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The Rebel of the Chinese School: Modernist Expression in A Da’s Late Animations

Yuanyuan Chen

From the 1960s to the 1980s the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, known both at home and abroad as the Chinese school of animation, produced a significant number of outstanding animation films. The success of these films lies primarily in the fact that “this is entirely Chinese-style animation.”1 Over the thirty years during which the Chinese school blossomed, two generations of animators drew on an approach inspired by Chinese traditional culture and classical arts and used it to educate and entertain children.

Xu Jingda, known as A Da (1934–87), one of the second-generation animators, worked for the Shanghai Animation Film Studio for seventeen years after graduating from the film department of the China Ministry of Culture. As several scholars have suggested, A Da “was nourished by Chinese traditional painting and folk art,” which led him to develop a distinctly Chinese form of animation.2 In fact, he “combined modern animation concepts with traditional Chinese culture.”3 A Da at first absorbed and followed the school’s conventional, classical manner, but his later works look significantly different from other Chinese school animations, which suggests that he eventually broke free of the school’s established ways. When we place A Da and his work in the context of the history of both Chinese animation and art movements, it becomes evident that the approach he chose in the last period of his career is not that of the Chinese school but rather a style influenced by modernist art and movements from Western countries, which in fact, as I show, can be said to directly conflict with the essence of the Chinese school. The application of modernist principles to animation has been evident in the West...
since the 1920s; however, it was a completely new phenomenon for Chinese animation, which was relatively isolated from international art movements prior to the 1950s. In this respect, A Da was a pioneer and a revolutionary who introduced new artistic and philosophical models to the China of the 1980s.

In this article, I rethink A Da’s later works and explore his evolving style in the context of the Chinese school and the modernist movement in China in the 1980s. I begin with a brief introduction to the Chinese school and an account of A Da’s life and career and follow that with an analysis of his most representative work, *Three Monks* (1980). I compare this animation from the middle period of his career to his last two animations, the six-minute-long *Super Soap* (1986) and five-minute-long *The New Doorbell* (1986). I explore aspects of modernist expression in *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* and various techniques A Da borrowed and adapted from modernist painting and literature. Overall, I aim to elucidate the revolutionary approach A Da crafted at the end of his career in the light of the history of Chinese animation and the profound cultural and artistic transformations that were brought about by the reform and opening up period in the late 1970s.

The Chinese School and A Da

While frequently used in Chinese animation studies, the expression “Chinese school” needs to be clarified. A national style of Chinese animation emerged and coalesced in the 1950s and gradually disappeared by the end of the 1980s, and during this period the Shanghai Animation Film Studio was the only professional studio in China and produced most of the country’s animated films. Thus, in this article, the “Chinese school” is defined as a group of animators associated with the Shanghai Animation Film Studio between the 1950s and the 1980s who shared traditional Chinese philosophical and aesthetic approaches and whose works present strong national characteristics. The representatives of the Chinese School include Te Wei, Wan Guchan, Wan Laiming, Qian Jiajun, Yu Zheguang, Wang Shuchen, Qian Yunda, Zhang Songlin, A Da, Yan Dingxian, Lin Wenxiao and others. According to incomplete statistics, from 1956 to 1988 more than 240 animation films were produced by the Chinese school, which won around fifty international awards.5 Inspired by traditional Chinese painting and folk arts, these animations were adapted from ancient tales, legends, and fables, and their intent was to educate.

A Da was held in high regard by many of his colleagues; however, he died at only fifty-three years of age and did not become particularly famous either at home or abroad. Nevertheless, David Ehrlich, former vice president of the International Animated Film Association (ASIFA), remarks that the Chinese animated film “most applauded in China and throughout the world was *The Three Monks*, directed by A Da in 1980. It is one of the finest examples of the integration of traditional Chinese painting and philosophy with western values of characterisation and experimentation.”6 A Da was also considered an “unusual talent in animation” by Te Wei, the first head of the Shanghai Animation Film...
In fact, Te Wei has stated that “Shanghai Animation truly reached its summit in 1980, with A Da’s Three Monks” (Ehrlich, “Animation in China,” 16).

The first film A Da’s name is recorded on is Conceited General (Te Wei, 1956), for which he worked as a background designer; after that, he served as a background designer for many animation films. He then codirected two propaganda animations: Chase after UK (1958) with Qu Jianfang and Yan Dingxian and Little Guests of the Sun (1961) with Wu Qiang. During this period, A Da absorbed the principles of traditional Chinese painting and imported them into animation, creating with his colleagues Duan Xiaoxuan and Tang Cheng the “ink and wash” animation that is considered the most important animation technique of the Chinese school. A Da was a loyal member of the school in the early stages of his career, concentrating on ideas of Chinese nationality and ethnicity.

In the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76), A Da was prevented from working and suffered a range of abuses, for his works were seen as part of the “black line” of art and literature in Shanghai Animation Film Studio, which was a metaphor the Chinese government used to describe those literary and artistic works containing antiparty or antisocialist ideology. After the Cultural Revolution, he entered a new stage of his career; his personal style formed and developed in this period. Between 1978 and 1981, he directed three films: A Night in the Gallery (1978), Nezha Noisy Sea (1979), and Three Monks (1980). Three Monks, the work that has received most international awards in Chinese animation history, is usually thought to be A Da’s highest achievement; thanks to it, he became acquainted with international animation makers and organizations and started communicating frequently with them.

