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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Film Studies

**The New Generation Chinese Cinema Animation (1995-2015): Industry
and Aesthetics**

by

Shaopeng Chen

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2018

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACT

The New Generation Chinese Cinema Animation (1995-2015): Industry and Aesthetics

Shaopeng Chen

This thesis examines the feature-length new generation Chinese cinema animation works between 1995 and 2015 in terms of their industrial and aesthetic features—both in the context of Chinese cinema and of Chinese cultural creative industries more broadly. This project constitutes an original contribution to scholarship as the first thesis length study of the above-mentioned productions and providing new insights about how various players (government, production company, audience, etc.) have contributed to shaping a Chinese animation panorama over the last two decades.

This thesis is based on detailed case studies of four Chinese-language animated theatrical films. The first case study chapter examines *Lotus Lantern* (1999), which can be considered as the first attempt of the ‘blockbuster-able’ Chinese cinema animation since 1995. The second focuses on the analysis of *Boonie Bears* films (2014 and 2015), the theatrical versions of popular animated TV series under the same name which best represent both the industrial and aesthetic characteristics of the ‘derivative’ films. The third analyses the significance of the *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013 and 2014) among all the original Chinese cinema animations (especially the ones with sound reputation) in the respects of commercial dilemma and aesthetic hybridization. The fourth and final case study chapter examines how Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) communication within social-media and reinterpretation

of an all-time favourite cartoon idol contributed to the box office miracle of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015).

This project demonstrates that the production of cinema animation is one of the most dynamic, uncertain and risky creative practices within the Chinese cultural creative industries. Meanwhile, the new generation Chinese cinema animation works still lack a distinctive national identity in the respect of aesthetic paradigms. Instead, the above productions can be categorised as a type of hybrid cultural product which features a multi-directional exploration in animation aesthetics.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, Shaopeng Chen

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

The New Generation Chinese Cinema Animation (1995-2015): Industry and Aesthetics

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
 1. Parts of this work have been published as: [Chen, Shaopeng, 'The Chinese Animation Blockbuster and Lotus Lantern (1999)', *East Asian Journal of Popular Cultural*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2017, 231-47]:

Signed:

Date: 15 March 2018

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the support of the following academic staff, sponsor and family members. They have supported me emotionally and financially in the production of this thesis:

Firstly, I am sincerely grateful to my main supervisor Dr Michael Williams for his professional and academic guidance and advice through the whole process of my PhD. I especially thank him for his support and patience with me as a non-native English speaker. I am also greatly thankful to my secondary supervisor Dr Corey Schultz and third supervisor Dr Malcolm Cook who provide me with valuable comments and suggestions in the field of Chinese cinema and animation respectively. I also would like thank my upgrade examiners Dr Sally Keenan and Dr Ruby Cheung in terms of their precious feedback.

Secondly, I am grateful to my sponsor China Scholarship Council (CSC) for financially supporting my PhD study. I could not have done it without the support of CSC.

Finally, I want to specially thank my parents Shunqi Chen and Aiping Peng for their love, encouragement and support. Thank you for being my biggest role models and strongest supporters, both on the trail and throughout life.

Abbreviations

ACG - Anime, Comic and Games

ASIFA - The International Animated Film Association

CCTV - China Central Television

CFDEC - China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation

CFGC - China Film Group Corporation

CGI - Computer-Generated Imagery

CPC - Communist Party of China

NGCCA - New Generation Chinese Cinema Animation

PRC - People's Republic of China

SAFS - Shanghai Animation Film Studio

SAPPRFT - The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television

SARFT - The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television

SMG - Shanghai Media Group

VCD - Video Compact Technology

VHS - Video Home System

WOM- Word-Of-Mouth

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Aims and Scope

When the People's Republic of China (PRC, henceforth referred to as China) was founded in 1949, the Ministry of Culture announced that 'the fine art film should serve the children'.¹ At the same time, under the system of the Communist state's planned economy, animation was identified as a tool of child education and indoctrination by the Chinese cultural authorities. The production of animation works also once belonged to a part of the socialist culture undertakings of creating common values for adolescents and young children's lives. The production model and function of animation was not changed until the initiation of the reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s.² In this sense, Guo Li and Jinying Li (2017) consider 'the history of Chinese animation, like Chinese film history, witnessed incessant negotiations between animators and film-makers' innovative endeavours and the political and ideological conditions'.³ From the 1990s, the Chinese government has paid close attention to the development of domestic animation and in 2000, this field was officially defined as an industry, the State further decided to develop the animation sector in the long term as a part of the national economy in 2001.⁴

¹ Animation in China has long been called as 'fine art film' (*Meishu Pian*), especially in the planned economy era. This phenomenon will be discussed later. See from Wei Te. 'Talking about the Creation of Fine Art Film' in Editorial Office of *Movie Communication* in the Film Bureau of Cultural Department and National Film Editorial Office in China Film Press ed., *Research on the Fine Art Film Creation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984) pp.1-11, p.1 [In Chinese, my translation].

² According to Communist Party of China's mouthpiece *China Daily*, the implementation of reform and opening-up policy, which was initiated by Deng Xiaoping (then China's supreme leader), aims to 'readjust the economic structure, and reform the economic and political systems'. See China Daily. '*Reform and Opening-up*'. Available from: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/cpc2011/2011-05/10/content_12480513.htm>. [Accessed: 22 October 2017] [In Chinese].

³ Li Guo and Jinying Li. 'Animating Chinese Cinemas: A Preface', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. Vol. 11, Issue. 2, 2017, pp. 115-122, p.117.

⁴ Miao Chun. '*The Moving Forward of Animation Industry*'. Available from: <http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2014-08/04/content_1461045.htm>. [Accessed: 17 February 2016] [In Chinese].

In examining Chinese cinema animations between 1995 and 2015 within an international animation market context, in this thesis I argue that these works have a dual identity: an identity as a type of entertainment media which aims to gain profit, and an identity as artistic creations and subcategory of Chinese cinema. With regard to the first aspect, I consider the production, distribution and exhibition of Chinese cinema animations seek to achieve high box office returns by entertaining the widest possible audience. Meanwhile, the cinema animation sector is one of the most dynamic, uncertain and risky creative practices within the Chinese cultural creative industries. In terms of the second identity, I argue that the above productions can be categorised as a form of cultural hybridity, which intertwines the traditional and the modern, the domestic (film art film, folk literature, etc.) and the exotic (mainly coming from their Japanese and American counterparts). Within this context, this thesis explores the above concerns and key developments in Chinese cinema animation, and the reasons behind particular critical and commercial success or failure of selected works.

The domestic animation works had been funded and distributed by the state-owned China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation (CFDEC) for approximately 44 years (1951-1995) (the latter subsequently became a fully funded distribution subsidiary of the state-run conglomerate China Film Group Corporation [CFGF] in 1999).⁵ Under this system, Chinese animation can be considered as a part of China's collective cultural undertakings in the context of a planned economy. That is to say, the production of domestic animated works was still an entirely state-run effort. In 1995, the government authorities suspended the CFDEC's exclusive sales rights of cinema animation,⁶ and since then the animation sector in China, along with its live action film industry counterpart (discussed later), began a process of marketization.

⁵ Daoxin Li. 'The Film Distribution and Exhibition Network in the People's Republic of China: A Historical Survey', *Journal of Zhejiang University of Media and Communications*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2017, pp. 1-19, p. 6 [in Chinese]

⁶ Shengnan Yu. 'The Comparative Studies Between Chinese and Russian Animation's Difference on Creative Concept'. Available from: <<http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/1008/c389664-25790911.html>>. [Accessed: 05 November 2015] [In Chinese].

In comparing the above animation creations and their pre-1995 counterparts, I find that the changes, in both aesthetic and industrial terms, are always entangled with continuities (the reinterpretation of classic cartoon characters in fine art film, the interplay between domestic and exotic creative experiences, etc.). Regarding this matter, I refer to the Chinese cinema animation works that are produced after 1995 as the 'new generation' to not only differentiate them from their predecessors, but also clearly illustrate the historical connection between the two categories.

Therefore, in this thesis the 'new generation Chinese cinema animation' refers to the mainstream commercial 2D (mainly hand-drawn cels) and 3D (Computer-Generated Imagery [CGI], stop motion, etc.) animated theatrical feature films in the traditional sense, which have been produced by Chinese animation companies independently, or co-produced by Chinese companies and their overseas counterparts after 1995. Within this context, other genres of animation in China like independent animated films and hybrid animation/live action films will not be the focus of this thesis, but noted where appropriate.

In this context, the overall research aim of this thesis is twofold. Primarily, I will focus on an industry/film policy analysis of the new generation Chinese cinema animation (henceforth referred to as NGCCA). I consider how the developmental processes of NGCCA, as a form of cultural product which has been gaining increasingly economic significance, are organized under the double influence of market forces and government intervention. As part of my industrial approach, I will mainly focus on the aspect of marketing. I will analyse how the production companies and distributors of chosen NGCCA works have segmented their target audiences and differentiated their marketing communications, whether success or failure, based on the diversity in specific audiences (children, young adults, family audiences, etc.). I will also examine the development of marketing practices for selected Chinese animated films like the different forms of Word-Of-Mouth communications in online social networking services. Secondly, this thesis will analyse the changing animation aesthetics (character design, worldview construction, etc.) of NGCCA as artistic creations, under a theoretical framework using textual analysis and a formalist approach. There has been little systematic

research into Chinese cinema animation over the last two decades, this thesis aims to fill this gap in scholarship as indicated in the next section.

1.2 Literature Review

Before outlining my approach in further detail, I will first examine the key debates and approaches taken by existing scholarship, such as the key concepts in cultural industry analysis, the role of government in cultural and animation production in China and the historical context of Chinese animation. First, I will examine the English and Chinese language sources that focus on the study of the Chinese cultural/creative industries and animation sector from an industrial perspective, in order to lay a foundation for the industry studies in this thesis. Second, I shall analyse the theoretical research on Chinese animation and the relevant cultural phenomena for the purpose of presenting the current state of knowledge about animation studies. My study expands on the existing literatures in the above field in two main ways. Firstly, on the whole, there is still a lack of systematic and methodical study on Chinese cinema animation, especially those in the recent two decades, which leads to a field requiring original research. This project analyses NGCCA in both industrial and theoretical path from a fresh perspective (discussed in the next section). Secondly, this thesis considers the extent to which NGCCA's dual identity, as a form of cultural product and as an artistic creation and sub-genre of Chinese cinema, which epitomizes the significant interplay among various aspects like the production company, market, government and audience.

1.2.1 Studies of Cultural/Creative Industries and Animation Sector and the Case of China

The English and Chinese language sources provide a helpful overview of the government intervention in Chinese cultural creative industries and the development of the animation sector. Since the production of animation is an important component of the cultural/creative industries, it is therefore important

to examine some of the most relevant terminologies in the above sectors. John Hartley et al (2013) examine several vital notions, such as cultural policy, cultural industry/cultural industries and intellectual property, in creative industries in terms of their origins and the debate over the definition.⁷ David Hesmondhalgh in his 2013 study defines the cultural industries as an assemblage that 'deals primarily with industrial production and circulation of texts', which not only conducts creativity and the relevant expertise, but serves as the promoter of social, economic and cultural transformation.⁸ It is worth noting here that the government in China mixes the above concepts together in order to create the Chinese 'cultural and creative industries' (*Wenhua Chuangyi Chanye*).⁹ With the explosive growth of the above sectors in China, the industrial study of both live action and animated films is now also receiving increasing attention from government bureaucrats, practitioners and scholars who are examining it from different perspectives, which will be analysed below.

The debate over the complicated role of government in the development of Chinese cultural and creative industries has created heated discussions within academic circles. Michael Keane (2009) argues that on one hand, the creative industries are 'traditional, political and slow moving'.¹⁰ On the other hand, they yearn to be free of political constraint. In the case of China, he believes that the local creative industries have suffered a compromising creativity due to official management.¹¹ Keane's observation is not surprising, especially in view of the fact that the development of the cultural and creative sectors has been identified as an important part of national strategy, thus always being regulated by the government authorities. Keane in his 2013 study further interprets China's ambition is to construct a 'creative nation' (*Chuangxin Guojia*) against a background of increasing

⁷ John Hartley et al. *Key Concepts in Creative Industries* (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2013).

⁸ David Hesmondhalgh. *The Cultural Industries Third Edition* (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2013) p. 4, 16.

⁹ Gang Li. 'Cultural and Creative Industries: New Engine for Economic Growth'. Available from: <http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/english/economy/2016-10/11/content_728808.htm>. [Accessed: 12 February 2017].

¹⁰ Michael Keane. 'Creative Industries in China: Four Perspectives on Social Transformation', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. Vol. 15, Issue 4, November (2009), pp. 431-434, p. 437.

¹¹ Same as above.

tension in relationship between political culture and commercial activity.¹²

Similarly, Terry Flew (2012) also argues that China's greater interest in creativity is due to the country's effort to 'move from a "Made in China" (*Zhongguo Zhizao*) economic base, centred on low-cost, high-volume manufacturing, to a "Created in China" (*Zhongguo Chuangzao*) paradigm, emphasising innovation, new ideas and concepts, intellectual property, and higher quality goods and services'.¹³

At the same time, the government intervention in the marketization process of Chinese film industry, as one of the core subsectors of the whole culture creative industries, has also been noted by scholars. Briefly speaking, the government authorities have exerted lingering influence over the Chinese film market. Darrell William Davis (2010) considers that the marketization of the Chinese cultural and creative industries is motivated by the government, which aims to stimulate the investment, production, and consumption of domestically made products that are at a competitive disadvantage when comparing with their imported competitors.¹⁴ He believes that the so-called 'marketization' in China not only needs to protect Chinese-language films, but it must also promote socialist doctrine while entertaining and enlightening audiences within the context of the Communist Party of China (CPC) authority.¹⁵ Similarly, Zhihong Gao considers the Chinese film market to have been shaped by the government to a large extent, the latter has enacted policy barriers to control the market share of overseas products. The government has also implemented an intricate licensing system to regulate the whole film sector.¹⁶ Emily Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis (2008) examine the triple role of government in the marketplace as regulator, participant and player. They argue that in the case of China, marketization has been utilized as a state repression mechanism instead of a force of liberalisation.¹⁷ It should be noted that the above 'protectionism', 'control' and 'state repression', besides other policies and

¹² Michael Keane. *Creative Industries in China: Art, Design and Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013) p.4.

¹³ Terry Flew. *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2012) p.48.

¹⁴ Darrell William Davis. 'Market and Marketization in the China Film Business', *Cinema Journal*. Vol. 99, No 3, Spring (2010), pp. 121-125, p. 122.

¹⁵ Davis, p.123.

¹⁶ Zhihong Gao. 'Serving a Stir-fry of Market, Culture and Politics – on Globalization and Film Policy in Greater China', *Policy Studies*. Vol.30, No.4, 2009, pp. 432-438, p. 433.

¹⁷ Darrell William Davis and Emily Yueh-yu Yeh. *East Asian Screen Industries* (London: British Film Institute, 2008) p.166.

regulations, are always achieved by the operation of the state-owned conglomerate CFGC, which routinely control the domestic market entry and market share. Davis and Yeh (2008) maintain that the CFGC 'aims to buttress state power through market mechanisms, ensuring that "marketization" is means to predetermined ends'.¹⁸

While in the case of animation production, John Lent and Ying Xu in their 2010 study maintain that the government has played a vital role in the development of Chinese animation since 1949, and that this has been 'serving different functions and yielding almost diametrically opposed results'.¹⁹ According to the authors, during the planned economy period until the late 1980s, animators were encouraged to explore a distinctive Chinese style instead of responsible for marketing and distribution.²⁰ While in the context of the market economy and marketization, the government has considered animation as 'a potentially profitable cultural product', and 'Chinese style cartoons have had to take a rear seat to a more quickly made, foreign-influenced, and universally motivated animation'.²¹ That is to say, Lent and Xu tend to see state funding and exploration of local cultural traditions as positive despite oversight or even censorship whereas market economics are seen negatively.

International scholars have also focused on the status quo of China's TV-animation market. Kenichi Ishii (2009) examines the broadcasting of animation programmes in China, who finds that the Chinese television screen is strictly regulated by the government.²² In 2004, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) launched an official notification, which indicated that each permitted

¹⁸ Emily Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis. 'Re-nationalizing China's Film Industry: Case Study on the China Film Group and Film Marketization', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. Vol.2, No.1, 2008, pp. 37-51, p. 49.

¹⁹ John Lent and Ying Xu. 'Chinese Animation Film: From Experimentation to Digitalization' in Zhu Ying and Stanley Rosen eds., *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) pp.111-125, p.112.

²⁰ Lent and Xu, p.111.

²¹ Lent and Xu, p.112.

²² Kenichi Ishii. 'Nationalism and Preferences for Domestic and Foreign Animation Programmes in China', *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 2, No. 75, 2013, pp. 225-245.

animation channel, such as the Children's Channel of China Central Television (CCTV, the state-owned television broadcaster) and provincial level cartoon channels which under the supervision of SARFT, must broadcast at least 50 per cent of animated programmes each day and that among them domestic animations should not be less than 60 per cent.²³ In 2006, SARFT officially further forbade any TV stations in China to broadcast imported animated TV series between 17.00 and 20.00.²⁴ Therefore, the only option in the prime time for the audience is to watch the domestic animations. Keane (2015) notes that domestic animators are eager to produce the next classic Chinese TV animation that has capabilities to compete with the Japanese and American frontrunners.²⁵ However, most of the highly-protected domestic animated TV series have failed to fill in the blank left by its imported competitors in terms of market share. Through the intercept surveys²⁶ which were conducted in two malls in Shanghai, Ishii concludes that the government policy has made little effect on changing the viewing habits of Chinese animation fans as they can still watch legal and illegal foreign animation programmes online. Therefore, Ishii maintains that 'attitudes towards the information regulations are negatively and significantly correlated with Internet usage' in China.²⁷

Various kinds of Chinese-language industry reports and blue books about the development of domestic cultural and creative industries have been published in China. However, most of them are more like a report on the work of the government which are full of stereotyped propaganda slogans, rather than a critical scholarly work. For example, in the sixth chapter of *Annual Report on Development of China's Animation Industry (2013)*, the Henan Province Animation Industry Development Research Group attributes the 'new trend and new highlight' of animation industry development in Henan Province to the 'brilliant leadership of

²³ Tencent Comic. 'SARFT: Oversea Animation is banned During Prime Time'. Available from: <<http://comic.qq.com/z/guangdian/>>. [Accessed: 06 February 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁴ Ke Bi. 'News Watch: Chinese Animation should strengthen itself besides the Ban issued by SARFT'. Available from: <http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2006-08/15/content_7076990.htm>. [Accessed: 06 February 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁵ Michael Keane. *The Chinese Television Industry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.134.

²⁶ The survey interviewed 133 or 134 males and 133 or 134 females in each of three age groups (15-19, 20-29 and 30-39).

²⁷ Kenichi Ishii, p. 241.

government officials at different levels'. Moreover, the authors maintain that 'the role of government intervention has become increasingly important, which can be considered as a vital impetus of animation industry's development'.²⁸ This phenomenon is not rare to see in other similar industry reports such as the annually published development report of Chinese cultural industries by Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education and Peking University.

It is worth noting that the role played by the government in the animation industry has experienced continuous changes in the past five years. Previously the animation production faced excessive regulations from the government. However, the relevant culture departments in the recent years have reduced the numbers of mandatory administrative examination and approval. For example, the approval, authorization and archival filing procedure of animation companies' income tax incentive was cancelled by the State Council of China by the end of 2015.²⁹ At the same time, in the case of cinema animation, it should be noted that the number of revenue-sharing foreign films (*Fenzhang Pian*) which are introduced into Chinese market every year has increased from 20 (2011) to 34 (2015),³⁰ but this quota does not set specific proportion for animated film imports. In other words, compared with Chinese animated TV series which have been strictly protected, cinema animation in China is in a relatively open market. Although there are still some government policies and regulations to support the development of cinema animation, the lack of a quota system forces NGCCA to compete with the live action blockbusters and foreign animated films in the cinema.

²⁸ Henan Province Animation Industry Development Research Group. 'Report on the Animation Industry Development in Henan Province' in Bin Lu, Yuming Zheng and Xingzhen Niu eds., *Annual Report on Development of China's Animation Industry (2013)* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press [China], 2013) pp.185-199, p.190 [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁹ Chinese Government. 'The State Council cancels 62 Administrative Measures for the Examination and Approval which involves Animation Industry'. Available from: <<http://www.cnaci.com.cn/html/dhzx/gnyw/17219.html>>. [Accessed: 10 February 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁰ Kuanmian Nie. *Revenue-sharing Films are Expected to Achieve 15 Billion Chinese Yuan in Box Office in 2015, in which the most Unsuccessful One just earn 3.4 million*. Available from: <http://ent.ifeng.com/a/20151104/42520798_0.shtml>. [Accessed: 06 February 2016] [in Chinese].

1.2.2 Theoretical Research on Chinese animation and the Relevant Cultural Phenomena

Historical surveys of Chinese animation examine it in terms of how it originated and its distinctive features during specific historical periods. Daisy Yan Du (2012) analyses Chinese animated films from 1940s (pre-PRC) to 1970s (Cultural Revolution), and argues that the period witnessed a transnational trend in animation creation prior to any national and sub-national characteristics. Even the national was created in an international context. Correspondingly, the national identity constructed through the above works 'was never stable and impermeable'. Instead, 'it was constantly in contestation with multi-directional flows of culture'.³¹

Sean Macdonald (2016) examines Chinese animation from both historical and theoretical perspective through interpreting classic works like *Havoc in Heaven/Danao Tiangong* (Wan and Tang, 1961) and *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King/Nezha Naohai* (Wang, Yan and A, 1979).³² However, the discussion of Chinese cinema animation over the last two decades is limited and fragmented in the final chapter of this book. Meanwhile, Chinese academics focus more on the fine art film as audio-visual representation. As suggested earlier, fine art film is the standard name for cinema animation in China until the marketization of the animation industry. However, this well-known name is criticized by Hui Yan and Yabin Suo. The latter two in their 2005 study believe that the pervasive use of 'fine art film' represents a misunderstanding of the essence of animated films. This is partly due to the fact that in the fine art film period, the majority of Chinese animators were previously painters rather than trained animation practitioners.³³ Therefore they often view animated films as static artworks and not as the motion pictures, and thus over emphasized the fine art elements of animation and neglected the film ontology as a visual and audio art. As a result, some of the cinema animation works

³¹ Daisy Yan Du, *On the Move: The Trans/national Animated Film in 1940s-1970s China* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012), p. 13, 14.

³² Sean Macdonald. *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

³³ Hui Yan and Yabin Suo. *History of Chinese Cinema Animation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 2005) p.18 [in Chinese, my translation].

are more like a successive slide show rather than a film with its own narrative form despite the distinctive Chinese visual elements.³⁴ Lin Song's 1984 study maintains that the older generation of Chinese animators might be putting excessive emphasis on the artistic design. He believes the success of a fine art film 'depends on whether it has all the essential ingredients of a film rather than unilateral success of the art design'.³⁵ Similarly, Yuanyuan Chen (2017) also believes that 'for classical Chinese animation (fine art film), overemphasizing techniques and patterns of traditional painting came inevitably at the cost of some of its cinematic characteristics'.³⁶

The national style in fine art films has also been mentioned by scholars. Yan Yin (1988) maintains that the 'Chinese School' is a kind of nationalized Chinese cinema animation with distinctive national characteristics and artistic expression principles, meanwhile inherits ethnic cultural and historical heritage in China'.³⁷ It is worth noting here that China is a multi-ethnic society which has 56 official ethnic groups of which the Han group is the majority (91.5 per cent).³⁸ Ethnic minority culture is considered as an important part of the Chinese civilization, especially after the founding of PRC which always pursues the equality of different ethnic groups as a basic state policy.³⁹ The national characteristics in both live action and fine art films are not limited to the expression of the Han's majority cultures. Instead, the construction of Chinese national identity is also always inspired by the ethnic minority cultural symbols and icons such as the folklores, costumes and pictorial

³⁴ Yan and Suo, *History of Chinese Cinema Animation*. p.3.

³⁵ Lin Song. 'The Exploration on the Creation Rules of Fine Art Film' in Editing Room of *Movie Communication* in the Film Bureau of Cultural Department and National Film Editing Room in China Film Press ed., *Research on the Fine Art Film Creation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984) pp.12-31, p.17 [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁶ Yuanyuan Chen. 'Old or New Art? Rethinking Classical Chinese Animation', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. Vol. 11, Issue. 2, 2017, pp. 175-188, p. 182

³⁷ Yan Yin. 'The "Chinese School" in Cinema Animation', *Contemporary Cinema*, 6 (1988), pp. 71-79, p. 71 [in Chinese, my translation]

³⁸ National Bureau of Statistics of China. 'Key Data on China's Sixth National Population Census in 2010'. Available from: <http://www.gov.cn/test/2012-04/20/content_2118413.htm>. [Accessed: 12 February 2017] [in Chinese].

³⁹ State Ethnic Affairs Commission. 'China's Ethnic Policy'. Available from: <http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-07/14/content_335746.htm>. [Accessed: 10 February 2016] [in Chinese].

forms. Paul Clark (1987) also notes that ‘minority peoples have had a much larger presence on Chinese screens since 1949 than their numbers would suggest’, and ‘the central government put great emphasis on the qualified assimilation and proper treatment of the minorities’.⁴⁰ A number of domestic cinematic creations are based on the cultural heritages from minority groups, such as the live action *Ashima/A Shima* (Liu, 1964) and puppet animation *Princess Peacock/Kongque Gongzhu* (Jin, 1963) which are adapted from the Yi and Dai people’s epic poetry respectively under the same name.

Chris Berry (2011) argues that the once stable cultural and national identity of Chinese cinema has been challenged by a series of transnational trends. In addition, he maintains that ‘both the terms “globalisation” and “transnational” refer to a larger structural shift in the world’.⁴¹ Animation is an important subgenre of national cinema, the latter can be regarded as not only the broader creative environment for animation, but for having a direct impact on the production of animation. With the marketization of Chinese animation industry and massive pressure from animation powerhouses such as Japan and America, the similar transnational trend happens in the cinema animation sector. I find that the once legible and unique ‘Chinese School’ style, which can be regarded as a result of multi-ethnic Chinese culture, has been undermined. Instead, the visual style of Chinese cinema animation now is still at the exploratory stage which blends not only domestic iconography (traditional Chinese painting, decorative arts, etc.), but exotic representations like the aesthetics of mainstream commercial animated works from Japan and America.

Although NGCCA has achieved considerable progress in the recent years, scholars and critics have also criticized it from various angles. Yuqing Ge (2010) argues that Chinese animation has ‘stuck and is not moving forward’ and more importantly, it

⁴⁰ Paul Clark. *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.96.

⁴¹ Chris Berry. ‘Transnational Chinese Cinema Studies’ in Lim Song Hwee. and Julian Ward ed., *The Chinese Cinema Book* (London: BFI: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) pp.12-31, p.12.

has 'lost its development direction to some extent'.⁴² He summarizes two major flaws in Chinese animated film, namely the confusion in audience targeting and theme selection, and the absence of fluent storytelling. His study provides a useful overview about what animation should be like from the perspective of scholars and industry practitioners, and how they make sense of the NGCCA works in terms of its limitations in the respect of content creation. This issue will be analysed in Chapter 4.

It is also important here to examine the current literature about animation theoretical studies, in order to provide more methodological support for my thesis. According to the Collins Dictionary, animation is the 'process of making films in which drawings or puppets appear to move'.⁴³ Paul Wells (2013) also considers that in the traditional sense, animation is an art form 'made by hand, frame-by-frame, providing an illusion of movement which has not been directly recorded in the conventional photographic sense'.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he also finds that the above definition has proven insufficient especially for the animation that have been facilitated by new production methods like the CGI animation. In this sense, the International Animated Film Association (ASIFA) defines animation as 'the creation of moving images through the manipulation of all varieties of techniques apart from live action methods'.⁴⁵ Within this context, Wells (2002) critically examines the cinematic language of animation through auteur theory and a case studies approach, and he treats animation as a vital discipline within media studies. He maintains that 'animation often reveals its fine art sources by demonstrating the sub textual meaning and process-oriented development of particular art-making, foregrounding its intrinsic modernity'.⁴⁶ Wells' study could be useful for my future research in terms of the essence and identity of animation, especially on the impact

⁴² Yuqing Ge. Reflection and Prospect on Chinese Animation Film, *Movie Review*, 3 (2010), p. 14 [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴³ Collins Dictionary. 'Animation'. Available from: <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/animation>>. [Accessed: 19 October 2017].

⁴⁴ Paul Wells. *Understanding Animation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) p. 10.

⁴⁵ ASIFA. 'Statutes'. Available from: <<http://www.asifa.net/who-we-are/statutes/>>. [Accessed: 20 October 2017].

⁴⁶ Paul Wells. *Animation: Genre and Authorship* (London: Wallflower, 2002) p. 39.

of the aesthetic style of fine art film on the creation of NGCCA. Maureen Furniss (2007) comprehensively examines animation as an artistic form and its aesthetic value.⁴⁷ For a long period, animation has been identified as a pure artistic expression rather than a media that have social function. Furniss puts the aesthetic of animation under the context of cultural studies, in order to get a more thorough understanding of animation as a media form.

1.3 Methodology

In the previous section, I analysed the current literature relevant to my project. This section aims to clarify my own critical position and the methodologies I shall adopt. More importantly, it indicates how my project expands the current research, how this thesis addresses the critical gap between the existing studies and new development trends on both industrial and theoretical aspects, which will be clarified in detail below.

Given the recent development tendency of the Chinese animation industry, I shall adopt a broader survey about the new features of the phenomena discussed in the previous section in order to present a more comprehensive overview of it. To begin with, I maintain that the production, distribution and exhibition of NGCCA are based on a profit-making incentive. The industrial production and circulation of NGCCA can be considered as a form of uncertain market behaviour, which has resulted in highly variable commercial performance. One further point needs to be clarified here is the above 'commercial performance' in this thesis mainly refers to the individual film's box office earning in the Chinese market. This is due to the fact that most of the Chinese production companies still lack the ability and awareness of developing follow-up products based on the cinematic content besides several intermittent attempts. Moreover, the overseas distribution and exhibition of NGCCA works are in a preliminary stage, which is characterised by the nearly negligible commercial returns in the overwhelming majority of cases. That is to say,

⁴⁷ Maureen Furniss. *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (London: John Libbey, 2007).

the domestic box office receipts are still the main source of Chinese companies' total revenue. Therefore the above issues will not be the focus of this thesis, but noted where appropriate. The industrial case studies in my thesis will be based on the critical analysis of figures and other achievable materials about the individual film's box office performance and marketing-related activities in the Chinese market, in order to explore the reasons behind particular commercial success or failure.

Second, although the Chinese government now plays a less decisive role in the development of NGCCA than is the case in TV animation sector, the government influence over the cinema animation market still should not be underestimated. In this sense, this project also illustrates new insights by discussing how and to what extent the government policies and regulations have affected the survival of NGCCA since the marketization process of the whole industry using a political-economic approach. My project shall avoid the uncritical conclusions made by the Chinese-language industry reports like *Annual Report on Development of China's Animation Industry*, namely the imprudent attribution of the positive development of the animation industry to the correct leadership from the government without further explanation and analysis.

In terms of the aesthetic/Film Studies approach, first, my work goes beyond the controversy of fine art film's cinematic language in terms of its possible explicit and implicit characteristics and limitations (as discussed in the previous section). I shall consider the influence of the fine art film's visual style on the production of NGCCA. This approach helps to answer how and in what form the aesthetic expression of fine art film has affected the creation of NGCCA, and the distinctive features of NGCCA in its initial development stage (discussed in Chapter 2 and 5). Moreover, my project shifts away from a focus on the specific limitations or advances of NGCCA in the aesthetic level. Instead, I explore the reason hiding behind these issues. The individual cases will be analysed under the specified social and historical conditions, and then consider comprehensively about how are these opinions and phenomenon shaped in the context of market economy. For example, I have also

chosen to compare the character establishment and narrative structure of the selected NACCA works and their overseas counterparts which share the same or similar theme, such as the comparative studies between *Lotus Lantern/Baolian Deng* (Chang, 1999) and *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff, 1994). This case study aims to highlight the aesthetic feature of NGCCA in its initial development stage.

Second, I will not discuss the question of divergence/convergence between the Han group and other ethnic minorities in building the national identity in my thesis. Rather, I consider the relatively stable Chinese national style in fine art film as a kind of multi-ethnic cultural aggregation in which major (Han) coexists with the minor (others). I will analyse the modern expression of the above Chinese elements, extrinsic or intrinsic, in NGCCA works in various aspects like pictorial form and thematic intention using formalistic approach and textual analysis. Furthermore, I shall also place emphasis on how the cross-culture representations and industrial practices have impacted the construction of the filmic image of NGCCA under the above theoretical framework. I reject the simplistic description of the national identity in domestic cinema animation from 1995 to 2015, and instead will analyse the above issue within a broader international context. That is to say, I shall critically interpret the application of national elements in the production of NGCCA in the context of social-political studies. For example, I will not only interpret the changes and continuities of the image of Sun Wukong in *Lotus Lantern* and *Monkey King: Hero is Back/Xiyouji Zhi Dasheng Guilai* (Tian, 2015), but analyse the *Kuiba* series as a cultural hybridity that entangles traditional Chinese values and exotic representations. This study is a vital and original contribution on the part of my thesis, which highlights the nature of NGCCA as a form of hybrid cultural product.

1.4 The Historical Context of Chinese Animation

China has a long history of creating cartoons. The Chinese comics are known as 'manhua' (literally means impromptu sketches), which is originally an 18th-century

Chinese literati painting term.⁴⁸ In 1925, a pioneering artist Feng Zikai reintroduced *manhua* into China in modern sense by titling his work as *Zikai Manhua*.⁴⁹ Then this art form became hugely popular domestically, which served as a part of a larger anti-fascist propaganda drive in China in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931-1945).⁵⁰ China also has its own creative tradition that produces the illusion of motion pictures, which can be traced back to the invention of a trotting horse lamp (*Zouma Deng*) at approximately AD 1000. This device is similar to zoetrope. The Chinese shadow play (*Piying Xi*) is the artistic form that is more similar to 2D cel animation, the former ‘performs stories by lighting silhouettes of dramatic personae made of beast hides or chipboards, actors sing attended by music, and control shadow tools at the same time’.⁵¹ The modern sense of animation was unknown among Chinese people until the beginning of the 20th century.

Cinema was first introduced in China in 11 August 1896, when a French tourist screened a short film in Xuyuan, Shanghai.⁵² Then in the 1920s, a series of early American animated shorts were introduced in Shanghai Bund such as *Out of the Inkwell: The Tantalizing Fly* (Fleischer, 1919) and *Trip to Mars* (Fleischer, 1924). This new artistic form immediately attracted the notice of several youngsters who were the enthusiasts of shadow play, they are four Wan brothers (fig 1.1).⁵³ According to Wan Laiming, he was excited that ‘the once motionless characters under the brush become animated’ when he was first watching animated films in the cinema.⁵⁴ Then the Wan brothers started to create animation and were the only creators of

⁴⁸ Robert Peterson. *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels: A History of Graphic Narratives* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011) p.120.

⁴⁹ Peterson, p.120.

⁵⁰ Paul Bevan. *A Modern Miscellany: Shanghai Cartoon Artists, Shao Xunmei's Circle and the Travels of Jack Chen, 1926-1938* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) p.1.

⁵¹ Weijing Zhu. ‘*Stories in the Shadows*’. Available from: <<http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2013/09/stories-in-the-shadows/>>. [Accessed: 22 December 2016].

⁵² Huilin Zhang. *Art History of Chinese Animation in the Twentieth Century* (Xian: Shanxi People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2002) p.25 [in Chinese, my translation].

⁵³ Four Wan brothers are Wan Laiming, Wan Guchan, Wan Chaochen and Wan Dihuan respectively, they were born in Nanjing city in China. Among them Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan achieve relatively high attainments in animation arts.

⁵⁴ Jishi Shang. ‘*Wan's brothers: The Proud Start of Chinese Animation*’. Available from: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/newmedia/2015-07/22/c_134436396.htm>. [Accessed: 11 November 2015] [in Chinese, my translation].

Chinese animation at this preliminary stage. In 1922, the men produced the first Chinese advertising animation, *Shuzhendong Chinese Typewriter/Shuzhendong Huawen Daziji*, which pioneered the production of commercialized animation programmes in China.⁵⁵



Fig 1.1: Three of the Four Wan Brothers

During the First World War, the Western powers were bogged down in the war and often failed to take into account their interests in China, which inadvertently resulted in the ‘golden ten years’ of Chinese national capitalist development.⁵⁶ In this decade, the Chinese film industry achieved great progress in terms of technology, story and acting aspects. However, Chinese animation still lacked the techniques to achieve synchronized animation and sound, by the time the first sound animation *Steamboat Willie* (Disney and Iwerks, 1928) had been produced in America. The Wan brothers, as Yan and Suo argue, realized that ‘the development of Chinese animation depends on the composition between sound, light and image, otherwise the silent animation will be eliminated quickly’.⁵⁷ After numerous experiments under the context of little understanding of animation technology, in 1935 the Wan brothers created the first sound Chinese animation *The Dance of the Camel/Luotuo Xianwu* with the help of The Great Wall Movie Enterprise.⁵⁸ In 1940

⁵⁵ Fujun Yin. Examination on the First Chinese Animation: The Analysis on the Details of Wai Laiming’s I and Sun Wukong, *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute Fine Arts & Design*, 03(2007), pp. 62-64, p. 62 [in Chinese].

⁵⁶ Huilin Zhang, p.29

⁵⁷ Yan and Suo, *History of Chinese Cinema Animation*. p.18.

⁵⁸ Huilin Zhang, p.40.

the first feature-length Disney animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937) was released in Shanghai and achieved great success with tickets selling out fast.⁵⁹ Such a grand occasion also deeply touched the Wan brothers who decided to make China's own full-length animated film *Princess Iron Fan/Tieshan Gongzhu*, which was premiered in Shanghai in on 1941 and became an instant hit.⁶⁰ The film features the animated Chinese ink and washing painting as the background, which brings the above traditional mode of Chinese art-making to the large screen for the first time. Meanwhile, the creation of *Princess Iron Fan*, besides the use of ink and washing painting, was actually not heavily impacted by the larger visual cultural context to which it belonged (domestic comic strips, live action films, etc.). Instead, it has associated itself with early Disney animation.⁶¹ *Princess Iron Fan* is clearly influenced by the characteristics of early Disney style in the respect of character design, such as the rubber tube-like arms and legs and the conspicuous analogy between the film's protagonist Sun Wukong and Disney's Mickey Mouse. Furthermore, some audiences bemoaned that *Princess Iron Fan* was not coloured like its Disney counterpart *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, besides the positive comments in the vast majority of cases.⁶²

After the founding of the PRC, Chinese animators (include the Wan brothers) have gradually started to explore the possibilities of applying Chinese cultural elements into animation creation instead of the mechanical imitation of Disney style. In the context of the Cold War, the major Western capitalist countries imposed a near-total trade embargo on the newly socialist China.⁶³ As a result, China turned away from the world and then turned towards the Soviet-led socialist block for help, which includes the relatively mature animation production techniques, because

⁵⁹ Huilin Zhang, p.43.

⁶⁰ Daisy Yan Du. 'Suspended animation: The Wan Brothers and the (In) animate Mainland-Hong Kong Encounter, 1947–1956', *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. Vol. 11, Issue. 2, 2017, pp. 140-158, p. 146.

⁶¹ Daisy Yan Du. 'Suspended animation: The Wan Brothers and the (In) animate Mainland-Hong Kong Encounter, 1947-1956. p. 149.

⁶² Daisy Yan Du. *Suspended animation: The Wan Brothers and the (In) animate Mainland-Hong Kong Encounter, 1947–1956*. p. 146.

⁶³ Shuguang Zhang. *Economic Cold War: America's Embargo Against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949-1963* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) p.83.

‘well-produced Soviet animations can be learnt by Chinese animators’.⁶⁴ Chinese animation thus achieved considerable progress by learning and referencing the above aesthetic styles, the works in this period are represented by *Why Crows are Black/Wuya Weishenme Shi Heide* (Qian and Li, 1955) (fig 1.2) which won an award at the 1956 Venice animation festival.⁶⁵ However, some audiences and judges misunderstood the film as an artistic creation from the Soviet Union,⁶⁶ because ‘this film did not reflect Chinese national characteristics and looked more like Soviet animation in terms of conceptual design’.⁶⁷ This phenomenon sounded the alarm for Chinese animators. Te Wei, then the first manager of the state-owned Shanghai Animation Film Studio (henceforth referred to as SAFS), believed that the development of the national style was extremely urgent because the Chinese customs, stories and visual arts should be reflected in domestic animation works.⁶⁸ SAFS was founded in April 1957,⁶⁹ Te Wei mentioned that ‘the target audience of Chinese animation should be mainly children, but it should also take into account of the taste of adults in terms of thematic intention and form of expressions.’⁷⁰



Fig 1.2: *Why Crows are Black* (1955)

⁶⁴ David Ehrlich and Tianyi Jin. ‘Animation in China’ in John Lent ed., *Animation In Asia and the Pacific* (London: John Libbey, 2001) pp.7-29, p.9.

⁶⁵ No Author. ‘Appendix 2’ in Editing Room of “Movie Communication” in the Film Bureau of Cultural Department and National Film Editing Room in China Film Press ed., *Research on the Fine Art Film Creation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984) pp.194-96, p.194 [in Chinese].

⁶⁶ John Lent and Ying Xu. ‘Animation in China Yesterday and Today: The Pioneers Speak Out’, *Asian Cinema*, Vol. 12, No.2, 2001, pp.34-49, p.35.

⁶⁷ Huilin Zhang, p.62.

⁶⁸ Lent and Xu. ‘Chinese Animation Film: From Experimentation to Digitalization’. p.116.

⁶⁹ Songlin Zhang and Jianying Gong. *Who creates Little Tadpole Looking for Their Mom: Te Wei and Chinese Animation* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2010) p.69 [in Chinese].

⁷⁰ Te, p.3.

The animation works produced by SAFS have covered a wide range of subjects and won a number of awards at international festivals. Its distinctive style led to it becoming known as the ‘Chinese School’. It is widely acknowledged that the period between 1957 and 1965 is the first golden era of Chinese animation.⁷¹ This is partly due to the integration of Chinese culture elements into its animated creations. *The Conceited General/Jiaoao De Jiangjun* (Te and Li, 1956) (fig 1.3) was the first fine art film produced by SAFS, and can be regarded as the first experiment in the nationalized style by adopting several representative elements of Beijing opera. For example, the creators used gongs and drums in the film music while the main characters are dressed in masks and stage costumes that are similar to that found in Beijing operas (fig1.4).



Fig 1.3: *The Conceited General* (1956)



Fig 1.4: Beijing Opera Mask

Animation production suffered massive impact during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).⁷² The whole film production sector carried out the ‘Four Clean-ups Movement’⁷³, an important component of the anti-revisionism campaign, as soon as the Revolution began.⁷⁴ A series of cinematic creations, which included fine art films, were condemned as ‘poisonous weeds’ (*Duciao*) and were then banned, such

⁷¹ Yuanyuan Chen, p. 176

⁷² The Cultural Revolution is a social-political movement lead by Mao Zedong and the leftists in CPC, this campaign is then publicly disavowing by the party. It also called ‘Ten Years of Chaos’ or ‘Ten-year Catastrophe’ in China.

⁷³ The Four Clean-ups Movement refers to clean thinking, clean politics, clean organization and clean economy respectively.

