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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CHINESE ANIMATION ON THE MOVE --TALKING ABOUT THE CURRENT SITUATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE ANIMATION FROM "MONKEY KING: HERO IS BACK"

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#### ABSTRACT

The development of Chinese animation in recent years has always been characterised by a lack of speed and quality. New works are forever shrouded under a glorious history of struggle. However, it would be unfair to criticise animation in recent years without understanding the art of animation and the difference between art films and commercial films. This article takes *Monkey King: Hero is Back* as the subject of study, and on the basis of an analysis of the film's strides in the various components of the animation process from the perspective of commercial animation, explores the achievements and shortcomings of Chinese animation by comparing the differences between commercial and artistic animation. Chinese animation has gone through the trials and tribulations of history and will rise in the future. The accumulation of technical concepts and the strength of the momentum will play an important role.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* ignited the entire Chinese animation scene with a starburst. By the official closing of the film on September 9, it had grossed \$956 million in 62 days, steadily creating a box office myth for Chinese animation in recent years and even surpassing the domestic box office record held by *Kung Fu Panda 2* for four years. So, after *The Legend of Qin*, *Cribug*, *Swallowtail*, and *The Red*, some people are shouting that the "golden age" of Chinese animation has arrived. Is this box office "blowout" a "flash in the pan" or an inevitable reflection of quantitative to qualitative change? As animation practitioners, it is particularly important to explore the successes of Chinese animation, to understand the current situation and to continue to explore the path of development.

**Current situation:** The glory of Chinese animation in the 1960s and 1970s was remarkable, but what the mainstream society experienced was the darkest period of Chinese animation, from witnessing the decline of Chinese animation, to being flooded with foreign animation since childhood by the influx of foreign animation since the reform and opening up, with only a handful of domestic animation to be seen, to blocking foreign animation and only broadcasting domestic animation with immature technology, under-aged stories and crude production. There is a lot of cursing of the animation industry in the country.

But to recognise the status quo, one must have a sufficient understanding of animation and must be clear about the difference between commercial animation and art films, and not make arbitrary comparisons. The so-called art film is a film or television work with an implied aesthetic, a way to share beauty or deeply meaningful emotions and awareness with others. In animation, artists often use many experimental ways to create for example: using different materials like ink and wash, just like Shangmei Factory's *Feeling from mountain and water*, Koji Yamamura's *Head Mountain*, puppets *The Magical Brush*, Mary and Max), paper cutouts *The Fisherman's Boy*; or using special narrative methods and camera language to describe the story (the use of montage in *The Greatest Showman*), which we are proud of. Most domestic animation actually falls into this category. Commercial animation, on the other hand, is a film that caters to the public's taste and appreciation, with the highest aim of making a profit at the box office or in terms of ratings. It requires an entertaining script, complex special effects, big investment, big publicity, big direction, etc. If it has some educational value, it is basically an outstanding work. The artistic achievement is not comparable to that of an art film. Therefore, the two can be integrated without contradicting each other, but there is a huge difference in essence. We have long considered films that are a step backwards to be commercial animation, which is why *Monkey King: Hero is Back* cannot be compared to the likes of *The Nine-Coloured Deer*, *The Monkey King* and *Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King*.

Once we look at *Monkey King: Hero is Back* from a commercial perspective we can see how far Chinese animation has come in recent years. Firstly, the script. For a long time, the public in China has believed that animation is for children, and that the content can be young and educational has always been the criterion for judging the good and bad of animation. In contrast, under the sound animation system of foreign countries, the classification system of animation works allows people of all ages to find something suitable for them, and animation is a form of expression rather than an educational object belonging only to a specific age. *Monkey King: Hero is Back* is a good solution to this problem, with a plot that is accessible to both young and old, and which children can understand and adults can appreciate. This is proven enough by the box office. It also shows that the country's animators are taking note and making a conscious effort to change the inadequate situation. What is missing, however, is a national classification system for animation. Another obvious shortcoming is the lack of originality and imagination in the plots. This is not spared in *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, which, although based on the traditional masterpiece *Journey to the West*, does not copy the whole thing, but rather incorporates the Sutra and creates a new relationship between the Sun Wukong and the young Tang Monk. However, Chinese animation has yet to break out of the shackles of its predecessors' best work, and no successful productions with a complete independent world view have emerged, whereas most of Disney's animated films have already been able to do this, such as *Monsters, Inc.*, *Dragon Taming Fighter and walle*. Secondly, the art design and characterisation. At the beginning of the film's release, people started to share the artwork for *Monkey King: Hero is Back* online. In addition to the detailed and mature design of the characters and scenes, there are fewer traces of imitation of Japan and the US, and a strong traditional Chinese style. In addition the character traits of each character are well represented, such as the portrayal of Sun Wukong, whose cool exterior, gentle interior and rebellion against fate all make for a character full of charm. These traits were carefully conveyed to the audience by the animators through the characters' expressions and mannerisms, adding humour to the seriousness of the characters and making them so popular that soon after the film's release there were a large number of homage comics and peripheral products were soon available for sale. In the past, only characters with cute looks or personalities were liked, but now audiences are more attracted to the diverse personalities of the characters, which was not the case with domestic animation before.

