



To Capture the Cartoon Cash

—China Reanimates an Industry

■ By Lowell Bennett

Cosponsored by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, and the Zhejiang provincial government, on April 28, 2006, the 2nd China International Cartoon and Animation Festival kicked-off for a six-day run in Zhejiang's thriving capital city of Hangzhou. About 300,000 visitors toured about 1,500 exhibits while businesspeople and artists attended conferences focusing on topics like the state of digital technology, trends in cartoon art and international asset management.

One of several major animation expos conceived and made popular in recent years in China, the Hangzhou event is just one element of a resurgent strategy tactically executed by a cohesion of government, industry, and an ever-more technically-savvy and increasingly educated workforce.

The objective is to regain ground in a worldwide field of art and commerce that annually generates about \$500 billion.



A display rendition of the venerable "Monkey King" and friend, at the 2nd China International Cartoon and Animation Festival in Hangzhou. by Lowell Bennett

China's animators annually crank out about 40,000 minutes of cartoons for domestic TV consumption. That may sound like a lot, but that production level bottom line amounts to one massive missed opportunity.

Total broadcast demand for animated products is estimated at about 300,000 minutes a year in China. And so government, industry and educational institutions are now

channeling considerable resources into seizing a more equitable share of what is a clean, dynamic and potential-packed industry.

The domestic cartoon market here is enormous. The primary consumer segment, China's citizens under the age of 16, number more than 370 million. If you need some perspective: That number of Chinese kids surpasses the entire population of the US by about 80 million. And those Sino juniors tally

up to equal about 80 percent of all those humans residing within all the nations comprised by the European Union.

The Figures of Fantasy

Today animated products generate more than 18 billion yuan in gross revenues within the nation, according to the Animation As-

sociation of China. The industry's problem is that only about 10 percent of those RMB stay here. The vast majority of product is supplied by Japan, with a lesser share snagged by the US and Europe.

And not a lot of progress has been made in recent years. According to 540 city kids surveyed in 2002 by the China Mainland Marketing Research Company, of their 10 favorite cartoon programs, six were Japanese,

two were US-made, and two were produced in China. Since that survey was conducted, more recent studies indicate no gains. Reportedly, today only about 11 percent of Chinese youngsters say they prefer homegrown cartoons.

According to John Lent, the author of *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, and a professor of communications in the Department of Broadcasting, Telecommunications and Mass Media at Temple University in the US, a shortfall in technical expertise may not be the primary holdback for China's producers. "I have no doubt that the technical skills in China are beginning to rival those of Hollywood or Europe." But, he says, "One of the problems I hear coming out of China and many other places in the Far East is the storytelling. Zhang Yimou (the big time Chinese director of films like 'Hero') said himself that when they have a good story they want to make a motion picture out of it, not an animated film."

The Glory Gone

Well ahead in the cartoon game in decades past, Chinese animation began its rise in the 1920s, notably driven by the WanSi Brothers and their animated silent films, such as their classic "Princess Iron Fan." In the 1930s and 1940s, China-produced animation was ascendant in the Eastern markets, far ahead in terms of artistic rendition, technol-

ogy and storytelling.

In the early 1950s, sponsored by the central government, the Shanghai Arts and Film Production Company was established and became a primary driver in China's rise to something of a golden era in the years that followed. After consistent success in the domestic market, in 1956 their "Why Is the Crow Black-Coated" gained international acclaim and awards.

The industry of animation in China arguably reached its zenith in the early 1960s, with "Uproar in Heaven," produced by the Shanghai Animation Studio and featuring the Monkey King, for centuries a mythical character beloved and venerated in China. Director Wan Laiming and his illustrators spent four years creating the two-part, 11,000-foot film feature, releasing the first installment in 1961 and the second in 1964.

The setback came during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Like all film production houses, animation studios stagnated and lost ground—just as Japan's anime producers came on strong.

And so China is now out to regain lost territory.