During his last period, A Da directed three animations: The Butterfly Springs (1983), Super Soap (1986), and The New Doorbell (1986), which significantly differ from the style of the Chinese school. Evidently, his frequent participation in international film festivals and communication with colleagues abroad after 1980 had a profound impact on his style. In June 1982, A Da attended the Zagreb International Animation Film Festival with his Three Monks. In an article entitled “Return from Zagreb” he confirmed his keen interest in international exchanges:

I think we should join international animation societies, because only then can we improve our skills and have a voice on the international animation stage. We should strengthen the connection with international animation societies, participate in more animation festivals. . . . During the ten-year Chinese Cultural Revolution, many foreign animations had been blocked out. I suggest importing animations, some for public screening and some for intramural research.10

In 1983, A Da was invited to southern France to hold a small workshop, following which he served as member of the jury of the 1983 Annecy International Animation Film Festival. In 1984, he traveled to the United States to screen some animations of the Chinese school and to hold workshops with animator David Ehrlich (Ehrlich, “Animation in China,” 19). In 1985, A Da was voted onto the twenty-member executive board of ASIFA, the first Chinese director to be chosen for this job. In 1986, he along
with twenty other international animators codirected ASIFA’s compilation animation film *Academy Leader Variations* (1987), which was awarded the prize for Best Short Film at the Cannes Film Festival the following year. One year after A Da’s premature death, at the 1988 Shanghai International Animation Festival, ASIFA chairman John Halas issued a special honorary award for his last work, *The New Doorbell*, to commemorate A Da’s contributions to international animation festivals.

**Three Monks: Pedagogy, Tradition, and National Values**

In February 1982, *Three Monks* won the Silver Bear at the Thirty-Second Berlin International Film Festival. It was the first time that a Chinese animation film was screened in Berlin. Besides the Silver Bear, *Three Monks* was also awarded a number of other international prizes. As many scholars have recognized, the success of *Three Monks* does not belong solely to A Da but also to the Chinese school as a whole, because it follows many important principles of the school. *Three Monks* is essentially congruous with the style of the Chinese school and presents some of its most typical features.

Similar to most of the Chinese school animations, which were adapted from ancient Chinese tales and legends, the story of *Three Monks* comes from an old Chinese proverb: “One monk will shoulder two buckets of water, two monks will share the load, but add a third and no one will want to fetch water.” Adapting classic Chinese stories provided two significant tools for representing national identity in animation: Chinese ideals and core values and traditional characters and landscapes.

The main function of animation in China had for a long been to educate children and the Chinese School dutifully embraced this pedagogical role and responsibility. As we know, an important reason for creating the Shanghai Animation Film Studio was to serve children: “With the emergence of the new China, many sectors of society beside schools began taking part in educating socialist children. . . . So it was important to develop Chinese animation, which could guide and educate children by providing healthy entertainment” (Zhang Huilin, *Chinese Animation Art History in the Twentieth Century*, 58–59).

One method of educating and entertaining children at the same time is anthropomorphism, a strategy that is widely used in the works of the Chinese school. Arguably, bestowing life or consciousness on inanimate objects or animals—in other words, animism—and creating “holy” characters with high morality standards who judge both right and wrong behaviors are efficient and direct ways of educating children. For instance, in *Sambar Deer* (Zhou Keqin, 1985), the deer, who is anthropomorphized as a kind and magical adjudicator, imparts a lesson to two bully brothers, teaching them to respect and help the disabled. In *Three Monks*, this same method can be observed: a Buddha statue is endowed with consciousness that enables it to judge right and wrong in the temple, which it does through its facial expressions. Four facial expressions appear on the statue following the different behaviors of the monks. The Buddha statue smiles when the little monk carries water from the mountain foot and puts some into the bottle to save a plant; it closes its eyes disapprovingly when the three monks refuse
to carry water cooperatively, the expressionless face becomes shocked and upset, eyes wide open, when the three monks fight over the water left in the bottle; and at the end, when the monks understand the importance of cooperation and work together to fetch water, the Buddha gives a smile. These details, full of moralistic meaning, are typical of the educational approach of the Chinese school.

The Chinese school frequently draws on core Chinese values, again in line with its educational aims. As Gao Fei has concisely explained, “Chinese animation reflects the emotional process of Chinese classic tragedy, from harmony to conflict and back to harmony. Advocating noble behaviors and ending with a happy ever-after are features of Chinese animation.” A happy ending, according to traditional Chinese values, has positive effects. For example, in Havoc in Heaven (Wan Laiming, 1965), Monkey King defeats the emperor and lives a happy life rather than being pinned under a mountain for five hundred years, as in the original traditional tale on which the animation is based. At the end of The Heroic Little Sisters on the Grassland (Qian Yunda, 1965), the sisters quickly recover and return to the herd after successfully protecting a flock of sheep in a bad blizzard, though “Long Mei suffer[s] some minor frostbite [and] one of Yu Rong’s legs [is] amputated.” In Three Monks, A Da also replaces the “but add a third and no one will want to fetch water” of the ancient proverb with a satisfying ending, in which the three monks cooperate to fetch water, thus complying with the well-established tactic adopted by the Chinese school to moralize and educate children.

