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To cite this article: Yuanyuan Chen (2017) Old or new art? Rethinking classical Chinese animation, Journal of Chinese Cinemas, 11:2, 175-188, DOI: 10.1080/17508061.2017.1322786

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2017.1322786

Published online: 11 May 2017.
Old or new art? Rethinking classical Chinese animation

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ABSTRACT
From the 1950s to the 1980s, a large number of outstanding animations produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio gained high international reputation on the basis of their unique Chinese style and oriental aesthetics, and are usually referred to as ‘classical Chinese animation’. Although many scholars highly appreciate its national and traditional style, and believe that it was the most important factor that contributed to the success, I would argue that this style also potentially limited the independence and originality of Chinese animation. In this essay, I will rethink classical Chinese animation through an analysis of the intimate relationship between Chinese animation and Chinese literacy classics, classical painting and traditional opera, with the aim to demonstrate that, in spite of its international reputation, classical Chinese animation also was negatively influenced by those prestigious art forms. Faithfully appropriating classical literature limits the ability of Chinese animation to freely explore the modern themes and narratives, and prioritizing the techniques and conventions of traditional Chinese painting and opera tied Chinese animation to the original masterpieces and potentially harmed its inherently cinematic nature. All of these factors would overshadow the destiny of classical Chinese animation and precipitated its foreseeable decline after the 1980s.

Introduction
Film art is the only art the development of which men now living have witnessed from the very beginning; and this development is all the more interesting as it took place under conditions contrary to precedent. It was not an artistic urge that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new technique; it was a technical invention gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new art. (Panofsky 2009, 247)

Inspired by the success of Disney animation, the self-taught pioneers Wan brothers made the first Chinese animated short in the 1920s, thus inaugurating the history of Chinese animation. Early Chinese animations were deeply influenced by American techniques and aesthetics; however, by the time animation became established as an art form in China, this Western influence had waned. A large number of outstanding animated films produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio between the 1950s and the 1980s gained high international reputation on the basis of their unique Chinese style and oriental aesthetics. The three decades from the late 1950 to the late 1980s are generally considered as the golden age of Chinese animation (Yin). Successful animation works made at the height of the Chinese animation industry, such as the two-part Havoc in Heaven (Wan Laiming and Tang Chen 1961/1964) and Three Monks (A Da 1980), are usually
referred to as ‘classical Chinese animation’; their creators, a group of animators associated with the studio, are known as the Chinese school of animation. Generally speaking, new art forms tend to absorb the ideas and influences of other, more established and thus more prestigious arts; while this, on the one hand, can place the fledgling art at an advantage, on the other hand it also subordinates it. As Chinese animation received in the course of its history a great number of international awards for its strongly traditional and national features, the question should be asked whether its animated films should take all the credit for this success.

The development of classical Chinese animation

In 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the Communist Party controlled almost all of Mainland China, and the People’s Republic of China was established. In the same year, a small animation department was founded in the Northeast Film Studio headed by Te Wei. In 1950, the department was moved to Shanghai and was incorporated into the Shanghai Film Studio to avail of a better location and more professional and technical resources. In 1957, the department upgraded to a studio, independent from Shanghai Film Studio and known as the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. It became the first Chinese institution, professional and specialized in animation making, and was to be the only animation studio in China for the following 30 years, until it gradually lost its dominance and influence in the late 1980s.

The period from 1957 to 1965 is frequently considered as the first golden era of Chinese animation by many scholars, during which the studio experienced remarkable development, and established a distinct Chinese style of animation, by absorbing the essence of traditional Chinese literature and art. In this decade, around 90 animated films were produced by the studio, including the renowned works *Havoc in Heaven*, *Where is Momma* (Te Wei 1960), *Pigsy Eats Watermelon* (Wan Guchan 1958), among many others; Chinese school of animation started to gain its reputation both at home and abroad.

