



CHINESE ANIMATION, CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, AND DIGITAL CULTURE

Weihua Wu

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CHINESE ANIMATION, CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, AND DIGITAL CULTURE

This book explores the development of the Chinese animation film industry from the beginning of China's reform process up to the present. It discusses above all the relationship between the communist state's policies to stimulate "creative industries," concepts of creativity and aesthetics, and the creation and maintenance, through changing circumstances, of a national style by Chinese animators. The book also examines the relationship between Chinese animation, changing technologies including the rise first of television and then of digital media, and youth culture, demonstrating the importance of Chinese animation in Chinese youth culture in the digital age.

Weihua Wu is a Professor of Media Studies in the Faculty of Journalism and Communication at the Communication University of China.

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Meihua Wu
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How and what are we to examine if we wish to understand the commonalities across East Asia without falling into the powerful fictions or homogeneities that dress its many constituencies? By the same measure, can East Asian homogeneities make sense in any way outside the biases of East-West personation?

For anthropologists familiar with the societies of East Asia, there is a rich diversity of work that can potentially be applied to address these questions within a comparative tradition grounded in the region as opposed the singularizing outward encounter. This requires us to broaden our scope of investigation to include all aspects of intra-regional life, trade, ideology, culture, and governance, while at the same time dedicating ourselves to a complete and holistic understanding of the exchange of identities that describe each community under investigation. An original and wide-ranging analysis will be the result, one that draws on the methods and theory of anthropology as it deepens our understanding of the interconnections, dependencies, and discordances within and among East Asia.

The book series includes three broad strands within and between which to critically examine the various insides and outsides of the region. The first is about the globalization of Japanese popular culture in East Asia, especially in greater China. The second strand presents comparative studies of major social institutions in Japan and China, such as family, community and other major concepts in Japanese and Chinese societies. The final strand puts forward cross-cultural studies of business in East Asia.

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1 Introduction

Animation reveals the unique and ambivalent sociocultural characteristics in the unfolding of media and film history in contemporary China. It represents a paradigm of visual phenomenology that constructs the missionary agenda to fulfill the need to nurture spectatorship with an educational purpose as well as the desire for successful socialist ideology. It creates a genre of cinematic and national aesthetic within an active field that frames both the demanding pursuit of visual modernity and the chaotic discourse of the cultural industry which, especially in the past thirty years, has directed its unsettling industrialized practices within the broad scope of cultural changes that have affected China. Both this pursuit and this discourse can be regarded as perspectives for understanding the indigenous identity of Chinese animation, which now shows its potential to present a dynamic image factory product consumed by the largest audience in the world. To some extent, the foundation of such understanding, reading, and theorizing of Chinese animation is becoming intertwined with efforts to make sense of the practical interactions among several crucial phenomena in the contemporary Chinese imagination of the political economy of Chinese film and the rising authority of the culture industry, where it has been intricately struggling with the dialogue of modernity and postmodernity and the rise and death of individual autonomy in the wave of mobilization of the iGeneration, which has been creating a landscape of independent animation of its own. The above will be the primary concerns of my thinking and writing in this book, in which I will focus on the problematic of the cultural redefinition of animation and its relationships with other recent trends in Chinese society, in order to illustrate the interpretive horizon of Chinese animation at the turning point where capitalism meets socialism, neoliberalism encounters digitalization, and spectatorship faces the iGeneration youth.

The present age of rereading and renarrating of the story of Chinese animation has been understudied but overinterpreted in broad new terms. Chinese animation could be a cultural weapon in a war without gunsmoke (Sun, 2011). It is the one and only soft power China could easily build upon in the field of cultural industry (Jin, 2012). It represents a unique channel for transnational communication carrying the Chinese ethnic aesthetic (Guo, 2003; Sun, 2011). It is a *minzu*/ethnic visual heritage embedded with the values of Chineseness, which is perhaps unique in the one-hundred-year history of Chinese film (Zhang, 1981; Yin, 1997; Zhang, 2002;

2 Introduction

Jing, 2004). It is already considered a pioneer of Chinese digital culture (Wu and Fore, 2005; Wu, 2005). However, it is burdened with a cultural catachresis and is located within a metaphoric category in Chinese film studies (Wu, 2009).

During the past thirty years, Chinese animation has undergone a process of rapid economic and organizational restructuring, driven by political, sociocultural, and technological transformation. The globalization-influenced shift of socialist-political ideology today has focused within the newly conceptualized “animation industry,” where a loosening political regulatory framework has involved more than the singularity of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) state discourse. This phenomenon, together with the emergence of digitalized techno-culture and a commodified form of individuality, has reoriented the cultural specifics of Chinese animation. This has resulted in substantial changes to the ethnographic mapping of animation narrative and spectatorship. The escalating emphasis on consumer-based commerce in the post-Cultural Revolution Reform Era has resulted in two forms of uncertainty, one in relation to the market for animation and the other in relation to the question of censorship and the continuing pressure to make politically correct animation. These ambiguities have led both individual and corporate creators of animation in China to diversify visual formats and distribution windows and to make the mode of production more efficient and streamlined, in part by taking advantages of overseas opportunities for animation processing.

Animation production experienced rapid growth and marketization in the increasingly digitalized sector during the 1990s, responding especially to the growth of ideologies of individuality and to the rise of both the challenge of, and the enthusiasm for, the industrialization of animation as a nationalized cultural product since 1997. The rising tide of individuality is associated with the new affluence of urban iGeneration culture, which has emerged from everyday practices of amateur online video production and sharing and the sudden boost of the Flash technology-based cyber-animation community. Individual independent animators and small studios have, in the shadow of the mainstream animation studios, made much progress since 1997 in fabricating an alternative animation network in cyberspace, owing to the nationwide popularity of the personal computer and the advent of the Internet in China. The call for cultural industrialization connects the intriguing dynamics of both the death and rebirth of Chinese animation to the double-edged sword of discourse and the nationwide practice of creative cultural industry. An emerging body of media and technology studies has begun to investigate the effects of these changes on the production styles and visual paradigms of those involved in digitalized animation production environments and the cultural industries more broadly than it previously had.

Therefore, it also has been the coming age of redefining animation culture and its aesthetic, determined by the indefinable audience who was raised as the reinventing-China generation (Clark, 2005), the urban generation (Zhang, 2007), the postsocialist audience (Berry, 2004), and the iGeneration (Johnson et al., 2014) in the post-Mao high-culture-fever (Wang, 1996) nation and the cultural-industry-driven period.