⁷⁴ Zhang and Gong, p.127.

as *Mudi/Mu Di* (Te and Qian, 1963) and *Havoc in Heaven*.⁷⁵ For example, Ehrlich and Jin maintain that the reason for *Havoc in Heaven*'s prohibition was that the film expresses marked disrespect to the supreme leader Mao Zedong. They argue that 'as a young conquering potent male who creates "havoc" with the "old boy" networks in Heaven, Monkey (Sun Wukong, who is the protagonist of this film) proved to be the paradigm of the heroic rebel for Mao Zedong (the authority).'⁷⁶ At the same time, animators were exiled to work in manual labour to be re-educated by the poor and lower-middle peasants for the purpose of 'purifying the poisonous part of their thoughts' and 'resisting the erosion of Soviet revisionism' like their live action filmmakers counterparts, where they were not able to work with any animation-related works.⁷⁷

Creators from SAFS did not return to work until 1972 when the Prime Minister Zhou Enlai asked to resume production of feature films and animation in a conference.⁷⁸ Even then their creative endeavours only served political propaganda, and had to be in strict accordance with the 'Three Prominences' principles.⁷⁹ Accordingly, individual creativity had been suppressed. This situation did not change until the end of the Cultural Revolution.⁸⁰ The works of SAFS during this period are typified by *After School/Fangxue Zhihou* (Yan, 1972) and *Little Trumpeter/Xiao Haoshou* (Wang and Yan, 1973). These films were created with distinctive marks of the Culture Revolution from plot to character design, which reveal strong political propaganda meanings such as the building of revolutionary little hero and ideal kid (discussed in Chapter 2).⁸¹ In 1979, SAFS produced animated feature film *Nezha*

⁷⁵ The 'poisonous weed' in Cultural Revolution refers to 'the label for any writing or art deemed anti-party, anti-socialist, and non-proletarian'. See Guo Jian, Yongyi Song and Yuan Zhou. *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) p.255. See also Huilin Zhang, p.105.

⁷⁶ Ehrlich and Jin, p.11.

⁷⁷ Lent and Xu, 'Chinese Animation Film: From Experimentation to Digitalization'. p.119.

⁷⁸ Huilin Zhang, p.106.

⁷⁹ The Three Prominences is one of the guiding literary theories in the Culture Revolution period. To be specific, it means that the media creators, in stage play, revolutionary opera, film and animation productions, need to highlight the positive ones among all characters, highlight the heroic figures among positive characters, and highlight the main heroes among heroic figures.

⁸⁰ Zhang and Gong, p.142.

⁸¹ Huilin Zhang, p.107.

Conquers the Dragon King and then won a series of awards at home and abroad.⁸²

The creation of animation shorts has also been regaining its aesthetic tradition, and then further enhanced the international status of the Chinese School. Within this context, the period between 1977 (the first year after Cultural Revolution) and mid-1980s is often identified as the second golden age of Chinese animation.⁸³

With the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the domestic animation industry has suffered a massive impact exerted by the imported competitors, thereby causing a long-term slump in the whole sector. This situation did not change until the government began to reassess the cultural and economic value of animation industry and then introduced a series of supporting policies. Along with the animation production and the marketization process of the industry, the domestic animation has achieved considerable development in recent years which will be further discussed in the case study chapters.

1.5 The Child-oriented trend

In this section, I briefly introduce the child-oriented trend in Chinese-language animated works. I argue that the above phenomenon is derived from a specific social circumstance. First, I examine the child-oriented principle in animation production in China. Second, I analyse the deep-seated reasons behind the above tendency in order to lay a foundation for the discussion in case study chapters.

Jayne Pilling (1997) argues that several successful feature films (animated and live action/animated hybrid) have changed the audience's judgements of the medium

⁸² The film won 'Best Animated Film Award' at the 1980 China Hundred Flowers Awards, 1979 Ministry of Culture Excellent Film Award, and 'Special Award' at 1983 Manila International Film Festival. It was also being selected for exhibition at 1980 Cannes International Film Festival. See People's Daily Online. '*Google Releases a New Doodle to commemorate the 35th Anniversary of Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*'. Available from: <<http://comic.people.com.cn/n/2014/0530/c122366-25086371.html>>. [Accessed: 12 February 2017] [In Chinese].

⁸³ Yuanyuan Chen, p. 176.

from a child-only enjoyment to an adult-appropriate entertainment.⁸⁴ Walt Disney also said that 'I do not make films primarily for children. I make them for the child in all of us, whether we be six or sixty'.⁸⁵ At the same time, the emergence of adult-oriented animated TV series such as *South Park* (1997-present), *Beavis and Butt-head* (1993-1997, 2011) and *The Simpsons* (1989-present) also reveals that animation has gradually become a form of entertainment that is suitable for all age groups. However, in terms of the target audience of Chinese animation, a relatively broad consensus from industry practitioners and scholars is that the target market of the overwhelming majority of NGCCA works is children. Accordingly, the adult viewers, intentional or otherwise, have always been ignored by creators for a variety of reasons. The child-oriented trend can be regarded as one of the most salient features of Chinese cinema animation nowadays. Therefore it is important to provide a brief overview about this trend in this section and about how it originated and its mixed impact on the animation production, in order to lay a solid foundation for the later discussion.

As suggested earlier, Chinese animation especially those created after the founding of the PRC, is being considered as a tool of child education, namely a form of educational entertainment as useful supplements to daily compulsory school learning. At the same time, there has been much discussion about whether animation should serve both children and adults. In other words, is it necessary to produce animation products specialized for adults? Through the examination of current industrial practice in China, it seems that a considerable portion of animators still believe watching animation is primarily 'entertaining activity for children'.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Jayne Pilling. 'Introduction' in Jayne Pilling ed., *A Reader in Animation* (London: John Libbey, 1997) pp. ix-xviii, p. ix.

⁸⁵ David Tietzen. *The Musical World of Walt Disney* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1990) p.8.

⁸⁶ Nisha Da and Yuan Yao. 'The Problem of "Child-Oriented" Hindered the Creation of Chinese Animation', *Art and Design*, No. 6, (2010), pp. 275-276, p. 275 [in Chinese, my translation].

Besides the seemingly narrow and incomplete understanding of animation and its potential audience in the context of child-based principles, it is worth further exploring the deep-rooted background. In comparison with Japan and America that greatly differ in production modes and aesthetic style but share a similar global importance, it can be said that Chinese animation is relatively weak in terms of influence and popularity both domestically and internationally. Japan is famous for the limited animation and the balance between quantity and quality; it has played a crucial role in shaping the global cartoon market, which occupied almost 40 per cent share of the American market in 2004.⁸⁷ Jianjun Chen (2009) reported that 19 of the 20 most popular animation characters among Chinese youngsters are made in Japan.⁸⁸ American cinema animation has also made a tremendous impact on China and the world market. According to the China Box Office website which is China's largest data platform about box office revenue, the top-grossing animated films in China had historically been CGI American products between 2008 and 2014 until the exhibition of its Chinese counterpart *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (discussed in Chapter 5). It is noticeable that several industry practitioners have found the potential limitation of the current child-oriented trend of NGCCA. The director of *The Legend of Qin/Qinshi Mingyue* (2007) Shen Leping maintains that 'the Chinese animation industry should serve all age groups. In America and Japan, there are many adult animation enthusiasts'.⁸⁹

Having the desire to change the current situation is a sign of attitude transformation while the market pressure may prove the rationality and feasibility of the child-oriented trend. A large number of foreign animations have entered the Chinese market and then occupied local TV screens since the 1980s (as mentioned

⁸⁷ Michael R. Czinkota and Ilkka A. Ronkainen. *International Marketing* (Cincinnati: Cengage Learning, 2007) p.8.

⁸⁸ Jianjun Chen. '19 of 20 most Popular Animation Characters among Chinese youngsters are from Japan'. Available from: <<http://japan.people.com.cn/35467/6636516.html>>. [Accessed: 25 December 2016] [in Chinese].

⁸⁹ Yuanting He. 'Animation should have the Ability to Serve All Age Groups'. Available from: <<http://comic.people.com.cn/n/2014/0710/c122366-25264291-2.html>>. [Accessed: 18 November 2015] [in Chinese, my translation].

earlier). Accordingly, Chinese audiences have been exposed to the overseas production (mainly Japanese and American works) for more than two decades especially in the 1990s. In terms of the cinema animation aspect, Te Wei argues that *Lotus Lantern* is the only domestic animated film that achieved commercial and reputation success due to the high standard production and successful re-adaptation of a widespread traditional folk tale (discussed in Chapter 2).⁹⁰ Years of watching overseas animated products have gradually fixed the aesthetic taste of the Chinese audience for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of foreign animations have achieved international popularity before they were introduced in China, in other words, they are proven competitive products even in their own countries. Chinese audiences become accustomed to watching such high-quality works and the standard they represent. Secondly, many of the Chinese animation cannot fully meet the expectations of local viewers, which inevitably led to disappointment. Therefore, within the context of the obvious gap between Chinese animation and its imported counterparts, it seems somewhat risky to produce mature-animation-fans-oriented cinema animation. On the contrary, a children audience, especially for those under the age of 10, may not form a fixed notion about animation aesthetics. Correspondingly, Chinese cinema animation should be more easily accepted by children viewers under the present production standard.

1.6 ‘Derivative Film’ as a Link of the Industry Chain

In this section, I briefly introduce the concept of ‘derivative film’ in this thesis. I argue that the above works feature the intimate connection between the film products and the whole franchise system. Firstly, I explain what is ‘derivative film’ and its market significance. Secondly, I examine how the content of ‘derivative film’ reflects the child-oriented trend in animation production. Lastly, I analyse the possible limitations of ‘derivative film’.

⁹⁰ Changmin Xu. ‘Status Quo of Chinese Animation and the consideration on Existing Problems’, *Today’s Massmedia*, No. 4, (2013), pp.53-55, p. 54 [in Chinese, my translation].

Keane argues that the animation industry in China 'is diversified into *content* production and the *animation value chain* more broadly'.⁹¹ He maintains that the animation content is produced for domestic TV stations in exchange for a fee. In terms of the animation value chain, it 'operates on a more industrial basis and incorporates a range of endeavours, including retail networks, logistics, product placement, franchising and licensing'.⁹² In recent years (from 2009 till now) Chinese cinemas have started to screen serialized domestic animated films that are adapted either from online games and virtual communities for children, or animated TV series under the same or similar name. For example, *Legend of the Moles/Moer Zhuangyuan* (2011, and its sequels, 2012 and 2015), *Seer/Saier Hao* (2011, and its sequels, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017) are based on the interactive children game, and *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf/Xiyangyang Yu Huitailang* (2009, and its sequels 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015) and *Boonie Bears/Xiong Chumo* (2014, and its sequels 2015, 2016 and 2017) are the film versions of TV animation. In most cases, these serialized products not only brand themselves through the successive screenings year on year, but also serve as a vital link in the animation value chain. The relatively high brand awareness of the original work makes their film products attract considerable potential members of audience even before they have start promotion. In other words, the target audience engagement, which involves the relatively loyal game player or TV viewer, could guarantee the box office to some extent. At the same time, the exhibition of film products in turn can promote the marketing of the whole franchise system.

Regarding the current creative direction of animated works, the NGCCA can be broadly separated into two categories: the serialized and broad-based films which are produced on a foundation of existing franchises, and the completely original works without pre-existing audience familiarity. The latter will be discussed in the next section. The most distinctive feature of the former is the connection between the film product and the online game, virtual community and TV series based on. Therefore this type of film can be regarded as the derivatives of its parent brand,

⁹¹ Keane. *The Chinese Television Industry*. p.135.

⁹² Same as above.

therefore we may call it 'derivative film'. But the 'derivative' here could not be simply understood as the cultural commodities for sale, but in return, the process of reputation accumulation of the films may also promote the spread of its parent brand. There is a popular belief that Chinese animation should copy the Japanese animated-manga mode, which means the adaptation of popular manga as the main source of animation creation.⁹³ It is partly due to the great success of Japanese manga and anime in China. Nevertheless, unlike Japan, where manga occupies approximately two fifths of the sales volume of books and magazines⁹⁴ and a nation that sold 481 billion yen of manga sales in 2006,⁹⁵ China's comics market is still in its preliminary stage that may not be able to provide enough relatively mature products as the source of animation. Danfeng Cui (2014) maintains that the target readers of domestic comics are still children under 12, and 90 per cent of older readers are the loyal customers of Japanese manga.⁹⁶ Regarding the current market situation, the *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* animated TV series have been continuously screened in over 50 central and provincial television stations,⁹⁷ and then released as comic books on this basis.

The child-oriented trend of NGCCA can also be seen in the above derivative films. As discussed earlier, the derivative films are produced based on the domestically-made popular animated TV series, online games and virtual interactive communities for children, which have one thing in common: the similar targeted children customers. As a result, the above works are always animated in a cute style in terms of the character (large head, sparkling eyes, tiny nose, etc.) and props (toy-like, etc.) design. The parent brands and their distinguished style establish the mass

⁹³ Wei Liu, Haiyan Huang and Peng Chen. 'The Relevance between Anime and Manga: Case Study on Ai Yazawa', *Art and Design*, No. 1, (2009), pp. 214-216, p. 215 [in Chinese, my translation].

⁹⁴ Kelly Chandler-Olcott. 'Anime and Manga Fandom: Young People's Multiliteracies Made Visible', in James Flood, Shirley Brice Heath and Diane Lapp eds. *Handbook of Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts, Volume II: A Project of the International Reading* (London: Routledge, 2008) pp.247-258, p.250.

⁹⁵ Mark MacWilliams. 'Introduction', in Mark MacWilliams ed. *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 2015) pp.3-25, p.13.

⁹⁶ Danfeng Cui. 'The Development of Chinese Comics: Inspirations from Japanese Experience', *Culture Monthly*, No. 5, (2014), pp.42-45, p. 41 [in Chinese, my translation].

⁹⁷ Yuhuan Liu. 'Value Chain Analysis on Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf Animated TV Series', *Film Review*, No. 7, (2012), pp. 81-83, p. 82 [in Chinese].

foundation for the film products. In return, the intensive display of relevant characters, clothes and props on large cinema screen can also reveal plenty of intentional or unintentional details ignored in TV series or online games due to the limitation on screen size and resolution. At this point, the derivative films can also play a role as the advertisement of other peripheral commodities such as the toys and action figures based on a 3D-animated character which are derived from the same brand.

The possible limitations of the derivative films should not be overlooked besides its increasingly important function in the animation value chain. In consideration of the brand building and subsequent new product development, many production companies choose to complete and release a new animated film annually or at least every two years, such as the previously mentioned *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* and *Happy Little Submarine/Qianting Zongdongyuan* (2008, and its sequels 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). While the brand building matters, it is questionable whether the film made within just one year, which includes not only the whole production cycle but also the distribution process, could achieve the industry standard. The production cycle of a Hollywood-style animated movie often takes three years, which can be divided into development, preproduction, production, post-production and distribution stages separately.⁹⁸ The creation and release of Hollywood cinema animation roughly follows the rule stated above in most circumstances, such as the *Ice Age* (2002, and its sequels 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2016) and *Shrek* (2001, and its sequels 2004, 2007, 2010). Moreover, the relatively well-known characters and background story may attract audiences to cinemas for the first few derivative films especially for the first one, but viewers could also seem to be gradually feeling aesthetic fatigue by the stereotyped character design and unreasonable plot arrangement (discussed in Chapter 3).

⁹⁸ Janet Wasko. *How Hollywood Works* (New York: SAGE, 2003) p.15.

1.7 Original works in a Dilemma

In this section, I examine the dilemma of original NGCCA works. I argue that the commercial predicament of the above productions is due to various reasons. I start by reviewing the contradictory relation between the sound reputation and prolonged box office slump of some original works. Then I consider the overwhelming spread of foreign animations in China and the corresponding impacts. Finally, I briefly examine the problems in animation production in China, which are represented by the overly hasty production schedule and the corresponding unsatisfactory quality.

As suggested earlier, the derivative films and their totally original counterparts are two mainstreams of Chinese cinema animation between 1995 and 2015. The former do have some limitations while the box office can be guaranteed by its mass foundation to some extent. At the same time, some of the original products have been stuck in an embarrassing circumstance that the films enjoy relatively positive feedback online and offline but suffer box office flop and even be unable to recover their production costs during the theatrical release. For example, *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013, 2014) is well-received in several Chinese online film databases and film review aggregator sites such as Douban movie and Mtime. The rating of the three instalments *Kuiba 1*, *Kuiba 2* and *Kuiba 3* achieves 7.8, 7.6 and 8.0 scores in Douban movie⁹⁹ and 7.5, 7.3, 6.7 in Mtime¹⁰⁰ respectively based on the rating system that ten is the perfect score, which are significantly higher than the majority of its derivative films counterparts (lower than 7 points in most cases).¹⁰¹ However, the box office of each episode forms an ironic contrast with the

⁹⁹ Douban Movie. 'The Subject Search of *Kuiba*'. Available from: <http://movie.douban.com/subject_search?search_text=%E9%AD%81%E6%8B%94&cat=1002>. [Accessed: 22 November 2015] [in Chinese].

¹⁰⁰ Mtime. 'The Movie Search of *Kuiba*'. Available from: <<http://search.mtime.com/search/?q=%E9%AD%81%E6%8B%94>>. [Accessed: 23 November 2015] [in Chinese].

¹⁰¹ The Chinese name of the first instalment of the five-part *Kuiba* series is 魁拔之十万火急/*Kuiba Zhi Shiwan Huoji*. But after checking this film's IMDb link, I find that its English name is also *Kuiba*, a name shared with the whole series (this phenomenon will be discussed in Chapter 4). In this sense, I will call the first *Kuiba* film as *Kuiba 1* for the purpose of differentiating the former from the multiple-film works.

high reputation. The contradiction between the sound reputation and prolonged slump of box office is just one manifestation of the dilemma of original works, while the deep-rooted causes under the partial or superficial phenomena are various and should be critically analysed accordingly.

As discussed earlier, the viewing habits and aesthetic taste of Chinese audiences have been gradually influenced by the overwhelming spread of foreign animation over the past two decades. Jing Sun (2012) considers the broadcasting of Japanese animation in China as a form of asymmetric cultural exchange, and 'Chinese youngsters have proved no stronger than their counterparts elsewhere at resisting the temptation of Japanese animation'.¹⁰² Cinema animation works from Disney, DreamWorks and Pixar have also long occupied the top ranks of animated film box office list in China.¹⁰³ At the same time, the once famous Chinese School style with distinct ethnic features has been gradually fading away and has become relatively rare to see in the cinema screen. Instead, a large number of original NGCCA works are now characterized by the conspicuous analogy with Japanese or American style. Chinese animators, especially those who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, grew up with watching Japanese and American TV animation programmes (the Chinese government during that time did not officially forbid the latter). They were enthusiasts of the above works and have been heavily impacted by their respective styles. Most of them have also been trained at Chinese universities under the Japanese and American animation education systems that were introduced into China over the last two decades. Furthermore, the majority of Chinese animators have previous or present experience of doing outsourcing work for Japanese or American companies, the longstanding practice has also influenced their future creation.¹⁰⁴ As a result, the reason why many original Chinese cinema animation works feature an obvious Japanese or American style can be seen as a combination

¹⁰² Jing Sun. *Japan and China as Charm Rivals: Soft Power in Regional Diplomacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012) p.52.

¹⁰³ Douban Movie. 'All Time Animated Film Box Office Chart in Chinese Market'. Available from: <<https://www.douban.com/doulist/43539600/>> [Accessed: 17 November 2017] [in Chinese].

¹⁰⁴ Bing He and Wei He. *The Stories of Animation Outsourcing in China* (Beijing: Communication University of China Press, 2014) p.102 [in Chinese, my translation].

of external and internal factors, namely the attempts to cater to audience taste and the creator's own aesthetic preference respectively. However, the problem is the products from the above two countries have raised the audience's expectation on future works regardless of where they come from. Meanwhile it is undeniable that Chinese animation, at the present stage, is not able to reach the world advanced level. Compared with Japanese and American animated films which are produced by industrial magnates, the nominally 'original' but homogenized Chinese cinema animation products would lack competitiveness in both domestic and international markets because of the similar style and relatively lower quality.

The original products are also being dragged down by the disreputable image of Chinese animation that is created by its previous cinema and TV series counterparts which are produced in a rough and slipshod way. In the last twenty years, the animation industry has grown rapidly in China. In 2004, all the animation studios in China, both state and privately owned, produced just 21,819 minutes of TV animations.¹⁰⁵ However, in 2011, the total production of animated TV series in China surged to 261,224 minutes and ranked 1st in the world.¹⁰⁶ In other words, the production capacity of Chinese animation companies had increased tenfold in only seven years. It is obvious that such growth rate does not accord to the characteristics and rules of animation industry as a creative sector which 'requires mutual understanding among a group of people who share similar aesthetic views and goals'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the Chinese animation industry seems to have enough human resources as 447 Chinese universities offered animation as a major subject by October 2006,¹⁰⁸ and more than 500,000 animation students graduated in 2013.¹⁰⁹ However, it is still questionable whether those graduates, after four years

¹⁰⁵ Wen Zhou and Wei He. *Investigation Report on Chinese Animation Industry and Consumers (2008-2013)* (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, 2014) p.171 [in Chinese].

¹⁰⁶ Same as above.

¹⁰⁷ Hyejin Yoon. 'Globalization of the animation industry: multi-scalar linkages of six animation production centres', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 23, Issue 5, 2017, pp. 634-651, p. 634.

¹⁰⁸ Xiao Zhong. 'Animation Education in Chinese Universities lacks of the concern about Traditional Art Spirits', *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, No.5, (2013), pp. 77-79, p. 75 [in Chinese].

¹⁰⁹ Han Li. 'It is Difficult for Animation Graduates to find a Job'. Available from: <<http://comic.people.com.cn/n/2014/0428/c122366-24950351.html>>[Accessed: 24 November 2015] [in Chinese].

undergraduate study, are instantly qualified to work in animation production. Wu Hanqing, the producer of the *Kuiba* series, maintains that in animation production process most of the graduates could only work as an assistant at the beginning, they might gradually become a skilled animator after four or five years industrial practice.¹¹⁰ The current problem is that in the pursuit of high production quantity, the understaffed companies have to use fresh graduates in the whole production process even in some key positions such as key frame drawings and compositing. Such an irresponsible attitude toward creation has led to the continuous deterioration of quality. Even some industry practitioners admit that many of Chinese animation works are ‘crap products’ and ‘not worth watching’,¹¹¹ let alone the reaction from audience. The similar situation happens on cinema animation production, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. Meanwhile, any embarrassment about original NGCCA works have slowly changed since the box office smash of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* which will be analysed in Chapter 5.

1.8 Sun Wukong and *Journey to the West*

In this section, I examine the image of Sun Wukong in Chinese culture and animation. I argue that this character can be considered as the most famous cultural icon in Chinese animation. To begin with, I briefly introduce Sun Wukong as the protagonist in Chinese supernatural evil-spirit novel *Journey to the West*. Afterwards, I examine the Chinese animation works starring Sun Wukong as a leading actor, who serves as a domestic superhero.

Throughout examination of the history of Chinese animation, the image of Sun Wukong (also known as the Monkey King or Great Sage) can be regarded as the

¹¹⁰ Zhou and He, *Investigation Report on Chinese Animation Industry and Consumers (2008-2013)*. p.159.

¹¹¹ Jijun Cao and Weiqi Yan. ‘Industry Practitioners: Chinese Animation Lacks of Humanistic Spirit and the desire to constantly improve Product Quality’. Available from: <http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2013/08-08/5138490.shtml> [Accessed: 22 November 2015] [in Chinese, my translation].

most classic narrative and visual symbol which is formed through the cross-textual communication in China. Therefore it is important to provide a brief review of this figure's significance to Chinese culture and animation in this section, for the purpose of enabling readers to understand the historical and cultural context of Chinese animation before the specific analysis on individual films starring Sun Wukong as the leading actor or as a guest appearance. Sun Wukong is the male-monkey-like main immortal character (fig 1.5), who 'is known for supernatural abilities as shape-shifting, cloud-travelling and demon-fighting',¹¹² in traditional Chinese supernatural evil-spirit novel *Journey to the West/Xi Youji* (written by Wu Chengen in the sixteenth century in Ming Dynasty China).¹¹³ He is a typical heroic image with magic power and is also a symbol of defying violence in Chinese folk culture. Sun Wukong is also well known in the West because he epitomizes one of the most attractive sacred monkey tales from the East.¹¹⁴



Fig 1.5: Sun Wukong in TV Series *Journey to the West* (1986)

Journey to the West is one of the four great classical novels of Chinese traditional literature,¹¹⁵ which tells the legend of how Sun Wukong and his companions Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing (the latter two are also known as 'Pigsy' and 'Sandy' in

¹¹² Jonathan H.X Lee and Kathleen M Nadeau. (eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife, Volume 1* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011) p.296.

¹¹³ The University of Chicago Press Books. *The Journey to the West, Revised Edition, Volume 1*. Available from: < <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/J/bo12079590.html>> [Accessed: 10 February 2016].

¹¹⁴ Matomah Alesha. *Sako Ma: A Look at the Sacred Monkey Totem* (Tucson: Matam Press, 2004) p.69.

¹¹⁵ The other three great classical novels are *Romance of the Three Kingdoms/Sanguo Yanyi*, *Water Margin/Shuihu Zhuan* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber/Honglou Meng* respectively.

English) protect their master monk Xuan Zang travel to the 'West' (India) in order to bring Buddhist scriptures to China during the Tang Dynasty (fig 1.6).¹¹⁶ A broad consensus in Chinese academia is that the story of *Journey to the West* is not the author's entirely original work but 'based on the cross-generational collective creation by countless professional entertainers, playwrights and fictionists'¹¹⁷ in various different artistic forms such as biographies, folktales and drama in Yuan Dynasty.¹¹⁸ In this process, the simple Buddhist story, namely Xuan Zang's pilgrimage to India, had gradually blended massive traditional and domestic Chinese thoughts such as the Taoist and Confucian cultural elements before the creation of *Journey to the West*. Therefore scholars and ordinary readers could interpret the theme of this novel from different angles and theoretical frameworks.

Guangqing Zhang in his 2002 study summarizes several of the most influential approaches for analysing the theme of *Journey to the West*, such as the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the homology of Chinese immortals and Buddha, and the sarcasm.¹¹⁹ It is noticeable that Chinese-language films and television programmes, which are based on the story of *Journey to the West*, often express Sun Wukong's rebellious spirit against the oppression from Heaven led by the tyrannical Jade Emperor,¹²⁰ and how the character combats with demons and other evil-doers on the way of Buddhist scriptures pursuit. In this context, the depiction of the above antagonists implicitly mocks and criticizes the emperor and the malfeasants of the Ming Dynasty respectively. This is unsurprising, considering that compared with the interpretation from religious and other

¹¹⁶ Tang Dynasty (618-901 AD) is one of the most flourishing ages in the history of ancient China, which is notable for the high achievements in various aspects such as economy, politics, culture and diplomacy.

¹¹⁷ Yongbin Xu. 'The Basic Features of Ancient Chinese Collective Creation Long-gestating Novel', *Jianghuai Tribune*, No. 2, (2003), pp. 118-121, p. 118 [in Chinese, my translation].

¹¹⁸ Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 AD) is the first dynasty established by ethnic minorities (the Mongolian People) in the history of ancient China.

¹¹⁹ Guangqing Zhang. 'The Analysis on the Theme of *Journey to the West*', *Journal of Jinan Education College*, No. 4, (2002), pp. 57-60, p. 58 [in Chinese, my translation].

¹²⁰ Jade Emperor is the leader among immortals of Taoism, he is also one of the main antagonists in *Journey to the West*.

relatively metaphysical perspectives, the dramatic conflicts and inner tensions will be maximized under the above good/evil theme. In this way, the image and personality of Sun Wukong are highlighted especially in several most renowned fight scenes such as *Three Battles with the White Bone Demon/Sanda Bagujing* and *Havoc in Heaven*, in which the character represents audacious and irrepressible figure and more like a comic hero.¹²¹



Fig 1.6: Xuan Zang and His Three Disciples in TV Series *Journey to the West* (1986)

As discussed earlier, Sun Wukong serves as a heroic figure in the majority of Chinese films and television programmes. However, some differences between the characterisation of Sun Wukong in live action films and animations need to be noted. The stereotypical perception of this character, as a heroic image, has been deconstructed in several live action films. For example, in fantasy comedies *A Chinese Odyssey Part One: Pandora's Box/Dahuaxiyou Zhi Yueguangbaohe* (Lau, 1995) and *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two: Cinderella/Dahuaxiyou Zhi Xianlvqiyuan* (Lau, 1995), Sun Wukong is depicted as an atypical hero, he is the leader of a group of outlaws who is trapped for the love and loses all his super power. These two films depict the identity dilemma of Sun Wukong and the conflicts between his animality, immortality and the remaining thought of human nature. This creative principle is referenced by *Monkey King: Hero is Back* in the respect of the characterisation of an unprecedented Sun

¹²¹ Linda Helstern. 'Griever: An American Monkey King in China: A Cross-cultural Re-Membering', in A. Robert Lee ed. *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (Madison: Popular Press, 2000) pp.136-154, p.141.

Wukong in Chinese animation, which has directly contributed to the film's phenomenal box office success (discussed in Chapter 5).

Unlike the radical re-reading of Sun Wukong and the story of *Journey to the West* in several live action texts, the character as the leading actor in animation works has maintained a relatively fixed image, namely a hero who defies the vicious power. In other words, he has always been served as a Chinese domestic superhero in both animated TV series and cinema animation (except his performance in the most part of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*). The first Chinese black and white Disney-style cinema animation, *Princess Iron Fan*, was adapted from the *Sun Wukong Borrowing the Plantain Fan/Sun Wukong Sanjie Bajiaoshan* story in *Journey to the West*, naturally this film's protagonist is Sun Wukong (fig 1.7). It was greatly welcomed by the Chinese audiences at home and abroad. According to Wan Laiming, this was partly due to the symbolic meaning of the film's thematic intention, which 'arranges Sun Wukong (a symbol of Chinese people) beats Bull Demon King (the antagonist and metaphor of Japanese invaders), in order to inspire the Chinese people to against Japanese aggressors for the final victory of the Second Sino-Japanese war'.¹²²

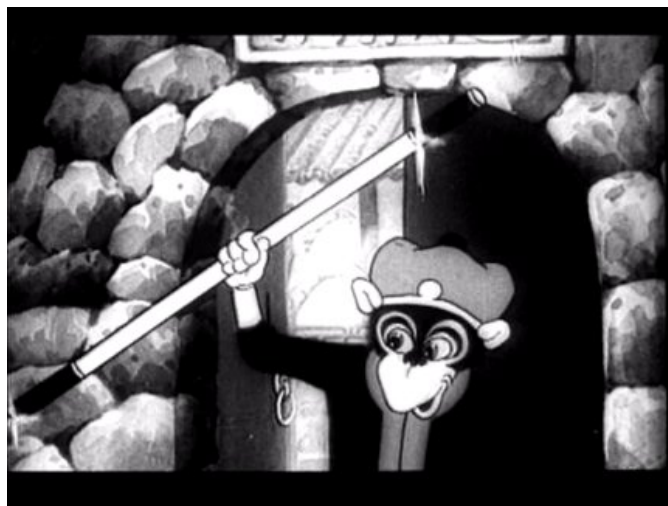


Fig 1.7: Sun Wukong in *Princess Iron Fan* (1941)

¹²² Hui Yan and Yabin Suo. 'Princess Iron Fan and Chinese Cinema Animation in the Second Sino-Japanese War', *New Films*, 06 (2001), pp, 20-22 and 58, p. 22 [in Chinese, my translation].

Since then Sun Wukong has gradually become a classic symbol of Chinese animation. The character's visual image is shaped by a series of most renowned animated films such as *Havoc in Heaven, Ginseng Fruit/Renshen Guo* (Yan, 1981) (fig 1.8), *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon/Jinhou Xiangyao* (Te, Yan and Lin, 1985) (fig 1.9), *Fire Ball: Journey to the West-The Secret Behind the Fiery Mountains/Honghaier Danao Huoyanshan* (Wang, 2005) (fig 1.10) and *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (fig 1.11), and animated TV series like *Journey to the West/Xi Youji* (Fang, Pan and Zhou, 1999) (fig 1.12). Thus the story of Sun Wukong has not only served as a part of Chinese animation audience's collective memories, but has enjoyed a cross-generational appeal among Chinese people.¹²³



Fig 1.8: Sun Wukong in *Ginseng Fruit* (1981)

Fig 1.8: Sun Wukong in *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon* (1985)

Fig 1.10: Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West: The Secret behind the Fiery Mountains* (2005)

¹²³ David M Robinson. *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001) p.14.



Fig 1.11: Sun Wukong in *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015)



Fig 1.12: Sun Wukong in Animated TV Series *Journey to the West* (1999)

1.9 Nationalization, Limitation and Self-examination

In this section, I examine the nationalization controversy in Chinese animation creation. I argue that this issue should be critically analysed in the later discussion of this thesis. First, I review the nationalized identity in Chinese animation. Second, I briefly introduce the traditional elements in Chinese culture and society. Third, I examine the nationalization and application of traditional elements, as a controversial topic, in Chinese animated works.

As discussed earlier, the fine art films, which were produced during the planned economy era, have not only achieved a good global reputation but also enjoyed domestic popularity, and some of the classic characters (such as Sun Wukong) in these works are still very popular among youngsters now. Therefore it seems that the way of nationalization should be the right direction for the development of NGCCA. According to relevant statistics, the fine art films have won 31 international awards between 1956 and 1982.¹²⁴ Chinese animation's 'splendid past, bitter

¹²⁴ No Author. 'Appendix 2' in Editorial Office of Movie Communication in the Film Bureau of Cultural Department and National Film Editorial Office in China Film Press ed., *Research on the Fine Art Film Creation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984) pp.194-96 [in Chinese].

present', ¹²⁵ which is represented by the lack of cartoon icon, from the official point of view make the government pin its hopes on the nationalization of animation creation. In 2008, a guidance document released by the Ministry of Culture calls for

Animation production companies under all forms of ownership (both state-owned and privately-owned) should create, promote and broadcast animation products that could function as the carrier of the essence of glorious traditional Chinese culture and distinctive modern spirit.

Government will also support the enterprises to develop new way of creation that combines the national style and the spirit of the times.¹²⁶

It is worth noting here that the government always put the 'national' or 'traditional' in front of 'modern', thus signalling the official attitude in regard to the industrial development, which contrasts with the perspective from industry practitioners to some extent (discussed later). While in terms of the creation practice aspect, Chinese animators are still currently exploring the possibilities of the nationalized Chinese animation in the context of Japanese and American products achieve a dominating market share. Due to the market and profit pressure, the relevant Chinese works are mainly experimental and relatively small-scale projects, with the exception of *The Legend of Qin* which, though features obvious anime influence, is adapted from the fiction under the same name and characterised by the real and fanciful depiction of Qin Dynasty in the form of the combination between 3D animation and Chinese water ink painting (fig 1.13).

¹²⁵ Xiao Li. '*Chinese Animation: Splendid Past, Bitter Present*'. Available from: <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/film/84974.htm>>. [Accessed: 03 February 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

¹²⁶ Ministry of Culture. '*Ministry of Culture's Some Suggestions to support the Development of Chinese Animation Industry*'. Available from: <http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2008-08/19/content_1075077.htm>. [Accessed: 16 November 2015] [in Chinese, my translation].



Fig 1.13: *The Legend of Qin* (2007)

The way of the nationalized identity in Chinese animation is largely based on the re-examination and modern application of traditional culture elements. Therefore it should be useful here to clarify what are the traditional elements and its distinctive meanings in Chinese culture. The traditional culture in Chinese-speaking cultural regions, which include the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, is a broad and complicated concept. The definition of traditional Chinese culture has not reached the consensus in academia. Zi Zhongyu in her 1987 study argues that the above concept refers to

The culture that prevailed in China from the pre-Qin Shi Huang¹²⁷ days (before 260 BC) until the Opium War (1839), which has Confucianism at its core, mixed first with Taoism and later with Buddhism.¹²⁸

This view is representative among Chinese scholars because the start of the Opium War is often considered as the starting point of Chinese contemporary history and the end of ancient China, because since then the country has been forced to open to the outside world. The traditional culture in China comprises Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, material culture such as wares (porcelain, etc.) (fig 1.14) and artworks (literature, painting, etc.) (fig 1.15, 1.16), and hierarchic culture like bureaucratic system, law and moral rules.

¹²⁷ Qin Shi Huang is the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty.

¹²⁸ Sheng Ding, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings: How China Rises with Its Soft Power* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008) p.68.



Fig 1.14: Porcelain

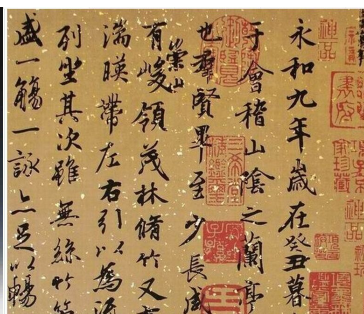


Fig 1.15: Chinese
Calligraphy



Fig 1.16: Chinese Water and Ink
Painting

The traditional elements can also be identified as a form of symbolic representation, which is accepted through common practice of the ancient culture. The above elements include various kinds of visual symbols, such as the ancient Chinese colour symbolism (yellow as imperial power) (fig 1.17), artistic symbols (Beijing Opera, etc.) (fig 1.18), ethnic symbols (customs, costumes and festivals of the Han and other ethnic minorities) and other symbols (Chinese cuisine, etc.). Furthermore, these elements not only formalize the cultural identity in the context of traditional culture, but also reflect the spiritual essence of ancient China. For example, the colour red symbolises prosperity and happiness in traditional Chinese culture, and people traditionally display their desire to pursue a better life by sticking red spring festival scrolls, setting off red firecrackers and hanging red lanterns (discussed in Chapter 3).



Fig 1.17: An Emperor of China's
Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in
Yellow Dragon Robe



Fig 1.18: Beijing Opera *Farewell My
Concubine/Bawang Bieji*

The nationalization and application of traditional elements in animation works remain a controversial issue in China. There are still no answers or consensus about some key questions of this subject in animation studies scholarship. For example, what exactly is the meaning for 'nationalization' in Chinese animation? Could the style of 'Chinese School' be accepted by the current audience, especially those who grew up with watching Japanese and American products? If not, should the Chinese animators abandon this style completely and then develop a new nationalized style? At the same time, there also exists a binary opposition between the government's expectations and industry status quo in the eyes of animators. As I have argued earlier, the government shows positive attitude towards the nationalization of Chinese animation creation. However, Wang Yunfei, the director of *Yugo & Lala/Shenmi Shijie Lixianji* (2012), maintains that 'there is no so-called "national character" with Chinese-style cultural symbols in animation, accordingly we (animators) should not aim at exploring the national character.'¹²⁹ In this sense, the anxiety exists among many industry practitioners in China in terms of whether their creations are 'Chinese' enough or 'too Chinese', which is significant to my thesis and will be discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

However, the above controversies may ignore a fact that the nationalization itself, from a contemporary viewpoint, should be a process of self-examination. If the creators only focus on the collection of superficial national symbols instead of critical thinking on the deeper cultural meaning it represents, that would mean the so-called nationalization lacks its most basic pillar, thus making it difficult to form a convincing and precise theoretical and visual system. Moreover, the nationalized process of Chinese animation should not be equal to the ethnocentric attitude and behaviour which exclude the elements from other cultures. In essence, the discussion of nationalization can be regarded as the exploration of traditional culture's modern value. On one hand, Chinese cultural heritages can indeed serve as the inspiration sources of cinema animation. While on the other hand, it should be admitted that not all the traditional texts, symbols and icons are suited to

¹²⁹ Zhou and He, *Investigation Report on Chinese Animation Industry and Consumers (2008-2013)*. p.171

today's animation creation. Therefore it might be beneficial for Chinese animators to seek inspiration from various sources rather than just place blind emphasis on Chinese-style symbolic representations. Above all, the nationalization issue has gradually become an urgent matter that should not be ignored by Chinese animators and scholars.

1.10 Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline

Chinese cinema animation works in the recent two decades (NGCCA) are chosen as the research objects for this thesis in which I will not only be presenting an in-depth examination of the shifting aesthetic style of Chinese animated films, but also offer industrial analysis on cinema animation production as an important sub-sector of the Chinese cultural creative industries.

This thesis is divided in six chapters. Chapter 2 examines *Lotus Lantern*, the first Chinese animation 'blockbuster' and one of the most successful NGCCA works on both reputation and commercial aspects, since it earned 29 million Yuan at the box office,¹³⁰ and won 'Best Animated Film Award' at both the 1999 China Huabiao Film Award¹³¹ and the 1999 Gold Rooster Award.¹³² In it, I introduce the special social and economic situations under which *Lotus Lantern* was created. The film shouldered the important historic task of resisting the market pressure brought by the imported animated works like *The Lion King*. Moreover, it aimed at re-stimulating the domestic cinema animation sector's decades-long slump. I examine the Chinese iconography in this film, which is represented by the continuities and differences when compared with its fine art films predecessor. I focus on how *Lotus Lantern* reinterpreted and reconstructed the classic cartoon image of Sun Wukong

¹³⁰ Film Box Office. 'The Box Office of Lotus Lantern'. Available from: <<http://58921.com/film/1111>>. [Accessed: 06 February 2016] [in Chinese].

¹³¹ Chunli Li. 'The Announcement of 1999 China Huabiao Film Awards Results'. Available from: <<http://www.gmw.cn/01gmrb/2000-05/10/GB/05%5E18416%5E0%5EGMA3-111.htm>>. [Accessed: 07 February 2016] [in Chinese].

¹³² Yuying Fan. '1999 Gold Rooster Award Results'. Available from: <<http://eladies.sina.com.cn/movie/news/movie/1999-10-21/12197.shtml>>. [Accessed: 07 February 2016] [in Chinese].

in Chinese animation. Then I turn my attention to the film's application of Hollywood iconography and techniques. I shall analyse the film's several useful attempts in the production process such as the adoption of pre-recorded dialogue and top film stars as voice casts. Through the comparative studies between *Lotus Lantern* and *The Lion King's* character establishment and plot arrangement, I show the differences between SAFS and Disney in terms of how to build a character in animated film.

Chapter 3 analyses the *Boonie Bears* series (2014, 2015), which is the theatrical version of animated TV series under the same name. In this chapter I argue that *Boonie Bears* is the representative work in terms of derivative films' industrial development. I briefly introduce Chinese cinema animation production after the release of *Lotus Lantern*. Then I examine the industrial significance of *Boonie Bears* series among all the derivative films by comparing it with the once dominant *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* films. I analyse the promotional activities, which are characterised by the cross-generational appeal and Internet thinking, of *Boonie Bears* series. To do this, I examine how the distributors of the films achieve targeted audiences by using different strategies in different platforms (both traditional and new media). I also analyse the use of product placement in *Boonie Bears*, in order to explore the role of derivative films in the whole industry chain. Afterwards, I focus on how the reinterpretation of logger Vick, who is the main antagonist in *Boonie Bears* TV series, in the 2014 version attracts young adult viewers especially young parents who are in their late 20s and early 30s. Finally, I compare the representation of media violence between *Boonie Bears* animated TV series and films. To begin with, I examine the physical and verbal violence in *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* TV animations, which have caused risky mimicry among child viewers and the corresponding personal injury cases. I review the social attitudes toward the above issue from different perspectives (state media, critics, parents, etc.). Then I turn my attention to how and to what extent the production company purifying and reducing the media violence in the 2014 and 2015 cinematic creations. These efforts were accepted by the majority of potential

audience members especially young parents that have further contributed to the box office success of the above two films.