During the 10 years of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the studio suffered a catastrophic blow. Since the early 1960s, influenced by the severe ‘ultra-leftism’ of the time, the subject matter covered by Chinese animation had gradually shrunk and become increasingly limited to political propaganda. Many animations that had been earlier produced were criticized by the authority due to their so-called bourgeois ideology implications. During this decade, the quantity and quality of animation both decreased significantly, and the subject matter and aesthetic sense of the works became more realistic.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the influence of ultra-leftism gradually decreased. The period from 1977 to the mid-1980s is often considered as the second golden age of the Chinese animation. The Chinese school returned to its old way to continue the national and traditional style, and reached another peak of its classical production with A Da’s *Three Monks* and Te Wei’s ink-and-wash animation *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (1988). A large number of animated films based on classical literature and with traditional style were made in this period. However, due to the deepening of the economic reform in China in the 1980s, the Shanghai Animation Film lost its dominant position by the end of 1980s.
It needs to be mentioned here that although the animations produced in the Cultural Revolution period adopted a realistic style, which may in fact be defined as anti-classical, in this essay, I will examine these three periods together as the first phase of Chinese animation, generally terming it the classical Chinese animation period. It is mainly due to the following reasons: the traditional style was dominant during this phase, and the majority of animated films produced in the three decades were with a highly classical approach. Hence, the Cultural Revolution period can be seen as an interlude, challenging and overthrowing the ways of the School, but after 1976, the School returned to its way and reached another peak of classical production. This interlude in Chinese animation was not a spontaneous movement by Chinese animators; instead, it violated the principle of animation as an artificial and plastic art, only to fulfill the political obligations of the party at the time.

A success that ‘owes something’ to classical Chinese literature

In her article ‘Monks and Monkey: A Study of “National Style” in Chinese Animation’, Farquhar (1993, 5) proposes that Chinese animation is ‘the adaptation of fairytales, myths and legends to animation’ and that, in the famous animations Havoc in Heaven and Three Monks, ‘emphasis has been given to adaptation: Havoc from the famous classical novel, Journey to the West (Xiyouji), and Monks from a popular counting rhyme’. It is a fact that ancient literary stories are the main sources of inspiration and prototypes of most classical Chinese animations. With its more than 5000-year history and culture, China has a rich set of written and oral stories that have been passed down for generations, widely accepted by people and canonized as classics beyond time and regions. The success of classical Chinese animation, I would argue, similarly to Dudley Andrew’s (2009, 372) comment on Jean Renoir’s A Day in the Country (1936) adapted from Guy de Maupassant’s short story, that no matter how much a cinematic adaptation is processed and transformed, its success on the screen always ‘owes something’ to the literary original that it adapts.

The strong link between Chinese animation and literature is first demonstrated by numbers: between the 1950s and the 1980s, around 150 out of the total 350 animated films made in China are based on classical Chinese literature. It can be roughly divided into three categories: classical epic novels, which are usually adapted into either feature-length or short animations; traditional Chinese folktale and legends, which are usually adapted into animated shorts and occasionally into feature-length animated films; ancient Chinese idioms and proverbs, which are frequently adapted into animated shorts. Second, during the 1950s and the 1980s, the most reputable Chinese animations, those which received multiple international awards – such as Snipe-clam Grapple, Havoc in Heaven, Three Monks and so forth – are always highly faithful adaptations of the well-known Chinese literature, which means the success of classical Chinese animation is somehow connected to their literary originals.

Literature and animation belong to different signifying systems, as Dudley (2009, 376–378) indicates that film works ‘from perception toward signification’ while ‘literary fiction works oppositely’; however, he also suggested that the narrative codes of novel and film are comparable: ‘[t]he story can be the same if the narrative units (characters, events, motivations, consequences, context, viewpoint, imagery, and so on) are produced equally in two works’. Theorists claim that there are three modes of film adaptation, depending
on the degree of fidelity to the original literature. Brian McFarlane (2009, 388), for instance, quotes Klein and Parker’s statement on different types of fidelity:

first, ‘fidelity to the main thrust of the narrative’; second, the approach which ‘retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly reinterpreting, or, in some cases, deconstructing the source text’; and third, regarding ‘the source merely as raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work’.

According to this paradigm, most Chinese animation adaptations of classical literature are in the first category and some are in the second one, which is to say that classical Chinese animations are transferred from literary originals without or with limit interference.

