production even more complicated. This is also the reason *Deep Sea* is so special.

Creating 3D images from traditional abstract Chinese ink paintings and using them throughout the film required abundant time in research and development. Even the crew was uncertain how long it would take. More than two years passed between the emergence of the first concept image and the successful experiment of the technology. However, technological success was only the first step, and a huge amount

of work followed. The scene when the sea is split features more than 100 layers of particle effects in one frame, and the particles number up to several billion. The special effect artists entrusted with the single shot cost 15 months to complete.

The production team also devoted unprecedented effort to explore production technology. For example, the team made sure that details as small as a shoulder shaking and chest contracting while the lead female sobs were realistic. Such efforts greatly improve the performance quality.

The final effect is breathtaking. More than two billion particles collide and more than 200 colors converge. The ocean becomes as magnificent and colorful as the morning sky, leaving viewers in a fascinating dream.

After two years of research and seven years of production, *Deep Sea* finally offered an unprecedented big-screen experience.

Sharing Technology and Experience

The team never expected the production to last seven years at

first. "After my experience on *Monkey King: Hero Is Back*, I thought three to four years would be ample," said Jin. "We have come a long way. Although we made some mistakes during the seven years, all the efforts on infrastructure were worthwhile."

Indeed, *Deep Sea* already represents an important step for the industrialized future of Chinese animation and an advance of the craftsmanship spirit of Chinese animators.

At the film's premiere, Tian declared that he was willing

to share the technology and experience with his Chinese peers, including teaching particle ink painting and helping standardize procedures. "I hope we can help others in China's animation industry," he said. "I hope that one day, Chinese animators will no longer need to worry about technology, so they can devote complete focus to the subject matter of the art and methods of expression."

Diverse approaches, bold innovation, and selfless sharing are fueling the rise of Chinese animation. CP



A still from *Deep Sea*. The film has been selected for the 2023 Annecy International Animation Film Festival's Screening Events section.

07/08
全国上映

Redrawing Tang Dynasty Stars

Text by Hu Zhoumeng

Photos courtesy of Light Chaser Animation Studios

The human spirit of pursuing ideals is common in both the East and the West.

When Gao Shi and Li Bai, both eminent poets of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), met for the first time in their youth, they engaged in a fierce fight. A traditional Chinese saying goes, “A fight can end up making a true friend,” and a long-lasting friendship between Gao and Li sprouted after they fought each other with a spear and a sword.

This plot is from the animated movie *Chang'an*, which is scheduled to hit theaters on July 8 this year. The film follows the adventurous lives and enduring friendship of the two great poets as well as many other famous poets, artists, and patriotic generals, culminating in an epic portrait of the great figures of their times. From the prosperous scenery of the capital city Chang'an to the poetic and picturesque night views south of the Yangtze River and then to fierce battlefields in border towns, the multi-faceted landscapes of the Tang Dynasty leap to life.

This film is the inaugural release of the “New Culture” series produced by Light Chaser Animation Studios. In an exclusive interview

A poster for the animated movie *Chang'an*, scheduled to hit theaters on July 8 this year.



with *China Pictorial* (CP), the film's directors Xie Junwei and Zou Jing said that viewers would learn about the extraordinary talent, grand visions, and patriotic feelings of the figures in the movie. “Even though more than a thousand years have passed, their spirit remains alive and deeply touches today's youth.”

CP: What is the main storyline of *Chang'an*? How did you hone the script?

Zou Jing: The film is set in a few years after the An-Shi Rebellion (755-763), a war of betrayal launched by Tang Dynasty generals An Lushan and Shi Siming. As military secretary Gao Shi defends Chang'an from the attack of the Tubo army in a southwestern town, he recounts his life-long friendship with Li Bai to a chief eunuch in the military. The film also depicts many other well-known poets of the Tang Dynasty with focus on their pursuit of their dreams. Viewers may have some knowledge of the stories but not that much, so we hope to generate mixed feelings of

strangeness and familiarity, and reinterpret the historical stories with animation.

Xie Junwei: In general, the film stays loyal to the historical facts and follows historical trends. The life experiences of Gao Shi, Li Bai, and other Tang Dynasty poets, who strived to pursue their ideals and realize their dreams, provide very good story materials, and we referred to the historical records of these figures when creating the script. However, there are also voids in these records so we filled the voids while ensuring the plot remains consistent with history and the figures' personalities.



Xie Junwei, co-director of the animated movie *Chang'an*. Xie joined Light Chaser Animation Studios in 2013 and has served as an animation supervisor for *White Snake*, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, and *Green Snake*, among others.

Zou Jing, co-director of the animated movie *Chang'an*, in his office. Zou has participated in the production of several hit animated films including *Big Fish & Begonia*, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, and *Green Snake*.



CP: The historical context and poems from the Tang Dynasty might seem bizarre to foreign viewers. Do you think they will appreciate this film just as much as Chinese viewers?

Zou Jing: The human spirit of pursuing ideals is common in both the East and the West, and the plot of this film is presented in a way that overseas audiences can relate. This story is told from the perspective of the protagonist Gao Shi, a character imbued with traditional Eastern flavor. We hope overseas audiences, through Gao's eyes, can see the spirit of perseverance in Li Bai and other Tang Dynasty poets through their stories of chasing dreams.

CP: Light Chaser Animation Studios is already a mature animation house. Did you run into any new challenges when making this film?

Xie Junwei: The biggest challenge we faced was determining how to present the impressive prosperity of the Tang Dynasty. Before production



Young Gao Shi (left) and elderly Li Bai (right) in the film *Chang'an*.

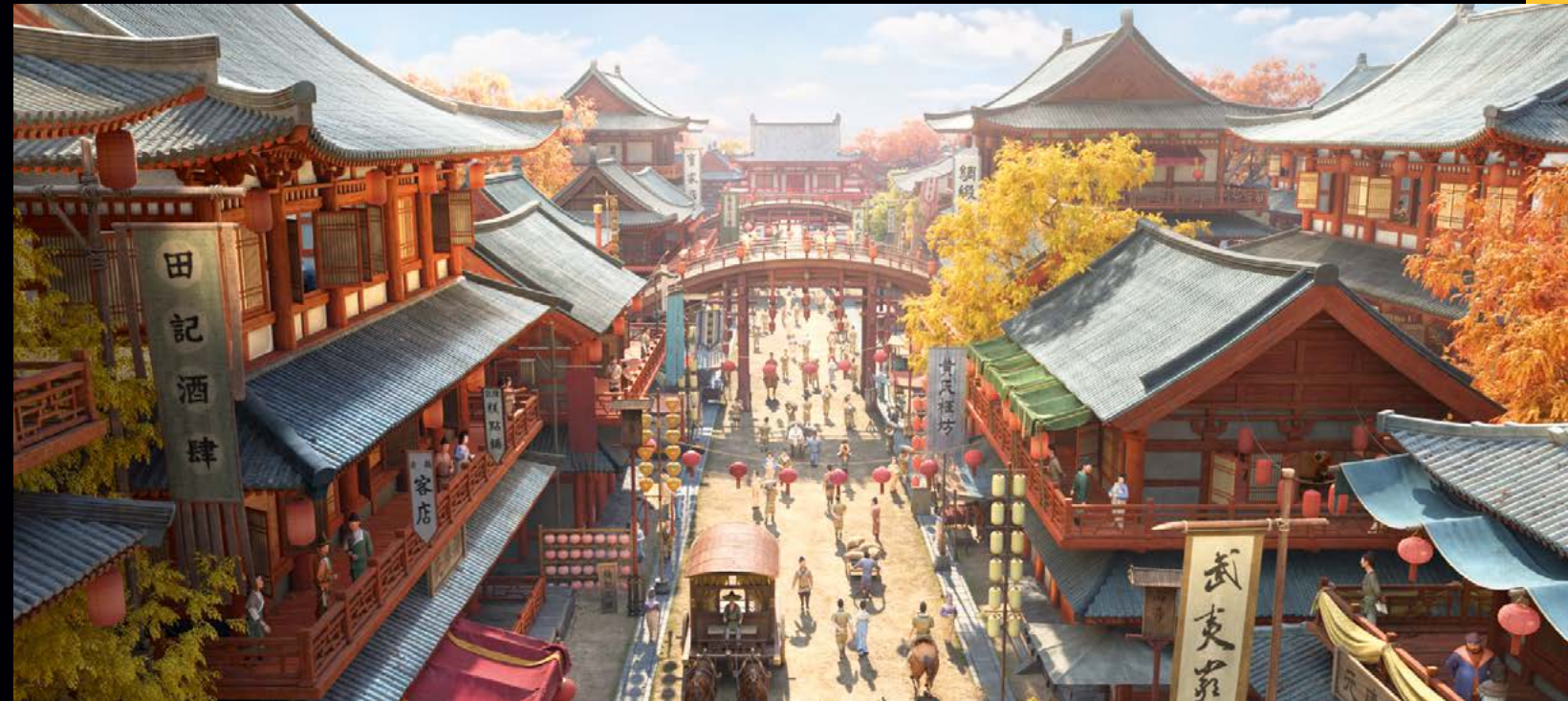
began, our team studied historical materials, read extensively about Tang Dynasty culture and the poets' lives, and researched the customs and rituals of that time. We invited experts from various fields to guide us to make sure the content was accurate and credible, and we also learned thoroughly about the poems in this film. Our team adopted an audio-visual language and performance design typical of animation, hoping to make the best of animation-based imagination and show poetic scenes with the greatest Eastern features.

CP: Compared to other art forms such as live-action movies, TV, and theater, what unique strengths does

animation have when telling Chinese stories?

Zou Jing: Making animation is like painting a brand-new imaginary world on a blank piece of paper, which demands strong imaginative power from the creators but also gives them plenty of space for creation. The production of animated movies follows a unique industrialized process so the procedures are more controllable, which is the biggest difference from other art forms. In this film, animation empowered us with a strong expressive means to present Chinese poetry culture in a more impressive way so that the audience could better resonate

A still from the animated movie *Chang'an* featuring a poetic and picturesque night view in Yangzhou, a city along the Yangtze River.



A still from the animated movie *Chang'an* showing prosperous scenery in the capital city Chang'an during the Tang Dynasty.

with the poetic mood and artistic concepts of the poets.

CP: Over the past decade, Light Chaser Animation Studios has been dedicated to creating animations featuring traditional Chinese stories, such as *Little Door Gods* (2016), *White Snake* (2019) and *Green Snake* (2021) in the "New Legends" series, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) and *New Gods: Yang Jian* (2022) in the "New Gods" series, and the upcoming *Chang'an* in the "New Culture" series. What has been learned from this work disseminating Chinese culture across the world?