Da’s Last Animations: Modernist Revolution

Currently, some researchers have begun to address the differences between A Da’s films and those that are typical of the Chinese school, although most scholars still consider him as a model representative of the school. For instance, Hu Yihong believes that the difference is a kind of self-innovation and self-transcendence, which makes him challenge the fixed styles of the “Chinese school.” Jiang Ping also emphasizes how A Da successfully combines “traditional Chinese culture with his experiences and creative ideas in animation”, something that amounts to “an innovation—but not to a revolution.” In “A Da: Outside the ‘Chinese School,’” He Fei vigorously argues that the relationship between A Da and the Chinese school is one of transcendence and betrayal rather than continuation and succession.

It is my opinion that the animations of A Da, especially those of his last period, significantly deviated from the route of the Chinese school; in them, he developed his individual style. I argue that the differences between A Da and the Chinese school are due to the modernist aspect of his works. The modernism that made its way into China from Western countries greatly influenced A Da’s works in the 1980s and alienated him from the Chinese school.

The 1980s was a complicated period for Chinese art and culture. After the reform and opening up policy, many Western novelties came to China, from commodities to ideas, which significantly influenced the outlooks and opinions of the Chinese. As Zhong Xudong has pointed out, the large-scale translation and introduction of Western works,
especially of the twentieth century, generated an extraordinary cultural debate across the country. This cultural debate, which was known as the “great cultural discussion” or simply the “cultural fever,” was generated by the necessity of China’s learning from the West, combined with the bitter recognition of domestic backwardness, and focused on the causes of the enormous gap between China and the “modern world” (the West). Part of this revolutionary wave was the introduction of Western modernism to China. Modernism, which I define here as a broad movement of thought and artistic practices that emerged in Western society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and challenged traditional and conservative aspects of art, literature, and architecture, had made inroads in China at the time, although it had not been as influential as in the West. As Shen Yubing remarks, “The absorption of Western modernism in China was rushed and insufficient: in the 1930–1940s, some Chinese painters who studied in Europe brought modernism to China and applied its techniques, but this movement ended quickly.” In the 1980s, the decade of the “cultural fever,” modernism was revived in China, but this second incarnation of the movement was likewise quite short lived, and modernist techniques were not fully assimilated into Chinese artistic practice.

While Chinese animation developed in a relatively isolated environment on account of the political situation, it is accepted that there were three significant moments of exchange with, and influence by, Western animation. The first was in the 1920s, when Disney inspired the birth of Chinese animation. The second was in the early 1950s, when the new China had just been founded. Because of the political system, the only material that animators in China could watch and study came from the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist countries, so in that period, animations in China presented some Soviet features. Finally, since the early 1990s Chinese animators have been studying Japanese and American animations with a view to achieving commercial success under the new economy and market system.

It can be argued that the country’s isolation and autarchy between the 1950s and the 1980s allowed the Chinese school to develop a distinctly Chinese style free from outside influences. But circumstances changed in the 1980s, when the Chinese “cultural fever” spread and the second wave of modernism washed over China following the ideological emancipation movement. As Shen Yubing has remarked, this modernist flourishing in China was not synchronous with that of the West: “All that had happened in Western art in the past hundred years happened in China in the short space of several years, and very soon postmodernism rushed in” (“The Way to Picasso: Reunderstanding Modernism”). As He Fei states, in the early 1980s, “the book Discussion on Modernist Art written by Chinese art historian Shao Dazhen became the most popular book for young artists. Biographies, painting albums and writings of Van Gogh, Picasso, Kandinsky and other modernists were translated and introduced to China” (“A Da,” 29). Undoubtedly, this development had a profound influence on Chinese literature, art, and painting, as well as on the animation of the Chinese school—although compared with other arts its influence on animation was less obvious. A Da, I would suggest, is the pioneer of the Chinese school who introduced many modernist elements into animation, and precisely because of this his works are aesthetically and philosophically
different from other Chinese school animations. In what follows, I aim to explore the modernist aspects of A Da’s last two animations, *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell*, to show how he adopted modern subjects and various techniques typical of modernist painting, as well as irrationalism and carnival—all of which were completely new to Chinese animation.

**Narrating the Modern Subject**

*Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* are two rare animations of the Chinese school that reflect modern people and society. Hu Yihong points out that in the 1980s, “Chinese arts, including literature, drama, film and music,” began to represent modern subjects, “joining the wave of internationalization, but the same didn’t really happen in animation. A Da is a pioneer who chose a difficult path to broaden Chinese animation, rather than following the way of *Three Monks*” (“The New Doorbell and Super Soap,” 100). Jiang Ping further remarks of A Da’s broadening of subject matter that “he abandoned traditional topics to explore modern subjects, although he had achieved success with a traditional theme and could have continued in this way smoothly.” In the 1980s, “A Da drew on modern fiction for new ideas and interests that would broaden the modern theme of animation” (Jiang, “Research on the Innovation of A Da’s Animation Creation,” 11).