Specifically, short and brief originals, such as folktales, fables, idioms, proverbs, used to be completely and faithfully appropriated by animated films. Peacock Princess (Jin Xi 1983) is an explicit example, based on a famous folkloric legend Zhao Shutun and Nanmu Nuona. First, the main narrative units of the animation, including characters, location, viewpoint, context, etc., are all equal to the literary original. Second, the actions of the animation that ‘open up alternatives of consequence to the development of the story’ are exactly the same as in the original text (e.g. Shutun takes Nuona’s peacock cloak; Shutun and Nuona get married; Shutun leaves for battle; Nanmu Nuona is framed up and leaves; Shutun comes back and looks for Nuona; the couple meet again). Those ‘hinge-points’ of narrative are called ‘cardinal function’ by Roland Barthes (McFarlane 1996, 13), and McFarlane (13–14) further claims that ‘preserv[ing] the major cardinal functions’ of the original is an efficient approach to a faithful film adaptation. Therefore, it is possible to say that Peacock Princess is a faithful adaptation of the literary text; the story is only converted in terms of the signifying systems, from signification to perception, and the narratives in two mediums remain equivalent.

For epic-length novels, which usually comprise dozens or even hundreds of chapters, animation adaptations used to appropriate one or several chapters from the original text. Keeping the narrative units, key events and ‘cardinal functions’ relatively equal to those of the literary source, these adaptations frequently offer a relevant opening and a satisfactory closing, sometimes making slight changes to the details, in an attempt to achieve a complete and persuasive story on screen. Take the classical novel Journey to the West as an example, which, as indicated before, has been widely adapted into animations in China during the three decades. It can be observed that, in these films, narrative elements of the literary original, such as the chronologic, geographical and characters’ information, the key plots and the manner of narration all are well maintained, and the changes to the original text are minimal. For example, animation Havoc in Heaven appropriates the settings and plots of the first seven chapters of the novel, only inserting an overzealous ending in which Monkey King defeats the antagonists and enjoys his free life, instead of being trapped under the mountain waiting for the monk Xuanzang as in the original novel which leads to the following chapters. Although the story is retold in a new art form – from literature to animation – it is hard to deny that it is a faithful film adaptation in regard to the narrative, since the film retains the main narrative thrust of the literary original.

Furthermore, for the animations that are not adapted from the literary classics, the narrative strategies are essentially inherited from the classical Chinese literature. In his book The Changing of the Narrative Techniques in Chinese Fiction, Pingyuan Chen (2003, 4)
briefly summarizes the characteristics of the narrative of classical Chinese novel as linear and chronological with an omniscient perspective. In Aesthetics of Folk Literature, Li Huifang (1986, 41, 61–62, 66) defines several narrative strategies of traditional Chinese folktale: for example, characters and stories are absolutely paramount; plot always applies one of two structures, namely the ‘single-climax mode’ and the ‘triple-climax mode’; the ending of traditional folktale is principally happy, and fulfills people’s wishes; the characters are very flat, for they are either completely perfect or completely evil, and are distinguishable from their appearance and behaviors, and so forth.

Chinese animations made between the 1950s and the 1980s heavily rely on the narrative formulas of classical Chinese literature, as it can be observed from the following four aspects. First, the plot of these animations is eminently simple and straightforward. Drawbacks and obstacles are the main causes of narrative conflicts, usually consisting in negative antagonists (e.g. Monkey King Conquers Evil), or in the protagonists’ own shortcomings (e.g. A New Football [Zhang Chaoqun 1957]), or in natural causes (e.g. The Little Sisters on the Grassland [Qian Yunda and Tang Cheng 1964]). Jian Zhang (1983, 193) in his book chapter on ‘The Features of Classical Chinese Novel and Representative Works’ addresses some of the highly stereotyped patterns of the classical Chinese novel, including black-hearted parents, overbearing officials, abominable contemporaries, evil gangs and the protagonists’ own mistakes; these narrative elements bring the conflicts to the story, which corroborates the theory that drawbacks and obstacles push the plots of (adapted) classical Chinese animation forward.

Second, the development of conflicts in classical Chinese animation, just as Li has discussed, is either the ‘single-climax mode’, in which protagonist takes one action to achieve the outcome, or the ‘triple-climax mode’, in which an obstacle comes to the protagonist three times. For instance, the camp leader sets three challenges to test the soldiers in animation Chief Li Artfully Test the Cooking Corps (You Lei 1965).