In Chapter 4, I analyse the *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013, 2014). A large number of original NGCCA works have stuck in a commercial dilemma that the films have achieved universal critical acclaim online and offline, but they were not able to obtain commercial success. This phenomenon can be represented by the quandary of the *Kuiba* films. I begin by examining the background in which the above films were created. I examine the Chinese cinema animation market in the year of 2011, which is represented by the box office failure of the original *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog/Zangao Duoji* (Kojima, 2011). Then I review the ambition of production company Vasoon Animation Studio, which attempts to create the first Chinese-style high fantasy fictional universe in *Kuiba* films. As mentioned earlier, *Kuiba 1* achieves 7.8 and 7.5 scores in film review websites Douban movie and Mtime respectively. Furthermore, the film has also been critically acclaimed offline. It was nominated for the ninth Golden Dragon Awards (2011) as the best animated feature film and won the 2013 Huading Award as the best cinema animation.¹³³ However, the actual box office receipts contrast with the sound reputation. In this sense, I analyse two main reasons which cause the box office flop of the first instalment. I examine the series' efforts to construct a fictional universe inspired by *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of The Rings* franchises. Then, I focus on the relation between *Kuiba 1*'s overly informative prologue and later narratives. I will also consider *Kuiba 1*'s naming strategy, which further confuses not only the individual film but the whole series' identity in the market. Afterwards, I analyse the insufficient promotional activities of *Kuiba 1*. Finally, I examine the aesthetic individuality of *Kuiba 1*. I consider this culturally hybrid film to straddle the line between Chineseness and Japaneseness. In arguing this, I review the originality issue in Chinese animation. The analysis on *Kuiba 1* follows by the comparative studies between this film and *Dragon Ball* (the

¹³³ See Qiong Liu. 'Kuiba was nominated for the Ninth Golden Dragon Awards'. Available from: <<http://finance.qq.com/a/20110913/001181.htm>>. [Accessed: 25 October 2017] [in Chinese]. See also Sina Entertainment. '2013 Huading Award Results'. Available from: <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2013-04-10/22273896804.shtml>>. [Accessed: 25 October 2017] [in Chinese]

former is suspected as the imitation of the latter) and other Japanese Shonen manga and anime works¹³⁴ for the purpose of finding the particular reasons beneath the argument on originality. Then I focus on how the ancient and contemporary Chinese cultural elements have been represented in the fictional Yuan Yang world in *Kuiba* series.

In my fifth chapter, I examine how Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) communication within social-media assisted the Chinese animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* break box office records (0.95 billion Chinese Yuan, previously 0.61 billion) and create a new method of film promotion in China.¹³⁵ Chapter 5 is framed in contrast to Chapter 4 because *Kuiba 1* failed and *Monkey King: Hero is Back* triumphed at the box office within the context of both films could be seen as the original animated features with high entertainment value. In considering the reasons for the above phenomenon, Chapter 5 examines the importance of audience feedback/engagement in making a film successful. In this sense, the case of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* can be regarded as the public opinion's victory on the industry expectations. This chapter analyses the changing influence of social media in terms of animation publicity in China and the role of audience by adopting data analysis and reception studies methods. Firstly, I analyse the inevitability and contingency in *Monkey King: Hero is Back's* massive popularity among Chinese Internet users, and how online public opinions overcome industry expectations. To do this, I start by examining the Chinese film market in the year of 2015, especially the summer film season, when *Monkey King: Hero is Back* was screened. Then I review the film's advance publicity campaigns like crowdfunding project and limited release which have helped to cultivated loyal fans. Afterwards, I analyse how the above enthusiasts promote the film on Chinese-language social networks and how the WOM communication exert influence both online and offline. Secondly, I examine the reinterpretation of Sun Wukong in this film, in order to explore how and to

¹³⁴ The target reader and audience of Japanese Shonen manga and anime are young boys under the age of 15.

¹³⁵ Julie Makinen. "'Monkey King' breaks 'Kung Fu Panda 2' record in China as 'Monster Hunt' surges'. Available from: <<http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-et-ct-monkey-king-monster-hunt-china-20150728-story.html>>. [Accessed in 08 February 2016].

what extent the re-expression of the character as the protagonist contribute to the film's phenomenal box office success. I focus on Sun Wukong's visual composition in this film such as facial design and body proportion, which largely contrasts with the previous depictions. An atypical Sun Wukong is not rejected by viewers, but instead tends to be favoured by them. Therefore, I will analyse the shaping of multiple identities of this figure, namely the combination of the divinity, animality and humanity. Overall, the former two qualities are downplayed in the film while the latter is greatly emphasized, thus creating an antiheroic role who wins great support from young viewers.

The following chapter will interpret *Lotus Lantern* which reflects the distinctive features of NGCCA at its first phase. It will explore in more detail the film's role in the history of NGCCA and how social and historical conditions influence the creation of animated work. This chapter also approaches *Lotus Lantern* as a conceptual pastiche that comes from hybridizing domestic traditions and foreign practices in terms of both aesthetic and industrial level.

Chapter 2 The Chinese Animation ‘Blockbuster’ and *Lotus Lantern*

2.0 The Historical Context of SAFS’s *Lotus Lantern* and the Main Aims of the Chapter

The main aims of this chapter are to identify the industrial significance of the 2D adventure animation *Lotus Lantern* by considering it as the first attempt at the ‘blockbuster’ Chinese cinema animation, in order to highlight NGCCA’s developmental features at this initial stage. Furthermore, this chapter will also illuminate the subject by analysing how and to what extent the Hollywood and Chinese iconography have affected the creation of *Lotus Lantern* and the subsequent NGCCA works, and the film’s characteristics (both industrial and aesthetic) in the context of such conceptual pastiche. The case study will begin with the interpretation on the film’s adoption of Chinese iconography in various aspects such as the inheritance of Chinese cultural and visual heritage and the recreation of classic cartoon characters. The discussion will follow by the analysis on how *Lotus Lantern* borrows from Hollywood iconography and techniques, and then the comparison between the character building of *Lotus Lantern* and *The Lion King*.

2.0.1 A Brief Introduction to the Chinese Film Market (1979—2000)

In this section, I briefly examine the Chinese film market (1979—2000) within a broader international context. I argue that this period witnessed how Chinese film business has transformed from a state-controlled and closed economy to one that is relatively open for imported productions. First, I examine the Chinese film industry and film market by the end of the 1990s. Second, I review the role of imported live action Hollywood blockbusters in China, and survey how and to what extent the domestic film sector has been impacted by the foreign competitors which have always shown strong box office appeal.

The Chinese film market was once totally controlled by the government and relevant cultural departments. From 1979 to the early 1990s, the films which had been publicly screened in China were entirely produced by the state-owned studios with limited themes such as revolutionary wars, historic events, martial arts and realistic melodramas about urban and rural people's life. As a result, audiences seemed to be feeling quite fatigued by the relatively one-sided and repeated thematic intentions and storylines. At the same time, this period also witnessed the continuous decline in the numbers of filmgoers due to various reasons like the popularization of television sets in Chinese families and the growth of VHS (Video Home System)/VCD (Video Compact Technology). According to relevant statistics, the annual attendance at theatres had dramatically decreased from 21 billion in 1982 to about 4.5 billion in 1991.¹³⁶ In view of the long duration of the crisis, the government broke up the monopoly of CFDEC (as mentioned in the Introduction section) and then further encouraged the non-governmental investment in film industry since 1995.¹³⁷ At the same time, Hollywood movies have been re-imported into China for the purpose of re-stimulating the declining domestic film market and attracting more moviegoers.¹³⁸ It should be noted here that the Hollywood works once dominated the Chinese film market from 1920s to 1930s but then banned in the PRC between 1949 and 1994 due to the ideological conflict.¹³⁹

Warren Buckland (2006) defines the blockbuster movie in two variables: 'the huge sums involved in production and marketing, and the amount of revenues received'.¹⁴⁰ Kirsten Thompson (2013) also maintains that Hollywood blockbusters

¹³⁶ Stanley Rosen. 'China Goes Hollywood' Available from:

<<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/04/china-goes-hollywood/>>. [Accessed: 07 May 2016].

¹³⁷ Shixian Huang. 'Trends in Globalization and the Direction of Domestic Chinese Films: Several Considerations on the Current Status and Future of Chinese Films', *Cinematic Creations*, 01(2001), pp. 58-62, p.58 [in Chinese].

¹³⁸ Sean O'Connor and Nicholas Armstrong. 'Directed by Hollywood, Edited by China: *How China's Censorship and Influence Affect Films Worldwide*' Available from: <<http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Directed%20by%20Hollywood%20Edited%20by%20China.pdf>>. [Accessed: 08 May 2016] p.5.

¹³⁹ Kenneth Chan. *Remade in Hollywood: The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009) p.14.

¹⁴⁰ Warren Buckland. *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (New York and London: Continuum, 2006) p. 17.

are characterised by 'spectacle, relative length and expenses, and the adoption of special technologies and presentational features in the content and exhibition of the film'.¹⁴¹ She also believes that blockbusters, which feature high production values and benefit from the star system, have played a vital role in differentiating Hollywood creations from other products in the international film market.¹⁴² That is to say, the attribute of being a blockbuster is one of the most important competitive advantages of Hollywood products. The return of Hollywood blockbusters began with the exhibition of *The Fugitive* (Davis, 1993) in the end of 1994, this movie was shown at approximately 200 theatres in China and ultimately earned 25 million Chinese Yuan at box office.¹⁴³ It is widely regarded as a critical event in the development of Chinese film sector by domestic critics and scholars. Then the Chinese government decided to import at most 10 American movies (mainly from Hollywood) per year between 1995 and 2000 such as *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994), *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) and *Rumble in the Bronx* (Tong, 1995), which resulted in high box office returns in most cases.¹⁴⁴ On one hand, Hollywood productions have rekindled the enthusiasm of Chinese audiences, thus greatly stimulating the whole industry which had fallen into a long-term downturn. According to an article written in 1996 for the purpose of summarizing the previous year's Chinese film market, 'the overcrowded film theatres are coming back; the "sold-out" board is repeatedly hung on the box office, film tickets are always in high demand but short supply and the scalpers take up their old trade again'.¹⁴⁵

On the other hand, the ten blockbusters always provided the majority of the box office revenue during this period, which placed further stress on the already struggling local film industry. For instance, ten imported films comprised 70 per

¹⁴¹ Kirsten Thompson. 'Once Were Warriors: New Zealand's first Indigenous Blockbuster' in Julian Stringer ed., *Movie Blockbusters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013) pp.230-241, p.231.

¹⁴² Kirsten Thompson, p.231.

¹⁴³ Hongjun Zhou. 'What Ten Blockbusters bring to Us?', *Centurial Trip*, 08(1995), pp. 13-15, p. 13 [in Chinese].

¹⁴⁴ O'Connor and Armstrong, p.5.

¹⁴⁵ Mei Lao. 'Domestic Film: Dawn and Shadow—A Glimpse of Chinese Film Market in 1995?', *Film Art*, 02(1996), pp. 43-48, p. 44 [in Chinese, my translation].

cent of the total box office receipts in China in the year of 1995.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, as an extreme example, in China *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) obtained 320 million Chinese Yuan in theatrical screening, which accounted for more than one fifth of the annual box office revenue (1.44 billion), the remaining part was shared by other imported films and 82 domestic productions.¹⁴⁷ Stanley Rosen in his 2010 study considers the re-introduction of Hollywood movies into the theatrical market in China as a measure of ‘reciprocity’, which aims at cultivating competitive spirit among Chinese-language films by directly competing their Hollywood rivals in both domestic and international market.¹⁴⁸ In this context, Chinese filmmakers started to explore the possibilities of their own blockbusters which undertook two historic missions, one is to resist the pressure from Hollywood and the other is to revitalize Chinese-language films. This trend can be illustrated not only by the production of live action box office attractions such as *In the Heat of the Sun/Yangguang Canlan De Rizi* (Jiang, 1995), *Red Cherry/Hong Yingtao* (Ye, 1995) and *Red River Valley/Honghe Gu* (Feng, 1997), but the initial exploration of Chinese animation blockbuster *Lotus Lantern*.

2.0.2 SAFS's *Lotus Lantern* as A New Dimension for Chinese Cinema Animation

In this section, I examine *Lotus Lantern* within a national context. I argue that this film is a product of particular historical circumstances and has an important role to play in the development of NGCCA. First, I consider how the creation of *Lotus Lantern* has been influenced by *The Lion King* and *A Chinese Ghost Story: The Tsui Hark Animation/Xiao Qian* (Chan, 1997). Second, I examine the historical context of *Lotus Lantern* as a state-owned SAFS creation, which entangled the political, social and economic tasks.

¹⁴⁶ Jenny Daccache and Brandon Valeriano. *Hollywood's Representations of the Sino-Tibetan Conflict: Politics, Culture, and Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p. 154.

¹⁴⁷ Shixian Huang, p.58.

¹⁴⁸ Stanley Rosen. ‘Chinese Cinema’s International Market’ in Zhu Ying and Stanley Rosen eds., *Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010) pp.35-54, p.35.

The creation of *Lotus Lantern* was directly affected by the great success of Disney's *The Lion King* in China, which achieved 41.3 million Chinese Yuan during its public screening in 1995, and the film also broke the opening-day records at the box office in Beijing city (0.5 million Chinese Yuan).¹⁴⁹ For the first time Chinese audiences and animators experienced the world-leading technical standards for animation and classic Disney-like aesthetic style on the large screen. The sensational effect even caught the attention of Jiang Zemin, then the Chinese president and chairman of the CPC, who wrote a letter to SAFS to encourage the latter to 'study the overseas advanced experience' and 'create Chinese own animation blockbuster'.¹⁵⁰

Furthermore, in 1997 the Hong Kong animated film *A Chinese Ghost Story: The Tsui Hark Animation*, as the first Sinophone animation to employ both cel and computer animation, achieved both critical and commercial success. Similar to the ambition of his mainland live action filmmakers counterparts, Hong Kong director and producer Tsui Hark hoped *A Chinese Ghost Story* 'would spark an interest in animation again in Asia'.¹⁵¹ The film earned 8.1 million Hong Kong Dollars at the box office and won Best Animated Feature at the 1997 Golden Horse Film Festival.¹⁵² Regarding the changing market circumstances and development trends, the executive vice director of SAFS Jin Guoping believed that the production of full-length cinema animation shall be one of the feasible ways that enable the animation to re-enter the market.¹⁵³ At the same time, Jin and other crews also maintained that the feature-length animated film, which functioned as a 'Gift Film' without political implication,¹⁵⁴ would be an ideal tribute for celebrating the 50th

¹⁴⁹ Jieying Xi. 'Highbrow or Popular—Some Inspirations from Cinema Animation *The Lion King*', *China Youth Science and Technology*, 09&10 (1995), p.1 [in Chinese].

¹⁵⁰ Jianyu Chen. 'Chinese Animation is quietly Rising up—Interview in Shanghai Animation Film Studio', *Popular Cinema*, 03 (1999), pp. 36-41, p.38 [in Chinese, my translation].

¹⁵¹ Lisa Morton. *The Cinema of Tsui Hark* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2001) p. 128.

¹⁵² Morton, p.128.

¹⁵³ Jianyu Chen, p.37.

¹⁵⁴ The so-called 'Gift Film' refers to a special genre of government-leading Chinese film, which is produced for the purpose of commemorating the decennial anniversary of the PRC or CPC in order to praise their great achievement. These works are often produced by state-owned film production companies. Accordingly the 'Gift Film' is often named as 'political filmmaking' and 'propaganda productions' by Western critics and viewers. The representatives of 'Gift Film' include *The Song of Youth* (1959), *The Birth of New China* (1989), *Jiao Yulu* (1990), *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) and *Beginning of the Great Revival* (2011).

anniversary of the PRC. *Lotus Lantern* was born and created under such special historical and social circumstances.

The story of *Lotus Lantern* (also called *Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother*) is a form of cross-media text which originates from the ancient Taoist myth and legend among Chinese Han group. *Lotus Lantern* and the relevant cultural phenomenon can be regarded as an important component of ethnic Han Chinese's cultural tradition. It has been adapted to traditional Chinese opera, live action films and TV series besides animation. The popularity and awareness of the *Lotus Lantern* story has laid a foundation for the success of the animated film version. Giannalberto Bendazzi in his 2015 study maintains that *Lotus Lantern* is a milestone of Chinese cinema animation, and it showed a fresh approach of creating Chinese-language animated features and pursued a balance between investment and quality.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Stephanie Donald (2005) also believes this film is one of the two recent examples of animated film (the other is *Journey to the West*) 'challenging foreign (Disney/Pixar) content for popularity'.¹⁵⁶ Guo and Li (2017) considers *Lotus Lantern* 'experimented with combining the commercial formula of Disney cartoons with the narrative and characters of a traditional folk story'.¹⁵⁷ *Lotus Lantern* is the first NGCCA work that achieved commercial success (29 million Chinese Yuan at the box office).¹⁵⁸ In the meantime, the film, functioned as the animation sector's first step of industrial production and circulation of texts, has triggered heated discussion on various aspects such as narration and character establishment. Accordingly, this film could not be simply treated as an artistic creation in the certain period. Instead it indicates a new dimension for NGCCA in some respects such as the matching of animation to pre-recorded dialogue, well-known actors as the voice casts and the completely digital visual effects.

¹⁵⁵ Giannalberto Bendazzi. *Animation: A World History: Volume III: Contemporary Times* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015) p. 272.

¹⁵⁶ Stephanie Donald. *Little Friends: Children's Film and Media Culture in China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) p. 11.

¹⁵⁷ Li Guo and Jinying Li, p. 117, 118.

¹⁵⁸ Film Box Office. 'The Box Office of *Lotus Lantern*' Available from: <<http://58921.com/film/1111>>. [Accessed: 08 May 2016] [in Chinese].

2.1 The Application of Chinese Iconography in *Lotus Lantern*

2.1.1 *Lotus Lantern* and its Fine Art Film Predecessors

In this section, I consider how and to what extent the visual attributes and narrative form of Chinese animation in the pre-NGCCA period have been referred and reconstructed in *Lotus Lantern*. I argue that the creation of cinema animation in the NGCCA era has become more market-oriented and audience-oriented. First, I examine the *Lotus Lantern*'s historical role in SAFS's full-length creations. Second, I compare this film with its fine art film predecessors in terms of narration (thematic intention, narrative structure, etc.), representation of ethnic minorities (creation of a dark-skinned tribe girl) and characterisation (reintroduction of the classic cartoon character Sun Wukong and Tudiye).

Lotus Lantern was the first full-length animated film produced by SAFS since the studio began its institutional reform in 1995.¹⁵⁹ It is worth noting here that there remains debate among Chinese academics and industry practitioners about the number of feature-length cinema animation works that are labelled as SAFS productions before this year. It is generally recognized that the above category includes *Havoc in Heaven*, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, *The Legend of Sealed Book/Tianshu Qitan* (Wang and Qian, 1983) and *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon*, this view is accepted by the majority of scholars and members of staff in SAFS. In the meantime, Yan and Suo (2005) maintain that the puppet animation *Saving Mother Part 1/Xiyue Qitong Shangbu* (Jin, 1984) (55 minutes) shall also be

¹⁵⁹ As mentioned in the Introduction section, the animation works produced by SAFS had been funded and distributed by the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation Company. According to an interview with the studio's deputy director Zhu Yuping in 2010, 'SAFS enjoyed full government funding before 1995 and the annual production volume was around 40 units which was ordered by the relevant cultural authorities', and 'purchasing prices was 100,000 Chinese Yuan for each two-dimensional animation production and 80,000 to 90,000 Yuan per puppet animation'. In 1995 the above system was terminated, SAFS then officially involved in market competition. See Yu Zhang. 'The Rise and Decline of Shanghai Animation Film Studio' Available from: <http://lywb.lyd.com.cn/html/2010-03/08/content_612364.htm/>. [Accessed: 10 May 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

counted in,¹⁶⁰ while Huilin Zhang (2002) argues that *A Zhuang Embroidery/Yifu Zhuangjin* (Qian, 1959) (48 minutes) is another feature-length example.¹⁶¹

Accordingly *Lotus Lantern* is regarded as either the fifth or sixth full-length cinema animation created by SAFS from different perspectives.

The cause of the above argument is that historically speaking, most Chinese scholars tend to define the theatrical animated film, like its live action counterparts, as one that 'tells the whole story in a time range between 60 to 90 minutes long' and that is 'being displayed mainly in the theatre'.¹⁶² In this case, I am inclined to consider that *Saving Mother Part 1* (henceforth referred to as *Saving Mother*), *A Zhuang Embroidery* shall be both classified as a full-length cinema animation. From the point of view of international conventions, the animated feature film is defined by the Academy Awards committee as:

Motion pictures with a running time of more than 40 minutes, in which movement and characters' performances are created using a frame-by-frame technique. Motion capture by itself is not an animation technique. In addition, a significant number of the major characters must be animated, and animation must figure in no less than 75 percent of the picture's running time.¹⁶³

The British Film Institute also considers 'feature length films (include narrative, animation, documentary, etc)' as 'more than 40 minutes' in an official document.¹⁶⁴ Therefore I reject previous views on the issue of SAFS's feature-length animated films production before 1995, instead I believe *Lotus Lantern* is the seventh full-length animated film created by the studio and a pioneer among all the NGCCA works. Furthermore, it is also worth noting here that *Saving Mother* is also adapted from the mythical story *Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother*. By considering

¹⁶⁰ Yan and Suo, *History of Chinese Cinema Animation*. p. 199.

¹⁶¹ Huilin Zhang, p.187.

¹⁶² Xiaolin Yang. *Interpretation on Selected Cinema Animation in the World* (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2007) p. 2 [in Chinese, my translation].

¹⁶³ Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. '88th Academy Awards of Merit for Achievement during 2015' Available from: <https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/88aa_rules.pdf>. [Accessed: 11 May 2016].

¹⁶⁴ British Film Institute (BFI). 'The 56th BFI London Film Festival' Available from: <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-lff-submissions-information-regulations-2016-02-15.pdf>>. [Accessed: 11 May 2016].

Saving Mother as a feature-length production, it is helpful to clarify the relationship between *Lotus Lantern* and its fine art film predecessor produced by SAFS, which provides an important historical and cultural background. Furthermore, the above analysis of *Lotus Lantern*'s historical role reveals SAFS's creative principle before and within the NGCCA era, namely the continuous exploration and development of Chinese iconography in various aspects.

Similar to the theme of *Lotus Lantern*, *Saving Mother* also tells a story about how Chen Xiang saves his mother who is imprisoned under a mountain. In the prologue of *Saving Mother*, a little boy Chen Xiang (it is his given name, the surname is Liu as his father) lives with his father named Liu Yanchang in an anonymous mountain, one day the former is abused by his classmate as 'the child has no mother'. The young protagonist then asks his father where the mother is, Liu finally tells his son the whole story after a long silence. In fact, Chen Xiang's mother is the female goddess San Sheng Mu (the name means the Holy Mother of Mount Hua¹⁶⁵ and her real name is Yang Chan) who falls in Love with mortal man Liu and then gives birth to Chen Xiang. San Sheng Mu's relationship with Liu is strongly opposed and intervened by her brother and male immortal Erlang Shen (the real name is Yang Jian).¹⁶⁶ Then San Sheng Mu is imprisoned beneath Mount Hua by Erlang Shen as the punishment for the former's adultery with ordinary human being. After hearing this Chen Xiang decides to rescue his mother from the mountain. On the way to Mount Hua the young boy meets Zhaoxia Gugu who is another female immortal and maidservant of San Sheng Mu, she tells Chen Xiang more details about his parents' tragedy. Zhaoxia Gugu also brings Chen Xiang to ask Pili Daxian¹⁶⁷ for help, the latter plays as the protagonist's master and teaches him how to save his mother

¹⁶⁵ Mount Hua is one of five most famous high mountains in China and a holy place of Taoism. San Sheng Mu, who is characterised by intelligence, beauty and kindness, is a female immortal figure of Taoism and lives in Mount Hua.

¹⁶⁶ Erlang Shen is a Taoist supernatural being who features a third truth-seeing eye in the middle of his forehead. He is also one of the main adversaries of Sun Wukong in *Journey to the West*.

¹⁶⁷ Pili Daxian is the god of thunder in Taoism culture.

by learning magic and martial arts. The film ends here without indicating the result of the mother-saving campaign.¹⁶⁸

The first half of *Lotus Lantern* adopts the basic storyline of *Saving Mother*, but the former attempts to adjust the narrative structure and character building by taking into account the market and audience's reaction. Unlike the character relationship in *Saving Mother*, in the beginning of *Lotus Lantern* Chen Xiang lives happily with San Sheng Mu (fig 2.1) while his father Liu Yanchang has been killed by Erlang Shen (fig 2.2). Then San Sheng Mu is caught and imprisoned by his brother, Chen Xiang is also being taken by Erlang Shen's vulture and Howling Celestial Dog to the Heavenly Palace as a hostage. Compared with the prologue of *Saving Mother*, the depiction of a mother being taken away from the side of her son in *Lotus Lantern* provides stronger dramatic conflict. More importantly, the above scenes give the audiences a more intuitive appreciation of the film's thematic intention (saving the mother). It is noticeable that San Sheng Mu's lotus lantern,¹⁶⁹ as an important prop and narrative clue in *Lotus Lantern*, does not appear in *Saving Mother*. In the 1999 version this magic weapon is robbed by Erlang Shen and then locked into the Heavenly Palace's warehouse. Chen Xiang then retakes the lantern as the only token of kinship between him and his mother. In the film the item always serves as the protagonist's behavioural motive.

SAFS has a history of representations of ethnic minorities in China such as the previously mentioned *Princess Peacock* and *A Zhuang Embroidery*. Macdonald (2016) maintains that 'for animation like *A Zhuang Embroidery*, as for live-action fictional film, minority culture offered an additional source for "national style"'.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ *Saving Mother Part 1* was released in 1984, the second part of this film was not produced until 2006. The second part is named as '*Saving Mother*' rather than *Saving Mother Part 2*. It is the combination of the remaking of part 1 and completion of the rest of the story. The 1984 and 2006 animated films share the similar aesthetic style and production techniques. But the former is more representative in terms of the characteristics of Chinese School style. Therefore regarding the main aim of this section, the 2006 version *Saving Mother* is not within the scope of discussion.

¹⁶⁹ Lotus lantern itself is a magic weapon previously owned by Nv Wo, who is the goddess that creates the whole world in Chinese ancient myth. Then Nv Wo gives San Sheng Mu the lotus lantern as a gift.

¹⁷⁰ Macdonald, p.113.

He also argues that *Princess Peacock*, a puppet animation adapted from Dai group's epic poetry, shows the minority culture and retains an exoticism among the SAFS oeuvre.¹⁷¹ That is to say, the application of cultural heritages from ethnic minority with regard to the practice of animation production has become part of SAFS's creative tradition. In *Lotus Lantern*, SAFS inherits this tradition, and responds to it creatively by introducing a dark-skinned imaginary tribe girl named Gamei into a fairy tale of Han group. Stephanie Donald (2013) considers Gamei, who is also caught by Chen Xiang's uncle as a hostage (fig 2.3), as a charming *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995) look-like girl whose father has been similarly disappeared.¹⁷² As the daughter of the tribal chief, Gamei's whole clan is forced to carve a huge heavenly stone into a statue based on the appearance of Erlang Shen. Chen Xiang accidentally encounters Gamei in the Heavenly Palace, they immediately become close friends due to the similar miserable experience. In this sense, the female character not only stands in for a fictional ethnic group but also a figure from a high-grossing foreign animated feature who also in turn represented a minority ethnic group in American culture. San Sheng Mu's son loses touch with Gamei after an escape from the Heavenly Palace, but they meet again during the former's adventure of saving mother. Then Gamei falls in love with Chen Xiang and helps the latter to defeat Erlang Shen with the assistance of other tribal people, which subtly epitomizes and advocates a harmonious coexistence of the unity among Han group and other ethnic minorities in China.

¹⁷¹ Macdonald, p.116.

¹⁷² Stephanie Donald. 'Crazy rabbit! Children's media culture' in Stephanie Donald, Michael Keane and Yin Hong eds., *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013) pp.128-138, p.136.



Fig 2.1: Childhood Chen Xiang with San Sheng Mu



Fig 2.2: Erlang Shen

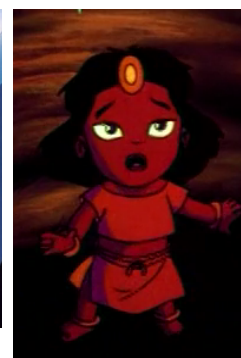


Fig 2.3: Childhood Gamei

Besides the consistent expression of ethnic minority characters like its predecessors created in the fine art film period, *Lotus Lantern* also reintroduces several iconic cartoon figures in the history of Chinese animation and reinvests them with new personalities and roles. In *Saving Mother*, the character relationships basically follow its counterparts in the original mythical text, that is, Zhaoxia Gugu acts as Chen Xiang's guide on the way to save mother while Pili Daxian as his master and patriarchal figure in the second part of the film. This form of character relationship, with pre-existing audience familiarity, has indeed mass foundation while putting the film itself at the risk of lacking content innovation. Potential audiences might be too familiar with the story to see the film in cinema. Howard Suber in his 2006 study maintains that 'characters are defined, not so much by what they are as by what they do, and what they do in drama is to interact with other people'.¹⁷³ In this sense, the characterisation of Chen Xiang does not just depend on his own actions and motivations, but more about the interplay between him and other key figures in the film. Regarding this the creators of *Lotus Lantern* made a bold attempt by replacing the role of Zhaoxia Gugu and Pili Daxian with Tudiye¹⁷⁴ and Sun Wukong respectively. It is undeniable that the tale of *Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother* has been spreading in China for thousands of years, the story was also listed in the

¹⁷³ Howard Suber. *The Power of Film* (Los Angeles: Michael Wiese Productions, 2006) p. 65.

¹⁷⁴ Tudiye (also known as Tudi or Tudigong) is the male god among Chinese Han group, he is the god of land. Tudiye is one of the lowest ranked gods in Taoist immortal system.

second intangible cultural heritage list in Shanxi Province in 2009.¹⁷⁵ Therefore Zhaoxia Gugu and Pili Daxian are frequently heard among Chinese people. However, there are few previous animated works starring these two characters besides *Saving Mother*. In other words, they are far less influential than Tudiye and Sun Wukong in terms of character awareness and appeal in the animation world.

2.1.2 The Recreation of Sun Wukong in *Lotus Lantern*

In this section, I focus on the continuities and changes in the expression of Sun Wukong in *Lotus Lantern*. I argue that the film reintroduces a brand new Chinese superhero as a guest appearance. First, I examine the iconic look of Sun Wukong. The cartoon image of the character is comprised of a series of visual elements from traditional Chinese art forms. In *Lotus Lantern* Sun Wukong's external appearance, besides the overall consistency of style, has been adjusted due to its identity change. Second, I analyse the process of Sun Wukong's inner transformation using textual analysis, in order to explore how this figure change from a neutral bystander to an enthusiastic helper.

Sun Wukong, as discussed in the Introduction, can be regarded as a representative of the Chinese superhero and 'for a long time the main cartoon figure standing for Chinese animation'.¹⁷⁶ The character's reputation is accumulated through a series of SAFS's productions such as *Havoc in Heaven*, *Ginseng Fruit* and *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon*. As for his commercial value, Sun Wukong serves as the logo for SAFS that displays on the licensed products related to the studio.¹⁷⁷ In terms of Tudiye, he often plays a supporting role as Sun Wukong's underling in the above-mentioned animation works. In *Lotus Lantern* their behavioural patterns are also being retained such as Tudiye's sneezing then rubbing his nose (fig 2.4) and Sun Wukong's restless monkey instinct. By adding the recognizable and symbolic

¹⁷⁵ Fei Kang. 'The Tale of Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother has become the Spiritual Symbol of Mount Hua Culture' Available from: <<http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2016-07-01/doc-ifxtscen3061047.shtml>>. [Accessed: 25 July 2016] [in Chinese].

¹⁷⁶ Macdonald. p.15.

¹⁷⁷ Macdonald, p.15.

cartoon characters like Sun Wukong and Tudiye into the narrative sequence, *Lotus Lantern* stimulates the adult audience's nostalgic memories within childhood. Meanwhile the animated image of Sun Wukong, who is also characterised by his outstanding personality, energetic appearance and dance-like action, is much more attractive than the relatively less-known and mediocre existence of Pili Daxian among younger viewers who have not watched animation works starring Sun Wukong but already heard or read his heroic deeds from other static mediums such as picture books and novels.

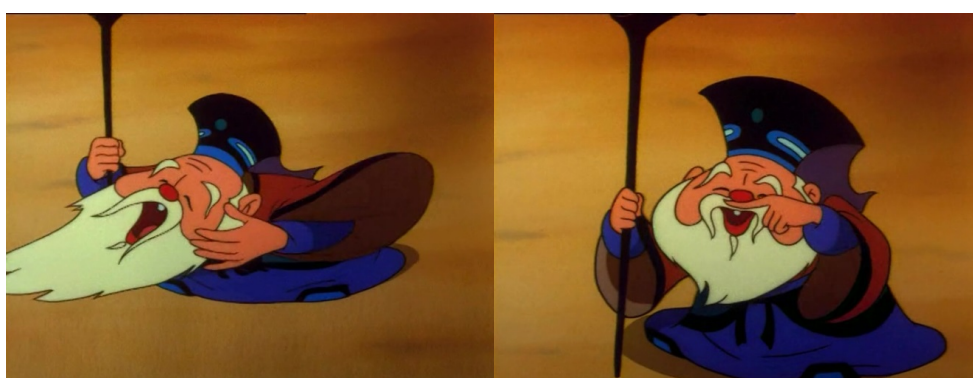


Fig 2.4: Tudiye is sneezing then rubbing his nose

Sun Wukong plays a guiding role in *Lotus Lantern* like Pili Daxia did in *Saving Mother*. In the first part of the film, he is more like a spiritual advisor of the protagonist rather than a master of fighting skills which is essential in the revenge campaign. While in the second part of *Lotus Lantern*, Sun Wukong serves as a helper to Chen Xiang in the latter's battle with Erlang Shen. The following discussion will focus on the refiguration of Sun Wukong as a guiding role in *Lotus Lantern*, in order to explore how and to what extent the use of Chinese iconography has affected the creation of the film, and the recreation of Sun Wukong in the context of the character's status transition and identity conflict.

There is no doubt about the significance of Sun Wukong and the story of *Journey to the West* in the field of Chinese animation. The classic cartoon iconography of Sun Wukong is initially designed by caricaturist Zhang Guangyu (fig 2.5) and finalized by animator Yan Dingxian in the creation process of *Havoc in Heaven* (fig 2.6), and then

inherited and developed by successive works which starred the character. Sun Wukong's visual image in Chinese animation is constituted based on a series of symbolic representations which are formed over a period of time. On the whole, the design of Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven* and subsequent SAFS works, including costume, action and body proportion aspects, is largely affected by the artistic creation of stage characters in Beijing Opera. The Chinese Thunder God like mouth (fig 2.7) and round ear come from Sun Wukong's nature of monkey while the body shape and action design are inspired by the appearance of Wusheng¹⁷⁸ in Beijing Opera (fig 2.8). Furthermore, Sun Wukong's multiple identities, namely the combination between monkey instinct, humanlike behaviour and Buddhahood,¹⁷⁹ is expressed by using several symbolic costumes such as leopard skirt and robes of Buddhist monks. Specifically, the leopard skirt symbolizes Sun Wukong's wildness, violence and rebellion features in terms of his monkey nature. At the same time, the monk robe is functioned as a foreshadowing of the character's inner transformation from human to Buddha.



Fig 2.5: Two Version of Sun Wukong designed by Zhang Guangyu



Fig 2.6: Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven*

¹⁷⁸ Wusheng refers to male characters in Beijing Opera who are skilful in martial arts.

¹⁷⁹ Sun Wukong ascends to Buddhahood after successful fetching the Buddhist scripture from India (the West in the novel). He is rewarded as the 'Victorious Fighting Buddha'.



Fig 2.7: Chinese Thunder God



Fig 2.8: Wusheng in Beijing Opera

Besides the overall appearance of Sun Wukong, the character's facial design is more representative in the respect of borrowing typical elements from Beijing Opera. By painting colourful dressing on the actor's face, Wei-ming Tu (2004) considers the painted-face characters in Beijing Opera represent 'men of great strength—men with superhuman physical or mental powers, or supernatural beings'.¹⁸⁰ The facial design of Sun Wukong is largely based on the extraction, simplification and then recreation of the visual attributes of the above painted-face image. Drawing extensively on Sun Wukong's graphic elements in Beijing Opera and other traditional Chinese drama (fig 2.9), the character's facial image is characterized by a series of symbolic representations like yellow monk bonnet, double-layered painting eyes and nose with bright red and golden yellow colour, brown hair, willow green arched eyebrows and Chinese Thunder God like mouth (fig 2.10). The inverted peach heart like shape has unstable, energetic and mutinous meaning, which is a metaphor for Sun Wukong as a heroic image with rebellious spirit. The creation of golden yellow eyes is based on the so-called 'golden-gaze fiery-eyes',

¹⁸⁰ Wei-ming Tu. 'The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature' in Corinne H Dale ed., *Chinese Aesthetics and Literature: A Reader* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004) pp.27-40, p.37.

which can penetrate all sorts of evil-doers in the disguise of human appearance.¹⁸¹ Gold colour here can be regarded as a sign of righteousness and brightness. The combination of bold colours enriches the visual impact of the character's external image by providing a stark contrast between colours like black, gold, willow green and bright red. Moreover, the designer simplifies several complex silhouettes such as the Thunder God mouth into succinct geometric shape and further highlights and exaggerates the circular arc ears.



Fig 2.9: Sun Wukong in Beijing Opera



Fig 2.10: Facial image of Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven*

In *Lotus Lantern* Sun Wukong's visual image basically adopts its counterpart in *Havoc in Heaven* with minor adjustments by considering the changes of his identity in the mythological world. In his first shot as a guest appearance in a desert with Tudiye, the previously disorderly Sun Wukong, who used to defy the whole Heavenly Palace and the hierarchical order it represents, has been rewarded as the Victorious Fighting Buddha. It can be inferred through the dialogue between him and Tudiye that at this time the once heroic simian has become a Buddha for thousands of years ('you have kept the old habits for thousands of years', Sun Wukong said). In that scene Sun Wukong is engaged in an argument with Tudiye

¹⁸¹ The 'golden-gaze fiery-eyes' as a supernatural power comes from the story that the primogenitor and supreme god of Taoism Laozi throws Sun Wukong into an alchemy stove for the purpose of burning the latter to death, but things turn out contrary to Laozi's wishes. Sun Wukong accidentally gets the ability of 'golden-gaze fiery-eyes' through 49 days in flames instead of burned in the stove.

about whether the former shall give a hand to Chen Xiang's saving mother campaign. It is worth noting here that in *Lotus Lantern* Sun Wukong always wear a red Buddhist cassock due to his Buddhahood like his master Xuan Zang. At the same time, the Victorious Fighting Buddha sits in meditation on a lotus blossom which shares the similar style with its counterpart owned by Buddhist Goddess of Mercy (also named as bodhisattva Guanyin in China) (fig 2.11).¹⁸² Sun Wukong's identity change is to be observed from the above details, the once recalcitrant Great Sage has become a member of the authoritative heavenly system which he used to violently opposed and treated with contempt. June English-Lueck (1997) argues that Sun Wukong's identity transition is 'the pilgrim who transforms his chaotic monkey mind, dominated by a lust of power, flitting from vanity to vanity, to that of a legitimate, disciplined and enlightened Buddhist consciousness'.¹⁸³



Fig 2.11: Sun Wukong's Overall Appearance in *Lotus Lantern*



Fig 2.12: Facial image of Sun Wukong in *Lotus Lantern*

Donald (2014) maintains that in *Lotus Lantern* Chen Xiang is helped by the 'beatific' Sun Wukong.¹⁸⁴ I disagree with her argument because the Buddha-like Sun Wukong is not 'beatific' in his first appearance, instead he holds to himself and is reluctant

¹⁸² In one chapter of *Journey to the West*, Bodhisattva Guanyin catches the disobedient Sun Wukong and places a golden loop over the latter's head. This item is used to keep Sun Wukong under control of his master Xuan Zang. The golden Hoop becomes increasingly tighter along with Xuan Zang repeats the corresponding incantation, thus forcing his monkey apprentice feels more and more headaches until the latter gives up making trouble.

¹⁸³ June Anne English-Lueck. *Chinese Intellectuals on the World Frontier: Blazing the Black Path* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1997) p. 5

¹⁸⁴ Stephanie Donald. 'Crazy rabbit! Children's media culture', p.136

to help Chen Xiang to rescue San Sheng Mu. This can be revealed by the change of the character's facial design. To be specific, the lively willow green eyebrow is replaced by the relatively sober and sedate brown while the vibrant and bright golden yellow eyes are changed to peaceful and cool azure colour (fig 2.12). Such obvious change in colour matching enables the audience to obtain an intuitive appreciation for how and to what extent Sun Wukong, as a classic and symbolic figure in Chinese animation, has changed in the film. Moreover, the steady and sophisticated visual image foreshadows the later plots in terms of the character's inner conflicts between different identities.

Qiang Xiaobo (1984), who is the editor of a variety of animation works produced by SAFS, interprets the heroic image of Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven* by arguing that

Sun Wukong's boldness stems from superb skill, he is unrivalled and triumphant after defeating all the divine troops descending from the Heavenly Palace. The rebellious monkey, who is exceptionally brave and resourceful, has left an indelible impression on the audience'.¹⁸⁵

He also believes that Sun Wukong epitomises a form of national trait, which is characterised by the heroic spirit of defying brutal suppression.¹⁸⁶ Macdonald (2016) also argues that Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven* is the most unrestrained and aggressive Monkey King. The creators of the film used the character's fury against both the hierarchical structure the Heavenly Palace represents and a restraint on himself.¹⁸⁷ The youthful and dynamic Sun Wukong is shown not only in *Havoc in Heaven*, but also in a series of animated films that were created before his guest appearance in *Lotus Lantern*. That is to say, in most cases, the stereotyped masculine form of Sun Wukong has always been a symbol of freedom and the contempt for authority.

¹⁸⁵ Xiaobo Qiang. 'Creating some Short Fine Art Film' in Editorial Office of *Movie Communication* in the Film Bureau of Cultural Department and National Film Editorial Office in China Film Press ed., *Research on the Fine Art Film Creation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984) pp.76-89, p.86 [in Chinese, my translation].

¹⁸⁶ Qiang, p.87.

¹⁸⁷ Macdonald, p.32.

However, the listless Victorious Fighting Buddha in *Lotus Lantern* contrasts with the classic image of the restless rebel hero. In the first half of his conversation with Tudiye, Sun Wukong insists that he has offered spiritual guidance to the protagonist hence rejects to give further assistance. To be specific, Sun Wukong gives San Sheng Mu's son two sentences of proverbs and waits for the latter's sudden enlightenment like a Buddha preaches his sermons to the devotees. He looks on as a disinterested by-stander instead of teaching Chen Xiang any practical skills for saving San Sheng Mu. In other words, Sun Wukong tries to avoid situations may produce hostility and confrontation between him and Erlang Shen who symbolizes the power of Heavenly Palace. It is noticeable that Sun Wukong and Erlang Shen used to be mortal enemies in the story of *Journey to the West*. Macdonald (2016) notes that although Sun Wukong is defeated by Erlang Shen in *Journey to the West* novel, but the narrative does not indicate the dignity of divine power. Instead, the fiction reveals 'Sun Wukong's unyielding rebellion against divine rule'.¹⁸⁸ However, it does not exist clash between Sun Wukong and Erlang Shen in *Lotus Lantern*. In this sense, it can be argued that the relatively neutral stance of the Victorious Fighting Buddha stems not only from the conscious mental restriction from his thousands of years of identity with Buddhahood, but also from an unconscious bondage of authority (Erlang Shen and the heavenly power) around him.

While at the same time, some behaviours and facial expression of Sun Wukong reveals his internal conflicts which include identity conflicts and emotional struggle. For example, before their conversation the invisible Sun Wukong teases Tudiye. Sun Wukong takes away the latter's walking stick and keeps the item in the air using magic power; Tudiye wants to take back his stick but painfully bumps against the lotus blossom. In this scene, Sun Wukong reveals his innate monkey nature and, as always, the naughty and joking personalities. Furthermore, the monkey-like Buddha feels angry and his face becomes contorted when Tudiye condemns his iron-hearted response on Chen Xiang's miserable sufferings, which contrasts sharply with his previous calm and indifferent expression. Such abrupt emotional

¹⁸⁸ Macdonald, p.23.

conversions can be considered as the struggle of character's heroism in the context of institutional constraints. The above clues prepare the ground for Sun Wukong's later character development in the second part of the film.