The world A Da represents in *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* is definitely a modern society; to be precise, it is the Chinese society of the 1980s under the reform and opening up policy and market economy system. The common people and modern commoditized society are the main subjects of these two animations rather than heroism or dramatic plots. For instance, *Super Soap* reflects a social phenomenon through a simple and fantastic episode. A seller hawks the super soap, which has the ability to make everything white, and the crowd rushes to purchase it. After using this special soap, every person in the crowd becomes white, losing all individuality. At this point, a little girl draws the crowd’s attention, for she wears a pink skirt and a purple bow, which make her stand out and look very different in the all-white world. The crowd follows the girl, and they soon run into another businessman (who, from his appearance, may even be the same person who had sold them the super soap). The businessman sells super color, which looks like colored soap and has the ability to make everything colored. Everyone stops to purchase the super color and becomes completely obsessed with it, in the same way they were obsessed with the super soap earlier. In *Super Soap*, there is no one hero designated to move the plot forward. What A Da represents on the screen are the common masses under the Chinese market economy system, which join in this social and commercial activity and are deeply affected by it. The old man and his granddaughter, the businessman who sells super soap and super color, three monks who blindly purchase the products, and the little girl with the pink skirt and others all are depicted with the same level of detail by the animator and are presented without any biases. None of them has the leading role; they come from the masses and represent the masses.
The *New Doorbell* pictures a series of behaviors displayed by a man who has installed a new doorbell and keenly desires to receive visitors and, at bottom, other people’s attention. Whenever footsteps approach outside his door, he gets excited and expects the person will ring his doorbell, but, unfortunately, there is no one who notices it. The owner becomes progressively angrier and refuses to open the door and even violently knocks the door back when visitors come without ringing the doorbell—until a postman comes. The man gives the postman a cigarette and tries to persuade him to ring his doorbell. The postman looks like he has agreed to ring it, but when the owner closes the door, the postman leaves quickly without doing anything. So, at the end of the animation, the disappointed owner is sitting in an armchair, absently holding a newspaper upside down, still waiting for someone to ring his doorbell. In *New Doorbell*, the owner doesn’t have a name or any special features; he is an ordinary person among millions, and his behavior and psychology would have been understood by and would have spoken to many Chinese during that time. In the 1980s in China the doorbell was something fashionable, new and pricy, so it is understandable that the owner in the animation wants to show it off, a desire that reflects a realistic and ordinary psychology, neither noble nor depraved. The protagonist in this animation is far from the typical black-and-white characters of the Chinese school.

Because *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* are no more than vignettes, it has been difficult for scholars to arrive at a consensus as to what A Da’s intended message might be. Tu Zhifen, for example, maintains that *Super Soap* mocks the masses that blindly follow fashions and that *The New Doorbell* reveals feelings of loss and unfulfilled expectation but is not as ironic as *Super Soap* (“Three Monks and Others,” 33). He Fei believes that *The New Doorbell* strongly criticizes the behavior of flaunting wealth (“A Da,” 30), and Hu Yihong insists that it addresses the problem of communication failure between individual and society (“The New Doorbell and Super Soap,” 100); both of them hold opinions that are different from Tu’s. However, setting aside all the possible readings of these two animations, there is no doubt that what A Da represents on screen is the behaviors and psychology of the Chinese masses in response to the modern commercialization, which was a completely new phenomenon in China after the economic reform of 1978. What’s more, as in many other materialistic societies, the development of modern commercialization in China inevitably alienated and reified human beings, and I believe that the behaviors and psychology of ordinary people in *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell*, which look simultaneously ordinary and abnormal, are associated with this phenomenon. As Erich Fromm outlines, “Alienation (or ‘estrangement’) means, for Marx, that man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation.”27 Frédéric Vandenberghe adds:

Reification is the opposite of personalization and is therefore conceptually related. While reification transforms something which is not a thing into a thing, personification transforms that which is not a person into a person. . . . Reification, in Marx’s sense, can also
be seen as personification: social or pseudo-natural forces are perceived and understood as quasi-human forces that rule the world.28

From this perspective, commodities produced by humans in a commercialized society become powerful, independent entities standing in opposition to them and indeed can affect and control human mentality and behavior. Furthermore, as Fromm notes, quoting from Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, “in the act of production the relationship of the worker to his own activity is experienced ‘as something alien and not belonging to him, activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation’” (*Marx’s Concept of Man*, 39). What A Da intimates in his two final animations is that human beings are not rendered passive and powerlessness just in the process of production but also in the process of exchange and consumption. In *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell*, the super soap, super color, and the doorbell, as well as commodity society as such, become something alien and independent of the people who created them and make them turn blind and reasonless. The positions of both commodities and humans are reversed; human beings are reified, turned into passive objects lacking personality and creativity, and their behaviors and lives are strongly dominated by the commodity they produce. We can see that the crowd shopping blindly A Da’s last animations, the three thoughtless monks, the grandpa and granddaughter, who didn’t want to buy the soap at first but hesitantly join the queue to purchase it when they see everyone rushing to buy it, and the upset doorbell owner are excellent examples of this; they are totally transformed into the slaves of commodities.

It is highly significant to the argument I make in this article that the subject A Da chose for his last two animations is the alienation and reification of the Chinese masses in the wave of commoditization after the Chinese economic reform. This was a completely new subject, not only for the Chinese school but also for the whole of Chinese animation. As William L. McBride points out, “The concept of reification appears as a generalization concerning many phenomena that are said to be peculiar to the modern world, to modern culture.”29 Tom Rockmore further explains that

> although Hegel did not go on to develop a theory of alienation specific to modern industrial society, he clearly provides the conceptual basis for doing so. Marx develops the Hegelian idea that one “crystallizes” oneself in one’s work, in capitalism in the production of commodities, as the basis of his view of alienation in modern industrial society. . . . In the section on alienation . . . he more clearly links alienation to modern industrial society.30

Besides the modern subject, the narrative structure of *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* is also notable. Unlike the closed narratives typical of the Chinese school of animation, both *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* are open-ended stories without definitive endings. Incomplete or open construction makes misreading and subjective understanding possible. At the end of *Super Soap*, the crowd is purchasing the super color, which leaves us with an ambiguous ending. After buying the super soap, the crowd rushes to another extreme and begins buying super color. However, after the super color, what will happen to them? Will they go back to the super soap or purchase other
new products? Or will the super color mark the end of their purchasing? Similarly, in *The New Doorbell*, the postman leaves without ringing the doorbell, which upsets the owner, so he is still sitting on the sofa, waiting for the next visitor. However, no one knows what will happen and whether the owner will finally be satisfied the next time.