Third, the conflicts of classical Chinese animation principally lead to a positive ending. For example, animation The Heroic Little Sisters on the Grassland is based on a real incident, in which two sisters, Longmei and Yurong, became severely disabled after they protected a flock of collectively owned sheep against a heavy blizzard overnight; however, in the finale of the film, the harsh reality is transformed into a happy ending with the two sisters quickly recovering and returning to their herd on the grassland, which provides emotional satisfaction for the audience and, more importantly, approves and encourages the communist ideologies and behaviors depicted in the film.

Fourth, the narration of animation is similar to classical Chinese novel. On the one hand, the audience is usually endowed with an omniscient perspective on space, which means that the audience has a spatial advantage and possesses more knowledge at a certain moment than the characters of the film. For example, In The Heroic Little Sisters, when the herdsmen are searching for the missing sisters, the audience knows exactly where they are and is also aware of their situation. On the other hand, the narration of classical Chinese animation does not have any omniscience as regards time – it strictly follows a linear and chronological order in telling a story. The use of flashback and flash-forward to access to a character’s memory, emotion or imagination is very rare in classical Chinese animation. Like traditional Chinese literature that consistently prioritizes rationality and ‘barely explores psychological states and the inner world of human beings’ (Wang 2009, 128), the narration of classical Chinese animation is also highly objective.
and passive, concentrating on depicting the external world and observing behaviors on the basis of strict chronology, rather than freely conveying the character’s mental states.³

The above discussion corroborates my suggestion that the success of the classical Chinese animation partially relies on the achievements of classical Chinese literature. The faithful appropriation of the stories and the application of the narrative conventions of classical literature, on the one hand, shows a successful combination of literature and film and a proved compatibility of animation as a new art form, while on the other hand, potentially limits the ability of Chinese animation to freely and innovatively explore the modern themes and narratives.

**Limited by classical Chinese painting**

Conventional hand-drawn animation, as it is known, is inherently fine arts based; in other words, the movements of animation are drawn, and each frame is a drawing or a painting. Hence, painting technique and style significantly affect the appearance of an animation work. Animation originated in the West, and has been under the long-term shadow of Disney norms. As Paul Wells (2009, 9) has addressed in his book *Basics Animation*, ‘Disney’s artists were influenced by a myriad of largely European visual sources including the work of JJ Grandville, Doré, Daumier, Kley, Griset and Potter, and ultimately predicated their drawing skills on Western idioms of composition and perspective’, which ‘defined approaches to drawing in animation’. However, as I have previously mentioned, Chinese animated film imitated Disney’s style at a very early point, but then experienced a quick process of aesthetic nationalization – the classical Western painting style was soon replaced by the local fine arts tradition, especially classical Chinese painting.

Painterly techniques and styles were given overwhelming prominence in Chinese animation making, evidence of which is that in China animation was named ‘Fine Arts Film’ from the 1950s to the 1980s. Chinese animators’ backgrounds and the prestige of classical Chinese painting might account for this phenomenon. In his article ‘Discussion on Animation Creation’, Te Wei (1984, 5) has pointed out that, ‘given the fact that most directors in the studio are painter, illustrator or caricaturist, it is very normal that they prefer exploring the painterly styles in animation making’.⁴ Additionally, as one of the oldest arts in the world, traditional Chinese painting is highly appreciated by Chinese people and significantly dominates Chinese aesthetic standards. While the rich techniques and unique aesthetics of classical Chinese painting have nourished Chinese animation and contributed to its success, the overuse of techniques and styles of traditional painting has also created problems for Chinese animation. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the traditional painterly strategies that classical Chinese animation used to deploy, and the cinematic problems that it has caused.