Chen Xiang meets his spiritual teacher when he grows up, San Sheng Mu's son immediately recognizes Sun Wukong and calls the latter his 'master'.¹⁸⁹ The protagonist bows down to Sun Wukong to beg for further assistance. In the beginning Sun Wukong still insists on his neutrality in the case of conflict between Chen Xiang and Erlang Shen, but his attitude has started to change as the communication progresses, which can be illustrated by his piquant behaviour. On one hand, he sits on the lotus blossom and continues preaching the Buddhist sermons to Chen Xiang like a priggish monk (fig 2.13). On the other hand, he is also winking and casting a glance at Chen Xiang's friend the little anonymous monkey when the protagonist lowers his head. Furthermore, as a vital turning point of plot and character development, Chen Xiang goads the Victorious Fighting Buddha into action by satirizing the latter cannot understand the pain over the loss of a loved one because he is born from a stone.



Fig 2.13: Sun Wukong refuses Chen Xiang's Request

¹⁸⁹ Chen Xiang has a general impression on Sun Wukong's appearance before they meet. When Chen Xiang is being detained in the Heavenly Palace, Tudiye shares the story of Sun Wukong with the protagonist by explaining a series of Chinese traditional frescos.

At this point Sun Wukong reveals his pent-up mood about family affection by denying he is a motherless orphan. He believes his mother, like the tragic situation of San Sheng Mu, has also been imprisoned by an evil person. Therefore he will rescue the mother at any price once he knows where she is (fig 2.14). It is worth noting here that in the original text of *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong does not feel bitterness or any other painful emotions in terms of his status as an orphan. For example, see the dialogue between Sun Wukong and his master named the Patriarch,

“I have no parents either,” said the Monkey King. The Patriarch said, “If you have no parents, you must have been born from a tree.” “Not from a tree,” said the Monkey King, “but from a rock. I recall that there used to be an immortal stone on the Flower-Fruit Mountain. I was born the year the stone split open”.¹⁹⁰

Furthermore, when Sun Wukong talks with an old man who lives in the Flower Fruit Mountain, he calls himself ‘the Great Sage’ and ‘equal to Heaven’, he shouts to the old man that ‘You really don’t recognize me! Take a closer look! I am the Great Sage in the stone box of this Mountain of Two Frontiers’.¹⁹¹ It can be argued here that in this case Sun Wukong is even proud of being a stone monkey without parents. Meanwhile, the soft side of Sun Wukong, as a figure who cherishes family’s affection, had also never been expressed in animation works which were created before *Lotus Lantern*.



Fig 2.14: Sun Wukong misses his Mother

¹⁹⁰ Chengen Wu. *The Journey to the West, Revised Edition, Volume 1*, translated and edited by Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013) p.115.

¹⁹¹ Wu, p.312

Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell (2012) believe 'the clarity of motivation, consistency or through-line, creates the emotional bond between viewer and character'.¹⁹² Similarly, Jon Lewis (2014) also maintains that the apprehension of a film character's motivation is a key approach to deeply understand the cause or explanation for his or her behaviour.¹⁹³ The commonality of miserable experience (born as a parentless creature or forced to become an orphan) between Sun Wukong and Chen Xiang provides a rational motivation for the former's stance change and the corresponding character development. Sun Wukong begins to present a sympathetic visage to San Sheng Mu' son under the latter's mild irritation. Chen Xiang also reminds Sun Wukong that 'other Buddha may not be responsible for eradicating evil and maintaining justice, but why master is standing back in silence and allowing the outrage continues' because 'you are the Victorious Fighting Buddha rather than a normal Buddha'. At this point Chen Xiang has, in turn, become the spiritual guide of his master.

Before the protagonist's above frank admonishment, Sun Wukong seems to have forgotten the true essence of being a 'victorious' and 'fighting' Buddha. Ironically his Buddhahood is awarded by vanquishing all kinds of evil-doers and escorting his master on the pilgrimage road to the west. Consequently, under the double influences of external stimulation and intrinsic drive, Sun Wukong finally awakens his self-awareness as a heroic figure who fights injustice and becomes 'victorious' over evil forces. The character's transformation can also be illustrated by an easily ignored detail. In most cases the Victorious Fighting Buddha is dressed in a red Buddhist cassock, which completely covers the entire body, and quietly sits on the lotus blossom. However, Sun Wukong suddenly takes the cassock off and then jumps off the lotus blossom when he finally decides to help Chen Xiang to confront directly to the chief culprit Erlang Shen. At this time Sun Wukong liberates himself

¹⁹² Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell. *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 404

¹⁹³ Jon Lewis. *Essential Cinema: An Introduction to Film Analysis* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2014) p. 34

from the constraints of the cage-like cassock and the Buddhahood it represents. More importantly, his classic costume in *Havoc in Heaven* reappears along with the pulling down of cassock, it can be argued that this symbolic action marks the return of the heroic Sun Wukong who always abhors evil as a deadly foe (fig 2.15).



Fig 2.15: Sun Wukong's Final Transformation

From then on Sun Wukong has played a vital role in Chen Xiang's rescuing mother adventure. He teaches Chen Xiang how to relight San Sheng Mu's wickless lotus lantern by insisting on being indomitable, which foreshadows the integration between Chen Xiang and Lotus Lantern in the protagonist's final battle with Erlang Shen. He also gives White Dragon Horse, who is the steed of Xuan Zang in the story of *Journey to the West*, to Chen Xiang as an important helper. The Horse then takes Chen Xiang to a large flaming lake where has a heavenly stone (actually the statue of Erlang Shen which is engraved by Gamei and her tribe) around the lakeside. Chen Xiang needs to find ways to push the stone into the flaming lake, and then cast the stone into a magical hatchet which can help to fulfil his aspiration. Under the assistance of Sun Wukong and help from Gamei and her tribe, Chen Xiang finally

defeats his uncle and then saves San Sheng Mu by splitting the Mount Hua with the magical hatchet.

2.2 The Application of Hollywood Techniques and Iconography in *Lotus Lantern*

2.2.1 Hollywood Techniques in the Production of *Lotus Lantern*

In this section, I focus on the application of Hollywood techniques in *Lotus Lantern* from a historical and practical point of view. I argue that *Lotus Lantern* can be regarded as the Chinese animation sector's all-round adoption of Hollywood techniques from various aspects like the internationally applied production standard and real-life, people-based character design. First, I analyse the application of pre-recorded dialogue in the film. Second, I examine the all-star strategy in the selection of voice casts and performers of film songs. Third, I consider *Lotus Lantern's* intensive promotional programmes on film distribution and exhibition. Fourth, I review how *Lotus Lantern* provided a new and efficient profit model for NGCCA at its initial stage.

As discussed in the first section, the popularity of *The Lion King* in China has greatly stimulated the enthusiasm of Chinese animation practitioners and audiences, thus inspiring the creation of *Lotus Lantern* as the preliminary attempt to produce a domestic animation blockbuster. More importantly, it is the first NGCCA work that pursued the industrial production and circulation of animation, which is represented by *The Lion King* and other Hollywood products. *Lotus Lantern* is the first feature-length Chinese animated film that matches its animation to pre-recorded dialogue. The sound design of this film adopts the industry practices of its Hollywood counterparts. In other words, the dialogue recording was completed before the character, prop, storyboard and layout design and animation drawing. The pre-recording is one of the most common ways to produce cinema animation in Hollywood but very rare in Chinese animation. Ed Hooks (2011) reviews the relation

between acting and words in Hollywood animated feature films production, he finds that it is standard practice to record dialogue first, then created the animation parts based on it.¹⁹⁴ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in their 2011 study believe that in Hollywood animated film, 'images of moving lips can be matched to the dialogue far more precisely than if actors watched finished images and tried to speak at exactly the right time to mesh with their characters' mouths by applying prerecording approach'.¹⁹⁵ In China the application of pre-recording began with the creation of animated short film *Good Friend/Hao Pengyou* (Te, 1954). Zhang Songlin, one of the key animators of this film and then the deputy director of SAFS and executive vice president of China Animation Association, recollected the production process of *Good Friend* and the issue of Chinese animation's dialogue recording in an interview. He recalled that:

90 per cent of Disney animation applies pre-recording... Our first attempt of pre-recording started with this film (*Good Friend*), but we just created a short clip with this technique rather than the whole work. This technique was abandoned afterwards. Generally speaking we sync the animation and voices (music and dialogue) together at the post-production stage. Before that the animators created the key frames totally based on the storyboard and the next step is dubbing. I have to admit that the voice did not match the animatic very well.¹⁹⁶

In terms of why Chinese animators abandoned the pre-recording approach after *Good Friend*, Zhang believed the reason is

We were never able to learn this technique (pre-recording) because it was too difficult to control, but this is not the main reason. More importantly, we did not have proper equipment at that time, this obstacle is so great that hard work alone cannot overcome.¹⁹⁷

Zhang Songlin's view can be proved by the relationship between sounds and movements in *Saving Mother*. In some scenes the voice of puppet figures gains one-third to half of a second in comparison with the actual moves, which directly lead to the character's excessive stiffness and unnaturalness. By applying the pre-

¹⁹⁴ Ed Hooks. *Acting for Animators Third Edition* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011) p. 28.

¹⁹⁵ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011) p. 160.

¹⁹⁶ Zheng Li and Yang Li. 'The Series of the Oral History of Chinese Filmmakers—The Interview with Zhang Songlin', *Contemporary Cinema*, 07(2012), pp. 83-89, p. 85 [in Chinese, my translation].

¹⁹⁷ Li and Li, p. 85.

recording approach, designers of *Lotus Lantern* draw the whole animation part based on the pre-recorded dialogue soundtrack, which is created by well-known film stars who are selected due to their distinguished voices and star personae. As a result, compared to previous Chinese animation works, each main character in *Lotus Lantern* looks more natural in motion.

As mentioned earlier, in the initial production stage of *Lotus Lantern*, superstar actors and actresses in Chinese-language films were invited to provide voices for their corresponding characters. It is another example of Chinese cinema animation's all-round adoption of Hollywood techniques. The latter has been accustomed to use live action movie stars as voice casting such as James Earl Jones acts as Mufasa and Jeremy Irons as Scar in *The Lion King*,¹⁹⁸ and in *Pocahontas* Mel Gibson lends his voice to the role of John Smith.¹⁹⁹ Rayna Denison (2017) notes the industry magnates in Hollywood like Disney and DreamWorks have progressively turned to stars from other media, particularly high-profile film actors, to perform roles in their high-end creations.²⁰⁰ Colleen Montgomery (2017) also argues that 'star vocal performance has become increasingly central to the production and promotion of Hollywood animated features'.²⁰¹ She also gives an example of how and to what extent Pixar has played an important role in popularizing the practice of casting outstanding star-like performers. That is to say, star dubbed performance has become a mature industrial mode. In *Lotus Lantern* almost all the animated characters, either leading or supporting roles, are voiced by famous screen stars. This is the first time that Chinese cinema animation has domestic all-star voice cast

¹⁹⁸ The Lion King. 'Cast' Available from: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110357/>>. [Accessed: 15 May 2016].

¹⁹⁹ Pocahontas. 'Cast' Available from: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114148/>>. [Accessed: 15 May 2016].

²⁰⁰ Rayna Denison. 'Anime's Star Voices: Voice Actor (Seiyū) Performance and Stardom in Japan' in Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright eds., *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp.101-118, p.102.

²⁰¹ Colleen Montgomery. 'Double Doublage: Vocal Performance in the French-Dubbed Versions of Pixar's Toy Story and Cars' in Tom Whittaker and Sarah Wright eds., *Locating the Voice in Film: Critical Approaches and Global Practices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp.83-100, p.95.

including Xu Fan as San Sheng Mu, Jiang Wen as Erlang Shen, Ning Jing as Gamei and Chen Peisi as Sun Wukong.²⁰² Director Chang Guangxi maintains that

Best actors are able to use their voice to express their understanding on animated characters' personality and different sentiment, audience could even 'listen' to feel the animated image through their voice. At the same time, the pre-recorded dialogue will lay a solid foundation for the future creation of key frame and inbetween drawing.²⁰³

It can be argued that the application of all-star voice cast also plays a critically role in enhancing the film's box office appeal. SAFS released a series of photos, which showed the dubbing process of the above screen stars, on several daily national or regional newspapers and film journals before the film's public screening. Such promotional activities have stimulated the audience's desire for viewing *Lotus Lantern*, many of whom were simply someone curious about how the above-mentioned live action stars would interpret the virtual and animated figures for the first time in Chinese animation history.

Among all the top film stars I want to mention the role of Jiang Wen in the whole production process. Jiang Wen, as 'China's most famous movie star', is also distinguished by his low husky voice.²⁰⁴ As mentioned earlier, in this film he plays Erlang Shen who is characterised by the cold and arbitrary voice and dry laugh. According to Chang Guangxi, Jiang Wen was reading Erlang Shen's character design sketches when he was in the recording studio. Suddenly Jiang made a bold suggestion that 'is it possible to recreate Erlang Shen's appearance based on my face? Look, small but twinkling eyes and sparse but domineering eyebrows (Jiang Wen's facial features)...'.²⁰⁵ Chang adopted Jiang's idea, in other words, the final image of Erlang Shen is the animated Jiang Wen (fig 2.16). Internationally, it is very common for the design of cartoon figures (both animation and comics) to be inspired by real person. For example, Douglas McCall (2005) notes that American

²⁰² Yi Shen. 'The New Development of Shanghai Animation Film Studio', *Popular Film*, 12(1998), pp. 62-63, p. 62 [in Chinese].

²⁰³ Huilin Zhang, p. 192.

²⁰⁴ Jianying Zha. 'China's Popular Culture in the 1990s' in William Joseph ed., *China Briefing: The Contradictions of Change* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997) pp.109-150, p.144.

²⁰⁵ Jianyu Chen, p.39.

dancer Marge Champion is the model for Snow White in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (fig 2.17).²⁰⁶ Almost every fighter in unarmed combat manga *Baki the Grappler*, which was serialized between 1991 and 1999, has its corresponding martial artist archetype in real world (fig 2.18). Carl Fredricksen in *Up* (2009) originates from both actor Walter Matthau and Spencer Tracy.²⁰⁷ However, this creation principle had not appeared until the vagarious thought of Jiang Wen as a layman of animation production. In the case of *Lotus Lantern*, Jiang takes up an unintentionally pioneering role in the history of Chinese animation, which is also inherited and developed in the subsequent NGCCA works (discussed in the next chapter).



Fig 2.16: Erlang Shen and Jiang Wen



Fig 2.17: Marge Champion and Snow White



Fig 2.18: Fighters in *Baki the Grappler* and their corresponding archetype

The creation of film songs in *Lotus Lantern* also adopts 'all-star strategy'. In Disney and other Hollywood animation studios, it is a common practice to hire musicians to perform theme songs and interludes in animated films, such as the award-

²⁰⁶ Douglas McCall. *Film Cartoons: A Guide to 20th Century American Animated Features and Shorts* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2005) p.69.

²⁰⁷ The Disney Wiki. 'Carl Fredricksen' Available from: <http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Carl_Fredricksen>. [Accessed: 16 May 2016]

winning theme song *Circle of Life* sung by Elton John in *The Lion King* and Maria Carey and Whitney Houston's *When you Believe* in *Prince of Egypt* (Chapman, Hickner and Wells, 1998). Justyna Fruzińska (2014) maintains that *Circle of Life* represents the thematic intention of *The Lion King* (discussed later). The song reappears a few time, and at crucial moments, bearing an impression of climax.²⁰⁸ Similarly, Melanie Wright in her 2007 study also argues that the closing message of *Prince of Egypt* is voiced in *When you Believe*, which 'places emphasis not on the object of devotion, but on the importance of self-reliance and commitment as the means for achieving one's goal'.²⁰⁹

However, the above field was blank in China until the release of *Lotus Lantern*. SAFS cooperated with Sony Music and then invited the latter's singers Liu Huan, Coco Lee (Li Wen in Mandarin) and Jeff Chang (Zhang Xinzhe in Mandarin) to perform the three theme songs and interludes of this film. Liu, Lee and Chang are all household names in Chinese-language pop music circle. Chinese-Mainland born Liu Huan is 'one of China's pioneers of popular music' and 'top pop singer of the 1990s',²¹⁰ while Taiwanese Jeff Chang is widely known as 'Prince of Love Ballads'. Coco Lee, who was born in Hong Kong but raised in San Francisco, had offered her singing to a series of live action films such as the theme song of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).²¹¹ Xingwang Cheng (2014) argues that *Lotus Lantern's* ending song *Love is not only A Word/Ai Jiu Yigezi*, which appears in the scenes of a reunion of Chen Xiang and San Sheng Mu and performed by Jeff Chang, is more like the pouring out of the protagonist's inner aspirations and a form of desire for a better and brighter future.²¹² Furthermore, audio versions of the film's theme songs and interludes were launched in a number of Chinese radio stations before the

²⁰⁸ Justyna Fruzińska. *Emerson Goes to the Movies: Individualism in Walt Disney Company's Post-1989 Animated Films* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) p.160.

²⁰⁹ Melanie Wright. *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007) p.160.

²¹⁰ Margaret Wan. 'Liu Huan' in Edward Davis ed., *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) p.481.

²¹¹ Kin-Yan Szeto. *The Martial Arts Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora: Ang Lee, John Woo, and Jackie Chan in Hollywood* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011) p.33.

²¹² Xingwang Cheng. 'Analysis of Music in Chinese Cinema Animation Works since 1990s', *Journal of Xinghai Conservatory of Music*, 02(2014), pp. 85-94, p. 91 [in Chinese].

wide release.²¹³ The combination of well-known artists from Greater China region²¹⁴ plays an important role in *Lotus Lantern's* promotion.

Unlike its counterparts which were produced in the planned economy era and rarely considered the commercial return, *Lotus Lantern* made several attempts toward the possibility of industrial circulation of Chinese cinema animation. The film was mass marketed by promotional activities and with the development of relevant derivatives such as music videos, which, combined with the selected film clips, of theme songs and interludes, were broadcasted in both central and provincial satellite TV stations half a year before the film's official release in China (fig 2.19). At the same time, the marketing campaigns were becoming more frequent during the theatrical exhibition. It is reported that marketing personnel of *Lotus Lantern* distributed more than one million coloured promotional cards in the first round the film's screening (12 days) in Beijing city alone, which means one in twelve citizens in Beijing could get the relevant information of *Lotus Lantern* directly.²¹⁵ The creators of *Lotus Lantern* also tried to develop the relevant cultural products based on the film's brand awareness such as the publication of serialized picture books and storybooks for children. The lack of data makes it difficult to learn the specific revenue performance of the film's derivatives. But the profit would be considerable which can be revealed by Jin Guoping's words in an interview, where he confirmed that the profit of derivatives equalled the box office revenue. The great commercial success of *Lotus Lantern* directly led to the increase in SAFS's sales revenue. In the same interview Jin said in 1999 (the year of *Louts Lantern's* release) the studio's annual income almost doubled against the previous year and reached 14.77 million Chinese Yuan and then further rose to 22.79 million in 2000.²¹⁶

²¹³ Jun Cao. 'Superstars from Sony Music illuminate the Lotus Lantern', *Popular Cinema*, 05(1999), p. 39 [in Chinese].

²¹⁴ Greater China region refers to four regions across the Taiwan Strait, which include mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

²¹⁵ Qiang Xu. 'Lotus Lantern: A new Direction for Chinese Cinema Animation', *Journal of Jilin University of Arts*, 04(2001), pp. 19-22, p. 20 [in Chinese].

²¹⁶ Qiang Xu, p.21.



Fig 2.19: Music Video of Theme Songs and Interludes in *Lotus Lantern*

Here, I argue that the state-of-the-art technique of *Lotus Lantern* provided a new and efficient profit model for NGCCA at its initial stage. SAFS then merged with Shanghai Television in 2000 and then formed a new Shanghai Television Corporation (then joined Shanghai Film Group Corporation in 2003). By applying *Lotus Lantern*-model, Shanghai Television Corporation's animated TV series *Music Up/Wowei Gekuang* (Hu, 2001) earned 1.5 million Chinese Yuan by selling the broadcasting rights in advance and more than 2 million Yuan in derivatives sales even before public screening, which accounted for almost 30 per cent of the budget.²¹⁷ According to Jin Guoping, there are approximately ten minutes special effects animation used in *Lotus Lantern*, which pioneered in this field among all the NGCCA works.²¹⁸ The successful application of digital visual effects also stimulated

²¹⁷ Shi Zhao. 'Accelerating the Development of Animation Industry through Thought emancipation and System Renewing', *China Television*, 05(2004), pp. 11-20, p. 15 [in Chinese].

²¹⁸ Sina Finance. 'Jin Guoping: Animated the Chinese Animation' Available from: <<http://finance.sina.com.cn/manage/cfrw/20050602/17001650544.shtml>>. [Accessed: 17 May 2016] [in Chinese].

the wave of innovation on animation techniques in China, but this trend is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the technical progress has indeed greatly improved the pictorial quality. On the other hand, the excessive use on the dazzling visual effects may lead to technology deciding everything in animation creation, which can be illustrated by the box office failure of the 3D science fiction-themed Chinese cinema animation *Thru the Moebius Strip/Mobisi Huan* (Chaika, 2005).

2.2.2 The Interplay between Chinese and Hollywood Iconographic Representations: The Comparison between Characters in *Lotus Lantern* and *The Lion King*

In this section, I compare the character establishment between *Lotus Lantern* and *The Lion King*, which share the similar thematic intentions, from the theoretical point of view by using a textual analysis. I argue that as *The Lion King* draws on a European tradition and *Lotus Lantern* on a Chinese tradition, the two films show different models of how a character should be represented. First, I compare the leading actor Chen Xiang and Simba in *The Lion King*. I consider Chen Xiang in *Lotus Lantern* reflects the old stereotyped thinking about how to build a child image which can be found in many Chinese-language live action children films and animated works produced in the planned economy era. Second, I compare the establishment of antagonistic and supporting characters in *Lotus Lantern* and *The Lion King*.

It is widely acknowledged that since the 1980s Disney has been drawing inspiration from Shakespeare's works includes *The Lion King* which is adapted from *Hamlet*. Richard Finkelstein in his 1999 study maintains that Disney's cinema animation 'not only make isolated allusions to Shakespeare, but also involve plot structures and characters that consistently borrow from his works'.²¹⁹ The story of *The Lion King* begins with the birth of little lion prince Simba who is the son of Lion King Mufasa

²¹⁹ Richard Finkelstein. 'Disney Cites Shakespeare: The Limits of Appropriation' in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer eds., *Accents on Shakespeare: Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) pp.179-196, p.181.

and Queen Sarabi who rule the African Savannas (Pride Lands in the film), the wizard mandrill Rafiki baptizes the lion cub with a handful of sand and predicts the latter will be the future king. However, Simba's birth triggers the envy and hate from Mufasa's younger brother Scar who bears a grudge against his nephew who will be the future first heir of the throne. After a failed conspiracy to kill Mufasa, Scar allies with hyenas and finally murders the old king, who is trampled to death by a crowd of stampeding wildebeests while attempting to rescue his son. Scar then inherits the throne and Simba escapes from the pursuing hyenas. The pride of lions, majordomo hornbill Zazu and other habitants are ruled under the alliance of Scar and hyenas. Then the exhausted and collapsed lion Hamlet is saved by a mongoose named Timon and warthog Pumbaa, they teach Simba to forget the past and enjoy the carefree life. However, when Simba grows into a handsome adult male lion he meets his childhood friend and lioness Nala, who asks the former to save the lion pride and other animals from the tyranny of Scar and hyenas. Simba rejects at first but changes his mind under the inspiration of Rafiki's instruction and his father's brave soul. The film ends with the lion prince's victory on his uncle, who is finally eaten by the defected hyenas. Accompanied by his friends and lover, Simba climbs to the top of Pride Rock and takes over the kingdom with the lion's roar. Rafiki holds up the new born cub on the Pride Rock and circle of life continues.

Lotus Lantern shares the similar thematic intentions with *The Lion King*. The patriarch figure is murdered in the beginning of the film and the maternal character is trapped by the uncle of young protagonist, and the leading actor undertakes the responsibility of revenge. With regard to the theme of love, hatred and revenge, *Lotus Lanterns* is comparable to *The Lion King* in terms of several groups of corresponding characters such as the leading actor Chen Xiang and Simba, the imprisoned San Sheng Mu and Sarabi, the protagonist's lover Gamei and Nala, antagonist Erlang Shen and Scar, the master Sun Wukong and Rafiki and the gag characters little monkey, Timon and Pumbaa.

In both films the leading actor is younger male (little human boy Chen Xiang in *Lotus Lantern* and anthropomorphic male lion cub Simba in *The Lion King*), but the latter appears even more humanized than the former through the narrative

process. Although it is Simba's destiny to become the Lion King but he is not born a hero, the heir of the throne was once a naive and mischievous boy under the care and love of his parents, he was curious about everything around him. In other words, the image of Simba is not so different from an ordinary human child, he does not understand the true meaning and responsibility of being a king. But his family tragedy forces him to make tough decisions: to revenge or run away and forget everything in the past. Sean Graham (2011) maintains that the success of *The Lion King* can be partly attributed to not only the expression of the complexity of father-son relationships, but the way Simba is portrayed. Mufasa's son encounters individual misfortune, a pervasive emotional difficulty that many children may confront.²²⁰

The mental activity of Simba can be illustrated by the following scenes: In the dusty canyon, Simba rushes to his lifeless father who was just trampled to death. The little prince tries to lift Mufasa's body, but the latter remains lifeless. He shouts for help and cries, Simba thinks this is just a game that he and his father used to play, he still cannot believe that a powerful and brave lion like Mufasa can die. Then Scar comes and slanders Simba for being responsible for his father's death, the lion cub feels hopeless and helpless like other kids when facing similar situations. At this moment he experiences fear and despair and the only option for him is escape (fig 2.20). The above sequence is less than three minutes but the depiction on child psychology is rather penetrating.

²²⁰ Sean Graham. 'Lion King, The' in Philip DiMare ed., *Movies in American History: An Encyclopaedia Volume 1* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011) pp.305-306, p.306.



Fig 2.20: Mufasa's Death

Then Simba meets Timon and Pumbaa and lives happily with them and grows into a handsome lion like his father. But the childhood experience makes him inevitably fall into the inner conflicts in terms of whether to forget or remember the past. The inner struggle and torment are embodied in the image of Simba, which can be revealed by his initially refusing a direct request for help from Nala. The development of Simba as the leading character is accompanied with the stimulation from both internal and external aspect. Simba's leonine instinct and sense of responsibility of being a king, as to protect the rest of the pride and other habitants in the land, is evoked by Rafiki and incorporeal Mufasa's guidance. Scott Olson in his 1999 study argues that 'the narrative structure of the film (*The Lion King*) is similarly one of departure and re-turn— the Lion King is eternal, even if particular lions are mortal', because 'the film ends where it begins, with the birth and presentation of a new lion cub and heir to the throne'.²²¹ But even the mortal lion like Simba is not born to be a king, and the throne is not specifically tied to the

²²¹ Scott Olson. *Hollywood Planet: Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Narrative Transparency* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999) p.109.

bloodlines. From the age of innocence to the hesitation and uncertainty as a teenager to the firm and indomitable Lion King, Simba gains a foothold in the Pride Land by undergoing considerable growing pains which are vital for the character development.

At the same time, compared with the fictional adventure, the spiritual journey of the protagonist plays a more decisive role in terms of his growth process. Annalee Ward (1996) argues that one of the most important moral values expressed in *The Lion King* is 'life is more than avoiding worries and responsibilities', which can be illustrated by the spiritual growth of Simba who wished to believe he could live in a relatively carefree life but finally realized he had to accept who he was and his obligation.²²² The transformation from the naive lion prince to the real sense of Lion King can be attributed more to the formation of strong will and indomitable spirit. The rebirth of Simba marks the overcoming of the devil inside, he finally finds the necessary motivation towards his future actions, thus providing a clear track of overall plot arrangement from the low ebb to climax. It is thus clear that *The Lion King* devotes more attention to the themes related to the challenges and difficulties that the children face, rather than the topic of pure vengeance. Such ordeals can also be regarded as the children's opportunities to grow. Rosemarie Gavin (1996) maintains that Hamlet, the prototype of Simba, mirrors all of us, a mirror that is primal and archetypal. It is because we, like Hamlet and Simba, all are to some extent exiled children who make individual adventures and find ways home.²²³ The thematic intention of *The Lion King* allows the children audience to admit the character's growing experience into its own emotions, thus exerting a subtle influence on the former's minds.

The image of Chen Xiang reveals the habitual thoughts of character establishment in Chinese animation especially for the building of the child figures. In contrast with

²²² Annalee Ward. 'The Lion King's Mythic Narrative: Disney as Moral educator', *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. Vol. 23, Issue 4, 1996, pp. 171-178, p. 177

²²³ Rosemarie Gavin. 'The Lion King and Hamlet: A Homecoming for the exiled Child', *English Journal*. Vol. 85, Issue 3, 1996, pp. 55-57, p. 55, 57

the portrayal of Simba in terms of the behavioural motive and character development, the figuration of Chen Xiang exposes a stereotyped creative principle, namely the image of mini-adults. This is actually a common phenomenon among Chinese children's feature films and animated works in the planned economy era (1949-1976), which were produced to educate and indoctrinate children. The case of Chen Xiang can be identified as its influence on NGCCA and its production.

Stephanie Donald (2005) considers the Chinese children's feature film as being 'distinguished by the seriousness with which pressing, political and social issues are addressed'.²²⁴ She is right on this issue because in China neither live action children's films nor animations are intended purely for entertainment until now. The young children, who are officially defined as the successors of the revolution and Communism,²²⁵ are often depicted as a carrier of ideological symbol and the concretization of Socialism. This phenomenon is more evident in the period of the planned economy. The 'revolutionary little hero' like leading actor is the typical image of the children. They are always filled with virulent hatred of domestic enemies and foreign invaders. Moreover, they have strong revolutionary will and spirit of self-sacrifice (fig 2.21). Stephanie Donald in her 1999 study argues that in this era the children 'work with a perverse neutral potency in political and social cultural production', they also serve as the 'potential political agents' in terms of the symbolic status.²²⁶

The pervasive of such ideal child image began with the creation of *Letter with Feather/Jimao Xin* (Shi, 1954). This film sets in the period of the Second Sino-Japanese War and tells a story about how the brave and resourceful young hero Hai Wa fights with the Japanese invaders and successfully sends the confidential information (letter with feather) to the army lead by CPC. The success of *Letter with*

²²⁴ Stephanie Donald. 'Children's Feature Film' in Edward Davis ed., *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) p.121.

²²⁵ Yihong Pan. *Tempered in the Revolutionary Furnace: China's Youth in the Rustication Movement* (London: Lexington Books, 2003) p.18.

²²⁶ Stephanie Donald. 'Children as Political Messengers - Art, Childhood and Continuity' in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald eds., *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) pp.79-100, p.96.

Feather stimulated the production of children's feature films starring revolutionary little hero such as *Red Children/Hong Haizi* (Su, 1958), *Little Heroes/Yingxiong Xiaobalu* (Gao, 1961) and *Little Solider Zhang Ga/Xiaobing Zhangga* (Cui and Ouyang, 1963). *Sparkling Red Star/Shanshan De Hongxing* (1974) (Li and Li, fig 2.22) is the most representative one among them, which was produced during the Cultural Revolution period and determined to have political and ideological elements even before the film's shooting schedule. Chen Yading, then vice-minister of People's Liberation Army General Political Department, redefined this film as:

(*Sparkling Red Star*) is a children's film but not an ordinary one. This film mainly focuses on the spiritual features of Pan Dongzi (the ten years old boy as protagonist) rather than the fast-moving adventure stories. *Sparkling Red Star* has to express revolutionary enthusiasm and class struggle, in order to establish a comprehensive, glorious and flawless image of a member of Children's Corps.²²⁷

Under this creative principle, the children's natural emotional expression is being repressed. Instead, a tough-minded proletarian soldier is created in the guise of child-like appearance. Stephanie Donald (2005) argues that Dongzi, like his predecessors in children's live action films, is eager for an instant revolution, but lack of humour and little childish wit.²²⁸ Xu Xu (2011) notes that Pan Dongzi is portrayed as a highly politicized child in the prologue of *Sparkling Red Star* which features his direct confrontation with the antagonistic landlord Hu Hansan. The protagonist is characterised by the articulation of class animosity and an intense consciousness of class status even in the film's opening scenes.²²⁹ As a more extreme example, in the following narrative Pan Dongzi's mother is trapped in a flaming house (ignited by adversaries), and the local militia want to save her. However, the protagonist prevents others from saving his mother which directly leads to the latter's death. He says that 'my mother is a member of the Communist

²²⁷ The Children's Corps in China refers to children and teenagers' organization before 1949, which was established by CPC in the Revolutionary Base Areas (controlled by the party). It has been renamed as the Young Pioneers since the founding of PRC. See Jiannong Zhai. *Red Memories: Chinese Film between 1966 and 1976* (Beijing: Taihai Publishing House, 2001) p.267 [in Chinese, my translation].

²²⁸ Stephanie Donald. *Little Friends: Children's Film and Media Culture in China*. p. 33.

²²⁹ Xu Xu. "'Chairman Mao's Child': Sparkling Red Star and the Construction of Children in the Chinese Cultural Revolution', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. Vol. 36, Issue 4, 2011, pp. 381-409, p. 392.

Party, I cannot put the masses' lives in danger to save her'. After analysing the image of Pan Dongzi in the whole film, Xu concludes that the proletarian child Pan Dongzi as 'neither a passive receptacle of adult indoctrination nor an exact copy of the adult'.²³⁰



Fig 2.21: Chinese Comic Strips starring 'Revolutionary Little Hero'



Fig 2.22: *Sparkling Red Star* (1974)

As discussed in the Introduction section, the government claims animation should serve the children in China. Accordingly, the above-mentioned phenomenon in children's feature film has happened in the animation creation over a long period of time. Compared with their counterparts in the pre-Cultural Revolution period, the image of heroic and politicized children is more prevalent in animation works

²³⁰ Xu Xu, p.114.

created during this political movement. Children are portrayed as mini-adults who keep the class struggle in mind at all times. Zhang Songlin recalls that

The animation works produced in this period are always themed as either chasing the spy or catching villain. The “little hero” also needed to “stand on a high lookout” and “speak a high moral tone”, children became mini-adults. We had to ignore the basic characteristics of animation, instead this art form was required to being as real as the actual life’.²³¹

Qian Yunda, one of the most prominent talents in SAFS, also argues that ‘the creation of animation came increasingly closer to its live action counterparts thus losing its own feature. Every production must have at least one perfect super-hero-like character. A series of strange works were created in this context’.²³²

Although there are far less political and ideological implications in terms of the creation of *Chen Xiang*, there are still some old traces to be seen in the narrative process. In the first part of the film, lotus lantern is robbed by Erlang Shen and San Sheng Mu is being prisoned, Chen Xiang is also being taken to the Heavenly Palace by his uncle as a hostage. Erlang Shen deceives the protagonist that his mother has been punished due to violating heavenly rules. Chen Xiang’s uncle continues to tell lies that San Sheng Mu has passed away. The young boy’s reaction is rather weird under this circumstance. Chen Xiang is indeed curious about his mother’s disappearance, but he neither feels indignation in San Sheng Mu’s miserable sufferings or anger about his uncle’s act of violence even after he knows the truth. Instead he pleads Erlang Shen to take him to meet his mother by addressing the antagonist as the honorific ‘Nin’ (fig 2.23).²³³ In other words, Chen Xiang here looks more like an amoral figure rather than a young boy who has just lost his mother. It can be said that creators here fall into the ideal-child-trap again, namely the perfect kids advocated by the government (polite, well-behaved, etc.). It is hard to think

²³¹ Songlin Zhang, p.106.

²³² Yunda Qian. 'The Issue of Realistic Theme: The Experience from the Creation of animation work *Heroic Little Sisters on the Grassland*' in Editorial Office of *Movie Communication* in the Film Bureau of Cultural Department and National Film Editorial Office in China Film Press ed., *Research on the Fine Art Film Creation* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984) pp.128-133, p.130 [in Chinese, my translation].

²³³ ‘Nin/您’ and ‘Ni/你’ in Chinese language system both have the meaning of ‘you’ in English, but ‘Nin’ often implies more honorific colour.

that simple-minded and obedient Chen Xiang could win his battle with the evil Erlang Shen in the end.



Fig 2.23: Chen Xiang and Erlang Shen in the Heavenly Palace

However, Chen Xiang suddenly becomes a mini-adult and small soldier, who features firmness of mind, forethoughtfulness and undaunted courage on his adventurous journey, after making a decision to rescue San Sheng Mu. It seems that San Sheng Mu's son never has any kind of negative emotional expressions such as fear, sadness and despair. He acts by his heroic instincts and without any hesitation like his revolutionary little hero counterparts such as the above-mentioned Pan Dongzi. However, it lacks foreshadowing that depicts the transition process of Chen Xiang's personality characterization. The only clue is a piece of dialogue in the film's opening scenes, which show San Sheng Mu and his son are happily canoeing on a lake at dusk (fig 2.24):

Chen Xiang: Mom, what is happiness?

San Sheng Mu: Happiness is Mom and Chen Xiang live together happily!

Chen Xiang: Oh I understand, I feel I am happiest when I stay with Mom!

San Sheng Mu: Right.

Chen Xiang: Happiness is Mom lives with Chen Xiang!

San Sheng Mu: Right.

Chen Xiang: Mom, I promise I will let the lotus lantern lights forever, I will also with mom forever!



Fig 2.24: Chen Xiang and San Sheng Mu are Canoeing on a Lake

The above conversation can be regarded as the plot motivation of the film. But it is doubtful that the prolix dialogues could serve as motive of the latter narratives. As discussed earlier, lotus lantern is the only token of kinship between San Sheng Mu and his son, it is also the source of strength and faith of latter's adventure. But it still lacks cinematic language to explain the significance of lotus lantern in terms of why this item is so important and the narrative function it carries. The importance of lotus lantern is also relying heavily on the mother's preaching to the son:

Chen Xiang: Mom, the lotus lantern lighted just now.

San Sheng Mu: Yes.

Chen Xiang: Mom, don't you want the lantern lights?

San Sheng Mu: No, mom really wants the lantern ignites, but not now. This lantern is not an ordinary one.

Chen Xiang: What do you mean by that?

San Sheng Mu: This is a magic lantern.

Chen Xiang: Mom, why it is a magic lantern?

San Sheng Mu: Because lotus lantern brings happiness to good person, and bad people are all frankly terrified of it.

It is hard to think that the seven-year-old boy could understand the significance of lotus lantern in the mother-son relationship through the above simple binary opposition between good and evil implied by the dialogue. Hitchcock noted in 1983 that

In many of the films now being made, there is little cinema; they are mostly what I call “photographs of people talking”. When we tell a story in cinema, we should resort to dialogue only when it’s impossible to do otherwise’.²³⁴

Robert Edgar, John Marland and Steve Rawle (2003) also maintain that ‘the frame of the image is... what makes film’s storytelling cinematic—by showing, not telling. Cinema tells stories through images, not just with dialogue’.²³⁵ Chen Xiang’s character development is more like a result of successive ‘photographs of people talking’ that are full of lecturing tone, rather than being expressed through certain dramatic conflicts. His action is always driven by the external stimulus while the character lacks transformation of inner quality. He is a passive audience in reading and accepting the others’ messages and has none of his own, he acts because he has to being an ideal child. In other words, Chen Xiang seems perfectly justified in everything, what impels him to save his mother and beat his uncle is because the plot arrangement.

In terms of the building of antagonistic figures, Erlang Shen has indeed strong will to fight for his faith and the order of Heaven and earth. However, similar to Chen Xiang, Erlang Shen, as the main antagonist of the story, still lacks character development within the whole narrative process. Patricia Cooper and Ken Dancyger (2012) observe the crucial role of antagonist in the story which portrays the protagonist’s heroic behaviour, they believe ‘the more forceful the antagonist in a story, the greater struggle of the protagonist’.²³⁶ But at the same time, there should not be too large power disparities between the protagonist and antagonist. This

²³⁴ Carl Boggs and Thomas Pollard. *A World in Chaos: Social Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) p.196.

²³⁵ Robert Edgar, John Marland and Steve Rawle. *The Language of Film* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003) p.127.

²³⁶ Patricia Cooper and Ken Dancyger. *Writing the Short Film* (Burlington, San Diego and London: Elsevier Focal Press, 2012) p.91.

power here not only refer to the external fighting skills, but internal elements such as mentality and morality. It should be noted here that Erlang Shen, as the emperor of the Heavenly Palace and earth in *Lotus Lantern*, is so omnipotent and formidable that he only needs to quietly wait for the challenge from Chen Xiang without doing anything. However, ironically, the seemingly invincible tyrant is easily defeated by San Sheng Mu's son who learns the martial and magic skills without a master (another unsolved mystery in the film) in the film's climax.

In the case of *The Lion King*, the life and death contest between Simba and the usurper Scar is consistently highlighted in the whole narrative sequence. Scar's unwillingness and viciousness is meticulously drafted even from his first line: 'Life is not fair. Yes, you see, I shall never be King. And you shall never see another day'.²³⁷ He loses his right of inheritance due to the birth of Simba, and thoughts of jealousy and hatred pervade his mind. But his own power is not enough to murder Mufasa while frame Simba for the charge of patricide. Accordingly, he puts aside the pride as a lion and colludes with hyenas, and even becomes the latter's leader in order to achieve his conspiracy. Scar can be regarded as an active antagonist and a form of plot motivation of *The Lion King*. Conversely, besides the initial evil actions on Chen Xiang and his families, Erlang Shen is merely passively waiting for the protagonist's revenge for the rest of the film.

The staunch Zazu, quick-witted Timon and simple and honest Pumbaa, as the funny characters in animated performance, play a crucial role in the little lion cub's growth. Zazu is loyal to Mufasa and Simba and the legitimate status they represent, the former has done his utmost to protect the orthodox heir of the throne until Scar's usurpation of power. Timon and Pumbaa then take Zazu's place in the second part of the film (fig 2.25). The anthropomorphic mongoose and warthog are characterised by the childlike innocence, they appease Simba's inner wounds by teaching the latter to enjoy the joyous life in the new home and forget the past.

²³⁷ Irene Mecchi and Jonathan Roberts. 'Working Draft of *The Lion King*' Available from: <<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Lion-King,-The.pdf>>. [Accessed: 23 May 2016].

Besides the optimistic emotion and energetic action, the image of Timon and Pumbaa also reflects the innate weaknesses of human nature. Initially Timon saves Simba because he believes the lion should be a reliable protective umbrella. When Simba encounters Nala and the mongoose knows the male lion is actually the king, Simba insists 'I'm still the same guy' and Timon responds 'but with power'. The image of being a follower of the rich and powerful is described vividly and incisively. Pumbaa features both cowardice and boldness, he runs for his life when facing the predator (Nala) while boldly rushing up to the impolite hyenas who call him as 'pig'. In *Lotus Lantern*, the role of little monkey equals with Zazu, Timon and Pumbaa in *The Lion King*. The little monkey, as the major companion in Chen Xiang's adventure on saving mother, is not able to speak in the film. His action is confined to making faces and behaving in a comical act such as the transformation to monkey-like wood brick because of being frightened by the giant Terracotta Warriors-like guardians in the Heavenly Palace's warehouse (fig 2.26). Little monkey here looks more like Chen Xiang's pet to relieve his owner's boredom during the long adventure, rather than a supporting character with conscious activity. In other words, the little monkey does not exert any significant impact on the protagonist's saving mother campaign.