**Animating the Modernist Painting: Abstraction, Flatness, and Collage**

As is widely recognized, Chinese school animations are nourished by classical Chinese painting. Given the long history of Chinese painting and its various forms and techniques, the imitation of classical painting undoubtedly offered many possibilities to the Chinese school and distinguished it from other schools. Thus, it is not surprising that many of its animators were good at Chinese painting; however, as A Da’s friend Jin Baisong recalls, A Da also “had a profound proficiency in Western painting and was very familiar with different styles of Western painting,” something quite unusual for a member of the Chinese school. Compared with the works of the Chinese school, the painterly style of *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell* is revolutionary, which, I argue, is due to A Da’s employment of techniques from Western modernist painting, especially in *The New Doorbell*. A Da’s approach in his last two animations is best considered from three perspectives: abstraction, flatness and collage.

The painterly style in *The New Doorbell* is responsible for its appearance, which is radically different from that of any other animation of the Chinese school. As Jin Baisong has correctly pointed out, A Da imported lines and blocks from Western abstract painting into the visual design of *The New Doorbell*, thus giving expression to the aesthetic and visual values of modern people. The style of the building in *The New Doorbell* bears obvious traces of the influence of Dutch abstract artist Piet Mondrian, who made a decisive contribution to modernism. As John McEnroe notes, “Piet Mondrian was an influential painter and theorist whose work embodies the Modernist desire to reduce each art form to its essence . . . He aimed to reduce painting to its essence, expressed in harmonious compositions of vertical lines, horizontal lines, and primary colors.”

Mondrian’s explorations of the constructive functions of lines and colors led him to focus on rectangles in the composition of the painting:

> I began to determine forms: verticals and horizontal became rectangles. They still appeared as detached forms against a background; their color was still impure. Feeling the lack of unity, I brought the rectangles together: space became white, black or grey; form became red, blue or yellow. Uniting the rectangles was equivalent to continuing the verticals and horizontal of the former period over the entire composition. It was evident that rectangles, like all particular forms, obtrude themselves and must be neutralized through the composition.

If we compare Mondrian’s famous *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow* (1930) and A Da’s *The New Doorbell*, we can see that the composition of the former is ingeniously adapted by A Da into his animation (figs. 1 and 2). Similar to *Composition with Red*,
Fig. 1. Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow, 1930. Oil on canvas, 46 x 46 cm.

Fig. 2. The background of The New Doorbell.
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Blue and Yellow, the background of The New Doorbell, a cross-section of a building, is only constructed out of three crossing horizontal and vertical lines and by the rectangles the lines build.

As figure 2 shows, notwithstanding the characters in the foreground, the background of The New Doorbell is entirely an abstract painting; crucially, its abstraction is completely different from the abstraction of Chinese painting, which is also a key principle in many Chinese School animations, especially in ink and wash animations. In the traditional approach, the arrangement of points, lines, colors, and other abstract elements in Chinese painting is random and follows the contingent emotions and situation of the painter. Thus, the way the structural elements are organized in Chinese painting is usually occasional and instinctive, undertaken without deliberation and incapable of being repeated even by the same painter. However, in The New Doorbell the arrangement of the horizontal and vertical lines is deliberate and careful. Three lines construct six open rectangular planes of different sizes, which are made to signify the apartment of the doorbell's owner, the upstairs and downstairs flats, and the landings. Concerning the composition, the biggest rectangle on the left-hand side dominates and is the focus of the vision, and it also is open, thus incorporating the off-screen space and creating narrative tension. The main construction is not colored: the lines are grey, and the rectangles are black and white. The left rectangular planes at the top and bottom of the screen are black, causing the biggest, white rectangle between them to visually expand; at the same time, these spaces constitute the darkened rooms of the flats (which, however, light up when characters enter them). Dee Reynolds's analysis of Mondrian's work can be equally applied to A Da's The New Doorbell: “The enlargement of the rectangles, and especially the presence of very large, dominant white rectangles establishes a greater balance, and also a tension, between the ‘internal’ composition and the ‘external’ frame. In fact, the lines of the frame and its format are themselves increasingly active parts of the composition.”

What is further notable in the construction of The New Doorbell are two small red rectangles, which are the only colored elements in the background, representing the doorbell. Both the shape and color of the doorbell are in Mondrian's style—it is rendered in primary colors and made up of simple rectangles of different proportions. The “constant equilibrium” of the right angle,” in Mondrian's work, as Dee Reynolds points out, “is balanced by the ‘dynamic equilibrium’ created by the relationship between different sized rectangles, where large areas of ‘non-color’ are balanced by small coloured rectangles” (Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art, 179). A Da uses Mondrian’s abstract style not only to clearly present the upstairs and downstairs and the interior and exterior of the building together on the screen but also to create an animation with a strikingly modern appearance.