‘Chinese traditional paintings are divided into two major categories: freehand brushwork (xieyi) and meticulous or detailed brush-work (gongbi)’ (Tian 2010, 136). Gongbi painting focuses on the decorative effects through emphasizing delicate and elegant lines, vivid colors and exquisite details. Many classical Chinese animations borrowed this style, especially applying it in the background. For example, the landscape of animated film *Havoc in Heaven* is a typical meticulous style painting, in which the smooth ink lines draw the outlines and textures of trees, mountains and water, and the details are enhanced by very gentle and gradual changing colors, bringing strong decorative effects. It has been
mentioned by many researchers; for example, in her book *Traditional Aesthetic Features and Cultural Sources of Chinese Animation*, Lu Xiao (2008, 83) describes the painterly style of *Havoc in Heaven* that ‘every frame, no matter it is a palace in the rippling sea or a building in the sky surrounded by clouds, is a decorative Goingbi painting impressing the audience’.5

The other style, xieyi painting, is usually applied in ink-and-wash animation. Contrary to the meticulous one, this style stresses simple image, casual brushwork and the painter’s subjective emotion. Take the animation *The Deer’s Bell* (Tang Cheng and Wu Qiang 1982, 19 min) as an example, in which the artwork of characters and landscapes is highly stylized, through using very simple brushstrokes and a limited color palette. The deer character in *The Deer’s Bell* is simple, stylized and ambiguous – the eyes and mouth are simplified into two ink strokes, the nose is a casual ink point and the body is just made up of several brushstrokes with a mixture of ink and color wash.

In *Basics Animation*, Wells (2009, 37) mentions that ‘[i]n China, for example, the Shanghai Studios used their own calligraphic approaches’. Here, the ‘calligraphic approaches’ refer to the typical techniques of traditional Chinese painting, which follows its own philosophy and rules to represent the world. First, traditional Chinese painting employs divergent perspective (also known as multiple-spot perspective). Opposed to the central perspective of a style of painting that strictly follows the logic of the human eye, with a vanishing point as if we were watching from a window, a divergent perspective, by deploying multiple vanishing points, frees the eye from a fixed location, as if the observer were moving, which also accounts for the reason of the long scroll form of classical Chinese painting. This perspective brings unique effects to Chinese animation, especially in representing landscape; simultaneously, it results in what can be described as a dull camera language: slow horizontal and vertical camera movements are the commonest approach in classical Chinese animation, which is similar to the way of an audience reading a still, long scroll painting, while track, dolly or zoom movements are comparatively limited, due to the illogical spatial relations brought by the divergent perspective.

Second, traditional Chinese painting utilizes stylized icons and colors to depict the world, neither realistic nor abstract. This approach makes characters and objects in classical Chinese animation easily recognizable, but at the same time, causes many works to fail in depicting facial expressions or representing details, and further limits the use of close-up shots.

Third, traditional Chinese painting uses a liner brush with round shape and pointed tip, which is easier for drawing lines than for creating a surface and depth. Just as Anzhi Zhang (2002, 6) had stated, ‘In Chinese painting, forms are defined by lines, and details involving light and shadow are conveniently dismissed’. The paint tool suggests the prominent role of the line, and accordingly a limitation of representing spatial relationship created by light and shadow.

Furthermore, classical Chinese animation frequently quoted the representative icons from famous paintings or, alternatively, the studio invited influential Chinese painters to reproduce their reputable pieces in animated films. In other words, the well-known icons and images of classical paintings are often recycled in Chinese animation, to narrate completely different or similar stories than in the paintings themselves. For example, the characters of the animated short *Where is Momma*, including the chicken, crab, catfish, frog and shrimp, evidently quote from Qi Baishi’s famous painting *Volume of Flower*,
Bird, Fish and Insect (1949). Not just the shapes, colors and details of the characters in the animation, even the brushworks are exactly the same as Qi’s original painting.

Undoubtedly, applying conventional techniques and appropriating original icons of traditional paintings in creating animations is a tactful method to achieve success, since it takes advantage of remarkable works that have been praised for centuries. However, these strategies arguably differentiate Chinese animation from Norman McLaren’s definition of animation – ‘Animation is not the art of drawing that move but the art of movement that are drawn’ – which implies the opinion that animation should prioritize movement and action over a painterly style (Solomon 1987, 11). For classical Chinese animation, overemphasizing techniques and patterns of traditional painting came inevitably at the cost of some of its cinematic characteristics.