Xie Junwei: We have always adhered to the principle of "telling Chinese stories from a Chinese perspective." The studio has based these films on

traditional Chinese stories and made tenacious efforts to explore traditional Chinese culture. It is crucial for us to align with the mentality of the Chinese audience, feel the pulse of our times, work according to the national conditions of China, and thoroughly consider the emotional needs of young people and family audiences. We want to do as much as possible with the imaginative power of animation and optimize our strengths in telling Chinese stories. CP

A poster for the animated movie *Chang'an* featuring a flowing mountain stream simulating the Chinese characters that make its name. The movie follows the adventurous lives and enduring friendship of Li Bai and Gao Shi, two great poets of the Tang Dynasty, as well as many other famous poets, artists, and patriotic generals, culminating in an epic portrait of great figures of their times.



Yao—Chinese Folktales: Experiencing Different Legends

Text by Gong Haiying
Photos courtesy of Shanghai Animation Film Studio unless otherwise credited

Yao—Chinese Folktales seeks to empower viewers to “meet different monsters” to explore the diversification of Chinese animation.

A young vendor carrying a goose cage passes the spooky Goose Mountain, where he meets a hobbling Scholar Fox who insists on getting into the goose cage and traveling with the vendor.

When they arrive at the top of the mountain, the Scholar Fox spits out a table full of delicacies to thank the vendor before a series of weird things start happening.

This is the plot of *Goose Mountain*, the second episode of *Yao—Chinese Folktales*. It was adapted from *Scholar of Yangxian County* written by Wu Jun (469-520) of the Southern Dynasties (420-589). Combining sketches with Chinese ink painting, the work is

mostly black and white and offers only a few captions, creating a mysterious and illusory atmosphere. The episode has been considered one of the most experimental in terms of visual presentation and narrative style in the animated series *Yao—Chinese Folktales*.

Themed *Yao* (meaning “monsters” in Chinese), the series was jointly produced by Shanghai

Animation Film Studio (SAFS), established in 1957, and Bilibili, an online video platform popular with younger generations. It consists of eight independent stories rooted in traditional Chinese culture, with subjects covering attachment to homeland, care for life, and human nature. Chinese aesthetics dominate the screen despite integration of Western and Eastern art styles and production methods of both traditional and modern forms. The resulting “monster world” boasts rich Chinese-style imagination and aesthetic appreciation.

Since its debut on January 1, 2023, the series has remained a hot topic online. By February 12, the view counts had reached 200 million. “The familiar SAFS is back,” posted one internet user. “This is my greatest gratification,”



Chen Liaoyu, chief director of *Yao—Chinese Folktales* and associate professor at the Animation School of Beijing Film Academy, in his studio. (Photo by Wang Lei/*China Pictorial*)



A still from *Goose Mountain*.

exclaimed Chen Liaoyu, chief director of the animated series, about the tide of positive feedback.

For several generations of Chinese people, animated characters with strong Eastern flavors such as Nezha and Detective Black Cat, created by SAFS by employing traditional Chinese art forms including ink painting, paper-cutting, and puppetry, have become treasured memories.

In *Yao—Chinese Folktales*, ancient scholars, clay statues in temples, weasels in *hutongs* (lanes), and catfish could all be “monsters” or “spirits” and

become carriers of people’s imaginations, emotions, or wishes. According to Chen, monster culture stemmed from human imagination of unknown things, and *Yao—Chinese Folktales* seeks to take viewers to “meet different monsters” by discovering and mirroring different states of the contemporary human spiritual world. At the same time, to herald the centenary of Chinese animation, Chen sought to represent the diversification and continuous exploration of Chinese animation and “inject new vitality” into its future development.

Chen has an intrinsic academic connection with SAFS. When he was a student majoring in animation at Beijing Film Academy in 1990, many of his teachers were from SAFS including Qian Yunda, one of the directors of *The Legend of Sealed Book*. His former classmate Su Da is currently head of SAFS and also producer of *Yao—Chinese Folktales*. During the creation of the animated series, Chen was particularly moved by veterans of SAFS taking the time to watch sample films and offer specific guidance and suggestions. “SAFS has a very long history, but the older-generation artists are very open-minded,” he said. “Inheritance does not mean reproduction. SAFS represents the peak of Chinese animation, and we must inherit the creative spirit of our predecessors while breaking through limits and exploring further with greater courage.”

To some extent, *Yao—Chinese Folktales* represents not only an exploration and inheritance of a century of Chinese animation, but also an artistic expression of the current cross-border and cross-cultural context. “Culture benefits from both vertical growth and horizontal integration, which nourishes the land we are in today. This is similar to the concept of a living form. When the creator has this nutrition, the work will naturally grow like grass or a tree.”

Poster for *Yao—Chinese Folktales*.



A still from *Fool and God*.



A still from *Null Island*.



A still from *Old Man Yang*.

Links:
Other Episodes of *Yao—Chinese Folktales*

Nobody

Set in the universe of *Journey to the West*, a household story in China, in *Nobody*, the protagonist is a young pig monster working on the monster boss’s plan to capture the monk because it is said that a bite of his meat would make one immortal. The humorous Chinese painting style makes it easy for viewers to establish an emotional connection with the young pig monster as a “nobody” at work.

She Wolf

To express with the style of Chinese ink painting in a 3D form, *She Wolf* tells the story of Linlin, a wolf girl living in the snowy woods of northeastern China. She ventures into the human world due to loneliness and awakens her true self.

Fool and God

Sketches of the changing landscapes of the Chinese countryside with a watercolor illustration style are poetic, and each picture evokes childhood memories with subtle scenes.

Ship Down the Well

Using traditional paper-cut animation, this film shows how a child grapples with fears and overcomes them. The bright-red background color and traditional costumes in the film emanate rich Chinese charm.

Null Island

Adapted from the Chinese folktale *River Snail Girl*, this beautiful animation seeks to explore a larger cosmic relationship by following star-crossed romance between human and alien.

Old Man Yang

Depicting anecdotes about Beijing’s *hutongs*, a 3D-to-2D conversion technique is used to fuse 3D characters with 2D scenes. The authentic Beijing-style dubbing makes the audience feel both real and warm.

Fly Me to the Earth

This stop-motion animation features a cute and kind robot rabbit in a puppet-show style, combining Chinese mythology with futuristic fantasy.

Legend of Deification : Reshaping a Sage

Text by Li Zhuoxi
Photos courtesy of Gao Weihua

This Chinese animated film presents both the story of Jiang Ziya and a daring departure from the traditional portrayal of the figure.

With an air of celestial elegance emanating from a flowing white beard and mustache, he wields the authority over the pantheon with a divine whip in his hand.

This is the portrayal of Jiang

Ziya, the “God of Gods,” in the Chinese mythological novel *The Investiture of the Gods* created during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). His position in the Chinese mythological system is comparable to Zeus in Greek mythology and Odin in Norse mythology. Like

them, he bestows divine titles upon numerous gods, commanding utmost respect.

Tall and lean, he wears tattered attire, his eyes exuding a profound melancholy, hinting at the weight of ages.

Over three centuries later, in the animated film *Legend of Deification* released in 2020, Jiang Ziya’s image underwent a remarkable transformation, descending from his divine pedestal to become an ordinary middle-aged man, scorned by society and burdened with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The Chinese animated film presents both the story of Jiang Ziya and a daring departure from the traditional portrayal of the figure.

Overturning

If one word had to perfectly describe *Legend of Deification*, it would be “overturn.”

Firstly, the narrative is overturned. In the original novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, Jiang Ziya’s story follows a particular trajectory: At the age of 32, he ascends Kunlun Mountain to become a disciple of the Primeval Lord of Heaven. At 72, he descends the mountain as requested to

aid King Wen and King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.) in their campaign against the tyrannical King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.), while also bestowing titles on 365 heavenly deities.

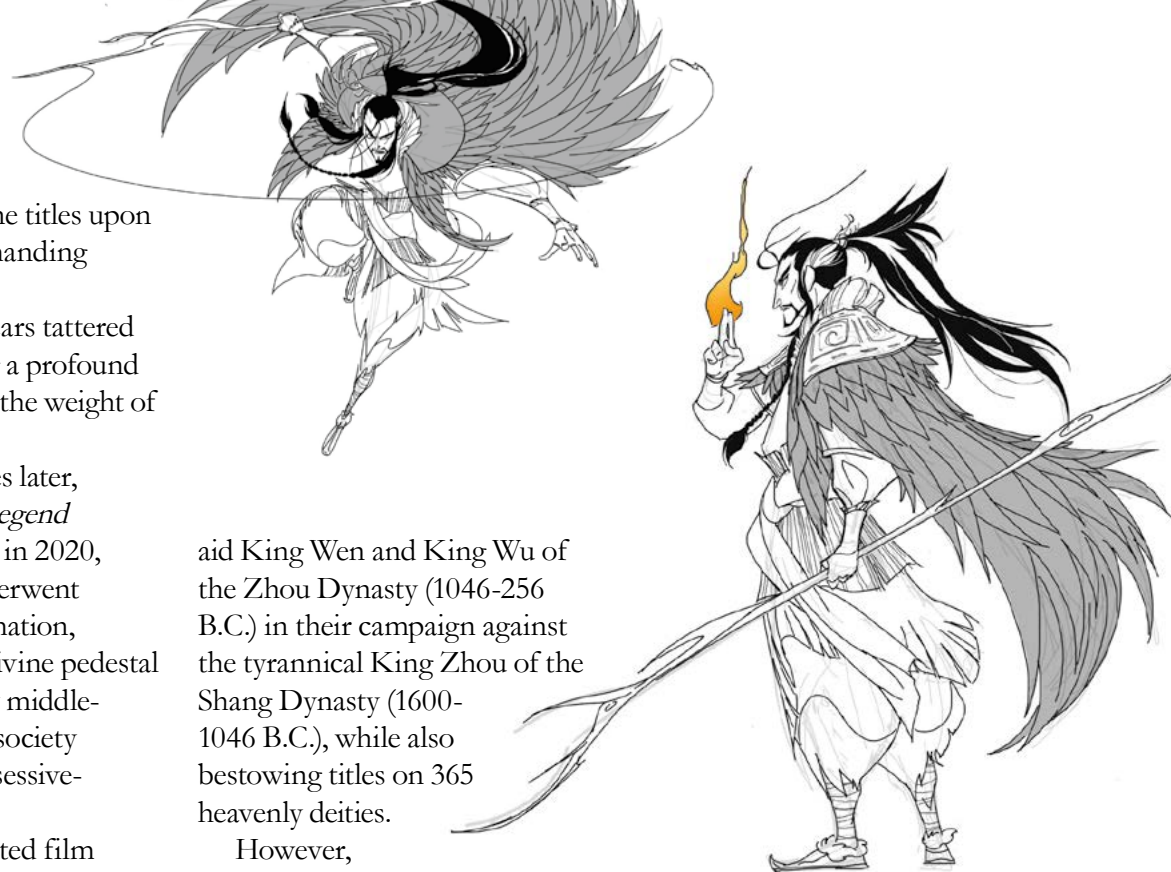
However, the animated film *Legend of Deification* veers far from the original storyline of *The Investiture of the Gods*. It embraces imagination, blends modern aesthetics, and envisions a brand-new sequel.