Besides Mondrian’s abstraction, the most obvious feature A Da absorbed from modernist painting, I believe that flatness is also an important feature in A Da’s two works influenced by modernism. Although traditional Chinese painting, which employs divergent perspective, is considered flatter than Western painting, which traditionally uses convergent perspective, it still tries to represent depth by placing near objects in
focus and far objects out of focus, positioning near objects at the bottom and far objects
at the top, emphasizing the blank space, darkening near objects and lightening far ones,
and so forth. In A Da’s *The Butterfly Springs* (1983), for example, the color shades and
the blurring of the objects create space and depth in the film (fig. 3).

Conversely, in modernist painting, depth is abandoned and flatness is emphasized. As Clement Greenberg suggests in his *Modernist Painting*:

> It was the stressing, however, of the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. Flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art. . . . Flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art, and so Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else. 37

This feature is evident in many modernist works. Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) is an early and an extreme case in which figures and background are nearly on the same level, and depth is ignored. Similarly, in *Super Soap* and *The New Doorbell*, the third dimension, depth, is almost entirely abandoned by A Da. Images in *The New Doorbell* are completely flat, and in *Super Soap* they are much flatter than in most Chinese school animations. Nearly all the elements that are capable of representing and reproducing depth are avoided, and the figures are directly placed on a blank background, a flat surface. In the compositions of these two works, no element is more important than the others; every element presented on the screen is equally emphasized (fig. 4).

Finally, collage is another common technique in modernist painting that is also apparent in A Da’s last animations, although it is less obvious than abstraction and flatness. Glen MacLeod offers a useful description of collage in his account of cubism:

> The third stage, Synthetic Cubism (1912–14), set off in a new direction. Having stripped the object of virtually all color and recognizable shape, Picasso and Braque now began adding elements back into their canvases. Color reappears, then letters and words are introduced, inviting the viewer to compare and contrast verbal and visual signs. Finally, the two artists started putting real objects into their artworks: a cigarette wrapper, a piece of fabric or wallpaper or rope, a sheet of music or a newspaper article. The technique, known as collage, is a revolutionary invention because it breaks down the boundaries between art and life, causing the viewer to ponder various kinds and degrees of artifice. 38

Clement Greenberg also asserts that “collage played a pivotal role in the evolution of Cubism, and Cubism had, of course, a pivotal role in the evolution of modern painting and sculpture.” 39

Although in the modern collage that MacLeod refers to artists put physical, material objects into their artworks, what I am interested here is the lack of unity that collage demonstrates. In fact, in modernist painting, film, and literature, a collage-like effect is achieved by the artist’s replacing expected elements with unexpected and irrelevant ones that would not typically appear in that moment. In *Super Soap*, A Da presents different customers in the crowd, some of whom obviously don’t belong to that time
Fig. 3. The Butterfly Springs.

Fig. 4. Super Soap.
and space. This kind of anachronism creates a chaos of time and space, “causing the
viewer to ponder various kinds and degrees of artifice,” to use MacLeod’s words. Fur-
thermore, A Da has “collaged” the three monks from Three Monks into Super Soup,
thereby effectively creating a “personal signature” with which to identify his works. A
Da directly cut and pastes their images into the crazy shopping crowd in the street,
and the effects of this technique are interesting. The monks, who should be far away
from the city, harboring no desires, are now rushing to purchase super soap and super
color (figs. 5 and 6). In Super Soap, the daughter of the super color seller, who wears a
pink skirt, is “collaged” into The New Doorbell, as the neighbor of the doorbell’s owner
(figs. 7 and 8). By inserting these distinct and unmistakable figures into new animations,
A Da not only identifies these works as his but also invites audiences to consider their
artificiality and constructedness in a gesture that is typical of Western modernist artists.

A World Upside-Down: Irrationalism and Carnival

Another feature of A Da’s last animations that sets them apart from other works
of the Chinese school is their apparent aimlessness; in others words, the educational
purpose commonly found in animations of the Chinese school is completely lost in
both Super Soap and The New Doorbell. Instead, A Da gives spectators the freedom
to draw their own conclusions, based on their own experiences and understanding,
taking up the observational and cognitive position of a bystander, concealing himself
under the surfaces and fragments of life. What he does is just represent these frag-
ments of life and his consciousness, without any further clarification or judgment.
This stance unsettles the spectators who are familiar with the Chinese school, because
they are deprived of both the customary voice-over clarifying the purpose of the film
and the details that might elucidate what its themes are. Monologue and dialogue are
completely abandoned by A Da in these two animations; only sound and music are
left to control the rhythm (actually, in The New Doorbell, music is abandoned too).
Educational function and guidance as to the animator’s intention are impossible to
find, and an understanding grounded in individual preference becomes necessary to
appreciate the films.

What is more, in Super Soap, stream of consciousness is presented for the first time
in Chinese animation. Admittedly, compared with a live-action film, it is impossible
for a six-minute animated short to achieve big leaps in time and space and deliver
long streams of consciousness, but this attempt shows that A Da had begun to think
about ways of picturing consciousness and imagination. There is also an element of
irrationalism, which is considered to be a component of modernism, in A Da’s Super
Soap. David Lodge lists irrationalism as one of the characteristics of modernist art in
general and of modernist writing in particular, together with dislocation of conventional
syntax, disturbance of chronology and spatial order, ambiguity, obscurity, and other
features.40 Irrationalism in art aims to liberate intuition and the emotions from formal
and logical constraints and emphasizes the role of the subconscious.41
Fig. 5. The monks in *Three Monks*.

Fig. 6. The monks in *Super Soap*. 
Fig. 7. The girl in *Super Soap*.