In terms of thematic issues, as it can be observed, ancient life is the main theme of classical Chinese animation. Besides the reason that a large number of animations are adapted from the classical Chinese literature, over-relying on traditional painting also can partially explain this trend – classical Chinese paintings regularly depict the ancient life with stylized characters and landscapes, consequently limiting animation to the telling of ancient stories, rarely involving modern subjects. In ‘Development of the Chinese School’, Yin Yan (1991, 89) wonders why the later ink-and-wash animations, such as The Deer’s Bell and Feeling from Mountain and Water, were not as successful as the early ones Where is Momma and Cowboy’s Flute, even though these late works possess more mature techniques and higher qualities of painting. I believe a likely answer is that, when ink-and-wash animation was first screened, its unique painterly style full of oriental charm was completely novel for an audience, but this attraction soon disappeared, once the audience became familiar with this fashion. Chinese ink-and-wash animation keeps repeating the old-fashioned stories, out of step with the times on the theme. Thus, it is understandable that the audience lost interests in it after the first applause.

In the shadow of traditional Chinese opera

Classical Chinese animation is not only influenced by classical Chinese painting, but also existed for a long time in the shadow of traditional Chinese opera. As an audio-visual art, opera incorporates singing, dancing, music, fine arts, dialogs, Kung Fu, acrobatics, and more, emphasizing exaggeration and stylization in its visual component, and rhythm and percussion music in its audio component, which, to some extent, is highly similar to animation (Mo 2008, 3–7). The animated short The Conceited General (Te Wei and Li Keruo 1956), the first work widely employing operatic elements and establishing the classical Chinese animation style, has been frequently cited and analyzed by scholars. For instance, John A. Lent and Ying Xu (2010, 116) assert that The Conceited General ‘was the first such experiment, incorporating Peking opera movements learned from opera teachers invited to the studio’. Besides The Conceited General, animated feature Havoc in Heaven is another work that also drew much attention from scholars on account of its opera-like looks. In her article ‘Monks and Monkey: A Study of “National Style” in Chinese Animation’, for instance, Farquhar (1993, 8–15) analyzes in depth how Havoc in Heaven takes advantage of traditional opera by adopting operatic conventions, such as the narrative structure, small props, painted face and more, in order to achieve its own success.
Although the scholarship has been aware of the various operatic elements in Chinese animation, the influence of traditional opera on classical Chinese animation has arguably been underestimated. Some scholars place operatic-style animations in a special category, namely ‘opera animation’, as equal to other animation categories, such as puppet animation, cut-out animation, ink-and-wash animation, folded-paper animation, new year painting style animation and mural painting style animation (Shao 2012, 148–151; Xu and Ge 2013, 110). However, if we distinguish the so-called opera animation by explicit operatic elements, very few animations can fall into this category, because in a large number of Chinese animations, the operatic devices are considerably vague and non-dominating, and the category often overlaps with other more recognizable categories of animation, such as cut-out animation and puppet animation. Thus, rather than classifying a few works as part of a separate opera animation category, I would rather suggest that classical Chinese animation is intimately bound up with traditional Chinese opera; the influence of opera on Chinese animation is thorough, not only on the audio-visual elements, but also on the cinematic space and its performative traits.

First, facial masks and operatic costumes are widely utilized in classical Chinese animation. As an ancient makeup art in China, different facial masks conventionally suggest various personalities of characters through applying distinct patterns and colors. Traditional operatic costume is based on Chinese ancestor’s clothes, but highly stylized and refined; it also indicates a character’s role through details. In some hand-drawn animations, Conceived General and Havoc in Heaven for instance, the elements of facial mask and operatic costume are highly recognizable. However, in more works, operatic mask and costume are inherited but in a subtler way. For example, the leading characters of puppet animation Flaming Mountains are all dressed in adapted operatic costumes: Monkey King wears yellow clothes with a special collar and a small patterned skirt, which resembles a special costume for the monkey character in Peking opera, and the Princess Fan is wrapped in an armor-look dress, which is the operatic costume typically for military women. The cut-out animated short A Fox Hunting the Hunter (Hu Xionghua 1978) is another example, in which the face of the fox character is subtly analogous to an operatic facial mask: the big sharpened slanted eyes, over-hanging eyebrows and the white point between the eyebrows subtly suggest its sinister personality and deliver a unique operatic charm.