Fig 2.25: Grown-up Simba with Timon and Pumbaa

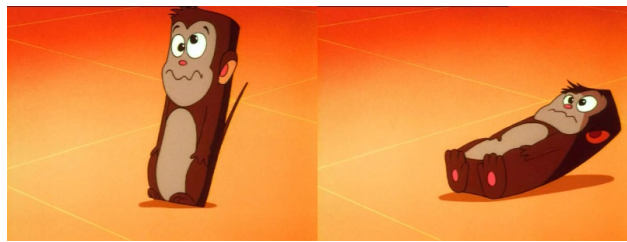


Fig 2.26: Monkey-like Wood Brick

2.3 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter focused on the analysis of *Lotus Lantern* as the first NGCCA work that adopted both Chinese and Hollywood iconography and then

achieved commercial success. Starting from a broad view of the creative context of this film, it can be said that since mid-1990s the re-importation of blockbusters from Hollywood has greatly stimulated the floundering film market in China. But at the same time, the survival and development space of the still struggling local film sector have also received massive pressure from the imported blockbusters. The latter has accounted for most of the box office revenue. Since then domestic industry practitioners have started to explore the possibilities of the 'blockbuster-able' Chinese live action films and cinema animation. As a state-owned animation studio, SAFS's creation of *Lotus Lantern*, which is an adaption of a traditional Chinese tale, was also affected by political factors, namely the combination of external expectations from senior figures within the ruling party and the consideration of this film as a tribute for anniversary celebration of the PRC. Therefore I argued that *Lotus Lantern* should be analysed under a broader historical and cultural context for the purpose of illuminating NGCCA's aesthetic and industrial features at the preliminary development stage.

I then examined how *Lotus Lantern* uses Chinese iconography. By considering *Lotus Lantern* as the seventh feature-length cinema animation work that is created by SAFS, this chapter compared this film with its pre-NGCCA counterpart *Saving Mother* which share a similar thematic intention. The puppet animation *Saving Mother* applies the basic setting of the original text (*Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother*). While regarding the market and audience factors, the creators of *Lotus Lantern* made suitable adjustment on several aspects such as the reconstruction of narrative structure and representation of fictional ethnic minorities. The relatively less known supporting roles Zhaoxia Gugu and Pili Daxian in *Saving Mother* are also replaced by the classic pre-NGCCA cartoon figures Tudiye and Sun Wukong respectively. It can be said that the latter two characters enjoy cross-generational popularity among Chinese audience. In other words, *Lotus Lantern* allowed Sun Wukong and Tudiye not only to sustain the narrative, but also to increase box office appeal.

In this section Sun Wukong was analysed using a formalistic approach and textual analysis. The classic cartoon image of Sun Wukong in Chinese animation and comics is designed and then constantly revised by different artists, which reveals a visual pastiche of several traditional Chinese art forms such as Beijing Opera and religious dress in fine arts. In *Lotus Lantern* the visual image of Sun Wukong follows its counterpart in *Havoc in Heaven* while makes adjustments according to the figure's identity change. For example, the red Buddhist cassock is added as a symbol of Buddhahood. Then the discussion turned to Sun Wukong's multiple identities conflict (monkey, human and Buddha) and the transformation of attitude towards the protagonist Chen Xiang. In *Lotus Lantern* the designers recreate the once stone-hearted Sun Wukong by giving him strong perceptual thoughts and normal human emotional responses.

The third section of this chapter focused on what *Lotus Lantern* borrows from Hollywood techniques and iconography. This film is the first feature-length Chinese cinema animation that used internationally applied techniques, which are represented by Hollywood productions. For example, *Lotus Lantern* matched the animation part to pre-recorded dialogue, the latter is voiced by top screen stars of Chinese-language films. For the first time the design of an animated figure based on real people in China. Simultaneously, Chinese animators began to re-evaluate the function of music in cinema animation by inviting well known pop musicians to perform theme songs and interludes. The film positioned itself at the mass market and presented new characteristics in terms of the marketing promotional activities, thus providing a plausible direction of the commercialized Chinese cinema animation.

Lotus Lantern is comparable to *The Lion King* because of the similar thematic intention and character relationship. Compared with the portrayal of Simba in *The Lion King*, Chen Xiang reveals the creative inertia of children characters in many Chinese live action films and animation works, in which children have always been presented as mini-adults. Although there are rare political implications of San Sheng Mu's son, the leading actor still shows other old traces like the image of adultified

children. Besides the comparison between protagonists, this section also analysed the differences between the characterization of antagonist and supporting roles in the two films, in order to highlight how SAFS and Disney present a character in the context of different traditions.

The following chapter will analyse the 3D *Boonie Bears: To the Rescue/Xiongchumo Zhi Duobao Xiongbing* (Ding and Liu, 2014) and *Boonie Bears: Mystical Winter/Xiongchubo Zhi Xueling Xiongfeng* (Ding and Liu, 2015) which are the theatrical version of animated TV series under the same name. I consider they are the representative works of derivative films in terms of promotional activities and cross-generational appeal. Next chapter will also compare the representation of media violence between the cinema and TV version of *Boonie Bears* productions.

Chapter 3 *Boonie Bears* Series (2014, 2015) and the Derivative Films

3.0 *Boonie Bears* Brand's Cinema Animation Products and the Main Aims of this Chapter

In this chapter, I examine the *Boonie Bears* films, a series of Chinese 3D animated adventure comedies, based on the TV animations of the same name. Among all the feature-length derivative films, these works are particularly significant with respect to box office revenue and marketing practices. By considering the animated films as an important component of the whole industry chain, the main aims of this chapter are to explore the typical importance of *Boonie Bears* series, with a particular focus on the first two productions, *Boonie Bears: To the Rescue* and *Boonie Bears: Mystical Winter* (henceforth referred to as *Rescue* and *Winter* respectively) which best represent both the industrial and aesthetic characteristics of the whole series. This chapter will begin with the analysis of cinema animation production in China after the release of *Lotus Lantern* and the creative context of *Boonie Bears* Series. Afterwards, this chapter will analyse *Boonie Bears* series' overall marketing strategy such as the cross-generational appeal, the combination between online and offline promotional activities and the application of product placement. Then this chapter will interpret the refiguration of Logger Vick, the main antagonist in *Boonie Bears* TV animations, in *Rescue*, in order to explore how and why Vick's image in the cinema animation attracts the young adult audiences. The discussion will follow on the comparison of media violence between *Boonie Bears*'s television and cinema version, for the purpose of illuminating how and to what extent the pressure of public opinion and production company's self-correction have influenced the creation of *Boonie Bears* films.

3.0.1 The Transformation of Cinema Animation Production in China since 1999

In this section, I examine the Chinese animation industry's conversion to the creation of feature-length animated film after the release of *Lotus Lantern* (1999). I

argue that significant shifts have taken place in China's cinema animation sector since 2004. First, I examine how and to what extent the production of animation film has gradually transformed from the government-led initiatives to a market-oriented behaviour, which is accompanied by the entry of private capital. Second, I consider how the explosive growth in the number of cinemas contribute to the surge in NGCCA production in this period.

As the first market-oriented NGCCA work, *Lotus Lantern* provided a plausible direction for the development of Chinese animation, thus giving NGCCA a feasible option about what the Chinese animated film should be like and how it should be promoted in the context of a market economy. However, it seems that *Lotus Lantern's* individual success did not mark the beginning of the renaissance of the whole animation sector, especially for cinema animation production. According to the database of Mtime, only two domestic animated films were screened in cinemas from 2000 to 2004; they were *Five Weeks in a Balloon/Qiqiu Shangde Wuxingqi* (Durniok and Hu, 2001) and *Little Tiger Ban Ban/Xiaohu Banban* (Han and Liu, 2001).²³⁸ In other words, NGCCA works were completely absent from Chinese theatres or other media outlets in the year of 2000, 2002, 2003 and 2004. During this period, state-owned animation studios remained the only production units of NGCCA, which means the creation of cinema animation was still a government-leading behaviour.²³⁹ This situation did not change until the SARFT (latterly known as The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television/SAPPRFT) released an official guidance document named *Several Opinions on the Development of China's Cinema and Television Animation Industry* in 2004, which indicated that its aim were:

Different economic factors should be encouraged to participate in the development and management of the Chinese cinema and television animation industry. The mutual development of diverse sectors of the

²³⁸ Mtime. 'The Combined Keywords Search for Film: "China" and "Animation"' Available from: <<http://movie.mtime.com/movie/search/section/#type=184&nation=138>>. [Accessed: 09 October 2016] [in Chinese].

²³⁹ *Five Weeks in a Balloon* was co-produced by Manfred Durniok Film Production (Germany) and SAFS. *Little Tiger Ban Ban* was created by Children's Film Studio (China) and China Film Group Corporation.

economy should be insisted, in order to make full use of social resources to jointly develop the Chinese cinema and television industry... The non-public investment in animation sector should be further developed and guided. (Related government departments) ought to effectively expand market access, and then promptly formulate the concrete measures to encourage the non-public economy to enter the animation sector.²⁴⁰

Davis (2010) argues that the marketization in Chinese cultural creative industries is designed to achieve a status of 'predictability, control and convergence' between an open market and a planned economy.²⁴¹ In the case of animation production, on one hand, the above national policy document announced that the state-controlled studios should still play a predominant role in Chinese animation industry, but the actual market situation contrasts with the government's expectation. Since 2005, privately owned animation studios and companies, which have sound credit and industrialized mode of production, have indeed enjoyed the same privileges as its state owned counterparts such as tax breaks and extra advertising slots, thus further opening the domestic animation market to non-governmental capital and private investment.²⁴² As a result, domestic privately owned animation studios and companies, which have accumulated a certain amount of capital through engaging in outsourcing works over a long period of time, have gradually become the main market players in the cinema animation sector as a result of policy changes. Many of them have started to explore the possibility of creating the original Chinese animation blockbusters, which are represented by *Thru the Moebius Strip* and *Happy Little Submarines/Qianting Zongdongyuan* (Mi, 2008). In the meantime, state-owned animation studios like SAFS and CFGC, have also kept producing original feature-length cinema animations like *Warriors/Yong Shi* (Wang, 2007) and *The Secret of the Magic Gourd/Baohulu De Mimi* (Zhu and Zhong, 2007).

²⁴⁰ State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). 'The SARFT released "Several Opinions on the Development of China's Cinema and Television Animation Industry"' Available from: < http://www.110.com/fagui/law_137010.html>. [Accessed: 08 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁴¹ Darrell William Davis, p.124.

²⁴² Junhao Chen. 'Domestic Animation Industry meets New Policy', *Toy Industry*, (03) 2004, pp.54-55, p. 55 [in Chinese, my translation].

At the same time, with the commercial real estate upsurge in the recent decade, the number of cinemas and screens in China, especially in several large- and medium-sized cities, has also experienced explosive growth. This phenomenon can be attributed to the connection between multi-screen cinemas and shopping malls in China, in which the cinemas has gradually been considered as a ‘standard component’ of shopping plazas in recent years.²⁴³ According to the relevant statistics from SAPPRFT, the number of cinemas had dramatically increased from 1,243 (2005) to 5,598 (2014) while the corresponding screens had risen almost tenfold (from 2,675 to 23,592) in the same period.²⁴⁴ The combination of above factors has directly lead to the sustained growth of the production and exhibition of cinema animation. By analysing existing sources, Wei He and Yinqiu Zhao (2014) find that domestic animated films had been outnumbering their imported counterparts in cinemas between 2008 and 2013, with the proportion reversed from 6:7 (2008) to 24:9 (2013) (Chart 3.1).²⁴⁵

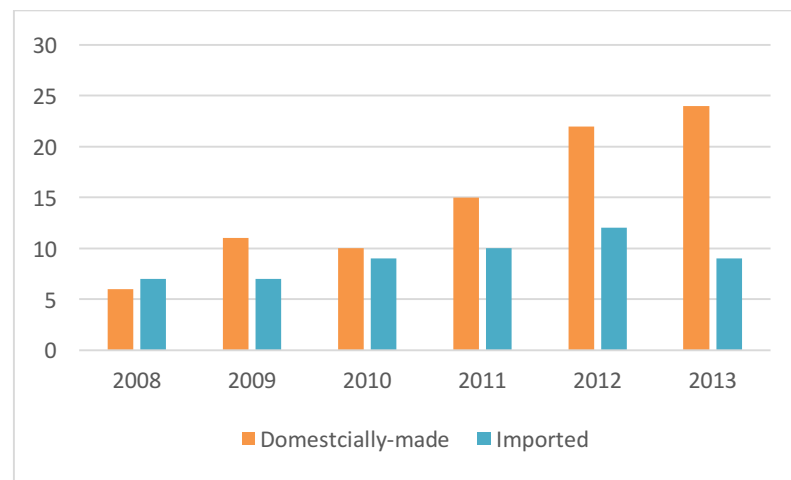


Chart 3.1 The Comparison between the Number of Domestically-made and Imported Cinema Animations in China (2008—2013)

²⁴³ Xilu Shen. ‘Cinemas have gradually become the “Standard Component” of Shopping Plazas’ Available from: <<http://news.enorth.com.cn/system/2011/05/20/006589536.shtml>>. [Accessed: 03 March 2017] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁴⁴ Chyxx. ‘Statistical Analysis of the Number of Cinemas and Screens in China (for the Year 2015)’ Available from: <<http://www.chyxx.com/industry/201509/342807.html>>. [Accessed: 09 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁴⁵ Wei He and Yinqiu Zhao. ‘Comparison and Analysis between Domestic and Imported Animated Film’ in Wen Zhou and Wei He eds., *Chinese Animation Industry and Consumption Report (2014)* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2015) pp.37-50, p.39 [in Chinese].

3.0.2 A Comparison of Box Office Revenue of NGCCA works (Original and Derivative) and imported Cinema Animations in China

In this section, I briefly examine the box office performance of both NGCCA works (original and derivative) and their imported competitors. I argue that the derivative Chinese animated films, despite some limitations, have more box office appeal than the original ones within the context of the foreign works' overall competitive advantage. First, I review a disparity in the box office grosses between domestically-made animated films and their overseas counterparts in Chinese film market. Second, I compare the box office performance between original and derivative Chinese cinema animations which are the two major categories of NGCCA.

As mentioned earlier, He and Zhao in their 2014 study indicate that the number of NGCCA works has exceeded the number of imported productions in recent years. However, they also note that the foreign-made animated films achieved the box office of 1.10 billion Chinese Yuan, which corresponded to two times the revenues of domestic productions (563 million) in the year of 2013. Moreover, the top three animated films in attendance were imported works, as were four of the top five and six the top ten (table 3.1).²⁴⁶ That is to say, even though 73 per cent of the animated films are domestic, foreign animations are still more popular and financially successful in most cases. In this respect, it should be noted that in the same year the box office earnings of domestically-made live action films achieved 12.6 billion Chinese Yuan during the theatrical release while its imported competitors earned 9 billion Chinese Yuan. The latter only appeared two times at the top ten of the Chinese box office charts (the similar circumstance happened in 2015, which will be analysed in Chapter 5).²⁴⁷ Therefore it can be argued that NGCCA, as an important subgenre of Chinese film, still has certain limitations on

²⁴⁶ Lei Song and Yinqiu Zhao. 'Top Ten of the Animated Film Box Office Chart in Chinese Market' in Wen Zhou and Wei He eds., *Chinese Animation Industry and Consumption Report (2014)* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2015) pp.51-70, p.51 [in Chinese].

²⁴⁷ State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). 'The Statistics of Box Office in Chinese Film Market (2013)' Available from: < <http://money.163.com/14/0109/20/9I63HBGV00254TI5.html>>. [Accessed: 10 August 2016]. See also Film Box Office. 'Ranking List of the Highest Grossing Film in Mainland China (2013)' Available from: < <http://58921.com/alltime/2013>>. [Accessed: 10 August 2016] [in Chinese].

several aspects such as audience recognition and box office appeal when comparing to its live action counterparts.

Title	Countries or Regions	Box Office Receipts
<i>The Croods</i> (2013)	U.S.	391.08
<i>Monster University</i> (2013)	U.S.	208.71
<i>The Smurfs 2</i> (2013)	U.S.	137.06
<i>The Mythical Ark: Adventures In Love And Happiness/Xiyangyang Yu Huitailang Zhi Xiqiyangyang Guoshenian</i> (2013)	China	124.93
<i>Turbo</i> (2013)	U.S.	111.75
<i>Seer III: Heroes Alliance/Saier Hao Dadianying 3 Zhanshen Lianmeng</i> (2013)	China	75.77
<i>Hotel Transylvania</i> (2012)	U.S.	73.19
<i>Roco Kingdom 2: The Desire of Dragon/Luoke Wangguo 2: Shenglong De Xinyuan</i> (2013)	China	66.69
<i>Happy Little Submarine 3: Rainbow Treasure/Qianting Zongdongyuan 3: Caihong Baozang</i> (2013)	China	55.84
<i>Epic</i> (2013)	U.S.	49.76

Table 3.1: 2013 China Yearly Box Office Results (Cinema Animation) (Million Chinese Yuan)

The reason for the above phenomenon is both complicated and varied. As suggested in the introduction, the production of NGCCA can be divided into two distinct areas: the completely original works and derivative films. The former is caught in a dilemma between reputation and commercial performance (discussed in the next chapter). For some of them, the box office revenue is too low to cover production costs until the end of theatrical screening despite the relatively high-reputation both online and offline. Admittedly, as discussed in the Introduction, Chinese animators still do not make films that fully meet audience expectations.

There is still a certain gap between original Chinese cinema animation (even those which enjoy relatively positive feedback) and its Japanese and American counterparts which are created by industry giants. Moreover, Keane (2009) points out that 'there is no real market for content and currently no sustainable market mechanism for stimulating original content' despite the massive expansion of animation companies and the government's push to increase animation output in China.²⁴⁸ In other words, there is a disconnection between the expectation from industrial practitioners and the actual market situation.

At the same time, a large proportion of derivative films, which are mainly produced by private companies and share the similar targeted child audience, have not only achieved commercial success with regard to box office returns but have also served as the advertisements of other products from the same entertainment brand. The first derivative film is *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* (2009) (henceforth referred to as *Pleasant Goat*) which is based on the popular animated TV series under the same name. Afterwards, the serialized *Pleasant Goat* films have been successively released to the public in the Lunar New Year Festival Season annually from 2010 to 2015.²⁴⁹ The average box office of *Pleasant Goat* films achieved 113.76 million Chinese Yuan,²⁵⁰ which was more than five times that of its NGCCA counterparts (21 million) in roughly the same period (2008-2013).²⁵¹ However, it is worth noting here

²⁴⁸ Michael Keane. 'Between the tangible and the intangible: China's new development dilemma', *Chinese Journal of Communication*. Vol. 2, No. 1, 2009, pp. 77-91, p.86.

²⁴⁹ The Lunar New Year Festival (also known as Spring Festival) refers to the first day in Chinese lunar calendar, which is the most important traditional Chinese festival and widely celebrated in Sinosphere. The date of the Spring Festival is fluid, which often alternates between 21 January and 21 February under the Gregorian calendar. In order to celebrate the Lunar New Year Festival which symbolizes a time for family reunions and national celebration, the Chinese government now stipulates people have seven days off for this event. As a result, people always crowd into the cinemas as a type of entertainment that suits the whole families, thus creating the peak movie-going period as Lunar New Year season (*Chunjie Dang*). According to relevant statistics, in 2016 the overall box office receipts of the seven-day Lunar New Year Festival period achieved 3.6 billion Chinese Yuan, which equals the annual monthly sales performance last year. See from Xiaoqin He. '3.6 Billion Chinese Yuan in Seven Days! An Astonishing Box Office Record that was created in Spring Festival Period' Available from: <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2016-02-15/doc-ixpmpqt1216120.shtml>>. [Accessed: 11 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁵⁰ China Box Office. *The Box Office of Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf Films*. Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/search?k=%E5%96%9C%E7%BE%8A%E7%BE%8A>>. [Accessed: 11 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁵¹ He and Zhao, p.46.

that the box office of *Pleasant Goat Series* has experienced continuous decline after episode four, which is partly due to the hasty production of a new work and the audience's aesthetic fatigue (Chart 3.2). According to a column article from Netease Entertainment, one online comment indicated that 'I asked a group of children whether they would like to watch *Pleasant Goat*, they immediately shook their heads and said they were sick and tired of watching it'.²⁵² A similar difficulty occurs in some other derivative films brands such as *Seer* series, which has also witnessed a box office downturn after the first two or three productions.

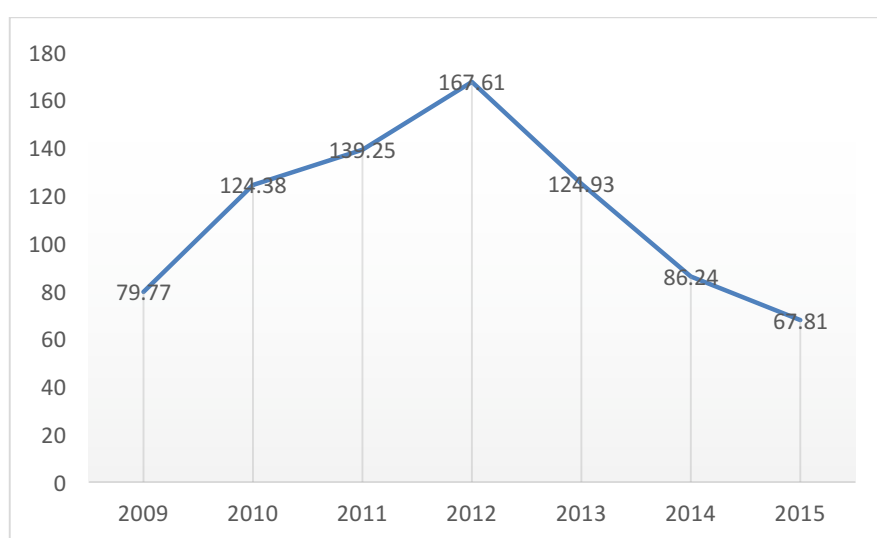


Chart 3.2 The Box Office of the Annually-released *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* Films (2008—2013)

3.0.3 Huaqiang Digital Animation and *Boonie Bears* Series

In this section, I review the background information of the privately-owned production company Huaqiang Digital Animation and its *Boonie Bears* series. I argue that *Boonie Bears* films have gradually become one of the most powerful competitors of the once dominant *Pleasant Goat* films in terms of box office appeal. To achieve this, first, I introduce the characters and storylines in *Boonie Bears*

²⁵² K Da. 'Pleasant Goat appears to be head into decline, how long Boonie Bears could stay in the peak level?' Available from: <<http://ent.163.com/15/0129/00/AH39N33500034R73.html>>. [Accessed: 12 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

animated TV series. Second, I compare the box office performance between *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* films, which are often exhibited in the roughly period in order to examine the former's strong box office appeal when competing against its main domestic rival.

As mentioned earlier, some of the derivative films have encountered a box office decline. Nevertheless, the above phenomenon does not seem to apply to the 3D *Boonie Bears* serialized cinema animation works (2014, and its sequels 2015, 2016 and 2017) (fig 3.1). The *Boonie Bears* animated TV series and cinema animations are produced by the privately-owned Shenzhen Huaqiang Digital Animation Company. In the original television animation text, two bear brothers Briar (Xiong Da in Chinese which means elder brother bear) and Bramble (Xiong Er in Chinese that refers to younger brother bear) (fig 3.2) and other small animals live happily in the forest in Northeast China. However, their peaceful life is disturbed by the arrival of Logger Vick (Guangtou Qiang in Chinese), who is employed by the voice-only Boss Li to cut down forest trees for a profit.²⁵³ The whole story centres on the farcical fight between two bear brothers (sometimes with the help of other small animals) and Logger Vick for the purpose of protecting the former's forest home. In terms of the character building, like the creative practice in *Lotus Lantern*, the visual image of Logger Vick is the animated Liu Fuyuan, who is the general manager and director of Huaqiang Company (fig 3.3).²⁵⁴ Unlike Logger Vick, the above mentioned bear brothers are not original characters in *Boonie Bears*, instead they come from Huaqiang's other TV animation production *Kung Fu Masters of the Zodiac/Shengxiao Chuanqi Zhi Shier Shengxiao Zongdongyuan* (Ding, 2010) (fig 3.4). Shang Linlin, who is the Senior Vice President of Huaqiang Company, recalled the creative process of Briar and Bramble in an interview,

Kung Fu Masters of the Zodiac is a source of inspiration for *Boonie Bears*. The former features three anthropomorphic Chinese northeast bears, a group of

²⁵³ The viewers of *Boonie Bears* TV and cinematic creations never saw Boss Li's animated image, instead the latter made his presence known by his voice (talk with Vick on the phone).

²⁵⁴ Xu Cong, 'Boonie Bears: "Imperfect" Positioning plus Occupying Broadcasting Channel', *China Business*, 22 April 2013, Section C03. [in Chinese].

bandits who depend on plunder for their livelihood. (The three bears) are just cameo roles, but they enjoy great popularity among audiences. Therefore we were just wondering whether it is possible to create a brand new animation work that starred the above bears.²⁵⁵



Fig 3.1: Posters of 2014 (Left) and 2015 (Right) *Boonie Bears* Films



Fig 3.2: Briar (right) and Bramble (left)



Fig 3.3: Logger Vick and Liu Fuyuan



Fig 3.4: The Three Bear Bandits in *Kung Fu Masters of the Zodiac*

²⁵⁵ Yingxin Ji. 'Decoding Boonie Bears: Why it becomes the Popular Series among Children', *CYzone*, 09 (2014), pp. 102-107, p. 103 [in Chinese, my translation].

In the same interview, Ding Liang, one of the two directors of the *Boonie Bears* films, also recollected that the creators decreased the number of bears from three to two for the purpose of ‘strengthening the characterization contrasts’.²⁵⁶ The film version of *Boonie Bears* may be considered as the imaginative re-creation of the TV series for large screens and features more ambitious narrative and more characters, which will be examined in the next section.

Long regarded as one of the most influential TV animation series in China, *Pleasant Goat*, which first aired in 2005, has remained one of the most popular domestically-made animated programmes, and at its peak had a 17.3 per cent audience rating.²⁵⁷ Moreover, the fourth *Pleasant Goat* film *Mission Incredible: Adventures on the Dragon's Trail/Xiyangyang Yu Huitailang Zhi Kaixin Chuanglongnian* (Jian, 2012) set a box office record at the time by earning 167.61 million Chinese Yuan.²⁵⁸ However, the once dominant role of *Pleasant Goat* on Chinese television screens has been gradually replaced by the *Boonie Bears* series since the latter first appeared on prime-time television in 2012. The special TV production for the Lunar Year of Snake *Boonie Bears: Homeward Journey/Xiong Chumo Zhi Guonian* (Liu, 2013) (14 episodes), which was played in CCTV Children’s Channel, gained 3.85 per cent of the audience share and was rebroadcasted several times within a short period, breaking the channel’s historical record ratings since it first began broadcasting in 2003.²⁵⁹

The popularity of TV production has established the mass foundation of its film version. The four *Boonie Bears* films earned 248.08 (2014), 295.72 (2015), 287.75 (2016) and 522.48 (2017) million Chinese Yuan during their theatrical runs, therefore becoming the most commercially successful serialized animated feature

²⁵⁶ Same as above.

²⁵⁷ Yuan Yin and Yi Luo. ‘The Development Prospect of Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf’, *Southeast Communication*, 11 (2010), pp. 64-67, p. 64 [in Chinese].

²⁵⁸ China Box Office. ‘*The Box Office of Mission Incredible: Adventures On The Dragon's Trail*’. Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/596448>>. [Accessed: 12 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁵⁹ K Da. ‘Pleasant Goat appear to be head into decline, how long Boonie Bears could stay in the peak level?’ Available from: <<http://ent.163.com/15/0129/00/AH39N33500034R73.html>>. [Accessed: 12 August 2016] [in Chinese].

films (chart 3.3).²⁶⁰ Meanwhile, by directly competing with its *Pleasant Goat* rival in the Lunar New Year Festival Season, *Boonie Bears* cinema animation productions have shown strong box office appeal in both 2014 and 2015.²⁶¹ The 2014 version *Boonie Bears* film also broke *Pleasant Goat*'s domestic cinema animation box office record. Compared with its high grossing competitor, the box office revenue for *Pleasant Goat* films were 86.24 (2014) and 67.81 (2015) million, were the lowest on record among the whole series (as mentioned earlier).²⁶² Therefore it can be said that the *Boonie Bears* cinema animation productions can represent the derivative films at the present stage. Moreover, this series indicates several new development directions for NGCCA such as the target audience expansion, cross-generational marketing and readjustment on media violence, which will be analysed in the following sections.

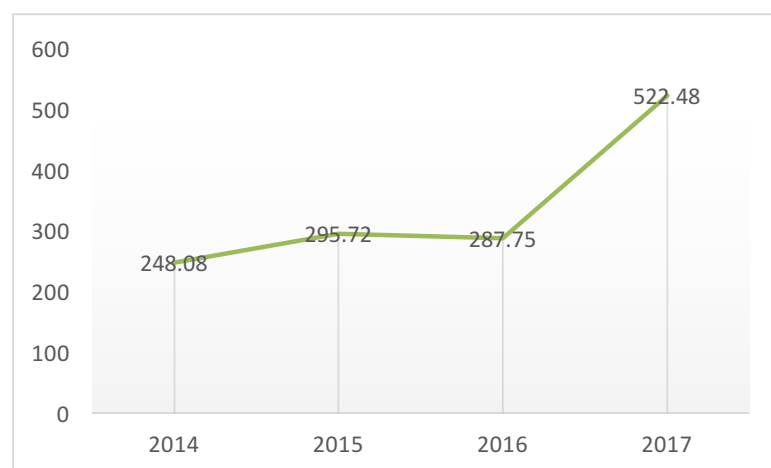


Chart 3.3 The Box Office of the Annually-released *Boonie Bears* Films (2014—2017)

²⁶⁰ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of Boonie Bears Films'. Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/search?k=%E7%86%8A%E5%87%BA%E6%B2%A1>>. [Accessed: 03 March 2017] [in Chinese].

²⁶¹ In 2014 and 2015, the release date of *Boonie Bears* (17 January 2014 and 30 January 2015) and *Pleasant Goat* (16 January 2014 and 31 January 2015) animated films in China were only one day apart.

²⁶² China Box Office. 'The Box Office of Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf Films'. Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/search?k=%E5%96%9C%E7%BE%8A%E7%BE%8A>>. [Accessed: 11 August 2016] [in Chinese].

3.1 Cross-generational Appeal and Internet Thinking: *Boonie Bears* films' Marketing Strategy

3.1.1 Synergy between Online and Offline Channels: The Marketing Campaigns of *Rescue*

In this section, I analyse *Rescue*'s online and offline marketing activities, which have generated a synergistic effect between content creation and promotion. I argue that the above efficient campaigns have contributed significantly to the box office success of this film. First, I examine the disconnection between the marketing practices and actual market situation in cinema animation sector before the release of *Rescue*. Second, I review how ordinary audiences access new animations in China. Third, I analyse how the distribution companies Mr. Cartoon Picture and Le Vision Pictures achieve different potential audience members by implementing three tactics in different platforms.

As suggested in the previous chapter, *Lotus Lantern*, as the first NGCCA work aimed at a mass market, has made several useful attempts in promoting the film before and after the release. However, as an animated film which was produced by the state owned SAFS, the creation and promotion of *Lotus Lantern* was not merely profit making. Instead, it featured certain political and social attributes. This film positioned itself as a 'Gift Film' for celebrating the 50th anniversary of the PRC in the pre-creation stage, which also carried the hope for Chinese animation's revival in the new market circumstances (long slump in domestic animation sector, pressure from imported competitors, etc.) through applying Hollywood iconography and techniques. Furthermore, although it should be admitted that *Lotus Lantern* achieved instant critical and commercial success with respect to awarding, box office revenue and derivative sales, but the film and its symbolic representations, such as the relevant characters and props, did not form an entertainment brand due to the lack of follow-up development. Compared with *Lotus Lantern*, the *Boonie Bears* films, as the privately-owned studio works, aimed at profit-making from the beginning stage of production despite the tangible and intangible

governmental and social concern on content creation (discussed later). At the same time, regarding the changing market conditions *Boonie Bears* adopted a series of effective marketing strategies, which not only directly guaranteed the film productions' box office earnings, but it have also made the derivative films served as an important component of its parent brand in terms of latter's sustainable development.

The marketing campaign of *Lotus Lantern* provided a practical example for NGCCA's promotion. However, after this the importance that marketing plays in ensuring a film's commercial success has not been fully recognised by Chinese animators. Flew (2012) argues that new media technologies have largely stimulated the cultural trade such as the role for Internet in accessing and promoting cultural products.²⁶³ However, in terms of the overall marketing strategy of NGCCA works, there were relatively rare advertising efforts on new media like Chinese-language cartoon channels, news portals and mobile Apps before *Rescue* and *Winter*. Instead, the promotional activities of the most NGGCA productions have limited to several traditional and separate channels such as the cinema poster and cardboard display. Nevertheless, there exists a disconnection between the above practices and current market situation.

In fact, the cartoon channels and Internet can be regarded as two vital resources to access new animations (both TV and cinema productions) in China. According to relevant statistics, among all the central and provincial cartoon channels in China the core programmes resources (include animated TV series, animation news, live action children's drama and educational children's television shows) occupied 11 to 25 per cent of the whole broadcasting duration each day in 2011.²⁶⁴ This proportion had further increased to 40 per cent in the first quarter of 2015, simultaneously the viewing figures of the above channels also reached more than 50 per cent.

²⁶³ Flew, p.127.

²⁶⁴ Yan Peng. 'The Analysis on Domestic Cartoon Channel's Problems'. Available from: <<http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/52789/214319/13946068.html>>. [Accessed: 16 August 2016] [in Chinese].

Moreover, the core programmes and viewing shares in provincial cartoon channels even stood at 62.35 and 68.36 per cent respectively.²⁶⁵ That is to say, children's television in China is largely underpinned by animation especially the domestic productions.²⁶⁶ Li Chen and Xiumei Wang in their 2014 study also confirm the predominant role of the above channels in terms of the children's viewing behaviour towards animation work. Through analysing 106 effective questionnaires from young parents (late 20s and early 30s) in five Chinese cities, they found that 70 per cent of the above-mentioned adults observed that their offspring would prefer to choose the TV cartoon channels (both central and provincial) rather than online video platforms to watch newly released animation programmes.²⁶⁷

In terms of the Internet users in China, China Internet Network Information Centre in its 38th *Statistical Report on the Development of China Internet Network* showed that the number of Chinese netizens has climbed to 710 million while the smartphone users reached 656 million until July 2016.²⁶⁸ In other words, half of the Chinese population now have Internet access. In this context, Wen Zhou, Wei He, Yan Chen and Juan Du (2015) surveyed 1,196 residents (mainly above 20s) in six Chinese cities using random digit dialling. Of the overall respondents, 15.1% indicated that they have watched animated films in theatres at least once in the previous six months, who were identified as 'cinema animation viewers' by the surveyors.²⁶⁹ Among the above-mentioned audience group, 85 per cent announced that they got the relevant information about cinema animation through news website, news apps and social media.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁵ CSM. 'Eighty Percent of Children's TV Programs come from Central and Provincial Cartoon Channels'. Available from: <<http://news.comicyu.com/html2012/139/2016/192552.html>>. [Accessed: 17 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁶⁶ Keane, *The Chinese Television Industry*. p.134.

²⁶⁷ Li Chen and Xiumei Wang. 'The Investigation on Chinese Children's Viewing Habits towards Animation', *Brand*, 12(2014), pp. 117-118, p.117 [in Chinese].

²⁶⁸ China Internet Network Information Centre. 'Statistical Report on the Development of China Internet Network (July 2016)'. Available from: <<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwzxbg/hlwjtjbg/201608/P020160803367337470363.pdf>>. [Accessed: 17 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁶⁹ Wen Zhou, Wei He, Yan Chen and Juan Du. 'The Analysis of Cinema Animation Viewers' in Wen Zhou and Wei He eds., *Chinese Animation Industry and Consumption Report (2014)* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2015) pp.83-92, p.83 [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁷⁰ Zhou, He, Chen and Du, p.89.

Regarding this, while maintaining the distribution of traditional marketing materials in cinemas and other gathering places for potential audiences (discussed later), the distributors of *Boonie Bears* series Mr. Cartoon Picture and Le Vision Pictures implemented a set of market strategies that aim at the TV animation viewers and Internet users. As the 'domestic leading distributing company for the whole-family-suitable cinema animation', Mr. Cartoon Picture and the 'integration between technology, arts and Internet' Le Vision Pictures have their own strong points in film distribution and circulation.²⁷¹ Chen Yingjie, who is the general manager of Mr. Cartoon, described the division between his company and Le Vision in *Boonie Bears's* advertising and marketing activities that,

Mr. Cartoon was primarily responsible for the audience of children while the major target of Le Vision is the young adults (in terms of *Boonie Bears's* advertising and marketing campaigns). Such 'joint operation' enables the two companies to achieve mutual complementarity of each other's high-quality resources, thus maximizing the effect and scope of promotion activities.²⁷²

Nowadays, even the already well-known *Boonie Bears* brand, which has established awareness among the Chinese audiences through the widely broadcast of TV animations, still needs to create as much viewing demand as possible for its film products through efficient advertising. Specifically, in the case of *Rescue*, Mr. Cartoon and Le Vision developed three approaches to segment the audiences, namely 'small hands (children) holding larger hands (adults/parents)', 'larger hands holding small hands' and 'larger hands holding larger hands', and then did more targeted works in order to achieve the maximum number of potential film-goers. The first one 'small hands holding larger hands', which aimed at attracting the audience of children, was implemented by Mr. Cartoon. Regarding the influence of central and provincial cartoon channels (as mentioned earlier) among child group, Mr. Cartoon released a large number of

²⁷¹ Film Headline. 'Mr. Cartoon releases the "MRCARTOON+" Strategy, which aims at High Quality Whole-family-suitable Cinema Animation'. Available from: <<http://mt.sohu.com/20150618/n415223850.shtml>>. [Accessed: 17 August 2016] See also DoNews. 'Jia Yueting appears on the Premiere Ceremony of *The Expendables 3*, who reveals the Overseas Strategy of Le Vision'. Available from: <<http://www.donews.com/net/201408/2827852.shtm>>. [Accessed: 18 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁷² Shu Yu. 'Boonie Bears: Marketing for all Age Groups', *Chinese Film Market*, 02(2014), pp. 19, 13, p. 19 [in Chinese, my translation].

advertisements about *Rescue* on the above platforms. According to Chen Yingjie, the advertisements of *Rescue* were being broadcasted at least 120 times per day on several most influential cartoon channels such as CCTV Children's Channel, Beijing TV Kaku Kids Channel, Zhejiang Children Channel and Shanghai Toonmax Cartoon Channel before its public screening.²⁷³ Among them Kaku Kids Channel collaborated most closely with the film's distributor. Mr. Cartoon arranged to plant advertisements, which include several short film clips feature the characters and brand, into the channel's children's TV programmes.²⁷⁴ At the same time, Mr. Cartoon placed the information of *Rescue* (theatrical release date, brief storylines, etc.) inside the beginning and ending of each episode of the *Boonie Bears* TV series which were broadcasted in Kaku Kids Channel and CCTV Children's Channel. In this sense, the animated TV series also became an advertising carrier of its film version counterparts, which can be regarded as a mode of industry chain cooperation. As suggested earlier, *Boonie Bears: Homeward Journey* achieved the highest audience rating in CCTV Children's Channel. Meanwhile other *Boonie Bears* TV series have also always occupied a place in the top ten programmes in terms of audience share for major provincial cartoon or children channels.²⁷⁵ Hye-Kyung Lee (2010) argues that although the global animation industry is keen to experiment with new media like mobile phone and Internet which served as windows for exhibition, but the usefulness of TV broadcasting still cannot be underestimated.²⁷⁶ Therefore it can be argued that the integration of film information into its TV counterparts was even more effective than the conventional TV advertisements in terms of the audience reachability and awareness.

²⁷³ Shu Yu, p.19.

²⁷⁴ Yu, p.19.

²⁷⁵ Daxia Zhong. '*Boonie Bears Animated TV Series achieves Top Audience Share in China while Ori-Princess also hits on Television Stations*'. Available from: <<http://www.hinews.cn/news/system/2012/11/27/015173829.shtml>>. [Accessed: 18 August 2016] [in Chinese].

²⁷⁶ Hye-Kyung Lee. 'Animation Industry at a Crossroads', *Creative Industries Journal*, Vol.3, No.3, 2010, pp. 183-187, p.186.

As a part of the whole marketing strategy, Le Vision adopted limited release and the corresponding online-exclusive sales method for the purpose of winning the Word-Of-Mouth reputation among young parents as well as Internet users, who are the target audiences of 'larger hands holding small hands' category. Before *Rescue's* public screening, cinemas in 50 Chinese cities showed the film for 150 times on 5 January 2014 (12 days earlier) and the number of tickets was limited to 5,000.²⁷⁷ On 5 December 2013, Le Vision started the online-exclusive pre-sale of *Rescue's* advance screening through its cross-platform application *Leyingke*. Beaven and Laws in their 2013 study find that the tension of buying admission tickets for live performance like concerts has been greatly intensified, which is largely due to the expanded stress of online pre-sales and the wider ease of ticket purchase via websites.²⁷⁸ A similar trend seems also apply to the advance selling of *Rescue's* limited release. Unlike the unsalable situation of the majority of its NGCCA counterparts, the admittance for *Rescue's* limited release was sold out in 10 minutes while the number of ticket appointment reached 117,626.²⁷⁹ Regarding the significant sales of *Rescue*, Chinese director Liang Hansen maintains that,

This mode (*Rescue's* online sale) is conducive to the development of Chinese cinema animation, the more channels customers could achieve, the more box office revenues could expect. Furthermore, it is indispensable to further develop the direct selling. In the case of *Rescue*, (Le Vision) chooses the cinemas according to the audience's location and consumption ability, (by using *Leyingke*) the producer can get more benefit by cutting out the theatre chain and other middlemen.²⁸⁰

It is noticeable that the pre-sale was implemented before the film's advertising exposure on the television channels. Instead the relevant information of the limited release was mainly pushed through the new media channels like Letv (the video

²⁷⁷ Jianbin Li. 'Boonie Bears becomes Dark House by applying Direct-selling Presale', *Beijing Business Today*, 13 December 2013, Section A03. [in Chinese].

²⁷⁸ Zuleika Beaven and Chantal Laws. "Never let me Down Again": Loyal Customer Attitudes towards Ticket Distribution Channels for Live Music Events: A Netnographic Exploration of the US Leg of the Depeche Mode 2005-06 World Tour' in Martin Robertson and Elspeth Frew eds., *Events and Festivals: Current Trends and Issues* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013) pp.19-41, p.33.

²⁷⁹ LI, Section A03.

²⁸⁰ Qian Liu. 'The Creation of Whole-family-suitable Chinese Cinema Animation: Case Studies on *Boonie Bears: To the Rescue*', *Popular Literature*, 11(2014), pp. 201-202, p. 201 [in Chinese, my translation].

website of Le Vision Picture's parent company LeEco), Baidu and Dianping, which are always listed as the most well-known websites in China.²⁸¹ As mentioned earlier, 85 per cent of Chinese cinema animation viewers as well as young adults prefer to obtain the news of a newly released product through Internet services. The tailored advertisements on the above influential web portals could achieve the maximum number of potential member of audiences as well Internet users, thus creating a viewing mood among the above group. The vice-president of Le Vision Huang Ziyang considered the campaigns on the mobile apps and websites 'aim directly at the "larger hands" and tries to attract young adults' attention by using promotional and interactive activities on the interactive platforms'.²⁸² As a result, Le Vision effectively reached wider young audiences than ever by using the above target marketing plan.