The entire film revolves around a conspiracy. The Primeval Lord of Heaven harbors ambitions to unify the Three Realms and makes a deal with the Nine-tailed Fox, a mythical creature from Chinese mythology and even in broader East Asian mythology. The story unfolds as follows: The Nine-tailed Fox assumes the guise of Su Daji to enchant King Zhou and incite a war across the Three Realms. In return, she is promised a position among the immortals once the

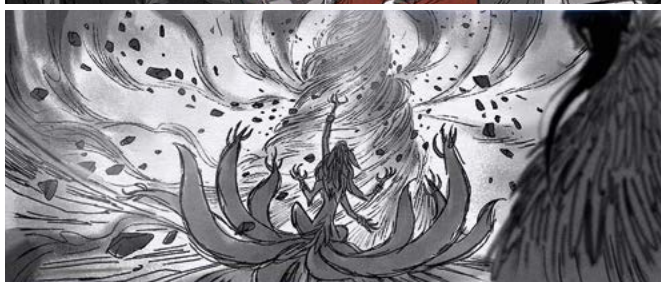
dust settles. However, the Primeval Lord of Heaven breaks his word. He annihilates the clan of the Nine-tailed Fox and commands Jiang Ziya to execute her. But within the body of the Fox, Jiang Ziya catches a glimpse of an innocent human girl, Su Daji. This shakes the foundation of his beliefs. Thus begins his arduous quest for truth.

In this film, Jiang Ziya departs from the traditional portrayal ingrained in the minds of Chinese people—a venerable old sage with flowing white hair. Instead, he emerges as a middle-aged man stripped of his godly characteristics. Grappling with the complex choice between divinity and humanity, the character exhibits perplexity and emotions just like ordinary humans.

Contrasting other animations adapted from legend, *Legend of Deification* defies expectations even in visual representation. The film emanates a sense of resplendence and oddity. “We established two dominant artistic tones in the



Poster for the animated movie *Legend of Deification*.



The early-stage design manuscripts of the animated movie *Legend of Deification*.

beginning: Chinese ink paintings and Cthulhu Mythos,” explained director Cheng Teng. The Cthulhu Mythos, originating from the mythological universe crafted by American writer H.P. Lovecraft, is known for evoking indescribable fear, enigmatic atmospheres, and arcane forces. In this animated adaptation of ancient Chinese mythology, the production team merged Eastern and Western elements boldly to weave a tapestry for a Chinese narrative that can evoke global resonance.

Reshaping

“The adaptation and retelling of Chinese literary classics is a process of cultural reproduction that should embrace both inheritance and innovation to inject contemporary spirit into traditions,” stated producer Gao Weihua. She also serves as a professor at the School of Animation and Digital Arts, Communication University of China. Approximately 70 percent of members of the film’s core production team were college teachers, students, and alumni from animation departments. Their academic background has imbued them with a profound understanding of “how to adapt Chinese classics.” They have the ambition to “inherit Eastern aesthetics and reshape the core of modern sensibilities.”

The film directly evokes a sense of Eastern aesthetic allure, with visuals radiating the poetic and ancient essence embedded in Chinese history. It masterfully merges classical cultural elements with contemporary craftsmanship through the lens of Eastern

aesthetics. Such efforts are most notable in scenes inspired by the likes of Jiang Ziya’s tomb and Suzhou gardens, as well as appear in minute details such as intricate designs of talismans and artifacts with motifs from Shang Dynasty relics and the haunting skeletal specter inspired by the mythological creature “Teng Snake” from the ancient work *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The result is a breathtakingly beautiful and mysteriously enchanting world that faithfully resurrects the original book.

In harmony with the film’s traditional Eastern aesthetics is the reshaped modern spirit at the core of the hero Jiang Ziya.


In the original ending of the

novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, Jiang coldly and ruthlessly beheads the Nine-tailed Fox as the executor of divine will. However, in the animated film, Jiang Ziya’s conviction wavers when he sees the human girl within the Nine-tailed Fox’s body. Faced with the classic ethical dilemma of “saving one person or saving the world,” he experiences the same hesitation, confusion, and inner turmoil as any ordinary person.

The result is moving. Jiang Ziya ultimately transforms from a “follower” to a “rebel.” His rebellion represents a profound and unwavering introspection on spiritual dimensions and a rupture from his identity after being blinded by the so-called “heavenly will”

for so long. This crisis of faith and the dilemma it presents bestow the animation depth and complexity beyond the original work.

Legend of Deification achieved remarkable box office success, earning revenues totaling 1.6 billion yuan (around US\$229 million). The figure made it the second-highest-grossing domestic animated film in China so far. It is an impactful work that offers important insight for Chinese animators: Why can’t serious topics be explored with animation? Why can’t animation address profound and thought-provoking themes while also achieving commercial success?

Chinese animation needs more exploration to find more possibilities. 

A still from *Legend of Deification*. The Chinese animated film was shortlisted for the feature film competition category at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival in France in 2021 as well as the feature film competition category at the Tokyo Anime Award Festival in Japan the same year.



Moving Pictures

Text by Liu Chang

Keeping a sincere attitude to convey the inner voice is key to producing a popular animation that can be embraced by a global audience.

A “magical brush” from the East stormed international film festivals in 1956, marking the global coronation of Chinese animation for the first time. That year, *The Magic Brush* (1955), a Chinese stop-motion animated film, was honored with the children’s

entertainment films award at the eighth Venice International Children’s Film Festival and the outstanding children’s film award at the first Belgrade International Children’s Film Festival.

A year later, Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS) was founded and began producing

Georges Schwizgebel

A Swiss animation director and the laureate of the Special Lifetime Achievement Award at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival 2017.



A still from the animated film *The Year of the Deer* (1995). (Photo courtesy of Georges Schwizgebel)

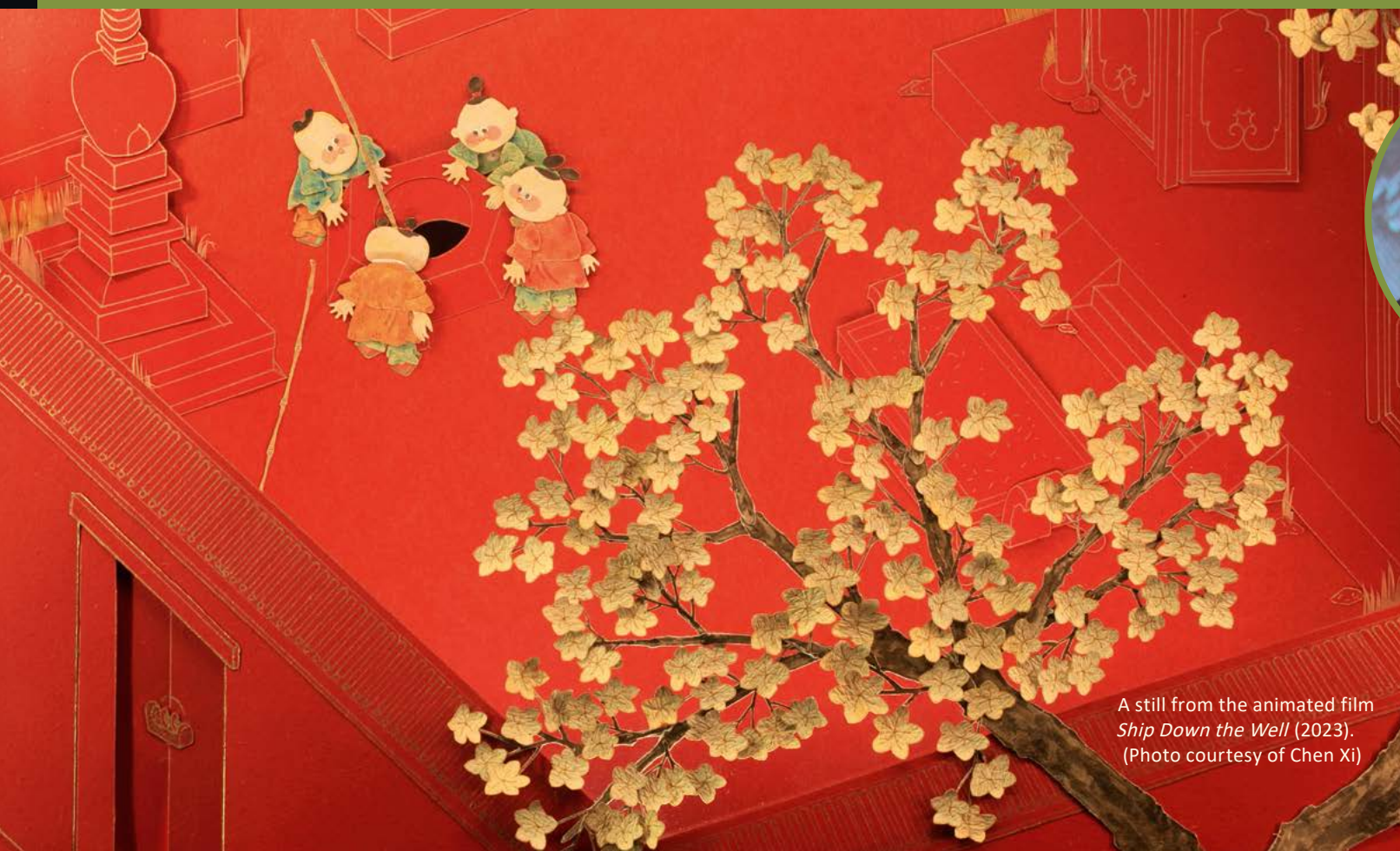
tional Animation Film Festival.

I was surprised by the scale of the studio back then. It employed 20 animation directors or so and about 500 staffers in total to produce delicate animated films, bringing Chinese animation into a golden age.

A Da also introduced me to many other SAFS artists like Yan Dingxian, who became the director of the first Shanghai International Animation Film Festival in 1988 and invited me to serve on the Selection Committee. The event, organized by SAFS, was fantastic. It featured 286 animated films from 26 countries and regions, the largest scale I ever saw at that time. *Feelings of Mountains and Waters* (1988) by SAFS artist Te Wei, a masterpiece of ink-painting animation, won the Best Animated Film prize.