Second, classical Chinese animation often employs stylized movements and poses of traditional opera, especially for the fighting scenes. There are two types of traditional Chinese opera – civil opera and military opera; the latter ‘deals with war, encounters, and the exploits of heroes and outlaws’ and is ‘full of action and acrobatics’ (Farquhar 1993, 8). Without the need of extra explanation to the audience, a highly exaggerated and stylized operatic movement or pose vividly reveals the situation and the intention of the character, and serves as a unique body language in traditional Chinese military opera. Thus, different from Japanese limited animation that deploys multifarious camera movements and fast editing to create the tension of actions, or Disneyesque animation that exaggerates real physical moments by the squash and stretch principle to achieve comic effects, Chinese animation absorbs conventional stage expressions from traditional opera to represent the characters’ movements on the screen, which are highly stylized, suggestive and performative. For example, in the first fighting scene of Prince Nezha’s Triumph, Nezha freezes a pose to start the battle, which is a classical posture on the opera stage of clenching the
weapon in one fist, raising the other arm with the palm outwards and stretching one leg up. When Nezha defeats the monster, he stands akimbo, looks up and laughs, followed by a side lunge with a pose of 'double mountain shoulders' and a fast movement of 'exploring the sea' (sweeping one arm into the water), also traditional and representative operatic movements, indicating his triumph and satisfaction.

Third, classical Chinese animation frequently imitates operatic music and language. The percussion of gong and drum, which are the core instruments of traditional Chinese opera, consistently accompanies characters' fierce actions in classical Chinese animations, in order to control the audience's emotion and drive the plot towards the climax. For example, when the Monkey King first appears in *Havoc in Heaven*, the background music straightway changes from a relaxed orchestral tune to an uplifting operatic percussion melody of gong and drum, facilitating the protagonist's actions and drawing the audience's attention. Classical Chinese animations also borrow typical operatic languages and voices, for instance, using operatic words 'Wa-Ha-Ha' to deliver happiness and 'Ai-Ya-Ya' to express anger, or speaking the last few words in a sentence with a special drawl, resembling traditional opera singing. Sometimes, the well-known opera ditties and songs are even directly, or with a slight modification, appropriated by animations. For example, animated short *Laoshan Taoist* borrows several famous ditties form traditional Kun Opera as the characters' narration and voice-over narration.

From the foregoing three aspects, it can be seen that traditional opera has a strong influence on the audio-visual expression of classical Chinese animation. The operatic devices transferred to animation not only win the national audience with a familiar appearance recognizable at first glance, but also win the international audience with a (for them) novel Chinese look. Nevertheless, film is a cinematic art, which makes its nature fundamentally different from a theater, stage art. In his article 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures', in which he compares cinema's dynamic space and theater's static space, Erwin Panofsky (2009, 249) claims that 'the imitation of a theatre performance with a set stage, fixed entries and exits, and distinctly literary ambitions is the one thing the film must avoid'. He further explains that, when watching a film, the space moves, 'approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through the controlled locomotion and focusing of the camera and through the cutting and editing of the various shots'; on the contrary, in theater 'space is static, that is, the space represented on the stage, as well as the spatial relation of the beholder to the spectacle, is unalterably fixed' (249–250). Film, as a new art often interrupts continuous actions and splits integrated spaces via single shots, then artificially and creatively rebuilds them into scenes and sequences. It offers cinematic possibilities through a variety of camera movements and editing, facilitating a cinematic space that is much more subjective and dynamic than in an opera.

The dynamic combination of short shots potentially creates a conflict contrary to the static long take, and more importantly, it interferes with the theatricalized continuity of the actions and the consistency of the space. Thus, to some extent, the shot length can be seen as a helpful indicator to measure the interference – the longer duration of a shot is, the more consistent space and continuous actions are created, which, for classical Chinese animation, potentially means obtaining more operatic traits, and vice versa. It can be observed that in fighting scenes of classical Chinese animation, long shot, long take and two-shots are frequently deployed, rather than cinematically utilizing cutting and editing
or shot reverse shot. For example, in *Havoc in Heaven*, the average shot length of fighting scenes is around 16 seconds, among which a long battle between the Monkey King and Nezha is solely built by six long takes. These long takes fully maintain the continuity of the actions and the consistency of the space, somewhat analogous to the live operatic performance on a stage. In another action animation, *Monkey King Conquers Evil*, the average shot length of the fighting scenes is around 10 seconds, much longer than contemporaneous Japanese action animated films, for instance, *Hokuto no Ken* (Toyoo Ashida 1986), in which the average shot length of the fighting is about one second.