Energizing Enterprise

In 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television officially put in



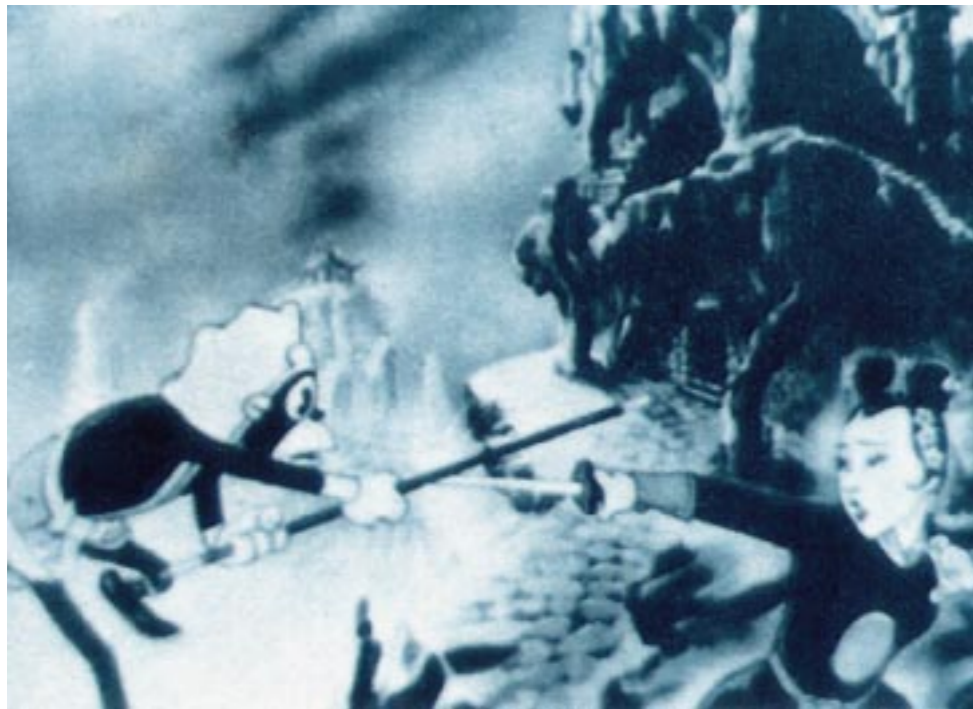
In Hangzhou's High-tech Industry Development Zone. by Zhang Rong



Networked collaboration at the Zhejiang Zhongnan Group Animation Video Company. by Lowell Bennett



An offshoot of animation based on popular characters, a Cosplay performance at the 2006 2nd China International Cartoon and Animation Festival in Hangzhou. by Lowell Bennett



"Princess Iron Fan," produced by the WanSi Brothers in the 1920s.

place new policies aimed to encourage and accelerate production—especially on the mainland—and four colleges and nine studios became the inceptive primary centers for development. Notable institutions at program startup included the Communication University of China, the Beijing Film Academy, and the China Academy of Art. Concurrently, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio and the China International Television Corporation became active industrial players.

Today, a growing number of major art schools offer programs in animation. And cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha, Guangzhou and Hangzhou have established high-tech zones specifically to accommodate and nurture viable new animation firms.

In particular, Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province, has become a fast-rising center for the development of the industry. More than 20 animation-related enterprises operate R&D and production centers within the Hangzhou High-Tech Industry Develop-

ment Zone, officially part of the National Animation Industry Base. And since 2005 the city has devoted 20 million yuan to a plan whereby its local animation production companies are paid 1,000 yuan for each minute of their product that makes it onto China's TV screens. Since the plans inception, within the Hangzhou National Animation Industry Base five firms have benefited from payouts totaling more than 7 million yuan.

But the climb back to the top may take some time, according to Zhang Hongjian, who heads up Hangzhou's Department of Publicity and Information. At a press conference in advance of his city hosting the 2nd China International Cartoon and Animation Festival, he said, "There is a remarkable gap between China's animation and cartoon industry and that of Japan. In fact, China lags behind at least 10 years in terms of technique and originality."



"The Monkey King."

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Zhang is no doubt right about that gap. But given China's seemingly supernatural ability to effect change, accelerate development and advance across a wide spectrum of industrial production, one might presume that a 10-year lag in "technique" can be overcome in short order. Originality, however, is a by-product of open innovative collaboration and individual creativity.

Considering the range of diversions available to technically-savvy young people in this digital age, the days of cartoons that compromise on plot in favor of hammering home a blatant message may well be over. And so the fate of this industry could rest within the nimble hands of those who best know their market: The youngest of China's storytellers. 