Impressed by SAFS’s artistic pursuits, I made *The Year of the Deer* (1995), inspired by the Chinese fable *The Deer of Linjiang*, authored by Liu Zongyuan in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). I chose a mixture of Chinese sketches and European animation techniques to show the tragic destiny of a young deer deceived by appearances.

Chen Xi: I enjoyed a colorful childhood thanks to SAFS. Among all the animated works it produced, *Havoc in Heaven* (1961&1964), impressed me most when I was a child. It is an adaptation of the earlier episodes of the 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. I can still recall vivid characters such as Sun Wukong, or the Monkey King, rebelling against the Jade Emperor



A still from the animated film *Ship Down the Well* (2023). (Photo courtesy of Chen Xi)

Chen Xi
(working name: Chen Lianhua)

An independent Chinese animator and a review panelist at the 2023 Ottawa International Animation Festival.



animation in various forms with Chinese characteristics. It also organized the first and second Shanghai International Animation Film Festivals in 1988 and 1992, respectively, marking a golden era for international exchange on animation.

More than six decades later, in 2019, the Feinaki Beijing Animation Week was introduced to bring artistic pursuits back to the animation industry and encourage

independent Chinese animators to embrace the world.

In this issue, *China Pictorial* (CP) invited Georges Schwizgebel and Chen Xi to recount stories from SAFS and the Feinaki Beijing Animation Week and discuss how Chinese animation can further embrace the world.

CP: Can you describe your relationship with SAFS, one of the most time-honored windows into Chinese animation?

Georges Schwizgebel: When I arrived in Shanghai in 1983 to learn Chinese at Fudan University, I got a chance to visit SAFS personally thanks to arrangements made by SAFS animator Xu Jingda (nicknamed A Da), a friend I had made at the jury panel of the 14th Annecy Interna-



The poster (middle) and other highlights of the fourth Feinaki Beijing Animation Week, held in March 2023. (Photo courtesy of the Feinaki Beijing Animation Week)



of Heaven to drum and percussion accompaniment inspired by Peking Opera traditions.

And SAFS animator Zhan Tong even replied to a letter I wrote to him as a primary school student. He encouraged me to maintain my passion for drawing cartoons and to find inspiration from daily life if I needed new ideas.

I never expected my serendipity with SAFS to continue almost three decades later with an invitation from Chen Liaoyu, chief director of *Yao—Chinese Folktales* (2023).

I partnered with Zhou Xiaolin to direct *Ship Down the Well*, a separate story of the animation series. The papercut stop-motion animated short follows a protagonist navigating his childhood trauma and growing up. The partnership marked a tribute to the historic glory of SAFS and an innovation in interpreting

Chinese aesthetics for modern people.

CP: How were you involved with the Feinaki Beijing Animation Week? How do you see its role in international exchange?

Chen: I am one of the founders of the event. When naming it, we were inspired by the phenakistiscope, the first widespread animation device that created a fluent illusion of motion in the 19th century.

Alongside main competition programs, exhibition programs, and animation workshops, Feinaki Meets, a series of academic forums, has also become an integral part of the event. It has touched on topics ranging from the

historical value of the first Shanghai International Animation Film Festival to experimental animation and the possibilities of non-fiction animation.

Even during the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the second Feinaki Beijing Animation Week was organized as scheduled in November, with 137 animated works screened in five days and almost 4,000 tickets sold out.

The event is dedicated to bridging the gap between animators in and outside China and inspiring and encouraging independent animators to participate in international exchange to promote a more prosperous ecosystem for animation. It also serves the increasing needs of the public to access animation knowledge and entertainment.

Schwizgebel: I was mainly invited to join the competition and exhibition programs and worked as a review panelist as well.

This year, a retrospective screening headlined “Images Dancing for Fifty

Years: A Retrospective of Georges Schwizgebel” was organized in March. Alongside *The Man without a Shadow* (2004) and other 14 classical animated films, *Nakounine* (“foreigner” in local Shanghai dialect), a documentary I produced in 1986, was screened as well. It was based on my bicycle trips through the streets of Shanghai from the suburbs to the city center between the autumn of 1983 and the summer of 1984.

It’s a very interesting and even revolutionary festival curated by people who truly love animation and seek to bring artistic pursuits

back to the animation industry instead of using it for tourism or commercial purposes only. It has also been a very rewarding experience to watch a lot of different films with a diverse, international vibe, especially for young animators just starting their journeys.

CP: What factors help animation be embraced by a global audience? Can you share some impressive examples?

Schwizgebel: Generally, you have to free your mind and make something you want to do. Also, if there have already been many animated films on one good subject, you can still do that topic if you find a new way to tell the story.

Personally, I was impressed by *Have a Nice Day* (2017) and expect to discover at the upcoming Annecy International Animation Film Festival *Art College 1994*

(2023), both produced by Chinese animation director Liu Jian. I read the interesting script of *Art College 1994* when I met Liu in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province this year. Set on the campus of the Chinese Southern Academy of Arts in the early 1990s, the 2D hand-drawn animation, with a creative neo-realistic style, follows a group of art students caught between tradition and modernity, with love and friendships intertwined with their

animation with a French animation director, he mentioned that sometimes the right background music can help a piece get the stamp of approval from a foreign audience because of its sincere flavor.

I would like to recommend the Annecy-winning and Oscar-shortlisted animation movie *Steakhouse* (2021) by Slovenian director Špela Čadež. The papercut stop-motion animation explores tense relations between Liza and Franc, a middle-aged couple in



Georges Schwizgebel (right) exchanges with SAFS artist Te Wei (middle) at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival 1995, where Te was awarded the ASIFA Prize, a Lifetime Achievement Award granted by the International Animated Film Association. (Photo courtesy of Georges Schwizgebel)

artistic pursuits. The film garnered international recognition after its global premiere at the 73rd Berlin International Film Festival.

Chen: Keeping a sincere attitude to convey the inner voice is key to producing a popular animation that can be embraced by a global audience. Otherwise, it will be either superficial or a vain attempt. Once, when I was discussing SAFS

Slovenia. Franc cooks a steak for dinner on Liza’s birthday. With a stopwatch, he times the grilling of each side of meat, fills their flat with the smell of the seared steak, and waits angrily at the table for Liza’s late arrival. The animation blends distinct aesthetics with a simmering narrative focused on often concealed domestic psychological violence, which a global audience can easily relate to. CP

The Dragon's in the Details: A Fairytale Told by Chinese and Spanish Animators

Text by Bian Xiuhong
Photos courtesy of Larry Levene

A commitment to accuracy and respect for Chinese culture aimed to rectify misrepresentations often found in foreign films and instead present a faithful and authentic portrayal of China.

In a remote fortress in a fantasy version of ancient China, a young slave girl named Ping forms an extraordinary connection with a dragon. Together, they embark on a heart-pounding odyssey across the breathtaking landscapes of China to evade the clutches of the villainous master. The enthralling narrative, seamless blend of art and technology, and complex character relationships make *Dragonkeeper* a monumental piece of animation. The China-Spain co-production

invites viewers to embark on an exhilarating rollercoaster of emotions in an enchanting adventure.

China Pictorial reached out to two key figures behind *Dragonkeeper*: executive producer Larry Levene and co-director Salvador Simó, both responsible for bringing Carole Wilkinson's fantasy



Concept design for Lu Yu, the mate of the Dragon Danzi, who lays an egg just before her death in the film.

novel to screens. As a parent who read the books to his own children decades ago, Levene recognized the potential for an exceptional film adaptation. His extensive experience working in China over the past three decades combined with his profound appreciation for Chinese culture and history shaped his vision for the film. Simó, who directed the Annecy title *Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles*, also recognized the appeal of the mythological story because it featured so many elements that children desire in their stories: dragons, magic, and the wonders of Chinese culture that remains relatively unknown and mysterious to foreigners.

Navigating Cultural Nuances

After the co-production process, *Dragonkeeper* emerged as a “genuine and authentic collaboration,” said Levene. It bypassed typical financial arrangements in which investments are quantified in favor of a true partnership. “From its inception, every aspect of the film was meticulously crafted together.” The objective was clear: to honor the distinct characteristics, history, architecture, and costumes of China during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.). This dedication to authenticity presented a challenge in terms of navigating the realm of archetypal characters and ensuring the narrative's universal appeal. The team dedicated significant time and energy to defining the characteristics of the film's antagonist because cultural perceptions of good and evil vary so much between regions.



A still featuring Ping, the protagonist in *Dragonkeeper*. Designing the character was an intricate process. The production team explored various possibilities and eventually incorporated various elements of a countryside girl.

Elements such as “mustache design, bird symbolism, and eye shape” became focal points of discussion, and “countless discussions and compromises were undertaken” to strike a harmonious balance.

Despite the hurdles in language challenges and cultural perceptions, one of the most fascinating aspects for Simó was the collaborative presence of Li Jianping, the other co-director and head of the Animation School at Beijing Film Academy. Li's crucial role ensured the preservation of the film's “Chineseness” and safeguarded cultural authenticity. “*Dragonkeeper* aimed to bridge the gap between the world's perception of China and its true essence.” From 2016 to 2017, the joint China-Spain art design team, led by Li, embarked on an extensive research journey across China's Sichuan and Shaanxi provinces, unearthing invaluable references for architectural structures and historical settings. A

profound commitment to accuracy also led to a collaboration with the Central Academy of Fine Arts, whose guidance extended to even the “intricacies of linen and the shapes of shoes.”

Designing the character Ping was an intricate process. Collaborating with Li, Simó explored various possibilities, eventually settling on Li's suggestion to incorporate elements of a countryside girl through details such as hairstyle. “Our objective was to ensure that Ping resonates with Chinese viewers,” Simó said. “We thought that if she, a Chinese girl, appealed to them, she would captivate



Salvador Simón (right) and Larry Levene collaborate with the Chinese team during the post-production phase of the film.



A still from the animated film *Dragonkeeper*. The art design team sought to meticulously craft every aspect of the film to honor the distinctive history, architecture, and costumes of China during the Han Dynasty.

audiences worldwide.” This commitment to accuracy and respect for Chinese culture aimed to rectify misrepresentations often found in foreign films and instead offer a faithful and authentic portrayal of China.

For the dragon, a mythical creature lacking fixed representation, early designs leaned towards a more cartoony style. However, the team shifted focus when they engaged the talents of Bill Nighy, a veteran British actor who voiced the character Dragon Danzi. The team sought to convey the essence of Danzi through his facial expressions, reinforcing his role in the film. Danzi, a 1,500-year-old dragon with a wealth of experience, chooses his words carefully and seldom speaks. In contrast, Ping, a spirited and curious young girl, represents the opposite end of the spectrum. Her impulsive nature and desire

for instant understanding sets the stage for conflict and propels the story forward. The relationship between Danzi and Ping, the film’s key dynamic, serves as the driving force. The design process involved extensive work to authentically capture the characters’ movements, including how the dragon leaps, walks, runs, and flies.