Finally, in terms of technology, China in the 1980s had not yet recovered from the bloodshed it had experienced. The media was not developed, and although the domestic animation industry had developed considerably, not many people paid attention to it, and the capital, manpower and concepts were not ready before the country opened its doors to face the impact of globalisation and the mature foreign cultural industry. Since the late nineties, we have not only become one of the largest consumer markets for American and Japanese culture, but have also started to work as an OEM for foreign animation because of the low labour costs. This process has been heartbreaking, but it has also trained a large part of the Chinese animation industry. Animation is a technology-intensive industry, where image processing, character modelling, scene processing and special effects production all have a direct impact on the outcome of the finished film, and they have easy access to the most advanced international equipment and technology, gradually breaking through the technical barriers in animation production, relying on their own hard work and wisdom and their affection for Chinese animation, silently preparing the strongest backing for good scripts in the future. A good example of this is *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, which Andrew Mason (director of *The Matrix*) saw during the Shanghai Film Festival and considered to be almost as good as a Hollywood production. It's not surprising that this has been a constant source of subcontracting. Of course, there is still a long way to go in terms of the handling of character hair and the consistency of movement, but I believe that with the accumulation of experience, these problems will not hinder the advancement of domestic animation. As another component of the animation industry, artistic animation is not something to worry too much about.

Animation education has developed rapidly in recent years, with more than 348 higher education institutions specialising in animation by 2015, and Chinese animators are present in famous animation schools and animation companies around the world. Animation theoretical research is also on the rise, with articles and publications appearing all over the place. The graduation designs of the major art schools and the various animation festivals and awards at home and abroad show that, for example, *There's Higher Sky*, *Water Brain and Back Down No More* are all really good works, both in terms of artistic attainment and the subject matter itself, and the authors are quite young with unlimited possibilities for development. However, the reason why artistic animation is often found in the work of students and artists is obvious: when the audience for profit no longer influences the thinking of the maker, it is possible to truly express oneself and purely pursue the good.

### Development

The impact of "Internet+" on the development of Chinese animation. In a new era, the creation of new things will also have a profound impact on every aspect of society, and this is something the animation industry is not exempt from. Before the release of "Monkey King: Hero is Back", numerous design manuscripts were circulated on the Internet, attracting potential viewers and bringing the producers closer to the audience. At the same time, the development of the internet has enabled more people to see and understand animation and thus to identify the film spontaneously, to discuss the problems in the film, and gradually not to be swayed by the media and not to be confused by the propaganda, and to mature aesthetics so that the best works are not buried. Therefore, with the spring breeze of the Internet, Chinese animation production teams can discuss their works with a wider audience and share their production experience, which will enhance the aesthetic quality of the audience and in turn drive the box office and market. Crowdfunding's role in promoting Chinese animation. Without crowd funding, I am afraid we would not have seen the completion of the animation *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. As a small production with no name or money, it is almost impossible to make a film based on "sentiment". Crowdfunding" is a form of "group buying + pre-buying" that allows small businesses, artists or individuals to showcase their ideas to the public, gain attention and support, and then get the financial assistance they need [1]. This offers a wireless possibility for the developing Chinese animation in this awkward situation.

### CONCLUSION

The success of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* is therefore justified and in line with the current situation of the Chinese animation industry. In the general environment of the internet and consumer era, technology is not a particular aspect to be pursued by Chinese animation creators. The opening of eyes, the emancipation of minds and the release of the spirit of entertainment are the only ways to truly promote Chinese animation to the world and to push Chinese animation back to glory. This is also what the animation OEMs cannot give us. All that is needed next is time and the unremitting efforts of all animators to achieve the good wishes.

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