Fig. 8. The girl in *The New Doorbell*. 
In *Super Soap*, A Da successfully constructs a hybrid realm of reality, consciousness, and imagination, all of which are intertwined on the screen. At the beginning of *Super Soap*, a curious crowd gathers around the soap seller who is demonstrating the virtues of the soap. It seems like a common situation in a Chinese town, because both the seller and the crowd are rendered in a very typical way for the time period represented. The seller, who wears a top hat, has a Chinese small-businessman's appearance, and the masses represent different social statuses between 1970s and 1980s in China—peasant, workman, housewife, and so forth. But this coherent, realistic scene is soon shattered by the appearance of more buyers joining the queue to purchase the soap, including an ancient Chinese matchmaker, exotic monks, a merchant from the Qing dynasty, foreign ladies, ancient Taoists, men with long hair from before the Qing dynasty, a foreign soldier, and even a Chinese ancient officer working for the king. Hu Yihong has claimed that the reason why A Da includes customers from different eras and countries is to show “the long-term and wide-ranging nature of blind obedience” (“The New Doorbell and *Super Soap*,” 103). While this interpretation is not implausible, I suggest that a more simple explanation of these scenes is that they are the fruit of A Da’s modernist irrationalism, which conjures an unrealistic and absurd or even surreal world.

Sounds and music can be considered as evidence supporting this viewpoint. At the beginning of the animation, the “naturalistic” noises of the seller drumming up business and the crowds discussing and admiring the soap represent the realistic situation of the market. Soon, however, the naturalistic sounds disappear and only rhythmical music is left; simultaneously, the strange crowds appear. The naturalistic noises reappear at the end of the animation, when the seller is peddling his super color and the crowds are discussing and admiring the new product; then, the sounds disappear and, once again, only rhythmical music is left. A bold conclusion may be drawn from this analysis: two planes merge in this animation, one in which things really happen—the people flocking to buy products responding to the invitation of the seller—and one that is thoroughly imaginative and to which the quaint and exaggerated expansion and climax of the story belong. A Da uses the naturalistic sounds—the peddler’s cry, the crowd’s babble, and “whoa”—to identify the real world in the animation and uses the rhythmical music to indicate the irrational world. However, two key figures should be highlighted: the old man and his granddaughter. They are two of the “real” buyers with modern appearances, but they are also the spectators of A Da’s irrational world. They take part in purchasing both super soap and super color but also witness the series of bizarre and absurd happenings. They are both inside and outside these unrealistic scenes. Arguably, the old man and his granddaughter, who are neither rational nor irrational, are special figures A Da inserts into his carnivalesque world to blur the line between reality and unreality.

One notable instance of the irrational can be found in *Super Soap* at 3’30”: a wedding procession, following the ancient Chinese tradition of bearing the wedding couple on a red sedan chair, suddenly turns all white when a white wind blows over it, thus making it look like a funeral procession. In a dramatic twist, at that moment, another
sad funeral procession whose participants are wearing the same white clothes passes by the wedding procession. In this scene, two different processions are presented together on the screen in nearly identical ambivalent ways, grotesquely mixing the joyful and sorrowful, the solemn and the ceremonial, the comical and the tragic and thereby exemplifying Bakhtin’s theory of the ambivalence of carnival images and the language of the marketplace:

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis.

Bakhtin also observes that the striking combination of praise and abuse in marketplace language is characteristic of Rabelais and accounts for its ironic ambivalence. Like the grotesque images alluding to death and birth and the language of the marketplace combining praise and abuse, in A Da’s animation the ambivalence of the wedding procession and funeral procession is a significant feature of the carnival. The transformation of the wedding into funeral, two moments that embody the strongest but opposite emotions in Chinese culture, is a top-to-bottom reversal that also points at the relationship between them—at the sorrow that is implicit in joy and at the death implied in life. Also, weddings and funerals in any official culture are ritual and serious ceremonies, something that is however subverted by this reversal, which turns them into their opposite—into a comic event, full of carnivalesque joking and laughter: “This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (Rabelais and His World, 11–12).

The masses who are purchasing the soap and who are patched together in an irrational way, beyond time and space, identity, and status, constitute an abnormal and unofficial world, in which different people from different times and places with different social statuses converge on the market and talk about one thing only—the soap. In Rabelais and His World, Bakhtin emphasizes the concept of the “second world,” outside officialdom, and views it as a characteristic of the carnival, which is a “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (9). The scene of A Da’s irrational world is similar to Bakhtin’s second world. People who are purchasing the soap in the market are released from the times, spaces, official worlds, and identities with which they are associated; they communicate freely and equally without hierarchy or the conventional rules that dictate relations between people of different races or statuses. The crazy crowds, including the monks, housewife, ancient matchmaker, foreign soldier, Taoists, and so forth, who would never gather together in official Chinese culture, picture the “second world and second life” of the carnival festival.

Although there is no direct evidence that A Da was familiar with Bakhtin, his work and thought became relevant during the cultural fever debates of the 1980s, when young and learned Chinese scholars began to read the work of Western thinkers such as Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, Adorno, Habermas, Terry Eagleton.
and others, as remarked by Zhang (Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms, 56). In brief, the irrationality, the ambivalence of the wedding and funeral processions, and the “second world” that A Da pictures in Super Soap present characteristics that are strongly reminiscent of the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque and that challenge the traditional Chinese approach to the representation of space and time and the distinction between high and low culture.