Different from Japanese animation that usually tends to depict a battle scene elliptically and briskly, the fighting scenes of Chinese animation are principally composed of long takes with smooth slow pan or tilt, presenting and displaying the full actions. Repetitive movements are seldom simplified or omitted in classical Chinese animation; instead, these redundantly repetitive actions are deliberately created – for example, in *Monkey King Conquers Evil*, the Skeleton Demon keeps circling on the sky over and over again, and Monkey King constantly jumps from one stone to another. Representing these swinging and recurring actions within long takes is arguably influenced by traditional Chinese military opera, for which the fighting has to be symbolically represented by stylized actions in a static and limited space. For classical Chinese animation, this expression allows the audience to fully observe the sceneries and actions on the one hand; on the other hand, it makes the works highly theatrical and performative, rather than cinematic.

**Conclusion**

From the mid-1950s to the early 1980s, classical Chinese animation fully committed itself to exploring the national identity through learning from classical Chinese literature, traditional Chinese painting and opera, which brought it international success for both the artistic aspects and in a cultural sense. However, because of heavily relying on other established art forms, classical Chinese animation arguably is a dependent rather than a free independent art, which partly leads to its short-lived success and flourish. Faithfully appropriating original stories and narrative strategies from classical Chinese literature, as I have argued, subordinated animation to the literary classics; over-prioritizing the techniques and conventions of traditional Chinese painting and opera inevitably tied animation to the original masterpieces, and harmed its inherently cinematic nature. All of these factors overshadowed the destiny of classical Chinese animation and precipitated its foreseeable decline due to its falling behind the times. During the first three decades of the new country and the Shanghai animation Film studio, Chinese animation displayed strongly national and ethnic characteristics, which were influenced by and which reflected the specifically historic era of China. The relatively isolated and centralized circumstances at the time shaped, supported and also constrained the Chinese school and classical Chinese animation.

**Notes**

1. The term ‘classical Chinese animation’ in this essay is opposite to the concepts of ‘modern Chinese animation’ and ‘post-modern Chinese animation’. The author proposes that there are three aesthetic phases of Chinese animated films from 1949 to date, which were primarily
influenced, in chronological order, by traditional Chinese culture, by Western modernist art and literature and most recently by post-modernism. The first phase took place between the late 1950s and the mid-1980s, during which Chinese animation was deeply influenced by traditional Chinese literature and art, and highly controlled by communist government, represented by the animated films such as *Havoc in Heaven* and *Three Monks* (1980). The second phase took place between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s. With the opening of China to external relationships, a wave of interest in Western modernist art and thought took the country by storm, and Chinese animation experienced a transformation from classicism to modernism (Chen 2015, 81–104). The third phase of Chinese animation started in the mid-2000s and featured a notable post-modern tendency, such as decentralized, variegated and antiauthoritarian animation making, which is a departure from both the classical and the modernist animation.

This essay focuses on the first phases of Chinese animation.

2. The data is collated from *The History of Chinese Animated Film* (Yan and Suo 2005, 238–252).

3. Original Chinese quotation: 中国传统文化始终缺少对人的精神和灵魂问题的深度探索。
All translations from Chinese in this article are by the author.

4. Original Chinese quotation: 我们的导演大都出生于美术行伍, 喜欢在美术形式上作各种探索,这是很自然的。

5. Original Chinese quotation: 无论是水波荡漾的海底宫殿, 还是云雾缭绕凌霄宝殿, 都是一幅幅极富装饰意味的工笔画, 给观众留下了深刻的影响。

6. Qi Baishi (1863–1957) ‘is considered one of the last great painters in the traditional Chinese style. Qi Baishi is considered one of the Four Great Master of the twentieth century Chinese painting, with Zhang Daqian, Wu Changshi and Xu Beihong’ (Perkins 2013, 404).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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