However, the applicability of the limited release and online pre-sale campaign should not be overstated. No denying the importance of the marketing effort, but the success of *Rescue's* advance screening is also largely based on the *Boonie Bears* brand's preceding audience familiarity and popularity. Flew (2012) believes acclaimed industry practitioners like directors, producers and scriptwriters 'may be seen as being able to attach particular qualities to a cultural product', which can be considered one of several key strategies to manage commercial risk and create consumer demand.²⁸³ In terms of *Boonie Bears* productions, the pre-existing fame and popularity of the TV version has attached peculiar attributes to the motion pictures, thus removing the audiences' uncertainty and suspicion on the film's entertainment value to some extent. In this sense, film-goers may not take kindly to the promoting information from other relatively less known cinema animations with limited brand awareness such as the *Kuiba* series (discussed in next chapter). On this aspect, *Rescue's* performance was even beyond Le Vision's collaborator

²⁸¹ Baidu is the largest Chinese-language search engine for websites, audio files and images. Dianping is often considered as the Chinese version TripAdvisor which share the similar ratings and reviews functions.

²⁸² Artron. 'Boonie Bears grabs Audience Attention while directly impact the Box Office of Pleasant Goat'. Available from: <<http://news.artron.net/20140122/n561551.html>>. [Accessed: 20 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁸³ Flew, p.121.

Chen Yingjie's expectation, who recollected the unsuccessful practices of his company that 'previously we (Mr. Cartoon) tried to use limited release and pre-sale approaches for other animated films, but the result was not very satisfying. Basically (the above methods) held little appeal to young parents'.²⁸⁴

While exploring the possibilities of promotion on new media, the distributors of *Rescue* kept high-intensity traditional marketing efforts to not only attract family audiences, but white-collar workers who are the target audiences for 'larger hands holding larger hands' strategy. In an interview Huang Ziyang provided a set of numbers which showed Le Vision's marketing efforts in theatre chains. Specifically, within two weeks prior to *Rescue*'s release, the company distributed three million Aeroplane Chess (a Chinese cross-and-circle board game play between the children and parents) and one million derivative toys of the film in order to attract family audiences (fig 3.5). At the same time, Le Vision also released 1,000 large stand advertising cardboards and 1,000 small ones in cinemas in large cities (such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou) where contributed the most to the box office revenues.²⁸⁵ Besides the large-scale coverage of propaganda items in cinemas, Le Vision also placed promotional materials in the sites that serve as the public gathering places for white-collar workers. For example, the relevant information about *Rescue* had been printed on the napkins which were provided in a number of hot-pot restaurants in large cities, thus achieving the objective of precision marketing on potential customers.²⁸⁶ Hesmondhalgh (2013) analyses the cross-media marketing of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Adamson, 2005), a film adaptation of popular novels. He finds that the producer and distributor Disney promoted the film on various platforms, such as the massive re-release of the original novel and the circulation of album and trailer which were

²⁸⁴ Yushu Wang. 'The Case Study on the Marketing Strategy of Boonie Bears'. Available from: <<http://www.zongyiweekly.com/new/info.asp?id=4063>>. [Accessed: 20 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁸⁵ Lin Lin. 'Boonie Bears tops at the box office among Chinese Cinema Animation: the Successful Models for Domestic Animation will become increasingly various in the Future', *China Film News*, 12 January 2014, Section 12. [in Chinese].

²⁸⁶ Jia Xu. 'Box Office Record is broken by Boonie Bears which has earned 100 million Chinese Yuan within three days! "Bear" beats "Goat"!', *Lanzhou Evening News*, 21 January 2014, Section B04. [in Chinese].

officially associated to the film and licensed products, to achieve different group of audiences. Such efforts have resulted in several positive reviews and significant box office returns. Hesmondhalgh summarises the above practices as a form of ‘synergy strategies’.²⁸⁷ Similarly, the marketing activities of *Rescue* were conducted on different media platforms according to the different target audiences, which also show a synergistic effect between content creation and promotion.



Fig 3.5: *Boonie Bears Aeroplanes Chess*

3.1.2 Target Audience Expansion and Celebrity Endorsement: The Marketing Campaigns of *Winter*

In this section, I analyse the promotional activities of *Winter* on the basis of *Rescue*'s successful experiences. I argue that the above practices have further cemented the *Boonie Bears* films' place in the market. First, I examine how *Winter* expanded the target viewers from the parent-child groups to three-generation families. Second, I analyse the celebrity endorsement strategy in *Winter*'s marketing.

Winter inherited the effective experiences and models (targeted marketing campaigns on different platforms, etc.) firstly explored by its predecessor *Rescue*.

²⁸⁷ Hesmondhalgh, p.378, 379.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cartoon and Le Vision further upgraded several new marketing strategies with regard to the changing market environment and film content. The story of *Winter* starts with the memories of young Logger Vick and bear brothers, among whom Bramble encounters a mysterious small white bear who swiftly disappears. The latter is actually the guardian deity of the White Bear Volcano which is located near the forests the bear brothers live. As the story unfolds, the mature Bramble meets his childhood friend again when the grown-up and huge white bear god (Tuan Zi named by Bramble) is chasing by a wicked and wealthy boss and his underlings Skinny Thug, Bald Thug and the hired Logger Vick. Bramble saves the white bear this time but the latter is still captured and tortured by the villains later. A tale circulates throughout the small town where Vick and other loggers live that the White Bear Volcano will erupt and destroy the whole town if anyone riles the god bear or damages the environment (deforestation). After a sequence of adventures, the bear brothers and the repented Vick finally save the white bear and calm the latter's flames of fury on the verge of going mad, thus saving the lives of inhabitants.

In view of *Winter*'s development on character building (adorable image of childhood Vick and bear brothers) and thematic intention (relationship between human beings and nature), Mr. Cartoon and Le Vision further expanded the film's target audiences from parents-children groups to three-generation families. On this appeal, they launched promotional activities that one member of the three-generation families could watch the film for free. According to the report from *Sina Entertainment*, after watching *Winter* in limited release, 90 per cent of audiences believed that the film was suitable for all age groups.²⁸⁸ The reporter also observed that 'not only children and young parents, grandparents also showed great enthusiasm for the film's further performance in the public screening'.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ Sina Entertainment. 'Cao Ge and Grace attend the Premiere Ceremony of Boonie Bears'. Available from: < <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2015-01-23/doc-iawzunex9299813.shtml>>. [Accessed: 24 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

²⁸⁹ Same as above.

It is also worth noting that *Winter* developed the promotional strategies of Chinese cinema animation by inviting celebrities to serve as the film's spokespeople. Martin Roll in his 2005 study argues that 'celebrity endorsements have been gaining higher levels of acceptance as an important tool to build brands by creating positive associations and building unique personalities'.²⁹⁰ However, it was rare to see the above approach in promoting NGCCA works before *Winter*. Since mid-2014 the Taiwanese music producer and singer Cao Ge and his dependents Joe (son) and Grace (daughter) have achieved great popularity in the mainland especially among young parents and children because their performance on reality TV show as well as massive ratings hit *Where Are We Going, Dad?/Baba Qu Naer*, which features five fathers and their children as they travel to rural places. In this show, Cao Ge showed his paternal love through coping successfully with traditionally female tasks, at the same time the Cao Ge families have also enhanced their profile through the intensive exposure in the programme.²⁹¹ It can be said that Cao Ge, Joe and Grace have gradually become the symbolic representation of family affection and a cross-generational icon, which perfectly fit the appeal of *Winter*. Jennifer Escalas and James Bettman (2014) believe that the efficiency of the celebrity's endorsement will be affected by the specific symbolism associated with him or her.²⁹² Similarly, Larry Leslie (2011) also argues that famous person's attributes will be transferred to the product he or she endorsed and stimulate sales to some extent.²⁹³ In the case of *Winter*, by inviting Cao Ge and his family to produce the film's theme song and attending the premier ceremony and other promoting activities (fig 3.6),²⁹⁴ the film aimed to harness the former's influence and

²⁹⁰ Martin Roll. *Asian Brand Strategy: How Asia Builds Strong Brands* (New York: Springer, 2005) p. 82.

²⁹¹ Michael Keane. *The Chinese Television Industry*. p. 105.

²⁹² Jennifer Escalas and James Bettman. 'Self-Brand Connections: The Role of Reference Groups and Celebrity Endorsers in the Creation of Brand Meaning' in Deborah MacInnis, C. Whan Park and Joseph Priester eds., *Handbook of Brand Relationships* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015) pp.89-104, p.117.

²⁹³ Larry Leslie. *Celebrity in the 21st Century: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011) p. 45.

²⁹⁴ Entgroup. 'Boonie Bears: Mystical Winter will be back on 30 January, the most Influential Domestic Cinema Animation ignites the Audiences' Viewing Enthusiasm'. Available from: <<http://www.entgroup.cn/MarketingNews/2223306.shtml>>. [Accessed: 25 August 2016] [in Chinese].

popularity to reach the maximum number of potential family-size audiences, and further created positive associations between the film and its spokespeople.



Fig 3.6: Cao Ge, Joe and Grace (middle) in the Premiere Ceremony of *Winter*

3.1.3 Product Placement in *Boonie Bears* Films: The Case of Fantawild Adventure Theme Park

In this section, I analyse the product placement in *Boonie Bears* films, especially the case of embedded advertising of Fantawild Adventure Theme Park. I argue that the above practices can be considered as a win-win scenario for both the *Boonie Bears* franchise and Fantawild. First, I provide a brief overview of product placement in American animated films and *Boonie Bears* series. Second, I analyse the cooperation between *Boonie Bears* and Fantawild through embedded advertising.

Besides using celebrity endorsement to expand the film's brand recognition, the *Boonie Bears* series also pioneered in the use of product placement in Chinese cinema animation. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell (2012) review the dual function of product placement in film production. They find that the embedded advertising serves as a crucial ingredient in building and cultivating brand identity for advertisers. Moreover, film producers will also benefit from product placement in

terms of raising development money and offsetting production costs.²⁹⁵ At the same time, the cartoon depiction of a certain product is also a common practice in animated films such as the Honey Nut Cheerios brand breakfast cereal in *The Chipmunk Adventure* (Karman, 1987) and Cinnabon bakery restaurant in *Bee Movie* (Smith and Hickner, 2007). However, the above approach, like the celebrity endorsement, was also rarely seen in NGCCA works before the *Boonie Bears* series. There are four kinds of products that have been planted into the 2014 and 2015 version *Boonie Bears* films: Fantawild Adventure Theme Park (2014, 2015), Infiniti SUV (Sports Utility Vehicle) (2015), Yili QQ Star Liquid Children Milk (2015) and Qzone (2015).²⁹⁶ Among the above placements I will mainly focus on the case of Fantawild which is typical for the *Boonie Bears* brand's industry chain analysis. Fantawild Adventure Theme Park is the largest amusement park chain in more than 20 Chinese cities, in which they own and manage the theme zone of *Boonie Bears* brand that aims at bringing the derivatives into the market. Liu Fuyuan considers the function of *Boonie Bears* zone as 'a place where "Bear Fans" can interact closely with "Briar", "Bramble" and "Logger Vick" (played by members of staff), (Bear Fans) can also purchase licensed products such as character dolls, picture books and DVD discs'.²⁹⁷

The *Boonie Bears* films not only actively endorse Fantawild, but also serve as the advertising carriers for its own derivatives, thus achieving a win-win scenario for the two brands. To be specific, in *Rescue*, Logger Vick shows several items for the purpose of coaxing the crying Du Du (discussed later). In these scenes, the creators insert the brochure of Fantawild Park among the above items (fig 3.7), which tactfully transfer the product information to the audiences. The *Boonie Bears* brand further enhanced its cooperation with Fantawild Adventure Theme Park in *Winter*,

²⁹⁵ Kuhn and Westwell, p.332.

²⁹⁶ Qzone is a Chinese-language social networking website, which is the most popular SNS among Chinese young aged between 15 and 20. See from Vanessa Apaolaza et al. 'The Relationship Between Gratifications from Social Networking Site Use and Adolescents' Brand Interactions' in George Christodoulides, Anastasia Stathopoulou and Martin Eisend eds., *Advances in Advertising Research (Vol. VII): Bridging the Gap between Advertising Academia and Practice* (Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler, 2016) pp.29-42, p.30.

²⁹⁷ Xu Cong. 'Boonie Bears: "Imperfect" Positioning plus Occupying Broadcasting Channel', *China Business*, 22 April 2013, Section C03. [in Chinese, my translation].

which can be illustrated by the more intensive and blatant product placement. As illustrated in the figures, the logo of Fantawild not only appears on a huge billboard that stands in the loggers small town in the film (fig 3.8), but was painted on the exterior of a long train which is used to detain the white bear god. The train also serves as a place where battle between protagonists and antagonists takes place (fig 3.9). Furthermore, at the end of the film, there is a short clip about Fantawild which features a hybrid use of live action (tourists to the park) and animation (the animated Vick and bear brothers in their childhood and adulthood respectively) (fig 3.10). The producers of *Boonie Bears* films do indeed benefit from the placement in the production stage in terms of the coverage of production and marketing costs. But in the meantime, Fantawild Adventure Theme Park's frequent appearance in the *Boonie Bears* films is not a mere one-way product placement which 'offer the producer the rights and use of the brand in the work while offer fees as compensation for the placement'.²⁹⁸ Instead, by building the *Boonie Bears* theme zone in Fantawild, the two brands have formed a close-knit community within which they enjoy common interests. From this perspective, it can be argued that the Fantawild Park placement is a form of collaboration between the upper reaches (content creation) and downstream (derivative sales) of the *Boonie Bears* brand's industry chain.



Fig 3.7: Brochure of Fantawild Park



Fig 3.8: The Huge billboard with the Logo of Fantawild Park

²⁹⁸ Lawrence A. Wenner. 'On the Ethics of Product Placement in Media Entertainment' in Mary-Lou Galician ed., *Handbook of Product Placement in the Mass Media: New Strategies in Marketing Theory, Practice, Trends, and Ethics* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) pp.101-132, p.110.



Fig 3.9: Logo of Fantawild Park on the Train



Fig 3.10 Short clip about Fantawild Park

3.2 Appeal for Young Adults: The Recreation of Logger Vick in *Boonie Bears: To the Rescue*

This section examines the refigured Logger Vick, who transforms from an out-and-out antagonistic figure in the TV animation version into an imperfect ordinary person in *Rescue*. I argue that such transition helps to attract young adult customers especially young parents. To explain this further, I start by examining an over-emphasis on child-oriented principle of creation in the majority of NGCCA works and the problem it brings. Then I analyse the image of Logger Vick in *Rescue* from various aspects, in order to explore how this character mirrors the young adult audience members. Firstly, I discuss Vick's massive work pressure as a logger, which reflects a similar circumstance of a regular employee in China. Secondly, I consider Vick's sarcasm on his employer echoes discontent experienced in real-life workplaces. Thirdly, I analyse how Vick's nostalgic toys brings back the childhood memories of adult audiences who are in their late 20s or early 30s. Lastly, I focus on the pressure of marriage faced by both Vick and Chinese young adults.

As discussed in the Introduction, the child-oriented trend is one of the most distinctive features of NGCCA especially for the derivative films. In most cases, the

target audiences of domestic animated films are still children between the ages of six and ten.²⁹⁹ In other words, the aesthetic needs and viewing demands of other age groups have always been neglected under the current creative principles. Sabrina Qiong Yu in her 2010 study finds that 65 per cent of Chinese Internet users were between the ages of 18 and 35, who made up the majority of cinema-goers in contemporary China.³⁰⁰ Furthermore, a recent sample survey data revealed that the proportion of Chinese film audiences in the age-group of 18 to 39 years grew to 86.7 per cent in 2014.³⁰¹ As suggested earlier, Zhou, He, Chen and Du in their 2015 research project analyse how would cinema animation audiences in China get information about newly released animated works. In the same study, they also find that adult viewers between the ages of 20 and 39 consist approximately 52% of the entire animated film audience group.³⁰² That is to say, although young people who are in their 20s and 30s have gradually become the mainstream audiences, they still have not received enough attention from Chinese animators and other industry practitioners.

On the whole, Chinese cinema animation always, consciously or unconsciously, finds opportunities to cater to the children's pleasure while ignoring the entertainment appeal from young adults. Paradoxically, in normal circumstances it is acknowledged that children in the age between six and ten are not allowed to buy film tickets and cannot go to the cinema alone. In other words, they should be accompanied by their adult guardians (often parents). However, the overemphasis on child-oriented principle has led to a dilemma in which 'children are laughing while adults are sleeping', which is largely due to the overly simplistic and childish

²⁹⁹ Sina Game. 'Chinese Animators talk about the Cinema Animation, the Excessive Child-orientation will not attract the Audiences', Available from: <<http://games.sina.com.cn/ol/n/dlwyxw/2015-06-24/fxehfqj8253952.shtml>>. [Accessed: 13 August 2016] [in Chinese].

³⁰⁰ Sabrina Qiong Yu. 'Camp pleasure in an era of Chinese blockbuster: Internet reception of *Hero* in mainland China' in Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley eds., *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of Hero* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) pp.135-151, p.137.

³⁰¹ Li Li. 'The Report of Chinese Film Art is Released, people born after 1990 occupy one third of Cinema-goers'. Available from: <<http://www.takefoto.cn/viewnews-150325.html>>. [Accessed: 13 August 2016] [in Chinese].

³⁰² Zhou, He, Chen and Du, p.87.

pictorial styles and storylines.³⁰³ And worse still, even in this case, though, a large number of derivative films feature a long narrative that full of lecturing tone like a form of supplement to daily compulsory school learning. Naturally, this embarrassing phenomenon will directly discourage the parents' enthusiasm for cinema-going, thus gradually forming a vicious cycle that, once in motion, is difficult to break. Kwai-Cheung Lo in his 2012 study considers this cycle is animation, especially Chinese cinema animation, is 'marketed to children only – not teenagers or adults – and must feature educational themes'.³⁰⁴

The *Boonie Bears* series has distinguished itself from its derivative films counterparts which are only concerned with possibility of attracting the audience of children. While holding the existing child viewers by maintaining the similar characters and forest scenes, *Boonie Bears* also takes into account the aesthetic taste and viewing demand from adult audiences. As suggested in the previous section, family audiences are brought to the *Boonie Bears* films primarily through advance marketing and publicity on different platforms, which are also based on the pre-existing awareness and familiarity of *Boonie Bears* entertainment brand. Meanwhile, at the same time I argue that the narrative content of the above creations also play an important role in attracting filmgoers especially audience of young adults. This section undertakes a case study of *Rescue*. The following discussion will focus on the refigured Logger Vick, as a leading actor that is simultaneously strange and familiar, in this film using textual analysis, in order to examine how and to what extent this character contribute to this series' appeal for young adults particularly for the young parents.

Rescue centres on a rescue campaign which features the cooperation between the once-hostile bear brothers and Logger Vick. The story begins in a stormy night, Skinny Thug (Da Mahou in Chinese) and Bald Thug (Er Gou in Chinese) drive on a

³⁰³ Jingran Wang and Tingjun Li. 'Boonie Bears: To the Rescue, Marketing-driven instead of Sales-driven', *China Film News*, 15 January 2014, Section 20 [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁰⁴ Kwai-Cheung Lo. 'Manipulating historical tensions in East Asian Popular Culture' in Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari eds., *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) pp.177-190, p.187.

two-lane forest alley with a mysterious suitcase in the backseat. However, they have a traffic accident and the suitcase is hurled into the deep forest. Simultaneously, Logger Vick receives a suitcase, which shares the same appearance as the above one, from Boss Li that contains tree felling equipment. In the same forest, Vick wants to start logging in the heavy rain, but his plan is thwarted because the suitcase is carried off by the bear brothers. Then Vick and two thugs, in the dark, mistakenly take each other's suitcases. Early the next day, a cute little girl named Du Du appears in Vick's house, after being kidnapped by the thugs and their evil boss and being loaded in the suitcase in the previous night. Vick and bear brothers then develop a strong relationship with Du Du. However, the little girl is kidnapped again by the evil boss and his more powerful underlings and then is taken to the latter's secret base. As the film develops, Vick and the bear brothers are aware of the fact that Du Du is actually an orphan who is adopted by the evil boss's father, a lonely and wealthy elderly man. The departed man donates almost all his property. But he left something for Du Du (actually some toys and photos), which is locked in a safety box and can only be opened by scanning Du Du's palm print. In other words, the evil boss does not inherit even a penny from his father. Therefore the former wants to take money and valuables (non-existent) from the little girl. After fierce fighting with the antagonists, Vick and the bear brothers finally rescue Du Du and evil boss is arrested by the police.

Logger Vick, as the main antagonist in the TV animation version, becomes the helper and partner of Briar and Bramble in the campaign to save Du Du. On the whole, his dark side, such as putting profit before everything else (immoderate deforestation without considering environmental consequences) and the frequent use of violence (discussed in the next section) which are often emphasised in the TV version, is rarely seen in *Rescue*. Instead, Vick's childish and moral aspects are motivated by getting along with Du Du in his house. This is not say that *Rescue* is the total deconstruction of the conventional image of Vick. Rather, the animators still try to maintain the connection between TV and cinema versions by retaining several of Vick's foibles like impatience and being subservient to his boss, which is similar to the practices of *Lotus Lantern* in terms of the recreation of Sun Wukong

and Tudiye. Kuhn and Westwell (2012) maintain that character establishment 'is the key to both narrative clarity and audience involvement, and a mainstream fiction film will ensure that each of a story's main characters is established through a specific scene or vignette'.³⁰⁵ Unlike the character design of its derivative films counterparts which always apply a simple binary opposite of good and evil, in *Rescue* Logger Vick's character is given more depth. This reveals the creators' efforts on character establishment, who want to express the complexity and multidimensionality in human nature through refiguring Vick. On one hand, Vick seems to be, as usual, a potentially antagonistic figure in the beginning of the film, which is represented by the familiar illegal logging and bear-logger chasing scenes. On the other hand, Vick soon shows his soft side in his care for Du Du. Furthermore, by putting him into the grander scenarios that feature new story elements and more wicked villains, the once 'bad' Vick gradually becomes a positive male role who gives up his own selfish desires and has a clear distinction between right and wrong.

The relatively lively and well-developed Logger Vick in *Rescue* establishes itself as an imperfect ordinary person, and then receives rapturous reception among the audiences, especially for the young adults. Like a regular worker, in the TV series Vick is often reprimanded for not completing the periodically deforestation campaign. In *Rescue* the deadline pressure is further intensified after he receives a new set of tools from Boss Li. Moreover, Vick is required to work overtime in the stormy night by his employer. The former grumbles that 'I have to cut the trees even under such a big rain, I hate Li Bapi (Boss Li), that's really too much for me!' (fig 3.11). Compared with the previous depiction of Vick on the TV screen as a seemingly tireless logger, in *Rescue* the character becomes an ordinary person living a 'real' life. Moreover, he also suffers various kinds of disappointments, rather than a typical out-and-out scoundrel in other derivative films who is simply wicked but lacks any clear motive. In this sense, it can be said that most of the employed adult audiences will sympathize with Vick's complaints on his superior for two reasons.

³⁰⁵ Kuhn and Westwell, p.404.

Firstly, the forced overtime work is common across many places in China. Xiaomin Yu and Xiaojiang Hu in their 2013 study investigated 16 workplaces, in which they discovered that ‘long hours working overtime were commonplace practice, none of the workers had a wage structure in place complying with the legal overtime compensation wages’.³⁰⁶ Similarly, Prakash Sethi et al (2013) also find that the compulsory overtime work has become increasingly commonplace in China, where the employee expectations for employment include an acquiescent extra work option.³⁰⁷ Therefore the majority of adult audiences may treat the symbolic image of Logger Vick as the reflection of themselves who has to, albeit reluctantly, work overtime due to a relatively high level of workplace pressure.



Fig 3.11: Vick complains the Overtime Work in Stormy Night

Secondly, the humorous use of Li Bapi (refers to Boss Li, literally means Li ‘the flayer’) refreshes the collective memories of adult spectators. The name of Li Bapi is adapted from Zhou Bapi, who is a despotic landlord in Chinese writer Gao Yubao’s revolutionary novel *The Cock Crows at Midnight/Banye Jijiao* (1955),

³⁰⁶ Although their research has statistical limitations due to the small sample size, it still demonstrates the point to some extent. See Xiaomin Yu and Xiaojiang Hu. ‘China’s Reform of the Migrant Labour Regime and the Rural Migrant’s Industrial Citizenship’ in Éric Florence and Pierre Defraigne eds., *Towards a New Development Paradigm in Twenty-first Century China: Economy, Society and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013) pp.89-104, p.99.

³⁰⁷ S. Prakash Sethi et al. ‘Mattel, Inc., Global Manufacturing Principles (GMP): A Life-Cycle Analysis of a Company’s Voluntary Code of Conduct’ in S. Prakash Sethi ed., *Globalization and Self-Regulation: The Crucial Role That Corporate Codes of Conduct Play in Global Business* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) pp.17-68, p.57.

which is set in the pre-PRC era. The farm labourers begin to work accompanied with the first cock-crowing every day. Zhou Bapi always wakes up before midnight and imitates the cock's crow, in order to extend the labourers' working hour for no extra cost. In Chinese language system, *Bapi* means to strip off someone's skin, which is often used as a metaphor for ruthless exploitation. With the broad spreading of *The Cock Crows at Midnight* in various forms like fine art film (You, 1964) and comic strip (1970) in China (fig 3.12), the image of Zhou Bapi, which reminds the Communist populace of the 'bad-old-days' (before the establishment of the PRC), gains increasingly popularity among Chinese people which can be considered as a form of widely shared collective memory. Hong Zhang (2013) reviews the significance of *The Cock Crows at Midnight* among Chinese youth. He finds that *The Cock Crows at Midnight* text, as a form of transmedia storytelling (novel, fine art film, comic strip, etc.), has been chosen by the Cultural and Propaganda Department as one of the several most important ideological and political educational materials for a long period, thus exerting a cross-generational influence on Chinese adolescents.³⁰⁸ In this sense, Zhou has also gradually become an analogy of mercenary employers who illegally reduce costs and exploit employees like stripping off the latter's skin. By establishing metonymic links between Zhou Bapi and Li Bapi (Boss Li), the creators aptly express Vick's great discontent over his superior. In China the similar phenomenon like complaining and secretly playing a joke on boss is very common both in workplaces and in social networks. Vick mocks Boss Li as Li Bapi in *Rescue*, thus naturally carrying some resonance with the adult audiences.

³⁰⁸ Hong Zhang. 'The Cock Crows at Midnight: History and Class Consciousness', *China Book Review*, 02 (2013), pp. 28-31, p. 28 [in Chinese, my translation].



Fig 3.12: Zhou Bapi in *The Cock Crows at Midnight* (1964)

In *Rescue* the creators also seek to attract the young adults by applying several nostalgic elements in prop design. Young parents in China, especially for those who have grown up in city areas, have certain common experiences and memories which are partly come from the planned economic system and the corresponding ration system. Due to the shortage of supplies, the Chinese government implemented a ration system for almost all the consumption goods until 1992.³⁰⁹ Under the ration system, there were relatively few types of commodities in the market while most of the ordinary Chinese families shared the similar household items. At the same time, the above young parents, as members of a generation who spent their childhood around the ration period, have formed the collective social and generational memories through homogenized toys and games.

As an embodiment of young parents who grown up between 1980s and 1990s, in *Rescue* Logger Vick owns a series of symbolic props which enjoy enormous popularity in Chinese families' daily lives during this period, such as the leatherette travel bag with the pattern of Tiananmen gate tower and 'Beijing' in

³⁰⁹ Caijing. 'From "Ration System" to "Supermarket Cult", the Dietary Habits of Low- and Middle-Income can still be found in its Chinese Counterparts'. Available from: <<http://politics.caijing.com.cn/20140808/3649323.shtml>>. [Accessed: 15 August 2016] [in Chinese].

Chinese character (fig 3.13),³¹⁰ and the tin box decorated with the traditional Chinese-style dragon and phoenix as the auspicious symbols, which is often given as a wedding present for newlyweds (fig 3.14). Furthermore, nostalgic childhood toys are also being brought to the story like marbles, a wooden slingshot, iron sheet frog, rubber yellow duck and water gun with bright colour (fig 3.15). Gareth Matthews (1994) analyses how children's books appeal to adult nostalgia from two aspects. First, he argues that this reminiscence could be induced by recollections of hearing a story as a child. Second, such nostalgia might be brought by recalling about characters or situations in the story that recalls one's own childhood.³¹¹ The above-mentioned symbolic household items, toys and games have formed an important component of a situation the young adult audiences grow up, thus recollecting their own childish times. In this sense, the second approach in Gareth Matthews's theory applies to cases involving the nostalgia of Chinese young adults and how *Rescue* evokes their memories.



Fig 3.13: Leather Travel Bag with the Pattern of Tiananmen Gate Tower and 'Beijing' in Chinese character



Fig 3.14: Tin Box decorated with the Traditional Chinese-style Dragon and Phoenix

³¹⁰ Tiananmen is the main entrance of the imperial city (also known as Forbidden City) of Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasty which is located in the centre of Beijing. It is often considered as a national symbol of the PRC.

³¹¹ Gareth Matthews. *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) p. 104.



Fig 3.15: A Series of Nostalgic Childhood Toys

Jason Sperb (2016) examines the nostalgia in Pixar's *Toy Story 3* (Unkrich, 2010), which not only evokes nostalgia narratively, but links to nostalgia for the audience remembering the first and second film (1995 and 1999 respectively) being released. He argues that the eleven years gap between *Toy Story 2* (Lasseter, 1999) and *Toy Story 3* brings about a form of generational nostalgia, which resonates for the audiences who grew up with the *Toy Story* franchise itself.³¹² Similarly, Jay Winter (2006) argues that collective memory can be perceived as 'a set of signifying practices linking authorial encoding with audience decoding of messages about the past inscribed in film'.³¹³ In this respect, *Rescue* serves as a mental bridge between the childhood experiences and remaining innocence in adulthood. Logger Vick shows the above toys for the purpose of coaxing Du Du who keeps crying (the latter is actually hungry). The above props exist as an exhibition practice and nostalgic representation, which remains recognizable in the young adults' consciousness. Through this process, *Rescue* gradually brings back the childhood memories and the corresponding carefree life of young parents, thus collectively mobilizes a large group of adult audiences who share the similar growing experiences. Such emotional resonance is also observed by Liu Fuyuan. In an interview Liu argued that,

³¹² Jason Sperb. *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016) p. 104.

³¹³ Jay Winter. *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) p. 197.

Actually, the audience of *Rescue* is not limited to children who have watched a large number of *Boonie Bears* TV series. While that fact is interesting, many young parents have commented on my Sina Weibo account that they see Logger Vick as their own reflection after watching the film... From my point of view, Vick is not a villain in essence, instead he is just an ordinary person who has imperfections or minor defects in the personality.³¹⁴

In addition to the above-mentioned aspects of character establishment, Vick further becomes an epitome of Chinese young adults which can be illustrated by the dialogue between him and his parents. Due to a lack of experiences in looking after children, the Logger is in a dreadful rush for coping with the restless Du Du. At that moment, the phone rings (fig 3.16),

Vick: Who is this?

Vick's father: Why do you speak so loudly! I have almost lost my hearing.

Vick's mother: Give me the phone!

Vick: Mother.

Vick's mother: Qiang Zi (the nickname of Guangtou Qiang), I have something to tell you. Your uncle become a grandfather yesterday!

Vick: He must be crazy with delight.

Vick's mother : Of course.

Vick's father: Qiang Zi, When do you plan to have a baby?

Vick's mother: Don't keep interrupting me (Vick's father tries to grab the phone). Qiang Zi, you are at the marriageable age now. When are you going to get married? I want to have a grandson as well. The kid (grandson of Vick's uncle) is so cute and adorable!

³¹⁴ Sina Weibo (henceforth referred to as Weibo) is one of the largest social networks in China, it is often called as the 'Chinese Twitter'. See from Yang Liu. "'Wild Kids' are roiling Lunar New Year Festival Season for Chinese Film Market', *People's Daily*, 23 January 2014, Section 19. [in Chinese].



Fig 3.16: Vick makes a Telephone Call with his Parents

Like most of the Chinese young adults especially for those living in large cities, Vick is also under pressure from his parents to get married and have a child. Unlike the pre-PRC period, Chinese parents now no longer directly arrange their children's marriage without regard to the opinions from the groom or bride. But in the overwhelming majority of cases, they still play an important and sometimes even a decisive role in the next generation's matrimony, which is described as a great event in one's life (*Zhongshen Dashi*). Meanwhile, Chinese parents also believe the children should follow their suggestions because they have more experiences in the respect of marriage and selection of partner. Lucille Lok-Sun Ngan and Chan Kwok-bun in their 2012 studies suggest that,

In a Chinese family, parents traditionally have high expectations for their children's academic achievement, career, and, most importantly, their marriage. Thus, while marriage is a personal matter between two individuals, to a large extent, it is also a cultural issue connected to Chineseness. Marriage, especially to an in-group member, is a filial obligation of children to their parents.³¹⁵

Socially, there exists a larger marriage crisis in China. For instance, the 'leftover women' (*Sheng Nu*) issue has sparked a pervasive debate about single women in

³¹⁵ Lucille Lok-Sun Ngan and Chan Kwok-bun. *The Chinese Face in Australia: Multi-generational Ethnicity among Australian-born Chinese* (New York: Springer, 2012) p. 151.

the country. Officially, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2007) defines the leftover women as 'urban professional women who are over 27 years old who have high educational level, high salary, high intelligence and attractive appearance, but also overly high expectations for marriage partners, and hence are "left behind" in the marriage market'.³¹⁶ Yuan Ren (2016) considers the reason for the above concern is that more than 90 per cent of Chinese women marry before the age of 30, 'single at 27 and you're a "leftover woman"; single at 30 – well, you're as good as dead'.³¹⁷ She also finds that leftover women are very common among well-educated circles who are sometimes described as 'picky' due to being 'over-educated'.³¹⁸ Regarding this, Darius Chan, Theresa Ng and Chin-Ming Hu in their 2010 study note that the above group of Chinese women will suffer great parental pressure to find a husband and get married. Parents will present serious concern about their daughters' single status and actively search a suitable partner for the latter.³¹⁹

Similar concerns are found in young Chinese men. In one example presented by Geng Song and Derek Hird (2013), who interviewed a 32-year-old single male financial consultant who works in Beijing, they found that the consultant's single status has caused his parents 'great unhappiness' and he 'was afraid of being pressured into a loveless marriage'.³²⁰ It is clear from what has been discussed above that the marriage issue has not only served as a catalyst of intergenerational conflict, but a source of pressure in young adults' daily lives in China. Logger Vick is urged by his parents to get married and produce offspring. This scene, which features the chatty and yearning father and mother, functioned

³¹⁶ Sandy To. *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and its Consequences* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015) p. 1.

³¹⁷ Yuan Ren. 'China's 'Leftover Women': What it's really like being Unmarried at 30'. Available from: < <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/chinas-leftover-women-what-its-really-like-being-unmarried-at-30/>>. [Accessed: 03 May 2017].

³¹⁸ Same as above.

³¹⁹ Darius Chan, Theresa Ng and Chin-Ming Hu. 'Interpersonal Relationships in rapidly changing Chinese Societies' in Michael Bond ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) pp.515-532, p.522.

³²⁰ Geng Song and Derek Hird. *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) p. 242.

as a mirror for adult spectators under the similar situation, thus helping the latter to identify themselves with the image of Vick.

3.3 Comparison of Media Violence between *Boonie Bears*'s TV and Cinematic Creations

3.3.1 Media Violence in *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* TV Animations and the Corresponding Impacts

In this section, I analyse the ubiquitous physical violence and verbal abuse in *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* TV creations, which have been imitated by audience of children. First, I provide a brief overview of the concern about media violence in *Boonie Bears* films and the reasons behind it. Second, I examine the representations of physical violence in *Pleasant Goat* TV series and the relevant child injury case. Third, I review the violent behaviours and improper language in *Boonie Bears* TV animations, which have also caused injury incident and other negative results. The above incidents have triggered anxiety for children's programming in Chinese society.

As discussed in the previous two sections, the *Boonie Bears* films have successfully sought a cross-generational audience and obtained commercial success by exploring the innovative marketing strategies. On this basis, the recreation of the once antagonistic Logger Vick in *Rescue* has also played a crucial part in attracting adult viewers especially young parents in their late 20s and early 30s. However, it does not mean that the reception process of *Boonie Bears* films goes smoothly like its promotional activities and character establishment counterparts. Instead, its content was once widely questioned by young parents before the limited release and public screening in terms of whether the film version of *Boonie Bears* is totally appropriate or suitable for children's viewing. The above concern arises mainly from the frequent appearance of physical and verbal violence, which often happens between the bear brothers and Logger Vick in the animated TV series programmes.

As suggested in the first section, the major conflict in the television story is the contradiction between deforestation (Vick) and anti-deforestation (Briar and Bramble). Therefore the realistic approaches to the depiction of battle process such as chase and combat is often considered as an important component of the storyline (fig 3.17). To some extent, this may be inevitable to express fight scenes. Randall Collins (2008) finds that although, in most cases, there is a more-or-less distinctive threshold between fun and when the fight turns serious, but sometimes serious fighting may disguises as playful behaviour.³²¹ Similar problem also applies to the creation of fighting scenes in *Boonie Bears* animated TV series, in which exists a vital concern that whether the creators could prevent the above scenes from the harmless playful fighting to harmful media violence in the context of children still account for the majority of audiences? For now though, the media violence in *Boonie Bears* animated TV series has triggered heated debate among audiences, critics and even official media in China. One further point needs to be clarified here is that in this chapter, I take a neutral stance toward the media representations of violence and its impact on child audiences. That is to say, when I quote different groups of people's concerns or anxieties on the above issue in the following discussions, these are, indeed, not my own opinions.



Fig 3.17: Action Scenes in *Boonie Bears* Animated TV Series

In fact, the media violence affair has always been one of the most consistently controversial issues discussion concerning cartoons worldwide. The three-year (October 1994 to June 1997) National Television Violence Study reveals that more than 500 high-risk depictions of violence are shown to ordinary American preschool

³²¹ Randall Collins. *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) p. 277.

children as well as cartoon audiences per year.³²² This research also indicates that 'there is nearly one high-risk portrayal of violence per hour in cartoons'.³²³ Douglas Gentile and John Murray in their 2014 study also consider the effect of media violence on children, they arguing 'children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of settling conflicts'.³²⁴ They also find that viewing violence may lead to real life violence.³²⁵ However, Jonathan Freedman (2007) comprehensively reviews the experimental research regarding media violence and child aggressiveness. He raises three major problems in the above studies: the divergence between 'violent' and 'non-violent' programmes; the questionable measures of aggression; the deliberate induction of experimenters.³²⁶ He concludes that no previous studies 'have produce a clear majority of finding consistent with the idea that exposure to violent television makes people (both children and adults) aggressive'.³²⁷

In the case of China, the above controversies can be illustrated by *Pleasant Goat* TV series' influence on the audience of children, which have always been criticized for the characters' excessive violent behaviour on television screens. According to relevant statistics, in the whole *Pleasant Goat* TV animations which feature the wolf-goat opposition, the main antagonist Wolffy (Big Big Wolf) is hit by his wife Wolnie's frying pan 9,544 times and being captured by the goat families for 1,380 times.³²⁸ Correspondingly the sheep leader Weslie (Pleasant Goat) is boiled 839 times and electric shocked 1,755 times.³²⁹ At the same time, other violent actions

³²² Cynthia Cooper. *Violence in the Media and Its Influence on Criminal Defense* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007) p. 44.

³²³ Cynthia Cooper, p.44.

³²⁴ Douglas Gentile and John Murray. 'Media Violence and Public Policy: Where We Have Been and Where We Should Go Next' in Douglas A. Gentile ed., *Media Violence and Children: A Complete Guide for Parents and Professionals, 2nd Edition* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014) pp.413-432, p.417.

³²⁵ Gentile and Murray, p.417.

³²⁶ Jonathan Freedman. '*Television Violence and Aggression: Setting the Record Straight*'. Available from: < <http://www.mediainstitute.org/PDFs/policyviews/Freedman-TelevisionViolence.pdf>>. [Accessed: 04 May 2017] pp. 5,6.

³²⁷ Jonathan Freedman, p.12.

³²⁸ Wei Liu and Lixiang Wu. '*Pleasant Goat is criticized for Violent Scenes: "Wolffy is hit by Frying Pan for 9,544 times*'. Available from: <<http://history.people.com.cn/n/2013/1014/c363490-23192905.html>>. [Accessed: 26 August 2016] [in Chinese].

³²⁹ Same as above.

such as burning and binding are also pretty pervasive. In this context, the above dangerous behaviours, along with the great popularity of the relevant characters and stories, have widely spread throughout the audience of children especially among young boys in China.³³⁰

An extreme example is a recent child injury case which happened on 10 April 2013. On this evening, three boys under the age of ten, who live in the coastal Jiangsu province, imitated the 'roasting live goat' plot in *Pleasant Goat*. Two children were tied up to a tree by another child, who then set fire to the surrounding bush. Both children suffered severe burns: one suffered burns over 40 per cent of his body, and the other suffered burns over 90 per cent of his body.³³¹ As a result, the parents of the victims sued the troublemaking child and the production company Guangdong Creative Power Entertaining in the court. This case has been widely reported on a national scale, which has also caused some discussions in terms of whether there is a direct causal effect between the portrayal of violence in a cartoon show and a rare event like this. Unsurprisingly, opinions and attitudes vary on the extent to which the media violence lead to the real-life tragedy. Here I do not go much into the above debate due to the research scope. Instead, the court judgements may reveal both the public and official attitudes towards this incident, in which Creative Power Entertaining was sentenced to undertake 15 per cent of total civil liability and then compensate the victims about 39,000 Chinese Yuan because 'the work (*Pleasant Goat*) exists obvious violent plots and scenes, which not only impose negative impacts on children's cognitive behaviour, but also directly lead to an dangerous imitation, thus resulting in serious consequences'.³³²

³³⁰ Xiaoxu Liu. 'Pleasant Goat compensates for the Burn-Injured Children'. Available from: <http://epaper.jinghua.cn/html/2013-12/19/content_49815.htm>. [Accessed: 1 March 2017] [in Chinese].

³³¹ Lingfei Zhang. 'Three Boys play "Roasting Goat" Game for the purpose of Imitating the Similar Scenario in Pleasant Goat, which results in two of them get burned'. Available from: <<http://news.sohu.com/20131014/n388100783.shtml>>. [Accessed: 25 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

³³² Same as above. [my translation].

Similar to its *Pleasant Goat* counterparts, the imitative behaviour of *Boonie Bears*'s TV series also resulted in personal injury and other detrimental effects. As an extreme instance, it is reported that a seven-year-old boy, who lives in Suzhou city, jumped from a ten-storey building with an umbrella as a 'parachute' on 15 April 2017, after watching it on *Boonie Bears* TV animations. The boy survived after an emergency surgery.³³³ Thus, like *Pleasant Goat*, the violent or dangerous behaviour and inappropriate language within *Boonie Bears* animated TV series' storylines have been also attracting great attention since the beginning of its broadcasting.

3.3.2 Social Concern and Huaqiang's Response Measures

In this section, I analyse the extensive social concern and public criticism towards the media violence issue in *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* animated TV series. I argue that the *Boonie Bears* films are created under industry self-regulation and massive social supervision. First, I examine a mixed attitude towards *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* TV animation from different groups (parents, scholars, state media, etc.). Second, I briefly introduce the role of animation in cultural production in China. Third, I consider how the production company Huaqiang deals with the media violence in the cinematic creations under the massive levels of social concern and pressure, which aims at catering for adult audiences especially young parents (as the companions of child viewers) who have showed their doubts about the *Boonie Bears* programmes.