**Conclusion**

The 1980s were a period of transition and transformation in China, during which, after the reform and opening up, both cultural conflicts and interaction between West and East became more frequent. This opened China up to international influences and disclosed new possibilities for Chinese art. In particular, Western modernism was given new relevance in China, and its impact manifested itself in various artistic fields. Operating within a highly traditional, codified school but also open to the influence of the West thanks to the extraordinary success of his Three Monks, A Da created two animations before his premature death whose profoundly innovative narrative, thematic, philosophical and stylistic approach must be understood and evaluated, as I have done in this article, with reference to a modernist framework. The revolutionary potential of these animations is an early example of what was to be the start of a period of profound changes, during which China, and Chinese animation, would find themselves in new contexts, shaped by globalization and hybrid cultural trends.

**Notes**


4. During the 1920s, “Dadaists like Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter, and modernist painters like Oskar Fischinger, turned into pioneer animators” and introduced abstraction into animation, “directly link[ing] to fine-arts modernism.” In the 1940s, artists such as Oskar Fischinger, Norman McLaren, John and James Whitney and Dwinell Grant developed abstract animation; the animated films of Carmen D’Avino, Harry Smith, Jerome Hill and Larry Jordan were “essentially kinetic surrealistc paintings.” Moreover, United Productions of America (UPA) “was world famous for modernist animation,” which “is reflected in both the narrative and aesthetic content of its animated films.” See Norman M. Klein, “Animation,” in The Routledge Companion to Film History, ed. William Gynnn (New York: Routledge, 2010), 98, Robert Russett and Cecile Starr, Experimental Animation: Origins of a New Art (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 100–130, William Moritz, “Visual Music and Film-

5. According to Zhang Huilin in Chinese Animation Art History in the Twentieth Century, 102 animation films were produced in the Shanghai Animation Film studio from 1956 to 1988, which received thirty-seven international awards (217–33). According to The History of Chinese Animation Film, the number of films and international awards are 244 and 56 respectively (Yan Hui and Suo Yanbin [颜慧, 索亚斌], The History of Chinese Animation Film [中国动画电影史] [Beijing [北京]: China Film Press [中国电影出版社], 2005], 228–52).

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12. *Three Monks* is adapted from an ancient Chinese proverb: a young monk, who lives in a hill-top temple, must each day carry two buckets of water up to that temple. After another monk moves in, the young monk tries to share the job, but the carrying pole is only long enough to carry one bucket when two people hold it. The arrival of a third monk makes the situation worse—no one carries water anymore, and everyone expects others to take on the chore. A fire in the temple forces the three monks to understand the importance of cooperation. From that point on, they collaborate on fetching water and have a harmonious life together.

13. “新中国建立以后，除少年儿童的学校教育受到重视外，社会上也大力开展有利于培养社会主义新人的活动。因此，以健康有益的娱乐引导、教育少年儿童，具有重大的社会意义，大量发展美术片也就成了一项势在必行的任务。”


17. He Fei proposes that the thought and standpoint of A Da are distinctly different from the Chinese School’s. The former matches the viewpoint of cultural universalism that explores the universal phenomenon valid and acceptable in every culture, especially Western cultures, in order to obtain a bigger voice. The latter focus more on nationality and ethnicity, and emphasize the individual and dependent stand. See He Fei [何非], “A Da: Outside the ‘Chinese School’” [阿达：在“中国动画学派”之外] *Art Observation* [美术观察] 7 (2011): 29–30.

24. It is important to acknowledge that some postmodernist features also can be found in A Da's Super Soap and The New Doorbell; for example, elements of irony and “tongue-in-cheek,” polyvalence, and game playing. There was no real transition period from modernism to postmodernism in China: the revival of modernism in the 1980s was very short and was followed very closely by the introduction of postmodernism. Therefore, modernist and postmodernist expressions are often found together in many Chinese works produced in the 1980s. However, I contend that A Da’s last two animations, as early works influenced by the “cultural fever,” exhibit many more traits of modernist than of postmodernist art. Following A Da, some other animators of the Chinese school in the late 1980s and 1990s, such as Ma Kexuan, Hu Yihong, and Yan Shanchun, began to incorporate Western art and discourses into their animations; their works have many more characteristics of postmodernist art than A Da’s.

25. “近年来，在我国艺术界，作为对传统艺术的超越，投身于世界潮流之中，... 在文学、戏剧、电影、音乐等领域里比比皆是。但在动画领域里作此尝试者并不多见（包括阿达过去的作品）。阿达本可顺着《三个和尚》这个高峰继续走下去，摘取完美的果子。然而他却另辟蹊径，要为动画电影开辟更多的途径，做一个铺路人。”

26. “对于阿达来说，尽管他在向我国传统文化取材的过程中也收获颇丰，原本可以继续沿着这条民族形式之路风风光光的走下去，但他不愿固步自封，于是转而寻求新题材。现代题材的开拓，需要新观念、新情趣，阿达开始大量关注现代题材的小说。”

27. Erich Fromm, Marx's Concept of Man (London: Continuum, 2004), 37.


35. Figures 2–8 are screen captures from A Da’s animations. All efforts have been made to contact the copyright holders.


42. “可以看出，群象人物传递出这么一个信息千人一面——盲从复盲从。导演把人物分为古今中外，以此来象征这一通病的历史长度和陷入此病的人数之多，根本就没有刻画这些人物的初衷。”
43. In China, people in wedding processions always wear red to express happiness, while those in funeral processions wear white to express sadness.