International cooperation is the

heart of *Dragonkeeper*. “Just as culinary fusion enriches the palate, the blending of cultures brings results in new dimensions and flavors.” Throughout the arduous process of creation and production spanning years, the team behind *Dragonkeeper* committed to a profound understanding of cultural awareness, which fostered dialogue, debate, and ultimately, consensus.

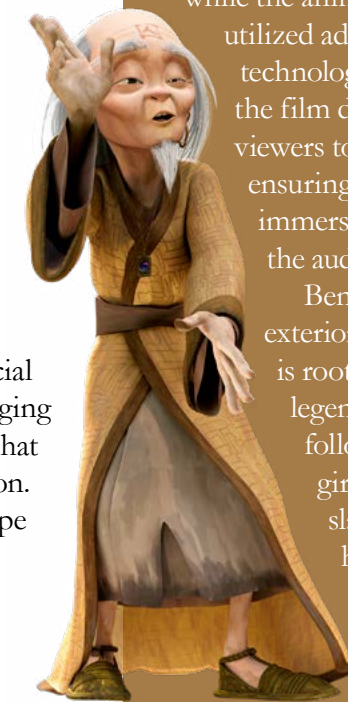


Concept design for Chang’an Road in the capital city of the Han Dynasty. The team endeavored to preserve the film’s Chineseness and safeguard cultural authenticity.

Emotionally Charged Adventure

At the heart of the creative concept of *Dragonkeeper* is strong emphasis on the story and the immersive experience it offers. Limitless possibilities exist in the world of animation, but it can’t be a free-for-all without rules. “The story should always take precedence, and the animation itself is just a tool to enhance the story’s appeal,” said Simó. His primary concern was crafting an unforgettable experience for the audience, offering a “rollercoaster ride of emotions” ranging from happiness and fear to thrills and joy.

Echoing Simó, one crucial aspect for Levene was bringing back the emotional depth that characterized past animation. The contemporary landscape of family entertainment has tended to lean on predictable formulas: fast-paced action, fleeting humor, and a streamlined narrative structure. Unfortunately, this approach often fails to make the heartfelt connection that fosters a lasting impression. With *Dragonkeeper*, they aimed to break free from the conventions of modern cinema and forge a new path by taking viewers on a breathtaking journey that harkens back to the spirit of movies from the 1990s. Levene’s granddaughter, who shares his love for those classic films, served as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that animation can have.



Concept design for Wang Chao, a herbalist and Danzi’s friend.

“A well-crafted animation should not only entertain but also evoke genuine emotions that linger in one’s memory for years to come.”

To achieve this goal, *Dragonkeeper* blended an “older visual style reminiscent of classic animation with state-of-the-art techniques.” Every frame was meticulously painted by the computer, with strokes of artistry, while the animation itself utilized advanced 3D CEI technology. Importantly, the film doesn’t require viewers to wear glasses, ensuring a comfortable and immersive experience for the audience.

Beneath its modern exterior, *Dragonkeeper* is rooted in an ancient legend. The story follows a young girl, initially a slave unaware of her own power, who ultimately becomes a brave dragonkeeper. This empowering narrative represents a contemporary tale that reflects the changes and growth experienced by individuals today. As the streaming era ushered in smaller screens and faster-paced content, some of the magic found in grand adventures and sweeping stories began to fade. *Dragonkeeper* endeavored to reignite that magic and captivate audiences once more.

Dragonkeeper has resonated with audiences on multiple levels, but the true impact varies

with each individual viewer. “Every interpretation and insight holds value, and each person’s perspective contributes to the overall appreciation of the film.” Ping’s journey intertwines with a parallel story of one of the film’s antagonists. Both characters yearn to change their destinies but choose different paths, presenting audiences with compelling choices and themes to explore. “With each viewing, new discoveries unfold, enriching the overall experience.”

Levene and Simó have little control over the potential impact of the production on the animation industry, and they both simply sought to make something that viewers would thoroughly enjoy. Other remarkable animated films all contribute to the genre’s growth and evolution in their own way. One such example is *I Am What I Am*, a Chinese animation they both like a lot. Both animation professionals were surprised that it hasn’t achieved worldwide success despite its quality and innovation. They both consider the film one of the best animated works from China. It explores the essence of Chinese culture, emotions, and traditions. Its style, lighting, and storytelling all captivated them, and they still believe it deserves broader recognition. While Chinese animation has strengths in many areas such as post-production, lighting composition, and visual effects, it still has room for progress. “By embracing opportunities for collaboration and co-production with other countries, the future of Chinese animation gets brighter.” CP

Animating Elephants

Text by Lu Sijie
Photos courtesy of Lu Sijie

Animation can transcend language and cultural differences thanks to animators' labor of love.

The animated short *Elegy of an Elephant* was co-created by myself and five other students from the Communications University of China as our graduation project. It tells the story of Nana, an elephant saved by an old man when she was young. Years later, she senses the old man's passing and leads her herd to bid him farewell.

In April 2023, *Elegy of an Elephant* won the Tricks for Kids Award at the 30th Stuttgart International Festival of Animated Film in Germany. It was the only Asian work to win an award in the film competition at the festival.

Elephants' Northbound Journey

The film was inspired by an Asian elephant herd's northbound journey in the summer of 2021. Back then, videos of a herd of elephants migrating north from Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve in China's Yunnan Province went viral online alongside the "chase the elephants" craze. Everyone loved seeing the adorable baby elephants, and people were intrigued about the reasons behind the migration.

After further research, we

learned that in 2018, a herd of elephants migrated from their habitat in South Africa. This group of elephants had almost fallen victim to poaching, but with the help of Lawrence Anthony, the author of *The Elephant Whisperer*, they were able to escape danger and return to nature. Thirteen years later, when Anthony passed away, the elephants came from afar to bid him farewell with long, mournful cries. We were deeply moved by the story and gained considerable respect for the spirituality and dignity of elephants.

Then, we came up with an idea to film *Elegy of an Elephant* set in Yunnan Province by blending the two stories.

Conflict or Harmony

At first, we faced a crucial choice when brainstorming the script: Should we present the conflict or the harmony between humans and elephants?

We reviewed documentaries related to Asian elephants and determined that human-elephant conflict was the most common topic. Initially, we sought to portray the elephant herd's journey from an objective perspective and incorporate more human-elephant conflict to dramatize and highlight the ultimate harmony. But we soon realized that doing so would not work in a short film because there is so little time for characterization. It could inspire audience reflection, but evoking empathy would be even more difficult. Consequently, we re-adjusted the balance between "conflict" and "harmony" to



A still from the animated short *Elegy of an Elephant*.

focus instead on the theme of "an emotional connection beyond species and across time between humans and elephants."

Visual Exploration

When we chose Yunnan as the setting, we wanted to integrate the province's local ethnic customs and elements into the film. We designed the grandpa and the grandma in the film as characters from the Dai ethnic group. Then, we thoroughly studied Dai clothes,

bamboo buildings, daily utensils, and funeral customs, striving to recreate convincing scenes. For the interactions between the baby elephant Nana and the grandpa, we added some memorable props such as banana leaves, bathtubs, white flowers, and baby elephant bells. The white flowers were based on the plant called *Sambucus javanica*, which was used in the movie to heal the baby elephant's wounds and was materialized to signify the emotional connection between Nana and the grandpa.

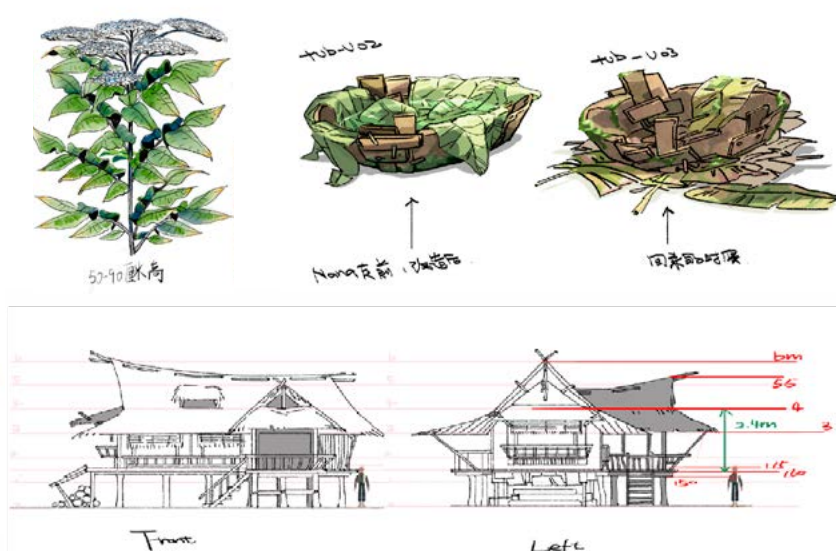
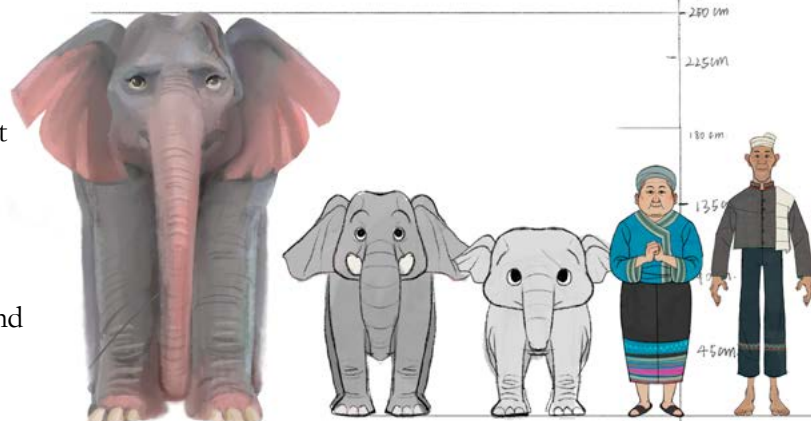
The film includes both past and present timelines. To better the audience's understanding and create a touching atmosphere, we differentiated images' texture accordingly: We added illustrated sketches and slightly reduced saturation to create a hazy atmosphere for the past timeline. We added defected lenses, digital noise, and other elements to simulate digital photography for the present timeline. We also spent a lot of time researching Asian elephants'

physical structure, skin texture, and movements. Only then did we finally create the lively and agile baby elephant and the majestic adult elephant.

The English word "animate" means to give life, which is the most charming aspect of animation creation. Looking back at our year-long journey to produce the animated short, I felt most impressed when seeing Nana start to run. I was overjoyed and moved as if I were witnessing her come to life.