Boonie Bears on TV screen has received a mixed response from adult audiences. On one hand, most of the young parents acknowledge the series' entertainment value and attractiveness. On the other hand, they also express serious concern about the frequency of physical and verbal violence (fig 3.18). Jing Ma (2014) finds that some parents have noticed that there exist 21 swear or offensive words (moderate or

³³³ Laurie Chen. 'Umbrella saves Boy after he jumps from Ten-storey Building'. Available from: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/21/umbrella-saves-boy-jumps-ten-storey-building/>>. [Accessed: 30 April 2017].

mild) in a ten-minute clip.³³⁴ In 2013 a journalist in Wuhan city conducted a random survey towards 97 kindergarten children between the ages of 4 and 6 years, among them 20 boys showed up a certain tendency toward violence in both physical and verbal aspects. For example, he found that those pre-schoolers were more likely to imitate Logger Vick's coarse language such as 'you dare touch me! I will kick your ass' and 'how you dare to prevent me (with lumber production), you have forced me to use electric saw', and offensive actions like waving the chainsaw. Moreover, a mother was frightened by the recent changes happen in her four-year-old son, who wanted to buy a real electric saw for 'having fun' after long periods of *Boonie Bears*-watching because his father refused to buy him a toy one.³³⁵



Fig 3.18: Physical Violence in *Boonie Bears* Animated TV Series

The violent behaviours and improper language phenomenon in *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* even attracted criticism from Chinese state media. On 12 October 2013 CCTV's National News Broadcasting (*Xinwen Lianbo*) selected several clips from the above two programmes as the example of animation works with the problems of 'uncontrolled violence and uncivilized language', in which 'some dangerous plots are imitated by juveniles and then lead to personal injuries' (fig 3.19).³³⁶ While at the same time, unlike the public and official attitudes which often

³³⁴ Jing Ma. 'Why Parents are not keen on *Boonie Bears*?', *News World*, 06(2014), pp. 251-252, p. 251 [in Chinese].

³³⁵ Jingya Yang. 'Four-year-old Boy indulges in Watching *Boonie Bears* Animated TV Series, who wishes to find a Real Electric Saw for Fun'. Available from: <<http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2013-11-03/035028605080.shtml>>. [Accessed: 26 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

³³⁶ National News Broadcasting (*Xinwen Lianbo*) is the leading CCTV program, which has not only stood without rival 'in view of geographical coverage, audience size and visual imperatives', but ranking as China's 'dominant and most authoritative sources of news, information and ideas'. See Anne Cooper-Chen and Yu Leon Liang. 'Television: Entertainment' in James F. Scotton and William A. Hachten eds., *New Media for a New China* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010) pp.98-115, p.104. The program clip can be achieved from iQiyi Video. '*Pleasant Goat and Boonie Bears are criticised by*

simplistically connect viewing with the seemingly corresponding actions, media critics in China have showed various opinions on this issue. For example, Jian Zhang and Linchen Xia in their 2014 studies randomly select 100 minutes from *Boonie Bears* TV animations in order to analyse the media representation of violence. By quantifying the nature and frequency of violent behaviours in the samples, they conclude that *Boonie Bears* can be attributed to the cartoon programmes with 'high-risk portrayals of violence'.³³⁷ While Chao Li (2013) maintains that parents should not worry or become too anxious about the so-called violent scenes in *Boonie Bears* TV series, instead they need pay more attention to the educational aspect. Specifically, they may spend more time watching *Boonie Bears* together with the children, and then give their dependants proper guidance and advice with regard to understanding what the right thing to do is.³³⁸

Such pervasive social concern of the media violence issue in *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* animated TV series in Chinese society is largely due to the role of animation in cultural production. Keane (2009) observes the dual identity of Chinese cultural creative industries, which are operated as both public institutions (*Shiye*) and industries (*Chanye*).³³⁹ Meanwhile, Xiaoming Zhang (2006) notes that the Chinese government has attempted to separate institutional functions from commercial functions over the last two decades.³⁴⁰ However, the Chinese animation sector, as an important branch of the cultural creative industries, is still always considered by the whole society as a cultural institution that belongs to the area of public service provision in most cases. Moreover, animation is requested to undertake a heavier social responsibility because the former has long been identified not only as a tool for child education, but as an entertaining activity primarily for children (as discussed in the Introduction).

National News Broadcasting'. Available from: < http://www.iqiyi.com/w_19rtgrbwm9.html >. [Accessed: 28 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

³³⁷ Jian Zhang and Linchen Xia. 'The Empirical Analysis on the "Media Violence" of *Boonie Bears*', *South China Television Journal*, 04(2014), pp. 42-46, p. 45 [in Chinese, my translation]

³³⁸ Chao Li. 'Parents should not be so Nervous when Watching *Boonie Bears*', *China Arts News*, 16 August 2013, Section 02 [in Chinese, my translation.]

³³⁹ Keane. 'Creative Industries in China: Four Perspectives on Social Transformation', p. 9.

³⁴⁰ Xiaoming Zhang. 'From Institution to Industry: Reforms in Cultural Institutions in China', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. Vol.9, No.3, 2006, pp. 297-306, p. 300.

As a result, under the massive pressure from the whole society, Huaqiang and 19 other influential children's cartoon channels and studios (included Creative Power Entertaining) jointly released an initial written proposal named '*A Proposal to create Healthy and Beneficial Animation Programmes for Children*' in 2013. The latter proposed that all the industry practitioners in Chinese animation sector and television industry should follow five basic principles of creation,

1. Take on social responsibilities for promoting the healthy growth and development of all juveniles.
2. Self-consciously spread the correct view of world, life and value.
3. Firmly abandon the violent, vulgar and unhealthy plots and contents.
4. Reject the reckless invention and devote to create the quality programmes.
5. Improve the quality of personnel resources and actively accept the public's supervision.³⁴¹



Fig 3.19: Criticism from National News Broadcasting

Jing Wang (2004) maintains that creative industries in China is characterised by 'creative imagination and content are subjugated to active state surveillance'.³⁴²

Similarly, Michael Keane (2010) analyses the creative freedom in China and see it as a compromise, he argues that 'Chinese creativity is about rearrangement according to circumstances, which may be political, social or economic'.³⁴³ As suggested earlier, *A Proposal to create Healthy and Beneficial Animation Programmes for*

³⁴¹ State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). '*20 Famous Animation Companies and Cartoon Channels release Joint Initiatives for the purpose of Creating Healthy Animation Works for Children*'. Available from: <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/art/2013/10/12/art_114_9073.html>. [Accessed: 29 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁴² Jing Wang. 'The Global Reach of a New Discourse: how far can "Creative Industries" Travel?', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. Vol.7, No.1, 2004, pp. 9-19, p. 13.

³⁴³ Michael Keane. 'Great Adaptations: China's Creative Clusters and the New Social Contract' in Albert Moran and Michael Keane eds., *Cultural Adaptation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010) pp.115-124, p.118.

Children was not a result of voluntary industry self-regulation. Instead, it was initiated under the enormous pressure from both social (parents, critics, etc.) and political (official mouthpiece) aspects. That is to say, the industry achieves its objectives by compromises on social concern and state intervention.

In this context, Huaqiang Company further launched its own '*Editorial Control on Huaqiang Televisual and Cinematic Programmes*' in order to examine the contents that may have a negative impact on children's growth. Huaqiang then further carried out the comprehensive content check on the broadcasted and in-the-making episodes. As a result, most of the suspected violent plots and improper language have been deleted. And for those must-retained contents due to the need of plot arrangement, the safety instruction popup messages have been added for the purpose of reminding the potential security risk.³⁴⁴ As illustrated in the figure, the presence of the above information, which is performed by a supporting role monkey Tiki, can not only guarantees a smooth narrative flow, but subtly points out what is the right thing to do (fig 3.20).



Fig 3.20: Safety Instruction Popup Messages (Bottom Left) in the Revised Version *Boonie Bears* TV Series

As suggested earlier, Huaqiang has started a process of self-examination on its content creation since 2013. In other words, the *Boonie Bears* films have been created under the new principles against the background of industry self-regulation and social supervision. That is to say, the production of the *Boonie Bears* films,

³⁴⁴ Huijuan Weng. 'How could Children Cartoon Programs become "Nuisanceless": Huaqiang initiates and complies with Industry Standards, the new version of *Boonie Bears* will completely eradicate the Uncivilized Language', *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily*, 18 November 2013, Section A12 [in Chinese].

which are purely aim at making profit, are still not wholly market led within the context of public concern and guidance (compulsory or voluntary). While the question here is whether the *Boonie Bears* cinematic creations, which have consciously positioned themselves as the whole-family-suitable productions, have met the public expectations in the respect of the purification of media violence.

3.3.3 The Purification of Media Violence in *Boonie Bears* Films

In this section, I focus on how and to what extent the creators have reshaped the action scenes and dialogues within *Boonie Bears* films. I argue that the once-pervasive physical and verbal violence in *Boonie Bears* TV animations have been eliminated from cinema screen. First, I focus on the purification of verbal attacks in *Boonie Bears* films which has resulted in mixed effects. Second, I analyse the reconstruction of action scenes in the film version, which is characterised by the recreation of weapons and other props. Third, I conclude with an analysis of how adult audiences make sense of the redesigned *Boonie Bears* films.

Boonie Bears TV animations have long been criticised for the excessive expression of offensive and hostile language. For example, Vick always waves his electric saw and threatens Briar and Bramble that ‘I will hack you to death!’. Furthermore, it is not rare to find bear brothers and Vick verbally insult each other, such as saying ‘go to hell’, ‘you idiot’, ‘you stinking bear’ (Chou Gouxiong in Chinese) and ‘you disgusting baldhead’ (Chou Guangtou in Chinese).³⁴⁵ The above dialogues between Vick and bear brothers can be considered as a form of bluster, in which ‘making threatening gestures, especially the mixture of verbal and paralinguistic gestures in cursing and insulting’.³⁴⁶ As discussed earlier, the scenes of bluster can be easily imitated by audience of children who have limited discernment of the potential

³⁴⁵ As suggested in the first section of this chapter, the Chinese name of Logger Vick is Guangtou Qiang. ‘Guangtou’ in Chinese language system refers to ‘baldhead’ or ‘baldheaded’ in English while ‘Qiang’ is the real given name of Vick. One of the most distinctive features of Vick is his hairless head in both *Boonie Bears* television and cinematic creations. Therefore the bear brothers always make fun of Vick by calling him ‘you disgusting baldhead’.

³⁴⁶ Randall Collins, p.339.

harmful impact on themselves or others. In view of this concern and the film version's thematic intention which features the collaboration between the once hostile human and animal, the potentially controversial choice of words in TV series have either been entirely abandoned or adjusted in both *Rescue* and *Winter*, which aims at foreshadowing a more cooperative relationship between Vick and bear brothers.

To be specific, in both films the simplistic and direct portrayal of verbal violence such as 'go to hell', 'you idiot' were completely eliminated from the narrative contents. Even in *Rescue*'s prologue which features the chasing and fighting scenes between Logger Vick and bear brothers (the latter snatches the former's suitcase contains tree felling tools), the once angry 'you stinking bear' is replaced by the more moderate and even a bit like an intimate nickname 'small bear' (Xiao Xiongxiong in Chinese). While at the same time, Briar and Bramble calls Vick his real name Guangtou Qiang rather than the consistent 'disgusting baldhead' in TV series. In terms of the dialogue design in *Winter*, Vick almost always functions as the bear brothers' helper in the white bear saving campaign. Unlike its *Rescue* counterparts, the prologue of *Winter* gives approximately fifteen minutes to depict a close childhood friendship between them (fig 3.21). In other words, the importance of dramatic conflicts between Vick and bear brothers is being further played down because they do not have the direct confrontation in the whole story framework. Therefore in *Winter* the verbal abuse factors are untenable in the context of such thematic intentions, so to say, thus rooting out the fertile ground for improper language which may lead to blame from the public and being easily copied by child audience.

However, this is not to say that the above language purification efforts can satisfy all the audiences and do not have any limitation. On one hand, the much more stringent use of language in both *Rescue* and *Winter* has been accepted and then welcomed by most of the audiences especially for the young parents (discussed later). On the other hand, the above mentioned 'uncivilized' lines, whether good or bad, can also be regarded as a form of verbal habit, which plays an important role

in shaping a character's distinctive personality. Aline Remael (2004) argues that dialogue in a film not only interacts with its other semiotic systems and constructs its narrative, but also builds character relations.³⁴⁷ In terms of the purpose of dialogue in animation, Karen Sullivan, Gary Schumer and Kate Alexander (2008) maintain that dialogue reveals a character's goal or motivation, attitude toward a situation, and transformation over time. They also believe an antagonist's motive can also be illustrated by the dialogue.³⁴⁸ In other words, audiences can distinguish the characters from one another and understand their motives and purposes by referencing each one's individual verbal habit to some extent. However, the relatively fixed image of Vick and bear brothers among audiences, which is gradually formed through the television-version watching, is more or less broken by the massive change of those characters' speaking habits in *Boonie Bears* films. This problem may directly lead to viewers' confusion on a figure and its symbolic identity. A user commented under an online news article which reported the language purification issue in *Boonie Bears* films that,

I think such change (on dialogues) is unwise, the characters speak in a very unnatural way. For example, Vick angrily shouts 'you stinking bear' because Briar and Bramble want to prevent him from cutting the trees. Therefore why Vick affectionately calls the bear brothers as 'small bear' while the latter take away his suitcase contains tree felling tools in the film? If your wallet is stolen, will you say 'would you please be so kind to stop and give me back my wallet, Mr Thief?'³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Aline Remael. 'A Place for Film Dialogue Analysis in Subtitling Courses' in Pilar Orero ed., *Topics in Audiovisual Translation* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004) pp.103-126, p.109.

³⁴⁸ Karen Sullivan, Gary Schumer and Kate Alexander. *Ideas for the Animated Short: Finding and Building Stories* (Amsterdam: Focal Press, 2008) p. 163.

³⁴⁹ BZCM. 'Wolffy becomes less Violent, "You Stinking Bear" is replaced by "Small Bear" in Boonie Bears Programs'. Available from: <http://www.bzcm.net/news/2013-11/28/content_1280741_4.htm>. [Accessed: 30 August 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].



Fig 3.21: Friendship between Childhood Logger Vick and Bear Brothers

The animators also put their efforts into adjusting the physically violent scenes, which are largely based on the recreation of props. In *Boonie Bears* TV series the shotgun and electric saw are Logger Vick's two main weapons that are being used against Briar and Bramble. At the same time, the physically violent behaviours, which are reflected in the highly repetitive use of above tools, are most likely to be imitated by child audience. Steven Kirsh (2012) believes that 'youth do not have the capability to act aggressively when they are born'. Instead, 'aggressive behaviour develops over the course of early childhood'.³⁵⁰ Although the above argument can still be up for debate, but the offensive actions between Vick and bear brother may, to some extent, exert a direct influence in cultivating aggressive behaviour in children, and in ways that are both subtle and obvious.

Regarding the potential high risk, in *Rescue* and *Winter* the real shotgun bullet is replaced by water in a water rifle. That is to say, the shotgun, as a symbol of violence, becomes a toy-like prop that is being used to depict the playful fighting between Vick and bear brothers (fig 3.22). In addition, another lethal weapon the electric saw is destroyed at the beginning of *Rescue* (fig 3.23), and this prop even totally disappears in *Winter*. Therefore it can be argued that the above modifications on the design and utilization of props greatly reduce the appearance

³⁵⁰ Steven Kirsh. *Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence: A Critical Look at the Research, Second Edition* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publication, 2012) p. 22.

frequency of direct physical violence between characters, thus significantly lower the risk of dangerous imitation from audience of children.



Fig 3.22: Water Gun in *Rescue*

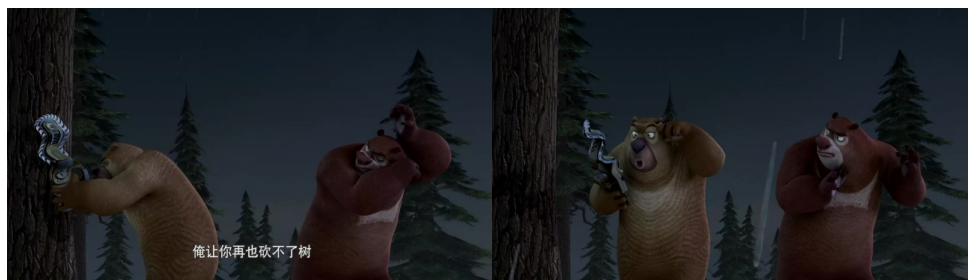


Fig 3.23: Bramble smashes the Electric Saw on a Tree

Besides that, the violence purification efforts in *Boonie Bears* films can also be illustrated by the props design in other action scenes. For example, in the chasing and fighting scenarios in *Rescue* which feature the battle between the righteous side (Vick and bear brothers) and the villain forces (evil boss and his rocket soldier underlings) for the purpose of recapturing Du Du, Briar and Bramble's anti-rocket-solider weapon is being set as a box of fireworks and firecrackers rather than the real arms. In most scenes, the bear brothers use crackers to frighten rather than directly destroy the rocket soldiers from pursuing Vick and Du Du (fig 3.24). Through adding the above non-lethal weapons into the action scenes, the film avoids the realistic portrayal of violently themed behaviours by replacing it with the playful fighting fantasies, thus avoiding the danger of children's harmful imitations to some extent. Furthermore, the bear brothers' 'weapons' share the similar appearances (shape and pattern) with their real-world counterparts. Lighting

fireworks and firecrackers is one of the most common customs to celebrate the approaching Lunar New Year in China, which also serves as an approach to heighten the festive atmosphere. However, Claudio Delang (2016) notes that in recent years the government of Beijing city has started to regulate firework displays in its jurisdictions for the purpose of easing the severe air pollution in the Lunar New Year celebration (firework burn to produce a large amount of harmful gas and metallic oxide).³⁵¹ Similar regulations have also been imposed upon a large number of Chinese cities, many of which have even totally banned lighting firecrackers especially in the urban areas. Such measures do indeed contribute to air quality improvement but many residents miss the ‘missing’ festive mood.³⁵² As suggested earlier, the *Boonie Bears* films are annually released in Lunar New Year Festival Season. Therefore the setting-off behaviour on screen can be considered as a form of replacement of its real world counterparts, thus adding more festive atmosphere to the Spring Festival celebration.



Fig 3.24: Fireworks and Firecrackers as Weapons

As a result, the efforts of verbal and physical violence purification campaign in *Boonie Bears* films have been widely accepted by young parents, thus further

³⁵¹ Claudio Delang. *China's Air Pollution Problems* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) p. 93.

³⁵² Zhenghua Wang. 'Shanghai Fireworks Ban clears Air, but some miss Festive Mood' Available from: < http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-02/02/content_28083469.htm>. [Accessed: 14 March 2017].

consolidating the basis of box office success. It is reported that before the public screening of *Rescue*, the distributors organized the 'parents censoring activities' in 53 Chinese cities, which featured the free limited release exclusively for parents who could estimate whether the film's content is suitable for their dependents based on their individual viewing experiences. As a result, 92 per cent of 15,000 adult audiences showed a positive attitude towards the film and confirmed that they 'did not find dissatisfied contents'.³⁵³ Similarly, *Winter* also adopted free limited release strategy by inviting over one hundred teachers from kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools, in order to examine the film from the perspective of professional educators. Like the evaluation result of *Rescue*, 90 per cent of teachers maintained that *Winter* is suitable for 'all-age groups'.³⁵⁴

3.4 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter analysed *Boonie Bears's* theatrical versions *Rescue* (2014) and *Winter* (2015), which can be considered as the representative works of derivative films in terms of promotional activities and cross-generational appeal. Unlike its derivative films counterparts that have shown the widely varying commercial performance, the *Boonie Bears* series have maintained a relatively stable high box office returns (338.58 million Chinese Yuan on average). The latter's success is partly due to the effective and innovative marketing strategies in film promotion process. In the case of *Rescue*, while maintain the high-intensity traditional marketing methods such as the placement of posters and cardboards in cinemas and *Boonie Bears*-labelled napkins in restaurants, the distributors Mr. Cartoon and Le Vision also explored the promotional activities on new media platforms. Mr. Cartoon released unprecedented amount of advertisements on central and provincial children's cartoon channels for the purpose of maximizing the film's awareness among child audience. At the same time, Le Vision also

³⁵³ Jingran Wang and Tingjun Li, Section 20.

³⁵⁴ Jingran Wang. 'Focusing on the "Age Guiding Criteria of Animated Film', *Boonie Bears 2: Self-discipline under no Rules*, *China Film News*, 04 February 2015, Section 07 [in Chinese, my translation].

organized the successful limited releases by pre-selling the tickets through its cross-platform application *Leyingke* which aimed at adult viewers. Nevertheless, the role of limited release and relevant marketing activities should not be overstated because its feasibility is largely based on the brand awareness and recognition.

In terms of the marketing strategies of *Winter*, Mr. Cartoon and Le Vision developed several new tactics while inheriting the successful experiences from *Rescue*. The film further enhanced its cross-generational appeal by launching promotional activities which aimed at fostering the jointly viewing experience within three-generation families. *Winter* borrowed the popularity and influence of celebrity families in reality TV show for the purpose of raising its public awareness and creating the positive association between each other. Furthermore, *Boonie Bears* films played a leading role in the product placement, which was represented by its cooperation with Fantawild Adventure Theme Park, in Chinese cinema animation. It can be said that the Fantawild advertising not only contributed as the compensation of the film's production budget, but also showed the role film products could play in the industry value chain of its parent brand.

While maintaining the existing child audience, *Boonie Bears* films also tried to cater the viewing expectations of adult viewers which can be illustrated by the refiguration of Logger Vick in *Rescue*. In this film Vick is recreated as a symbolic representation of ordinary Chinese young adults from various aspects. Vick is always under the working pressure from his employer Boss Li like its real-world employee counterparts in China. By jokingly calling Boss Li as Li Bapi, Vick's complaints on endless logging and ruthless boss not only recall the collective memories of the spectators, but also mirror the similar atmosphere in real-life workplaces. *Rescue* also brings back the collective memories of young adults especially for those who grown up in urban areas by applying a series of nostalgic props in Vick's daily lives, which is mainly manifested in the creation of household items and childhood toys. Moreover, the single Vick is under the massive pressure to get married from his parents like many Chinese young adults especially for those who live in big cities. The marriage and offspring issue is a pervasive cultural

phenomenon in China, which establishes the mental contact between Vick and the adult audiences. Through the above detailed portrayal of Vick as a reflection of Chinese young adults, *Rescue* has struck a responsive chord in the hearts of its mature viewers, thus reaching a wider range of target audiences in a natural way.

Media violence, which includes physically violent scenes and inappropriate language, within *Boonie Bears* animated TV series has triggered great concern among young parents, critics and state-controlled media. The physical violence and verbal attacks have always appeared within *Boonie Bears* and its main competitive rival *Pleasant Goat* which are the two most influential brands of television animation in China. The resulting improper imitation behaviours and even serious accidents of personal injury among children have generated criticism and controversy among the public. Regarding this issue, Huaqiang Company has adopted a series of measures to regulate the content creation for the purpose of avoiding the similar mistakes in the film works. The direct verbal aggression between bear brothers and Logger Vick has been totally eliminated from the cinema screen. At the same time, other verbal abuse factors have also been replaced by the more moderate and even intimate conversation. Such transformation on dialogue design not only symbolizes Huaqiang's effort on language purification, but also reflects the change of character relationship and plot arrangement in film products. However, the abrupt change in the manner of speaking also breaks the stereotyped impression about characters, which results the audience's confusion on role identity to some extent. The designers also reshape the actions scenes in *Boonie Bears* films by redesigning weapons and other props, in order to avoid the direct depiction of physical violence which may easily be copied by audience of children. As a result, the contents of *Boonie Bears* films have been recognized and praised by adult audiences, which can be illustrated by the young parents and professional educators' attitude towards *Boonie Bears* films in free limited release campaigns.

The next chapter will analyse the *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013 and 2014), which represents the dilemma of original NGCCA works, especially those

which have been well received online and offline. The discussion in the next chapter will be largely based on the interpretation of the first instalment. I start with the analysis of the box office failure of the first *Kuiba* film. Then I analyse the hybrid process of cultural production in the above creation, which reveals the interplay between Chinese and Japanese iconography in various aspects (character design, worldview construction, etc.).

Chapter 4 *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013 and 2014) and the Original NGCCA works

4.0 The Ambition of Original NGCCA Works and the Main Aims of this Chapter

The main aims of this chapter are twofold. Firstly, I will examine the deeper causes behind the box office failure of the 2D adventure drama series, *Kuiba*, especially the first instalment *Kuiba 1* (2011). Second, as mentioned in the Introduction section, I find NGCCA works can be classified as a form of hybrid cultural product. In this chapter I will review the *Kuiba* films as the emblematic products of cultural hybridization, which conflates Chineseness and Japaneseness in animation production. In this sense, this chapter will illuminate this thesis by examining the significance of the *Kuiba* series among all the original NGCCA works in the respects of commercial dilemma and aesthetic hybridization.

As I consider *Kuiba 1* to be representative of the series, therefore, this chapter will focus mainly on the analysis of this film for three main reasons: first, *Kuiba 1* shows the maximum contrast between box office earning and production cost among the three instalments, which illustrates the largest gap between expectation and market reality (discussed later); second, this film represents the production and distribution companies' ineffectiveness at reaching the potential audience members in the initial stage; third, *Kuiba 1* can also be considered as the foundation of the whole series in terms of the worldview construction and aesthetic tone (the worldview/settings/systems and major characters in this series are consistent).

The first section of this chapter introduces the background information of the *Kuiba* series and the importance of the first instalment *Kuiba 1*. The second section analyses *Kuiba 1*'s box office flop by examining both the film content itself and the film promotional activities. For example, how the prologue disconnects from the later narratives, and why failing to reach a greater proportion of the

target audience affects the films' commercial performance. In the third section, I examine the ambivalent relation between originality and imitation (mimicry, copy, etc.) in the production of NGCCA works. In this context, I analyse the relevance between *Kuiba 1* and Japanese Shonen manga and anime in the respect of character design. I consider *Kuiba 1* as a form of cultural hybridity, which mingles various kinds of symbolic representations that mainly come from Chinese and Japanese cultural resources.

4.0.1 The Commercial Dilemma of Original NGCCA works: *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog* in 2011

In this section, I examine *Kuiba 1* and its original NGCCA counterpart *The Tibetan Dog* within the Chinese cinema animation market. I argue that the above two works epitomize the development dilemma of original NGCCA works (especially those with relatively sound reputation online and offline) in commercial aspects. First, I discuss the context in which those films were created. Second, I review the animated film market in the year of 2011 by comparing the huge box office earning discrepancy between the original works and their derivative films competitors. This year also saw several expensive box office flops, which was represented by *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog*.

In the previous chapter, I analysed several features of *Boonie Bears* series as the derivative film products of the existing broad-based entertainment franchise. *Boonie Bears* has established itself in the domestic animation market as a pioneering and sustainable film brand by not only producing high box office results and appealing to a broader target audience, but also eliminating media violence on the cinema screen. It can be said that the *Boonie Bears* series is a successful example of NGCCA in terms of both commercial operation and reputation accumulation. While, as suggested in the Introduction section for this thesis, many of the totally original NGCCA works have been stuck in a commercial dilemma that the films have been well received online and offline but failed at the box office. In the past decade, particularly in the last five years, the original feature-length

animated films have always outnumbered their derivative counterparts on the cinema screen in China. Through summarising relevant statistics from animation industry reports and online film communities, I find that the original NGCCA works at least twice the number of derivative animated films in Chinese theatres between 2011 and 2014. The only exception is the year of 2012 when the audiences witnessed a roughly equal amount between the original (12) and derivative (10) creations (chart 4.1).³⁵⁵ However, the box office earning of the former, whether as an individual product or as a subgenre of NGCCA, has lagged far behind the latter.

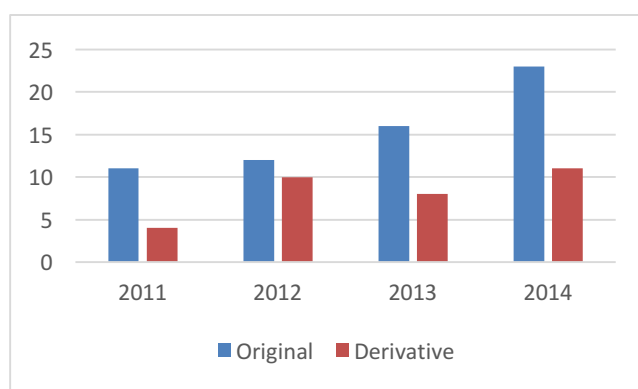


Chart 4.1: NGCCA Works between 2011 and 2014

This phenomenon became more pronounced in 2011 when Chinese cinema animations achieved a box office average of 21.79 million Chinese Yuan.³⁵⁶ To be specific, the average box office per original film was 7.03 million (ranged from 0.23 to 45.68 million) while the corresponding figure of their derivative competitors was 46.36 million (ranged from 3.8 to 139.25 million).³⁵⁷ In other words, in general, the derivative films earned more than six times their original counterparts (chart 4.2). Moreover, the highest-grossing original creation had just about reached the

³⁵⁵ See He and Zhao, p.39. See also Xiaoshan Li. 'Report on the Development of China's Animated Film 2014' in Bin Lu, Yuming Zheng and Xingzhen Niu eds., *Annual Report on Development of China's Animation Industry (2015)* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2015) pp.76-92, p.77 [in Chinese]. See also Mtime. 'The Combined Keywords Search for Film: "China" and "Animation"'. Available from:

<<http://movie.mtime.com/movie/search/section/#sortType=2&viewType=0&type=184&nation=138>>. [Accessed: 09 October 2016] [in Chinese].

³⁵⁶ Wei He and Yinqiu Zhao. 'Trend Analysis of Chinese Animated Film Market (2008-2013)' in Wen Zhou and Wei He eds., *Chinese Animation Industry and Consumption Report (2014)* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2015) pp.27-35, p.30 [in Chinese].

³⁵⁷ The above statistics are derived from China Box Office website (<http://www.cbooo.cn/>) by searching the box office earning of individual film.

average performance of the former. Among all the original works in 2011, I would specifically like to mention *Kuiba 1* and its 2D animation counterpart *The Tibetan Dog* (fig 4.1), two that represent the sharpest contrast between the sound reputation and box office flop.

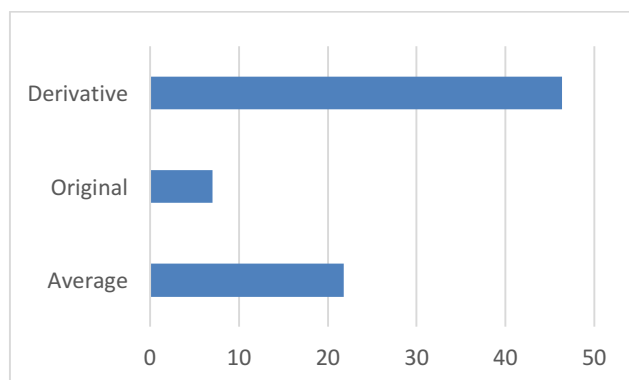


Chart 4.2: The Average Box Office of NGCCA Works in 2011 (Million Chinese Yuan)



Fig 4.1: Posters of *Kuiba 1* (2011) (Left) and *The Tibetan Dog* (2011) (Right)

As I have already indicated in the thesis Introduction, *Kuiba 1* is praised in Chinese online film communities. In the meantime, the rating of *The Tibetan Dog* also achieves 7.9 in Mtime and 7.7 in Douban Movie.³⁵⁸ It is reported that *Kuiba 1* was viewed more than 30 million times on several most influential Chinese online video platforms within one month after being uploaded online (after the theatrical

³⁵⁸ See Mtime. 'The Tibetan Dog' Available from: <<http://movie.mtime.com/142893/>>. [Accessed: 09 October 2016] [in Chinese]. See also Douban Movie. 'The Tibetan Dog' Available from: <<https://movie.douban.com/subject/5948613/>>. [Accessed: 09 October 2016] [in Chinese].

screening).³⁵⁹ Moreover, according to an article from *People's Daily*, the flagship newspaper of the CPC, the film had been watched over 70 million times online up to June 2013.³⁶⁰ Furthermore, through a comprehensive examination of the database of Mtime, I found that *The Tibetan Dog* and *Kuiba 1* are among the most well-received NGCCA productions (second and third highest rating) with *Monkey King: Hero is Back* occupying the first position (table 4.1) (discussed in the next chapter).³⁶¹ In other words, *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog* are even more enthusiastically received than the first Chinese animation blockbuster *Lotus Lantern* online.

<i>Monkey King: Hero is Back</i> (2015)	8.1 Points
<i>The Tibetan Dog</i> (2011)	7.8 Points
<i>Kuiba 1</i> (2011)	7.5 Points
<i>Lotus Lantern</i> (1999)	6.9 Points

Table 4.1: The Highest-rating NGCCA works on Mtime

At the same time, the former two are also being critically acclaimed offline. According to a report from CNTV which is a web-based TV platform that is affiliated with CCTV, after watching *Kuiba 1*, a large number of viewers described it as an outstanding work and 'create a new benchmark for the Chinese animation sector'.³⁶² Similarly, the distributors of *The Tibetan Dog* organized two previews in Guangzhou and Shanghai city, in which the film was being praised as 'the best animated film I have watched in the first half of 2011' by a Guangzhou-based journalist. While in Shanghai several managers of cinema chains considered the

³⁵⁹ Lingling Wang and Beibei Ma. 'Animated Film *Kuiba 1* releases a DVD Version' Available from: <http://news.cyol.com/content/2011-11/17/content_5207329.htm>. [Accessed: 09 May 2017] [in Chinese].

³⁶⁰ Yi Zheng. 'Chinese Animation, Fight for Dreams', *People's Daily*, 03 June 2013, Section 12. [in Chinese].

³⁶¹ Mtime. 'Search for Movie by Keywords: Select China + Animation and Sort by Highest to Lowest Rated Order' Available from: <<http://movie.mtime.com/movie/search/section/#sortType=2&viewType=0&nation=138&type=184>>. [Accessed: 10 October 2016] [in Chinese].

³⁶² CNTV. 'The Director and Producer of *Kuiba* Talk about the Development of Domestic Cartoon' Available from: <<http://news.cntv.cn/20110804/100199.shtml>>. [Accessed: 10 October 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

main character Tibetan Mastiff is more like ‘a Chinese version the Great Lion Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series’, which ‘symbolized the spirit of not only the Tibetan group but the whole Chinese people to face and overcome difficulties without fear’.³⁶³

John Hartley et al (2013) argue that ‘markets in creative industries are, by and large, not markets for known generic quantities but instead for novel products for which it is difficult to judge quality or even to form preference expectations prior to consumption’.³⁶⁴ In the case of *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog* as the novel works in animation market without pre-existing audience familiarity, even the perceived high-quality prior to the public exhibition (consumption), which has been gradually formed through the preview, did not directly lead to the subsequent commercial success. Instead, there was a tremendous contrast between the expectation of some audiences and film industry practitioners and the above two films’ actual box office performance. *Kuiba 1* was a box office disaster with a much lower than expected revenue (4.99 million Yuan box office comparing with the 35 million production cost).³⁶⁵ A similar situation has also happened in *The Tibetan Dog*. As a relatively expensive film to produce (60 million Chinese Yuan), it only achieved 1.48 million in gross box office receipts.³⁶⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, the last five years witnessed the release of the derivative *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* films in Chinese cinema chains in the Lunar New Year Festival season, which can be considered as one of several vital moments in Chinese film market each year. Meanwhile, there is another important period in terms of the distribution and exhibition of NGCCA: the summer film season which targets the young student audience groups who have a lot of free

³⁶³ Sina Entertainment. ‘*Duoji in the Tearjerker Tibetan Dog is being praised as A Chinese Version the Great Lion Aslan*’ Available from: <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2011-07-08/11203354622.shtml>>. [Accessed: 11 October 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁶⁴ John Hartley et al, p.134.

³⁶⁵ China Box Office. ‘*The Box Office of Kuiba 1*’. Available from: <<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=589829>>. [Accessed: 21 July 2017] [in Chinese].

³⁶⁶ China Box Office. ‘*The Box Office of The Tibetan Dog*’. Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/593618>>. [Accessed: 12 October 2016] [in Chinese].

time. Having examined the periodical characteristics of film exhibition on a global scale, Nick Lacey (2014) argues that the summer film season (May-August) is a vital period at the box office.³⁶⁷ S. Craig Watkins (1998) also considers that the summer is a crucial season for the US film industry, which is largely due to the primary moviegoers like young teens and adults are away from school.³⁶⁸ Similarly, the importance of the summer film season also applies to the Chinese animation market. He and Zhao (2014) find that the number of domestic animated films released in the cinemas in the month of June, July and August accounted for 43 per cent of the total between 2008 and 2013.³⁶⁹ Regarding the dominant role of *Pleasant Goat* films in the Spring Festival Season, *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog* chose to screen on July 2011.³⁷⁰ However, their performance in cinemas were not a patch on their derivative films counterparts which were released in roughly the same period. *Seer/Saierhao Zhi Xunzhao Fenghuang Shenshou* (Huang, 2011) (released on 28 July) and *Legend of the Moles: The Frozen Horror/Moer Zhuangyuan Bingshiji* (Liu, 2011) (released on 11 August), as both the first cinematic creation under the same name of 3D web game and online community for children, achieved 44.03 and 17.47 million Chinese Yuan on box office respectively in the context of relatively low online rating (3.7 and 6.1 scores in Mtime) (chart 4.3).³⁷¹

³⁶⁷ Nick Lacey. *Introduction to Film* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p. 153.

³⁶⁸ S. Craig Watkins. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) p. 120.

³⁶⁹ He and Zhao, p.40.

³⁷⁰ *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog* were released on 8 July 2011 and 15 July 2011 respectively in Chinese cinema chains.

³⁷¹ See China Box Office. '*The Box Office of Seer*' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/590079>>. [Accessed: 11 October 2016] [in Chinese]. See also China Box Office. '*The Box Office of Legend Of The Moles: The Frozen Horror*' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/594624>>. [Accessed: 11 October 2016] [in Chinese]. See also Mtime. '*The Combined Keywords Search for Film: "China" and "Animation" and "Year of 2011"*'. Available from: <<http://movie.mtime.com/movie/search/section/#type=184&nation=138&year=2011>>. [Accessed: 09 October 2016] [in Chinese].

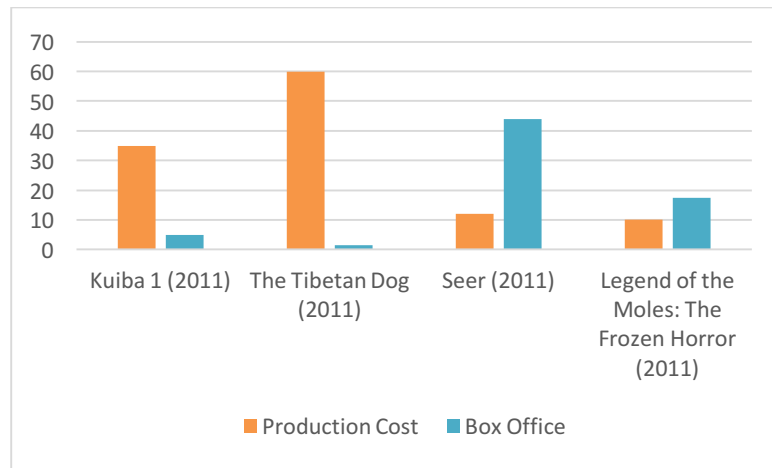


Chart 4.3: The Comparison between Production Cost and Box Office of *Kuiba 1*, *The Tibetan Dog*, *Seer* and *Legend of the Moles: The Frozen Horror* (million Chinese Yuan)

4.0.2 Vasoon's *Kuiba* as a Chinese High-fantasy Franchise

In this section, I examine why *Kuiba 1*'s production company Vasoon proceeded to produce two sequels after the initial failure. I argue that the ambitious Vasoon has tried to build *Kuiba* as a high-end Chinese animated fantasy franchise by applying serialization strategy. First, I discuss the company's incentive for the creation of the five-part *Kuiba* series. Second, I briefly introduce the storylines and worldview construction in *Kuiba 1* and its sequels, which clearly associate themselves with the Japanese manga and anime on the aesthetic aspect.

Having argued the box office failure of *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog* in 2011 in the previous section, it should be noted that the overwhelming majority of original NGCCA works (like the case of *The Tibetan Dog*) would not produce a sequels after a box office failure, but the above general rule does not apply to *Kuiba 1* and the production company Vasoon. As China's longest running privately-owned animation studio, Vasoon, like many of its domestic competitors, had been specializing in the outsourcing of TV animation production for a long time. According to a report from *China Culture Daily*, Vasoon's annual net profit had reached more than ten million

Chinese Yuan before the setting up of the *Kuiba* project (before 2004).³⁷² As suggested in the previous chapter and thesis Introduction, the Chinese cultural authorities have started to limit the broadcasting of imported TV animation programmes and encourage the non-government capital to enter the domestic animation sector by implementing a series of regulations and policies like tax exemption and production subsidies since 2004. In this context, many new animation studios have been set up, thus exerting a market pressure on old pioneers like Vasoon. Regarding the changing market circumstances, Wu Hanqing, who is the CEO of Vasoon, concerned that 'the established order of Chinese animation market would be changed (by the emerging studios) and Vasoon's price advantage on outsourcing would disappear'.³⁷³ She explained further in an interview that,

A large number of investors will flood into an industry which has a better chance of enjoying the preferential policies (in China). With this in mind, a major Chinese animation market reshuffle is on the horizon. What should we (Vasoon) do next? In my opinion, we need to find a new and relatively stable market which can secure the safety of the company. I believe the most feasible option for Vasoon is to produce and promote high-end animations in the future which will be welcomed by both domestic and international markets.³⁷⁴

The above arguments can be considered as the creation incentive of the epic fantasy *Kuiba* series that features the intricate construction of a fictional universe. *Kuiba* is actually the name of the most destructive creature in the imaginary Yuan Yang world (*Yuanyang Jingjie*) where is composed by the heaven (*Tianjie*) (ruled by the 'heavenly beings' or 'deities') and the earth (*Dijie*) which is made up of many kingdoms where various kind of mortal creatures live.³⁷⁵ Every 333 years the disastrous *Kuiba* is reborn into the Yuan Yang world and then brings absolute deconstruction. The story of *Kuiba 1* starts from *Kuiba* epoch 1664, the alliance

³⁷² Nili Liu, Zheng Li and Qian Li. 'The Financing of Chinese Cartoon Brand: Case Study on Beijing Vasoon Animation Studio', *China Culture Daily*, 26 January 2013, Section 04. [in Chinese].

³⁷³ Same as above.

³⁷⁴ Chunmei Niu. 'The Birth and Growth of Chinese Cinema Animation *Kuiba*', *Beijing Daily*, 07 July 2011, Section 17 [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁷⁵ In the following discussion, the standardized form 'Kuiba' refers to the devil creature. The italic form '*Kuiba*' means the serialized cinema animation productions.

between heavenly beings and earth kingdoms plans to assassinate the sixth generation Kuiba at the moment of the latter's reincarnation. However, this campaign failed and the escaped Kuiba is reborn as a child Manji (the protagonist of the *Kuiba* series). The ingenuous and memoryless Manji is adopted and trained by a spirit warrior Man Xiaoman from Holy Beast Kingdom. At the same time, after the initial unsuccessful attempt to destroy Kuiba, the alliance then send a coalition army to relocate the accurate position of the survived Kuiba (Manji) and its subordinates for the purpose of gaining time, in order that the deities could make warlike preparations and implement the second general offensive against Kuiba force. Afterwards, the conscription order reaches the Wowo village in Holy Beast Kingdom where Manji and Man Xiaoman temporarily live. The village chief incites the restless master (Man Xiaoman) and apprentice (Manji) to join the army and combat with Kuiba, which is often considered as a form of highest honour of a spirit warrior. Manji, who is unaware of his real identity as the six generation Kuiba, therefore ironically enter the path of destroying himself.