At the Stuttgart International Festival of Animated Film, the final sentence in the evaluation of *Elegy of an Elephant* by the children's jury left a deep impression on me: "We find it remarkable that the film is almost completely without dialogue and that the message can be understood all over the world." This made me believe that animation can transcend language and cultural differences thanks to animators' labor of love. CP

Some sketches of the characters and elements from the animated short *Elegy of an Elephant*, including the elephant named Nana, the grandparents from the Dai ethnic group, *Sambucus javanica*, bathtubs, and bamboo buildings.



Eating Chinese Art

Text by Li Zhuoxi
Photos courtesy of Zhou Yi

The incorporation of Chinese animation into fondant cake involves infusing fresh elements and delicately dissecting and refining traditional Chinese culture.

At the 2017 Cake International, a prestigious fondant cake making competition held in Britain, a memorable incident that captivated the judges and fans

around the world occurred.

One entry, titled “Lie Drunk in Nepenthic Land,” left everyone in awe with its unimaginable beauty. However, due to a minor technicality, it was nearly disqualified.

This particular entry incorporated the technique of “pulling sugar” (which makes sugar hard) to create the surface of a lake, but to qualify, the cake had to be easily cut with a knife, and it was too hard. Nevertheless,

A fondant cake inspired by the Flying Apsaras in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang City and mythical creature Wenyaoyao Fish, a symbol of abundance from the ancient Chinese book *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

after extensive deliberations by the judging panel, they recognized that the masterpiece couldn't be overlooked and made an exception by placing it in a different category. Ultimately, the submission secured a bronze award in that category, a testament to the judges' reluctance to let such artistic brilliance go unrecognized.

However, the story didn't conclude there.

On that same evening, the creator of this exquisite artwork, Zhou Yi, a young Chinese fondant cake artist, still managed to receive the highest accolade of the entire event with another piece named after Wu Zetian, China's only female emperor.

For the first time, the highest

award of the competition was bestowed on a Chinese individual.

East Meets West

Born in 1983, Zhou Yi is a fondant cake artist from Suzhou. His devout fans on social media call him the "Sugar King."

Zhou completed his studies on Chinese cuisine cooking with specialization in traditional dough modeling, which honed his skills on modeling and ignited his passion for the aesthetics of food craftsmanship. During a Western dessert competition, he became intrigued with the sugar-pulling technique from foreign countries. Determined to refine his craft, he traveled to France and studied under famous sugar

artist Stéphane Klein. During this period, Zhou assimilated a wealth of knowledge of Western pastries. He also explored diverse forms of sugar modeling skills including fondant making.

As Zhou transitioned from traditional Chinese dough sculpting to Western sugarcraft, many wondered what kind of obstacles he would encounter along the way.

"Challenges do not arise from the transition itself," Zhou explained. "Distinctions between dough and fondant modeling are primarily found in the characteristics of the ingredients employed, which can be mastered when you get used to the new ingredient. The genuine challenge

is the art itself."

Pinnacle of Chinese Artisans

From Zhou Yi's perspective, there are no shortcuts to master any form of art.

"Everyone is familiar with the story of Leonardo da Vinci painting eggs," he said. "One can only grasp the intricate details of eggs after painting tens of thousands of them. The same is true for fondant cake modeling." Through extensive practice, he began to shine in the industry.

Even as Zhou was gaining fame, he was still not content. After a long journey of exploration, he infused his fondant modeling with traditional Chinese craftsmanship. For example,



The fondant cake named after Wu Zetian. It won the golden award at the 2017 Cake International. It was the first time a Chinese person ever won the top award.



①



②

① Zhou Yi claims the Modelling Excellence Award during the Cake Masters competition and is also honored as the "Cake Artist of the Year," October 2018.

② Zhou Yi works on the fondant cake "Chang'e."



A gilded incense burner in Zhou Yi's fondant cake "Wu Zetian." At first glance, his works feature strikingly exquisite details.



The scroll paintings and blue-and-white porcelain jar in the fondant cake "Wu Zetian."



The fondant cake "Jingwei." It drew inspiration from a Chinese myth about the daughter of the Yan Emperor, who perished by drowning in the sea and transformed into an indomitable bird named Jingwei.

the award-winning piece "Wu Zetian" showcased the remarkable technique of sugar-figurine blowing, an ancient Chinese art and intangible cultural heritage, which left judges from around the world in awe.

"Becoming a skilled fondant modeling craftsman is no easy feat," Zhou remarked. "You

must gain knowledge of plastic surgery, makeup, and hair styling as well as expertise in fashion design, jewelry design, footwear design, furniture design, and landscape design. Understanding perspective, light, and shadow is also essential. Each of these aspects demands significant time and dedication." Given the steep barriers to entry, few even dare to start the journey to learn such a diverse range of disciplines, all for the sake of creating a sugar figure.

However, the details from this amalgamation of diverse

disciplines are precisely what imbues Zhou's art with unparalleled soul. His works of classical Chinese beauties exhibit exquisite facial expressions, makeup, and garments. The patterns and folds of their clothing and the slight tilt of their adorned headdresses boast vivid details.

Even the backdrop screen, the antique display stand, the scroll paintings by the figures' feet, and the incense burner appear remarkably authentic. These exquisite details were created through an immense reservoir of professional knowledge, dedicated research, and painstaking work. And Zhou doesn't accept compromise.

In 2019, Zhou and his team won four golden awards at the Cake International for their works "Chang'e" (the Chinese goddess of the moon), "The Legend of the White Snake" (a Chinese folktale about a romance between a man named Xu Xian and a snake spirit named Bai Suzhen), "Butterfly Lovers" (a Chinese legend about a tragic love story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai), and "Mermaid." The judges were again awed by the artistry displayed by the fondant art master. "Through the translucent silk outer garments of the classical beauties, one can see the skin color, which led the judges to mistakenly think they were made of rice paper," Zhou recalled. "Only when I broke off a piece and asked them to taste it did they believe it was indeed made of sugar. Such skills represent the pinnacle of Chinese artisans."

Collaborating with Chinese Animation

In addition to the classical beauties series, Zhou has also created works based on popular Chinese animations such as *Wukong* (a 2017 Chinese fantasy-action-adventure animated film).

"The incorporation of Chinese animation into fondant cake involves infusing fresh elements and delicately

dissecting and refining traditional Chinese culture through adaptation to pique people's interest," explained Zhou. "Cultivation of such interest makes people develop a deep appreciation for this cultural fusion. By blending traditional heritage with the contemporary preferences of a wider audience, we can create art that meets the demands of our times."

New technologies are not only lifting the visual appeal to new levels but also enabling a more diverse range of flavors. Through heartfelt creativity, traditional craftsmanship can integrate into modern society and gain new vitality. Zhou has upgraded his fondant ingredients and techniques to continue to narrate the legend of China with beautiful edible figurines. 4



Zhou Yi works on the fondant cake "Mermaid." The design and production of "Mermaid" took over four months.



The fish scales adorning the mermaid's tail, carefully molded and affixed by Zhou Yi one by one, are awe-inspiring for their sheer level of intricacy and complexity.



At a height of three meters, the giant fondant cake "Mermaid" has already been transformed into collectible figurines.

Animator Life Rewind

Edited by Wang Shuya

Photos courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive

The pioneers of Chinese animation engaged in arduous experimentation and exploration to craft a glorious era.

Original sketch of the “seven fairies” in the second part of *Havoc in Heaven*, jointly designed by Lin Wenxiao and Yan Dingxian. The “cloud ship” they rode drew inspiration from China’s traditional art of relief clouds.

七仙女乘云船飞向桃园原画稿 (1964)



Animators of Shanghai Animation Film Studio: An Oral History (I), compiled by Fu Guangchao, published by the Communication University of China Press in October 2022.

As the largest and oldest animation production house established since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS) undoubtedly holds a significant place in the history of Chinese animation. The older-generation animators from the studio were engaged in challenging experiments and exploration to fuel the rise of the “Chinese Animation School” and usher in the golden era of Chinese animation from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Outdoor location shooting has been a long-standing tradition of SAFS due to an unwavering commitment to immersion in real-life experiences before embarking on any film production. For

Nezha Conquers the Dragon King (1979), water-related scenes played a prominent role and were characterized by ceaseless motion. To better grasp the nuances differentiating tiny waves, gentle waves, mighty waves, and colossal waves, the team of art designers stood on shorelines to sketch the tumultuous waters approaching the reefs. Seeking to better design underwater characters like the shrimp and crab soldiers and yakshas, the team took field trips to marine aquariums to study oceanic life, engaged with local fishermen on islands, and even jumped into the water of Dianshan Lake.

This is a story recounted in *Animators of Shanghai Animation Film Studio: An Oral History (I)*. The book features interviews with


professional animators, researchers and others related to the animation industry who have personally witnessed and experienced the development of Chinese animation throughout the 20th century. Central to the narrative are tales from SAFS retirees, unsung behind-the-scenes heroes who braved the limelight to share the creative journey behind the animation classics.

The clouds in *Havoc in Heaven* (Part One produced in 1961, Part Two produced in 1964) were inspired by relief clouds in Beijing’s Biyun Temple. “Those clouds aren’t flat at all,” reminisced Lin Wenxiao, principal designer for the animated film. “Their stereoscopic quality left us astounded. We found them so captivating that we immediately transfigured them onto the canvas.” And their influence continued. “Previously, we had been drawing those fluffy, cotton-like clouds often seen in American cartoons,” Lin added, reflecting on the profound impact of the relief clouds. “However, *Havoc in Heaven* marked the turning point when we began to draw inspiration from traditional art.”

As early as the turn of the 1950s, Te Wei, the inaugural manager and director of SAFS, started researching an artistic style with Chinese flavor. “Te Wei had long-standing aspirations to cultivate a distinctive animation style unique to China,” said Lin Wenxiao in an interview. To design character models for *The Proud General* (1956), the SAFS production team tried to emulate the live-action movements from the

Soviet film *The Fisherman and the Goldfish*. “Our production team enlisted actors from a feature film studio to perform scenes while they meticulously captured their actions frame by frame and subsequently transformed the figures into animated forms. However, upon reviewing the sample footage, Te said that the effect did not align with his vision,” Lin recalled.

Ultimately, the team decided to find inspiration in Peking Opera. The director instructed the production team to watch Peking Opera performances and invited acclaimed actors to deliver lectures to enlighten them on the origins and evolution of Peking Opera as well as methods to appreciate it. The actors also explained how their movements in performances derived from everyday life to be refined and transformed into a choreographed art form. “Once the character designs took shape, there was a collective sense of awe and excitement,” remarked Lin. “We realized that using these designs to create animation would be truly remarkable.”

“This experience compelled all of us that had heard the lectures to prioritize the essence of traditional Chinese culture, and it exerted a direct impact on our future creations,” added Yan Dingxian, a former animation designer at SAFS. “It was a pivotal turning point.” The pursuit of a distinctive Chinese style not only marked a significant milestone in the history of Chinese animation but also laid the foundation for the development of Chinese animated films in the ensuing decades. 



A team of animators including Yan Dingxian, Lin Wenxiao, and others draw characters for *Havoc in Heaven*.



Image of the Monkey King from *Havoc in Heaven* finalized by Yan Dingxian based on the draft design (left) by decoration artist Zhang Guangyu.



Poster for *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* that combines the hero and the scene, mainly drawn by Lin Wenxiao.



Poster featuring characters from *The Proud General*.

Empathy for Animators

Text by Wang Lei

The key factor for animation to bridge different cultures isn't cool pictures or complicated technology, but touching stories that provoke empathy in a global audience.

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The Legend of Sealed Book, produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio in 1983, was adapted from *The Three Sui Quash the Demons' Revolt*, a novel from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which is full of grotesque fantasy and profound enlightenment. (Photo from Douban)

Many have experienced yawning being contagious. Others can't help but do it after seeing someone else yawn. It was until 1996 that the scientific rules behind the phenomenon were discovered by Italian scientists Giacomo Rizzolatti and Vittorio Gallese.

They used the brain scanning technology to discover that when one monkey made a certain action, the corresponding area in the brain of another monkey that saw the action activated. The mechanism to influence the actions, expressions, and emotions of others is unique to higher primates, including humans, which is called the mirror neuron.

The discovery of the mirror neuron proved that empathy, a psychological feature unique to humans, has a true physiological basis. Not only are we affected by other people's yawns, but we can also feel happy just by seeing happy people on the streets of festivals. Humans are the only creatures that hold funerals

for others and become sad for other people's sorrow and pain. We can be moved by stories and deeply affected by the happiness and sadness of characters in a book or movie.

But it is empathy that enables people to love and help each other, empowering our evolution into a highly-socialized species of extraordinary civilization.

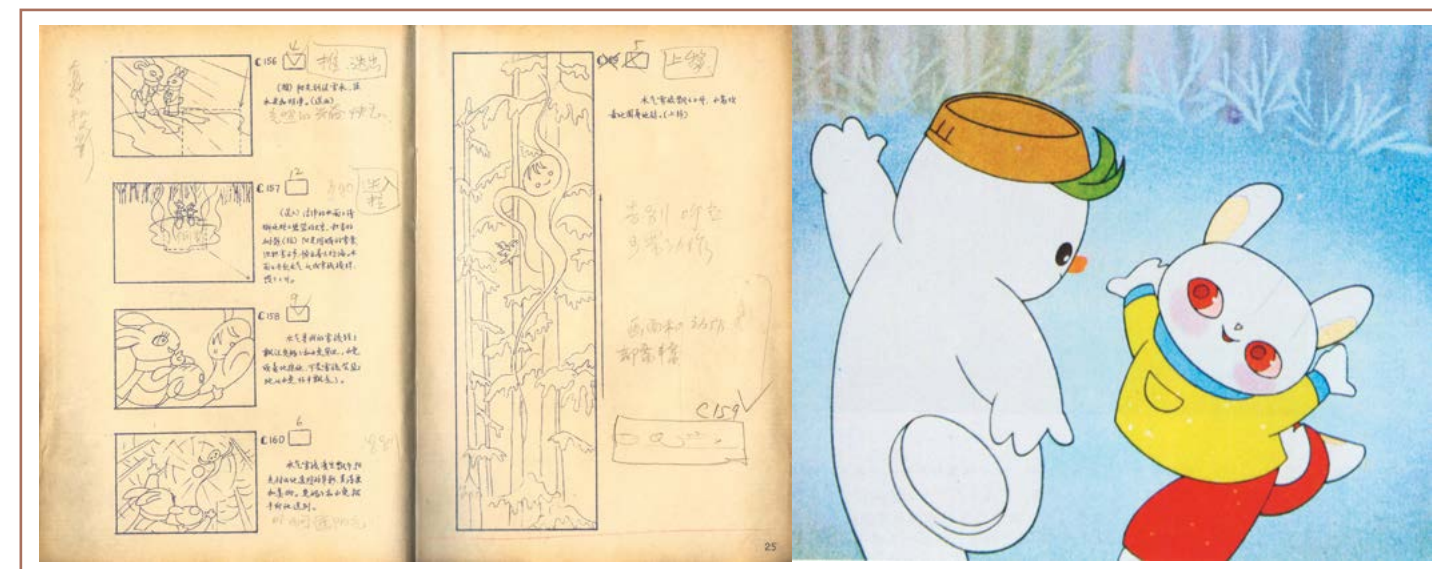
Humans are primates who excel at empathy. We can travel across time and space to be touched by ancient Chinese stories such as *The Foolish Old Man Who Moved Mountains* and *Jingwei Filling up the Sea*. We can understand cultures from other countries and times and learn and improve emotional skills for social life from characters in stories.

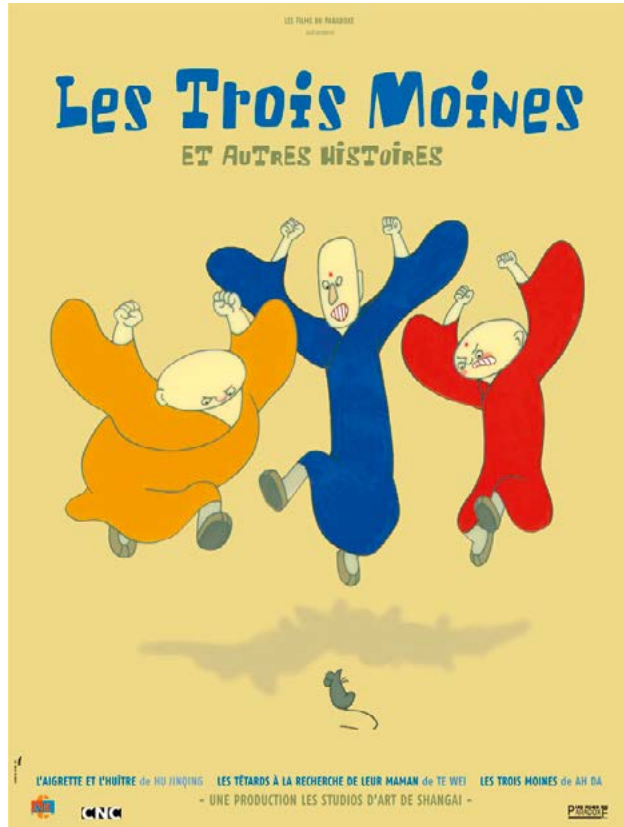
The same is true for animation. While watching *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki, we follow Chihiro's perspective into a fantasy world to be moved by the little girl's experience and growth. We shed tears to the song "Remember Me" in the final scene of *Coco* and sigh



The author is a professor and dean of the School of Animation and Digital Arts at the Communication University of China.

Some layouts and sketches of the animated film *Snow Kid* (1980) and a still from the film (right), which is a tear-jerker story about love and courage. (Photos courtesy of Kongzang Animation & Comics Archive)





The French poster for the animated short film *The Three Monks* (1981), which reflects a Chinese folk proverb emphasizing the importance of unity. (Photo from Douban)



A still from the animated film *White Snake*, which reinterprets a Chinese folktale from a modern perspective. (Photo from Douban)



A still from the animated film *The Old Man and Two Mountains* (2020), which emphasizes the coexistence of man and nature with the theme “faith can move mountains.” (Photo from Douban)

for the passing of the times and the uncertainty in life.

The key factor for animation to bridge different cultures isn’t cool pictures or complicated technology but touching stories capable of evoking empathy from a global audience.

Norman Hollyn, a late professor of film studies at the University of Southern California, vividly described an audience’s movie-viewing experience as two sitting postures. One is “leaning forward,” when the viewer is deeply moved by the fate of the characters and immersed in the story. The other is

“leaning back,” when the audience keeps a distance from the story and the characters and judges the happenings calmly.

In the animation industry, creators, of course, hope to create more “leaning forward” moments so the audience can empathize with the characters. However, they often get trapped in an overemphasis on technology and obsess about the form of the movie.

As storytellers, animators should take story logic even more seriously and spend more time depicting the desires and dilemmas of the characters. Even for stories set in a fantasy

world, the characters should still be flavored by real personalities and psychology.

A character in Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* says, “The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular, and vice versa.” Love for another culture, era, or country always emanates from empathy for a specific person or role, rather than from impressions of some abstract concepts or symbols. Film production technology, art, and story topics are important, but they are all secondary to characters that evoke empathy. 4



The author is director of the Animation Department of the School of Arts at Southwest Minzu University, Sichuan Province, and co-founder of the 56-Moon Animation Festival.

Coloring Childhood With Animation

Text by Zhou Zhou

Photos courtesy of Zhou Zhou

Let’s plant the seeds of animation in the hearts of children and wait for them to bloom.

During the 2019 National Day holiday, my family traveled to Maribor, Slovenia, to accompany my daughter to the StopTrik International Film Festival. Her animated film, made at the age of seven, was chosen to be screened at the event. At the theater, my daughter interacted with a young local audience in English. Not only did she gain recognition but also interest in learning English.

The idea of coloring my daughter’s childhood with animation dates back to 2013 when I was teaching courses such as stop-motion animation in the Animation Department of the School of Arts at Southwest Minzu University. I worked on stop-motion animation at home as well, with blackout

curtains drawn and doors closed to avoid the changing light throughout the day. One day, my five-year-old daughter opened the door out of curiosity to explore what was going on. Likewise, it led to her animation creations and my animation education for children.

Like many parents, I didn’t intend to guide my daughter to follow the same career path, knowing the inherent hardships of the industry. Behind the fun of animation was the sweat required to complete 24 frames per second. Only passion and patience can sustain animators in the industry. Stop-motion animation in particular requires considerable manual work to construct props and set up scenes even before moving the characters within frames to bring

them to life. Characters could be a puppet with a moveable skeleton like in *The Story of Afanti* by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, a normally inert object like in *Fresh Guacamole* by American stop-motion animator Adam Pesapane (better known online as PES), and even our bodies as seen in *Neighbors* by Canadian animator Norman McLaren. And perhaps you can find a “secret”: No drawing skill is required to start making stop-motion animation.

Initially, I didn’t teach my daughter specific techniques to make stop-motion animation. Instead, I just asked her to move the little puppet on the desk bit by bit while helping operate the camera. I still

vividly recall how joyful she looked when watching her first short animation made in five minutes. I subsequently gave my daughter an iPad loaded with stop-motion animation apps so she could convert her toys into animated characters. To my surprise, she even succeeded in filming a close-up transition, a technique between two shots, which she tried after watching other animations. The process of transforming experience into creativity without formal knowledge of relevant principles is autonomous. Once she gets it, it will be a life-long memory.

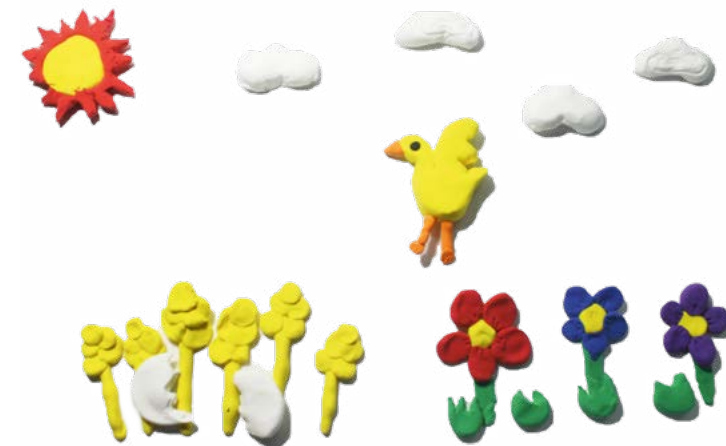
That success inspired me to engage animation majors in

education activities. Not only can it broaden their employment opportunities, but it can also cultivate future animation directors if children are exposed to animation at an early age. David Ehrlich, former vice president of the International Animated Film Association and a professor at Dartmouth University in the United States, stepped up when I searched for some expert advice. Ehrlich has been teaching children animation around the world since 1979 and came to China in 1988 to organize animation workshops at primary schools in Shanghai. Later, they also spread Chinese animation and educated children on animation in France and the United States.

Ehrlich was very supportive of my idea and came to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province, to design the curriculum and lead a hands-on lesson for third-graders at a local primary school. We integrated mathematical knowledge with animation education and guided children to create stories about dots and lines as well as changing angles with stop-motion animation. We realized that children can not only develop imagination and creativity but also acquire knowledge via animation instead of passive listening. It was a joyful learning journey.

Hopefully, one day, children can express themselves with animation as easily as they do with drawing, singing, and dancing. Let’s plant the seeds of animation in the hearts of children and wait for the bloom. 4

David Ehrlich (middle) demonstrating how to make animated shorts in Shanghai in the summer of 1994.



A still from *The Adventure of Miraculous Rice Grains*, produced by a child animator.



A still from *Weather Forecast*, produced by a child animator.



Zhou Kemi brainstorms a draft for her animated work *The Adventure of Miraculous Rice Grains*.

Selfie Masters

Text by Liu Chang

Artists' exploration of their inner worlds results in "visual autobiographies."

Madonna della Seggiola (top right) by Raffaello Sanzio, flanking the painter's self-portrait. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of China)



To create a flattering image of oneself, modern advice is to hold your phone higher than your eyeline and tilt the lens down at a 45-degree angle. But before the birth of photography, artists painted self-portraits as business cards to the world. The timeless charm of portrayals of painters by themselves continues to awe art aficionados even in the selfie and social media era.

To mark the end of the China-Italy Year of Culture and Tourism, the National Museum of China (NMC) joined hands with the Uffizi Galleries in Italy to present an exhibition titled "Self-Portrait Masterpieces from the Uffizi Galleries Collections" in Beijing.

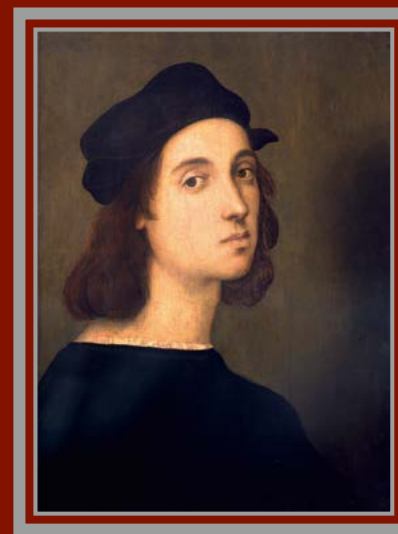
Located in Florence, the "cradle of the Renaissance," the Uffizi Galleries boast the world's finest and largest collection of

self-portraits, a collection that first started to take shape with the Medici family in the 1660s. Fifty paintings were selected from the Italian art house's nearly 2,000 works. They were threaded together in an art landscape that has evolved from the Renaissance period to the 21st century.

A special genre of art, self-portraits should resemble a painter's true appearance and provide valuable information for studying style, society, and culture in the artist's era. "We expect these classical works to evoke memories on myriad topics with windfall findings," said Chinese curator Pan Qing.

Vivid Outlook

One of the pieces nearest to the entrance of the exhibition hall is *Self-Portrait* by Raffaello Sanzio (better known as Raphael), inlaid in a velvety maroon



Self-Portrait by Raffaello Sanzio, sketched freehand with no hint of hesitancy. (Photo courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries)



Self-Portrait by Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez featuring occasional silver flashes in the darkness, from a knight sword and a key. (Photo courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries)



Self-Portrait by Marie-Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun featuring an elegant black silk robe, a reference to the officialdom of her rank. (Photo courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries)

wall. The Italian Renaissance master is shown in a half-bust portrait featuring shoulder-length chestnut hair covered by a cap and an absorbed and melancholy expression. *The School of Athens*, one of the artist's iconic masterpieces, hangs aside. Thoughtfully, curators flanked the painters' self-portraits with their other notable works.

Contrasting a young Raphael in his early 20s in *Self-Portrait*, the self-portrait of Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez dates from the last decade of his life, when he had acquired a huge international reputation and an unprecedentedly high social standing among artists in Spain. The artist used a perspective technique to represent the figure from a slightly lowered, non-frontal perspective so that his presence almost looms over viewers and his gaze appears piercing.

Among the 50 self-portraits displayed, seven were created by female artists, providing visitors a chance to explore the gradual improvement of women's status throughout art history.

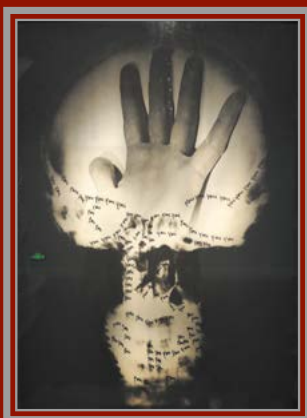
A self-portrait of Marie-Louise-Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, a court painter, is particularly unique because while painting Marie Antoinette with one hand, she used the other to depict herself during the process of working. The painter conceived the painting as a double portrait to pay homage to her queen and demonstrate loyalty to the regime.

Real Inner

After the 19th century, artists stopped prioritizing resemblance in their self-portraits and sought to present inner voice instead, picturing themselves from unconventional angles or with disjointed



Self-Portrait by Marc Chagall featuring a cockerel and a bride, an expression of hope and fertility. (Photo courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries)



Craniologia by Ketty La Rocca featuring an X-ray image of her skull. (Photo by Dong Fang/China Pictorial)



Self-Portrait by Yayoi Kusama in manga style. (Photo courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries)



Exploding Cai by Cai Guoqiang featuring gunpowder deposits on the canvas. (Photo by Dong Fang/China Pictorial)

backgrounds, echoing feelings like “I don’t want to have a real face,” as per Vanessa Gavioli, one of the exhibition’s Italian curators.

A painter in his robe against a fantastical Paris with the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, and the Seine all clearly recognizable is perhaps the most evocative of the more than thirty self-portraits Marc Chagall has completed. Painted over a nine-year span from 1959 to 1968, it is both an homage to France and a celebration of life itself. The artist’s face, with almond eyes and high cheekbones, surmounted by “the bride” and “the cockerel,” is the central focal point.

Even a “dialogue” between two female artists is decoded in the exhibition. Ketty La Rocca’s examination of the borders between outside and inside, looking and being looked at, found expression in an especially captivating way in her self-portrait *Craniologia*, which showcases her identity as a “visual poet.” It includes an X-ray image of her skull. Inspired by her bout of brain cancer, the work features a hand signaling “No” and a handwritten “You.” Construction of her own identity became possible only by dealing with the other, or in the artist’s words: “The ‘You’ has already started at the border of my ‘I.’”

Positioned nearby is an acrylic self-portrait of Japanese female artist Yayoi Kusama. The artist again deployed polka dots, her most characteristic stylistic feature, to construct a face and torso, colored like a manga comic.

What else can be applied to a canvas other than oil and acrylic? Chinese multidisciplinary artist Cai Guoqiang’s *Exploding Cai* offers a possible answer. In his self-portrait, Cai portrayed himself in a very classical manner with his face in a frontal pose and flanked by the tools of his trade—but not a brush and palette. Instead, he placed a trigger and the explosion of a small firework in the top left-hand corner. An interesting point is that *Exploding Cai* (“*Zhacai*”) is a pun in Chinese. The term means “pickled tuber mustard” in Chinese. “You can not only enjoy but also ‘taste’ the artist,” smiled

Alessandra Griffo, the other Italian curator.

The Uffizi Galleries’ self-portrait masterpieces debuted for the Chinese public at Shanghai’s Bund One Art Museum on September 9, 2022. Contrasting the previous partnership, this exhibition adopted a more spiritual method of displaying exhibits to bring out the philosophical connections between paintings instead of placing them chronologically throughout the site.

“The new exhibition is more spiritual by nature, following the evolution of the artists’ styles and mentality, with similar subjects and themes positioned nearby,” explained Gavioli. She emphasized the on-site display of impressionism, which was developed in France in the 19th century and based on the practice of painting outdoors and spontaneously “on the spot” rather than in a studio from

sketches.

A highlight of the exhibition is an immersive light-and-shadow experience. This event employs digital technologies to showcase Renaissance paintings, sculptures, and other treasures from the Uffizi Galleries’ collection and aims to evoke curiosity from the audience to engage them more deeply in virtual dialogues with artists across both time and space. And Ai Wenwen, the virtual AI guide of NMC, provides a wealth of additional information for visitors throughout the exhibition.

“These works are the artists’ exploration of their inner worlds and can be considered ‘visual autobiographies,’” said Pan. “We hope the event can help promote cultural exchange between China and Italy and forge closer ties between the two peoples.” 47



Ai Wenwen, the virtual AI guide at the National Museum of China, introduces an immersive light-and-shadow experience showcasing Renaissance paintings, sculptures, and other treasures from the Uffizi Galleries’ collection. (Photo courtesy of the National Museum of China)

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