James Walters (2011) argues that the fictional world in a film often stands beyond the territory of the knowable and explainable. He also believes that the nature of a fictional world, which features a sequence of particular facts and events, differentiates itself from our own. In this sense, fantasy films 'expands the terms of credible occurrence, reshaping the world into new, and uncharted, extremes'.³⁷⁶ Nowadays, the construction of a fictional universe has become an established industrial practice and an essential element in the production of fantasy films (both live action and animated). However, the above field in NGCCA creation was still blank until the *Kuiba* series. In general, *Kuiba* tries to build a totally new fantasy world which has its own chronicles and internally consistent fictional setting. It is also the first Chinese cinema animation that involves the creation of a coherent and autonomous fictional universe without any pre-existing audience familiarity. Unlike the development strategies of *Boonie Bears* and *Pleasant Goat* entertainment franchises which often regard the film products

³⁷⁶ James Walters. *Fantasy Film: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011) p. 43.

as the derivatives of the existing texts, Vasoon instead considers the *Kuiba* films as the foundation of the future content creation. In view of this, Wu Hanqing believes that,

The creation of *Kuiba* is not merely to make a film. The world of *Kuiba* is completely new to the audiences, therefore it (the *Kuiba* series) should have almost unlimited spaces for stories and character development. We can apply the above creative practices to the later commercial operations such as *Kuiba* themed online games and theme park.... Everything is possible.³⁷⁷

Janet Wasko (2008) considers the film or entertainment franchise as ‘a property or concept that is repeatable in multiple media platforms or outlets with merchandising and tie-in potential.’³⁷⁸ Kuhn and Westwell (2012) also argue that a successful franchise not only enables the production of a set of tie-in products that feature characters and scenarios from the film, but grants the film to be utilized to promote other merchandises.³⁷⁹ In the case of *Kuiba*, the ambitious Vasoon chooses to break up the main story into five-part cinema animations for the purpose of not only gradually building the *Kuiba* films’ influence through successive screenings year on year, but laying a solid foundation for the franchise’s future development. However, the first three instalments’ box office performance largely contrasts with Vasoon’s initial expectations.

At the same time, *Kuiba*’s efforts to create a high-fantasy world, which pioneered this field of NGCCA, have also received a mixed reception among audiences. For example, the series has been widely discussed for its conspicuous analogy with Japanese Shonen manga and anime in the respect of pictorial form and character design, which has raised questions about the original *Kuiba*’s originality (discussed later). Jianfeng Zhang (2012) considers *Kuiba*’s ordeal epitomizes ‘Chinese animation industry’s bumpy road towards originality’.³⁸⁰ I agree with his argument

³⁷⁷ Chunmei Niu, section 17.

³⁷⁸ Janet Wasko. ‘The Lord of the Rings: Selling the Franchise’, in Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs eds. *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien’s World Audiences* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) pp.21-36, p.22.

³⁷⁹ Kuhn and Westwell, p.188.

³⁸⁰ Jianfeng Zhang. ‘Chinese Animation Industry focuses on Brands and Talent’. Available from: <<http://english.cntv.cn/program/cultureexpress/20120524/107051.shtml>>. [Accessed: 06 November 2016].

as I will later discuss. The three instalments of the *Kuiba* series all suffered from lukewarm box office receipts. There is a lack of specific data about the production cost of *Kuiba 2* and *Kuiba 3*. Nevertheless, according to relevant statistics, the box office revenue of *Kuiba 2* (25.30 million Chinese Yuan) cannot cover the production expenses'.³⁸¹ Moreover, the unsatisfactory commercial performance of *Kuiba 3* (24.31 million Chinese Yuan) in cinema chains has directly lead to the suspension of the fourth instalment.³⁸² Vasoon announced that the production of the fourth *Kuiba* animated film would be postponed indefinitely after the third one's public screening on October 2014, due to the 'low output-input ratio'.³⁸³

4.1 The Critically Acclaimed Box Office Flop: *Kuiba 1*'s Commercial Dilemma

4.1.1 *Kuiba 1*'s Box Office Failure: A Content Analysis Perspective

In this section, I examine the reasons behind the relatively critically acclaimed *Kuiba 1*'s box office failure from a content analysis perspective. I argue that the overambitious filmic content and ambiguous naming strategy have directly lead to the film's box office failure. First, I examine *Kuiba 1*'s efforts to build a completely fictional universe (Yuan Yang world) like its *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of The Rings* counterparts have done in the multi-media creations. Second, I analyse in contrast with the expectation of the creators, how and why the film's overly informative prologue fails to serve not only as the carrier of necessary contextual information of the story, but as a link of narrative sequence. Third, I discuss the naming strategy of

³⁸¹ Getu Zhaori. 'The Production Company stops the Plan of Next *Kuiba* Film', *Haikou Daily*, 12 October 2014, Section 08 [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁸² China Box Office. '*The Box Office of Kuiba 3*'. Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/616743>>. [Accessed: 22 November 2016] [in Chinese].

³⁸³ Sina Entertainment. '*The Production Company announced that the Production of Kuiba 4 would be postponed indefinitely while Netizens feel Sorry for that*'. Available from: <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/w/2014-10-11/10054222231.shtml>>. [Accessed: 05 November 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

this first instalment of the whole series, which further confuses *Kuiba 1*'s identity in the film market.

Stanley Cavell in his 1979 study maintains that 'the "sense of reality" provided on film is the sense of *that* reality, one from which we already sense a distance. Otherwise, the thing it provides a sense of would not, for us, count as reality'.³⁸⁴ In other words, Cavell considers that the film-world is a distant copy of reality, a reality that is reorganised by the artist.³⁸⁵ In proceeding from this point, audiences may also perceive the 'reality' in film entangling both realistic background knowledge and personal experience between themselves and the creators'. For some genres (both live action and animated) with a real-world context such as the historical melodrama, the awareness of the cinematic reality always involves the interplay with the realistic expression of evaluated actual circumstances. Torben Grodal (2002) argues that one of the most important tasks of the designers of fantasy films is to make the movements of fantasy creatures 'realistic', which is made in keeping with the audience's experience-based 'movement conception'.³⁸⁶ In practice, the above rule not only applies to the creation of imaginary creatures, but to other settings like props design and scenario building. In this sense, in terms of the creation of a fully realized and extensive fictional universe in epic fantasy animations or live action films, probably one of the most important factors in the worldview/settings/systems construction is the resemblance and dissimilarity between the fantasy realm and the reality. Hence, the *Kuiba* films' scriptwriting team spent three years to build the two million Chinese characters encyclopaedia of the fictionalised Yuan Yang world includes astronomy, sociology, martial arts, geography and history volume. According to one of *Kuiba*'s chief writers Tian Bo, the encyclopaedia even depicts the courtship, fertility, skeleton and mode of

³⁸⁴ Stanley Cavell. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) p. 226.

³⁸⁵ Daniel Frampton. *Filmosophy* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2006) p. 4.

³⁸⁶ Torben Grodal. 'The Experience of Realism in Audiovisual Representation', in Anne Jerslev ed. *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002) pp.67-92, p.68.

motion of every single creature in this land in detail.³⁸⁷ That is to say, the Yuan Yang world exists in an alternative universe which has its own natural law. The encyclopaedia of the Yuan Yang world was not only used for the reference of the filmmakers, but was also published as a derivative book *The Book of Kuiba* which has enabled the background knowledge of the series to be available to potential members of audience to some extent. Wu Hanqing, who is also the producer of the *Kuiba* series, believes the reason for the construction of the Yuan Yang world has been due to,

We (Vasoon) want to tell a Chinese style legendary epic that features kindness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness in essence. This kind of story needs a complete and rigorous worldview. For instance, *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of The Rings* franchises and some of the most popular digital games have a complete and consistent system about race, regime and other settings. Since we decide to do the same thing, we want to be the best.³⁸⁸

As discussed in Chapter 2, *Lotus Lantern* is the first NGCCA work that tries to adopt Hollywood iconography and techniques. While considering Wu's above arguments, we can infer here that *Kuiba 1* is another original NGCCA work that aims to replicate the West's creative practices and commercial successful experiences. Having the desire to create the domestic animated epic fantasy franchise is a sign of attitude transformation, which reveals the Chinese animators' exploration from the apparently simplistic and childish narratives to grand thematic statement. The courage of Vasoon has also been praised by a large number of normal viewers and critics (discussed later). However, from a distance it can be said that the above transition has been one-sided. On one hand, Vasoon and its *Kuiba* series have opened up the possibilities of the development of the Chinese epic fantasy franchise. As suggested earlier, Vasoon seeks to

³⁸⁷ Tianyang Zhong. 'Kuiba: The Breakthrough of Chinese Original Cinema Animation', *China Business News*, 22 July 2011, Section D01 [in Chinese, my translation].

³⁸⁸ Kindness, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness are the Five Cardinal Virtues in Confucianism, which was firstly proposed by Confucius and then inherited and developed by the successive Confucian scholars. The Confucian tradition emphasizes the perfect man must follow the above virtues. See David Stent. *Religious Studies: Made Simple* (London: Heinemann, 1983) p. 170. See also Yu Cai and Ling Zou. 'Kuiba: 95 Per Cent Mathematics and 5 Per Cent Art in Chinese Original Animation'. Available from: < <http://finance.ifeng.com/news/corporate/20110801/4334044.shtml>>. [Accessed: 07 November 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

develop the *Kuiba* franchise based on the awareness of serialized films. Henry Jenkins (2006) considers several common notions referenced by the term ‘convergence’ in multimedia franchise, which include ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audience who would go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want’.³⁸⁹ He also defines the ‘corporate convergence’ as the ‘commercially directed flow of media content’.³⁹⁰ In this sense, Vasoon’s ambition, from the point of view of franchising development, is to promote the above convergence and synergy effects in the development of the *Kuiba* franchise, thus achieving the maximum number of audience in different media platforms that aim at profit making.

James Buhler (2016) argues that ‘one reason franchising is drawn to developing epic tale is because franchising works best when its world is immersive, when it can overlay our world with another fictive one’.³⁹¹ The fictional and immersive worlds constructed in epic fantasy franchises are represented by the Middle-earth in *The Lord of The Rings* and The Wizarding World in *Harry Potter*. As mentioned earlier, the creators of *Kuiba 1* have tried to learn from the fictional-universe construction experiences of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of The Rings* (henceforth referred to as *LOTR*). In this sense, *Kuiba 1* can be regarded as the first original NGCCA work which deliberately devotes itself to build an immersive world, and the domestic animation sector’s first attempt to explore the Chinese-style legendary fantasy (discussed in the next section).

On the other hand, they have ignored, either intentionally or unintentionally, the particularity *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* represent in terms of the development models and internal rules. Sandra Beckett in her 2010 study finds that Tolkien’s a

³⁸⁹ Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006) p. 282.

³⁹⁰ Same as above.

³⁹¹ James Buhler. ‘Branding the Franchise: Music, Opening Credits, and the “Corporate” Myth of Origin’, in Stephen Meyer ed. *Music in Epic Film: Listening to Spectacle* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) pp.3-26, p.4.

series of *LOTR* novels are one of the most popular works of the twentieth century in the respects of sales and reader surveys. The three *LOTR* fictions had sold 150 million copies until 2010.³⁹² At the same time, *LOTR* was awarded as the greatest book of the millennium in a 1999 poll initiated by Amazon.com. It was also declared as the 'Nation's Best-Loved Book' in Britain in 2003.³⁹³ Its enormous popularity can be traced to the first publication in the 1960s, a key feature of *LOTR* novel's success has always been its cross-generational appeal.³⁹⁴ Christine Littlefield (2009) argues that *Harry Potter* has evolved to a franchise and a brand from a piece of children's literature within a very short period.³⁹⁵ She also attempts to review the relations between *LOTR* and *Harry Potter*, which have exerted a positive mutual influence on each other in terms of the international popularity. She believes the above two entertainment brands share the similar effects and impacts within the context of incomparable stories.³⁹⁶ Therefore it can be argued that as both the high fantasy novels written by British authors, *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* are already phenomenal intellectual properties before the creation of their film version.

Hesmondhalgh in his 2013 study argues that the cultural industries constitute an exceptionally risky business in which companies encounter particular problems of risk and unpredictability.³⁹⁷ Regarding the sector's high level of risk, Hesmondhalgh believes one plausible problem-solving approach is the 'formatting' of the cultural products. He considers one main approach to achieve the 'formatting' is the star system, which features the association between celebrated industry practitioners (writers, performer, etc.) and the texts. Hesmondhalgh argues that this type of formatting is 'reserved for privileged texts

³⁹² Sandra Beckett. *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) p. 106.

³⁹³ Sandra Beckett. p.107.

³⁹⁴ Same as above.

³⁹⁵ Christine Littlefield. "'One Harry to Bind Them All': The Utilisation of Harry', in Diana Patterson ed. *Harry Potter's World Wide Influence* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) pp.249-270, p.259.

³⁹⁶ Littlefield, p.259.

³⁹⁷ Hesmondhalgh, p.27.

that cultural industry companies hope will become big hits'.³⁹⁸ Having examined the important international influences of *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* novels, it can be argued that the above two works are the privileged texts that have the possibility to become the big hits and multimedia franchises. That is to say, their cinematic creations own considerable potential audiences, who are already familiar with the worldview/characters/systems within the stories, even before the formal production and promotion.

Hoping to extend the analogous relationship between the *Kuiba* films and *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* novels, which features an initiative to create a fantasy world completely unlike the reality, creators in Vasoon have dedicated themselves gradually build *Kuiba* as a privileged text like the latter two for the purpose of laying the foundation for the franchise's further development. However, as suggested earlier, *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* novels had been proved to be highly competitive products before the creation of the derivative films. To put it simply, their industry mode is from novel to film to other peripheral products (video games, collectible item, clothes, etc.). The high awareness and popularity of the original texts have largely contributed to the success of the franchises' storytelling in various media platforms (films, digital games, etc.). That is to say, the combination between the existing reputations and other strategies could minimize the high-level risk of box office failure of the film adaptations.

While in the case of the *Kuiba* series, Vasoon implements a film—other peripheral products strategy (animated TV series, books, figurines, etc.). From an industry value chain point of view, the role of the *Kuiba* films equals *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* novels in the respect of audience and reputation accumulation. The former aims to serve not only as the privileged text, but also as the foundation of the derivatives which are largely based on the film series' brand recognition. In other words, Vasoon's has enthusiastically engaged in developing *Kuiba* franchise on the basis of cinema animation productions. Ideally, the latter could serve as the

³⁹⁸ Hesmondhalgh, p.32.

‘introductory marks’ for other peripheral products like online games and theme parks (as mentioned earlier), which tell the stories take place in the same fictional universe constructed in the films. This approach thus presumes what Henry Jenkins (2006) considers the ‘transmedia storytelling’, ‘stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world’.³⁹⁹ Regarding this, Vasoon aims to construct a believable fantasy land by the public screening of the five-part *Kuiba* films without foreshadowing any other kinds of texts. In this sense, the *Kuiba* series wishes to provide as much information as possible about the worldview settings of Yuan Yang world even in the opening scenes of the first instalment. To be specific, in the first five minutes of *Kuiba 1*, audiences are introduced to the context of the story features a sequence of action scenes and the corresponding off-screen commentary (fig 4.2),

*Voiceover: This land is called the **Yuan Yang world** which has an inexplicable phenomenon. A horrific creature reincarnates on this world every 333 years, it is **Kuiba**. Each generation of Kuiba brings a catastrophic destruction to the whole Yuan Yang world, even the **deities in the heaven** can’t survive. Kuiba is being destroyed again and again under full attack from the alliance between the heaven and **the earth**, but then reappears again and again. In **Kuiba epoch 1042**, goddess **Puxin** is killed during the war against the fourth generation of Kuiba. In **Kuiba epoch 1058**, the heavenly beings call up all their forces and launch a general offensive on the fourth generation of Kuiba.*

*Unknown male voice: ‘**Qi, Heng, San!**’*

*Voiceover: Kuiba summons his powerful **pulse beast** and then engages in a life-and-death battle with the heavenly beings with the help of his underlings.*

*Voice of Kuiba’s two underlings: ‘**Leiguang**, notify everyone to assemble at the tower top!’ ‘**Ling, Jia**, anyone still alive, assemble at the tower top immediately!’ ‘**Youmikuang**, come here!’ ‘Kuiba, leave us alone.’*

*Voiceover: The fourth generation Kuiba opens **Qujing** with his weapon **Chongtian Spear** in his final moment, in order to protect his underlings to escape from the fatal position. Then Chongtian Spear transforms into a giant stone pillar in **Woliu Island** in the earth, which is protected by the surviving subordinates who wait for the rebirth of the next generation Kuiba. In **Kuiba epoch 1331**, **Jingxin**, who is the daughter of Puxin, takes up a **senior post** in **Department of Kuiba** in the heaven and successfully assassinates the fifth generation of Kuiba. The sixth generation of Kuiba will be reincarnated in **Kuiba epoch 1664**.*

³⁹⁹ Henry Jenkins, p. 293.

*Jingxin: 'This is the **Stonehenge in Ling Mount**, the place of resurgence of the neo Kuiba. The sign of life in this area is getting increasingly stronger, the accurate time and location of the resurgence are confirmed.'*

***Yanshuo (the chief god of fire faction in the heaven as illustrated by the subtitles):** 'the sun, moon and star gods are on standby in a **Xuanfang array**, and ready to cooperate with **Yuan point strike**.'*

***Luochen (the chief god of earth faction in the heaven as illustrated by the subtitles):** 'Wake up, **Yuan**. I'm calling you in the name of the **five great gods**, open the **Yuan point**.'*

***Yuan (the chief god of the heaven as illustrated by the subtitles):** 'Long time no see'.*

Jingxin: 'On your marks, enter the count-down.'

Unknown male voice: 'Ten, nine, eight, seven.'

Jingxin: 'Mother, can you hear it?'

Unknown female voice: 'Yuan point ready to open.'

***Yangche (the chief god of water faction in the heaven as illustrated by the subtitles):** 'Attention, the time of opening Yuan point cannot exceed **Pai millisecond**.'*

Unknown male voice: 'Two, one.'

Unknown female voice: 'Yuan point strike.'

Unknown male voice: 'Hit the target.'

***Pu (the chief god of wood faction in the heaven as illustrated by the subtitles):** 'The sign of life has completely disappeared, pretty accurate.'*

Yanshuo: 'He is dead.'

Yuan: 'That's it, the nightmare is over.'

Jingxin: 'Kuiba, I'll never give you any chance.'

Voiceover: However, to the surprise of Jingxin and other deities, the neo Kuiba escapes from the deadly attack due to an unexpected error, unbelievably, he survives.



Fig 4.2: The Five-minute Prologue of *Kuiba 1*

The purpose of providing such a long paragraph of off-screen voices and dialogues is to illustrate how many strange and confusing notions are peremptorily thrown out by *Kuiba 1* within a five-minute prologue. The unfamiliar concepts, which have never appeared before the film, have been bolded to differentiate themselves from the conventional narrative and language. I calculated that there are roughly 31 new terms in this short opening sequences, which not only involve the extensive portrayal of multiple cultures in Yuan Yang world such as geographical setting, space-and-time conception and combat mode, but include characterisation like the characters' name, position and relation. In general, the functions of a film's opening sequences are twofold. One is to bring the spectator from the reality to the unfamiliar cinematic world, the other is to build the context and provide background information, usually several preceding tales which are relevant to the main storylines. In *Kuiba 1*'s prologue, the viewers are being ushered into the fictional Yuan Yang world as an alternate reality by

showing a sequence of grand scenes. Stephen Prince (2012) argues that ‘the enduring cultural practice of placing viewers into immersive, virtual spaces came naturally to cinema, with its ability to provide moving images and to combine pictures with sound’.⁴⁰⁰ He also considers the *LOTR* films provide the spectators an immersive illusion which is perceived as an experience rather than a representation.⁴⁰¹ It is understandable that Vasoon here attempts to immerse audiences as quick and fully as possible by introducing the necessary worldview/system/settings (at least in their minds), thus providing a uniquely immersive viewing experience. However, it is also questionable whether this kind of overwhelming information bombardment could achieve the creators’ intentions in terms of the popularization of background knowledge.

At this point, I argue that *Kuiba 1* fails to serve as the introductory remarks of the five-part series, which not only derives from the incoherence and disconnection between the opening sequences and the following plots, but also due to the overall arrangement of dramatic structure and the naming strategy. For example, on the surface, the film’s prologue makes a relatively intense statement, which narrates grand events in the form of annalistic epic and links to the earlier stories. However, as mentioned in the transcript of the first five-minutes opening scenes, the five gods in the heaven are hastily introduced to the audiences within several seconds of appearance, the former only have a few lines in the above scenes. The importance of their racial identity and their hierarchical role in the heaven are largely based on the corresponding subtitles. Through examination of the whole film, I find that the five great gods only appear on the film’s beginning and are not accessible to audience in the later narratives. Moreover, afterwards the story turns to focus on how Manji, who needs to fight his inner demon as the monstrous Kuiba, and Man Xiaoman overcome the resistances and difficulties in order to get on board the battleship towards Kuiba’s pulse beast elimination campaign. In other words, *Kuiba 1*’s narration is not consistent, nor does it

⁴⁰⁰ Stephen Prince. *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012) p. 186.

⁴⁰¹ Stephen Prince, pp.189, 190.

pretend to be. The worldview first settled in the opening scenes does not continue to make itself felt through the film's narration.

While under normal circumstances, after introducing such a range of concepts in a prologue that aims at foreshadowing and composing a grand narrative, the viewers may naturally assume the relevance between the first five minutes and the unfolding plots. That is to say, they will wait for the further explanation of the complicated settings introduced in the opening scenes. For example, what are the five great gods? What is Kuiba epoch? What is the point of all of this detail about the Yuan Yang world chronicles? How and in what way does the heaven cooperate with the earth? However, *Kuiba 1* features not only an oversimplified depiction of the heavenly beings, but also lacks further explanation of the perplexing terminologies like 'Xuanfang array', 'Yuan point' and 'Pai millisecond'. In this sense, the opening sequences do not resonate with the main story. It seems that the creators here just want to throw the film's system setting at the viewers within a limited time without consideration of the latter's receptivity. From this perspective, *Kuiba 1*'s prologue disconnects with the later narrations, rather than serves as a link that echoes narrative sequences in the film.

The discontinuity and disconnection between the first five minutes and the subsequent narrations can also be illustrated through analysis of the narrative strategy. After the opening sections, *Kuiba 1* adopts a linear dramatic form that starts with Manji and Man Xiaoman's martial arts practice in Wowo village where encounters robbery from a group of bandits lead by Man Xiaoman's former acquaintance Xuelun. The protagonist and his master defeat the bandits and protect the village. Then they enter into Miladu, the capital of the Holy Tree Kingdom. After being scorned and rejected by the innkeeper who adopts a completely different attitude towards them and another high-ranking spirit warrior from Holy Dragon Kingdom, Man Xiaoman duels with his high-level counterpart in the name of a spirit warrior (this plot will be discussed in the next section). The above plots can be identified as the rising action in the overall narrative structure which sets up several secondary conflicts that thwart the

progress of the leading actors. The climax occurs in the Green Leaf Harbour in the Holy Tree Kingdom, where Manji and Man Xiaoman finally get on the battleship and join the alliance after a series of battles with the coalition army officers and the pulse beast (which is summoned by Manji's inner Kuiba demon). In other words, the successive stories (after the prologue) take place in the earth's Holy Beast Kingdom and Holy Tree Kingdom without involvement of the heavenly powers. This dramatic conflict, mainly between the creatures in the earth, is generalized into a martial arts-themed animated work, which sharply contrasts with the science fiction-themed prologue.

Furthermore, the story ends with a sense that *Kuiba 1* is just the prelude of Manji and Man Xiaoman's adventure journey. It also contrasts with the audience reception of this film, which is affected by the latter's naming strategy. According to an article in *Southern Weekly* for the purpose of discussing the production and possible limitations of *Kuiba 1*, the author noticed that,

Cinephiles, who are familiar with Japan and America's industrial model of animation production, have already discussed the oddness of *Kuiba 1*: (the relevant story) has never appeared on television; the film throws a large amount of unacquainted conceptual settings to the spectators; and many viewers do not know this is the first instalment of the five-part series which makes the above unfamiliar conceptions even more difficult to understand.⁴⁰²

The above observations reveal that *Kuiba 1* is not known as the first instalment of the serialized animated films by many viewers. Such misconception of *Kuiba 1*'s positioning is largely due to the film's unclear and confusing name. Nolwenn Mingant, Cecilia Tirtaine and Joël Augros in their 2015 studies maintain that the production company determines the film's positioning by 'setting its identity and defining where it stands in relation to other films on the market and in audiences' mind'.⁴⁰³ That is to say, a film's positioning relies on its target audience and selling points. As suggested earlier, the identity of *Kuiba 1*, for both the market and

⁴⁰² Zhanxiong Xu. 'Kuiba: A doomed to Failure Animation Revolution?', *Southern Weekly*, 21 July 2011, Section D27. [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴⁰³ Nolwenn Mingant, Cecilia Tirtaine and Joël Augros. *Film Marketing Into the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p. 2.

audiences, is the introductory remarks of the serialized epic-like *Kuiba* films franchise. Therefore the name of the first instalment should reflect its function in the whole five-part stories. However, as mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, the Chinese name of the first *Kuiba* film is *魁拔之十万火急/Kuiba Zhi Shiwan Huoji* rather than *魁拔 1/Kuiba 1* or any other forms of title that indicates the film's identity as the first instalment. The first *Kuiba* film is more like an individual and independent NGCCA work rather than a part of the ambitious film series. In this sense, audiences may perceive the film as an incomplete narrative event because the falling action does not solve the final suspense resulting from the conflict between the self-contradictory Manji-Kuiba Binity. Moreover, in this context, the film's ending is an anti-climax to the extravagant worldview display of the beginning.

Meanwhile, *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* films use a simple but effective naming strategy—the same one as the corresponding volume of the original fantasy novels. For example, the first instalment of *LOTR* film is titled as *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, which shares the same name with the first volume of the novel (fig 4.3). Naturally, afterwards each film's narration is based on the corresponding novelistic version. On one hand, despite the above film series' success at the box office, the fidelity issue in the process of adaptation has triggered wide discussion among critics and audiences. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (2010) consider the reason why the *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* film adaptations disappointed the viewers is the above works don't fulfil the cinematic potential of the books.⁴⁰⁴ But on the other hand, setting aside the controversies over the understanding of fidelity between the cinematic creations and the original texts, the loyalty of film title to its novel counterparts can give the audiences (especially for the readers of the novels) an intuitive feeling of the film production's identity and where it stands in the whole series.

⁴⁰⁴ Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan. *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p. 76.



Fig 4.3: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* Novel (Left) and film (Right)

4.1.1 *Kuiba 1*'s Box Office Failure: An Industry Focused Approach

In this section, I examine the reasons behind *Kuiba 1*'s box office failure using an industry focused approach. I argue that the ineffective marketing campaign and stereotyped image of Chinese animation have aggravated the commercial dilemma of this film. First, I analyse the promotional activities launched by the film's distributor, who failed to reach the target audience. Second, I examine the marketing campaigns of the production company Vasoon, which also showed a limited promotional effect. Third, I examine how *Kuiba 1* was dragged down by the disreputable image of their crudely-made domestic counterparts from the eyes of other industry practitioners, and then the ordinary viewers' support for the film.

I have already claimed that in the creation of the *Kuiba* series, Vasoon aims at duplicating the successful industry practices of *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* franchises. However, it is clear from what has been discussed above that *Kuiba*'s simulation is unilateral. It seems that Vasoon's creators focus more on the macroscopic aspects such as the worldview/setting/system construction while pay little attention to

handle several small and easily ignored details like the film title. As examples of *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* illustrate, the naming strategy is actually a vital component of film production and promotion. An appropriate title becomes more important for totally original works like *Kuiba* series without pre-existing audience familiarity. At the same time, it should be admitted that the naming strategy is not the only way to brand a film. Hartley et al (2013) believe that the creative industries have a unique relationship with audiences because the target market of the former is the one 'where supply precedes demand'.⁴⁰⁵ I agree with their argument because the role of marketing has become increasingly important in promoting and circulating creative products like animated films. In this sense, the high-efficiency and comprehensive promotional activities can not only maximize awareness of an individual work, but also improve the recognition of an entertainment franchise especially for a newly-built one. However, the predicament of *Kuiba 1* became even more severe accompanied with the ineffective advance publicity.

As mentioned in the previous section, Vasoon's revenues mainly came from the outsourcing TV animation production before the initiation of *Kuiba* project. Kuang Yuqi, the president of Vasoon, maintains that

Vasoon has accumulated over 19 years of experience in animation production, but the company is a recruit in terms of the animation market operation. We are not familiar with the relevant industry rules, in other words, we are not very mature in the respect.⁴⁰⁶

Regarding this, Vasoon decided to choose Shanghai Toonmax Media, a subsidiary of the Shanghai Media Group (SMG), as *Kuiba 1*'s distributor which is largely due to Toonmax's successful experiences in the circulation of *Pleasant Goat* serialized films. It should be noted here that *Kuiba* and *Pleasant Goat* films target different audiences. To be specific, *Kuiba* has positioned itself in the juveniles and young adult audience between the ages of 10 to 23 while *Pleasant Goat* aims attract

⁴⁰⁵ Hartley et al, p.12.

⁴⁰⁶ Xingxing Chen. 'The *Kuiba* Series manages to fight back after losing the First Battle', *Beijing Daily*, 07 July 2011, Section 17 [in Chinese, my translation].

children aged 4 to 10.⁴⁰⁷ In the previous chapter, I examined *Rescue*'s marketing campaigns on cartoon channels, in which the advertisement-bombarded strategy was being implemented to ensure that the widest possible child audiences were reached. This tactic has been proved effective in reaching target children viewers, which was also used by Toonmax in promoting *Pleasant Goat* films. Rob Donovan and Nadine Henley (2010) argue that 'different target audiences may have different values, attitudes and lifestyles, and, hence, different communication styles may be necessary to attract their attention and establish rapport'.⁴⁰⁸ However, in the case of *Kuiba 1*, Toonmax mechanically followed the above mentioned advertising mode without a consideration of the obvious different target audience between *Pleasant Goat* and the first instalment of the *Kuiba* series.

He Yu, the principle of the department of publicity and distribution in Toonmax, revealed in an interview that the advertisements of *Kuiba 1* had been fully launched in subway carriages, outdoor large screens and the Toonmax cartoon channel in Shanghai city and fourteen television channels and fifteen radio channels that are affiliated to SMG (fig 4.4).⁴⁰⁹ However, the above promotional activities were to a large extent ignored by the targeted teenagers and young adults customers, which was largely due to the ineffective marketing strategy. As suggested in the previous chapter, the majority of juvenile and young adult cinema animation viewers in China prefer to get information about the newly-released animated works through news website, news apps and social media. In the case of the potential members of the audience of *Kuiba 1*, He Yu also admitted that 'they (the target audiences) would obtain information through the Internet rather than TV screen'.⁴¹⁰ That is to say, Toonmax might have chosen the

⁴⁰⁷ Penghuan Shou. 'We did not take A Cent from Vasoon in Kuiba Promotion'. Available from: <<http://ent.sina.com.cn/x/2011-07-26/16243369511.shtml>>. [Accessed: 10 November 2016] [in Chinese].

⁴⁰⁸ Rob Donovan and Nadine Henley. *Principles and Practice of Social Marketing: An International Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p. 252.

⁴⁰⁹ Xingxing Chen, section 17.

⁴¹⁰ Hao Miao, *Research on the Relationship between Artistry and Commercialism in Kuiba* (Unpublished Master's Dissertation, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 2013), p.11 [in Chinese].

wrong platform which put *Kuiba 1* at risk of being ignored by the likely filmgoers. Furthermore, the distributor also made scant use of traditional marketing materials (stand advertising cardboards, posters, etc.) in cinema chains. As mentioned in the previous section, *Kuiba 1* was widely released on 8 July 2011. It is reported that on 5 July, Wang Lingling, the chief media officer of Vasoon, made her trips to Guangzhou city (capital city of Guangdong Province) to promote *Kuiba 1*, where she surprisingly found that ‘a large number of theatres did not display *Kuiba 1*’s posters, many theatre managers still have not watched the copy, the majority of filmgoers did not know what is *Kuiba 1* in a random survey.’⁴¹¹



Fig 4.4: *Kuiba 1*'s Advertisements on Toonmax Cartoon Channel

Regarding Toonmax's ineffectiveness in marketing campaigns in both traditional channels and television platforms, Vasoon, as a production company without experience of content dissemination and distribution (as mentioned earlier), had to promote the film by itself (fig 4.5). Xu's report on *Southern Daily* depicts the detail of the helpless effort of Vasoon in promoting *Kuiba 1* that,

⁴¹¹ Chinanews. 'Kuiba shows the Indomitable Spirit after Initial Failure. How could Chinese Cinema Animation Develop in the Future?'. Available from: <<http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2011/07-25/3205633.shtml>>. [Accessed: 12 November 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

Vasoon's office in Beijing is completely empty for a whole week (after *Kuiba 1*'s release)...A white board that reads 'Kuiba: fight against fate' is placed in the dishevelled conference room. Under the slogan are the addresses of theatres in Beijing city.

Over a hundred of creators in the production team go to cinema chains to trace the box office. They are assigned different tasks every morning and come back to the company in the evening to summarize the earning of this day, and then inquire the screening proportion of *Kuiba 1* in the individual theatre the following day. 'We have almost become a distribution company!' Wu Hanqing said, 'fight against fate' becomes both our and *Kuiba 1*'s belief.⁴¹²

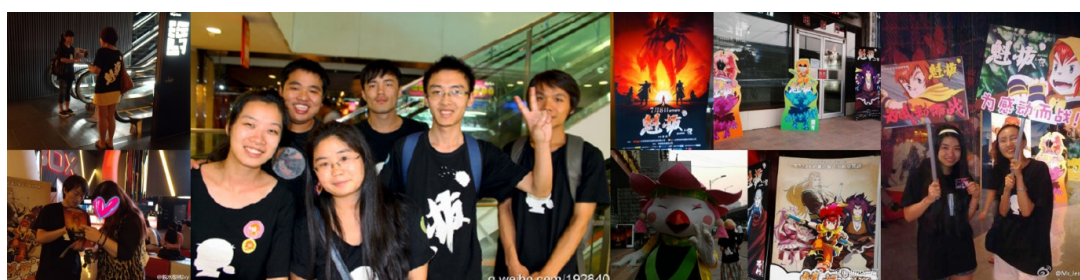


Fig 4.5: Staff Members in Vasoon Promoted *Kuiba 1* in Theatres in Beijing

Staff members in Vasoon, as the creative workers that should be responsible for creativity rather than commerce, naturally lack film marketing knowledge, particularly in relation to their ability to present marketing materials. It is reported that all the posters and advertising flags in front of a theatre in Beijing, which were placed by Vasoon's animators, were confiscated by the urban management officers due to the poor communication beforehand.⁴¹³ Moreover, Vasoon's promotional activities were constrained to interpersonal communications with the potential members of the audience in theatres and to print and display advertisings (cardboards, posters, etc.) in Beijing city alone. Setting aside the above regional-based campaigns' nearly negligible influence on a national scale, Vasoon's efforts were being proved to have little impact on Beijing

⁴¹² Zhanxiong Xu, Section D27.

⁴¹³ Xueliang Wang and Yufei Mao. 'Kuiba wins Reputation while loses in Box Office Appeal: Domestic Animations are still in Crisis', *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 2011, Section 15 [in Chinese].

city alone where the amount of cinema and screen achieved 115 and 600 respectively in 2011 (that is to say, Vasoon could roughly arrange one worker to one cinema).⁴¹⁴ As compared with the number of theatres and cinema screens, Wang Lingling noticed that *Kuiba 1* was screened only 80 times on 8 July 2011 (premiere day) in Beijing and the maximum figure was 104 in the first three days of the opening week.⁴¹⁵ Furthermore, on a national scale, the screen share of this film was 3.46 per cent at most during the theatrical run, which was much lower than its domestic and imported animated film competitors that were screened in roughly the same period.⁴¹⁶

The ineffective Toonmax and unprofessional Vasoon, in the respect of marketing activities, failed to improve the awareness of *Kuiba 1* among the target audience. But it should be noted that the above missteps were not the only causes of this film's financial failures. In fact, the embarrassing circumstance of *Kuiba 1* in Chinese animation market was also largely due to the exhibition sector's stereotypes on original NGCCA works. As mentioned earlier, the *Kuiba* series and Vasoon share the same belief as 'fight against fate'. To put it simply, this belief in the films refers to how the protagonist struggles against his foreordination: a contradictory unity between the innocent Manji and his own inner monstrosity as *Kuiba*. In terms of the latter, Kuang Yuqi explained on his Weibo account that,

Our opponent is actually the 'Original Sin' of the domestically-made animation, is Chinese people's distrust against Chinese animation which is accumulated over the last several decades. This form of 'Original Sin', which is being mislabelled on almost every original domestic animation, is indeed our greatest enemy.⁴¹⁷

Kuang Yuqi considers *Kuiba 1*'s commercial performance has been hindered by the 'Original Sin' of Chinese animation. At this point, the 'Original Sin' can be identified as a form of intentional or unintentional discrimination, a biased

⁴¹⁴ Nanyan Zhou and Yujiao Fu. 'The Number of Cinema Screens in Beijing reaches 600'. Available from: <<http://news.cntv.cn/20111018/101177.shtml>>. [Accessed: 12 November 2016] [in Chinese].

⁴¹⁵ Xingxing Chen, section 17.

⁴¹⁶ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of *Kuiba 1*'. Available from: <<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=589829>>. [Accessed: 21 July 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴¹⁷ Wang and Mao, Section 15.

interpretation of animated works which are labelled as ‘made in China’, and the negative effects of stereotyping on domestically produced animation. As suggested earlier, the number of NGCCA works being able to release to the public has surged significantly, but the box office cannot cover the production cost in most cases (especially for the original works). Such a dilemma may be partly attributed not only to the previous poor reputation but more importantly, the negative stereotypes from audience even practitioners in the media industry. As an extreme example, Wang Chuan, the director of *Kuiba 1*, noticed that several box-office clerks would remind the customers that the film is a domestically made cinema animation, thus unintentionally discouraging considerable potential audience for the film.⁴¹⁸

However, with an increasing number of affirmative comments for the film spreading rapidly both online and offline especially on several most popular Chinese-language social networks and film reviewing websites (Douban Movie, Mtime, Weibo, etc.), plenty of audiences have become gradually familiar with the worldview construction of the *Kuiba* series and the market identity of *Kuiba 1* over the period of this first instalment’s public screening. At the same time, many people, who still have not watched the film at the theatre, have also started to search the relevant information of *Kuiba 1*. It should also be noted here that a number of unprompted Internet users began to ‘counter back’ the industry expectations in various approaches, for example,

‘After watching *Kuiba 1* online, some audiences have sent money to the company as a replacement for film ticket.’ Wang Chuan said.⁴¹⁹ Initially, many people were just propagating *Kuiba 1* to their relatives and acquaintances through Weibo, they also repeatedly watch the film two to three times with different friends. While some others waited at the box office counter, when the clerks admonish the filmgoers that ‘this is Chinese animation’, they would introduce the film with further details. Moreover, several people negotiated with the theatre managers to seek the possibility

⁴¹⁸ Kuanmian Nie. ‘Wang Chuan confirms the Studio will cut *Kuiba IV* Project: The Series may come with a Broader Audience Foundation’. Available from: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqgj/jryw/2014-10-16/content_12537164.html>. [Accessed: 13 November 2015] [in Chinese].

⁴¹⁹ Yi Zheng, Section 12.

of increasing *Kuiba 1*'s screening proportion, they also appealed to organize a group of people to watch the film through Weibo.⁴²⁰

In fact, the sound reputation of the film (*Kuiba 1*) has basically accumulated through a period of screening. Positive feedbacks have been shown by animation industry practitioners and film critics in terms of the film's exploration of a Chinese style fantasy world.⁴²¹

However, the above efforts showed little effect when compared to the grand market environment. Despite more and more people began to search the related information about the film and then planned to watch *Kuiba 1* in cinema, the film had ceased public screening. At the same time, the above spontaneous actions, for the purpose of promoting *Kuiba 1*, on social networks set a trend in the evolution of Word-of-Mouth marketing in Chinese animation sector, which also laid a foundation for the box office miracle of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (discussed in the next chapter).

4.2 Imitation, Mimicry or Aesthetic Borrowing: *Kuiba 1* as a Cultural Hybridity straddles the Line between Chineseness and Japaneseness

4.2.1 Originality and Aesthetic Individuality Issue in Chinese Animations and *Kuiba* Series

In this section, I examine the originality issue in Chinese cinema animation, which has also been mentioned in the reception of *Kuiba 1*. Regarding this matter, I analyse the relevance between *Kuiba 1* and Japanese Shonen manga and anime. I argue that the above phenomenon can be partly attributed to the absence of an easily recognizable national style in animation production. First, I examine the imitative behaviour in NGCCA works and a rip-off scandal as an extreme instance. Second, I consider the aesthetic individuality of *Kuiba 1*, which has also been mentioned by both the creators and animation fans. Third, I analyse the analogy

⁴²⁰ Wang and Mao, Section 15.

⁴²¹ Yang Shao. 'Reconstructing the Reputation and Reversing the Bias: The Discussion on *Kuiba*, *The Tibetan Dog* and *Legend of a Rabbit*', *Journal of Literature and Art*, 27 July 2011, Section 04 [in Chinese, my translation].

between *Kuiba 1* and Japanese Shonen manga and anime in terms of the character establishment.

As suggested in the introduction of this chapter, Vasoon's ambition to create the high-end animated fantasy films (the *Kuiba* series) has received a varied reception among viewers. The previous section examined the commercial failure of *Kuiba 1*, as a representative of the whole series, using both content analysis and industry focussed method. The missteps in storytelling (the disconnection between the overly informative opening scenes and following plots) and naming strategy have led to not only difficulties in understanding the storylines, but confusions on the film's market identity. In addition to the above aspects, the relevance between *Kuiba 1* and Japanese Shonen manga and anime has also triggered a heated discussion among animation fans in terms of their similarities on character building. That is to say, the originality of *Kuiba 1* has been thrown into doubt by the ordinary audiences. Within this context, the following discussions will analyse this film from an aesthetic perspective using formalistic approach.

Laikwan Pang (2009) believes 'cartooning is a visual form closely associated with copying'. She argues that 'it is difficult to differentiate between creative copying and plagiarism in cartoon, the notion of originality in cartoons is not only weak but alienating'.⁴²² Pang is right on account of the relation between copying and cartooning in artistic creation. However, this does not mean that the importance of originality could be underestimated in animation production and reception. In fact, the issue of originality is not a question can be avoided in the study of animation, especially Chinese animated works created in the recent two decades. In the Introduction of this thesis I briefly reviewed the imitation phenomenon in the original NGCCA works, stemming from the relatively fixed aesthetic preference of the viewers, as well as deriving from the animators' involuntary

⁴²² Laikwan Pang. 'The Transgression of Sharing and Copying: Pirating Japanese Animation in China', in Chris Berry, Nicola Liscutin and Jonathan Mackintosh eds. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Industries in Northeast Asia : What a Difference a Region makes* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009) pp.119-134, p.129.

creative intention. It should be noted here that these discussions assume that the above imitative behaviour is a process of aesthetic borrowing in animation production, which is reflected in the extraction and recreation of symbolic representations from influential overseas works (*The Lion King*, *Harry Potter*, *LOTR*, etc.). However, in the last four or five years, there are some rare instances of the 'original' Chinese cinema animations that have broken the above rules. In this sense, I argue that this so-called animation 'creation' has become a form of organised and deliberate mimicry or even plagiarism, rather than the innovative activity that should involve creativity and ingenuity.

For instance, a 3D feature-length Chinese animated film named *The Autobots/Qichen Zongdongyuan* was released on July 2015, this film has been vehemently criticised and condemned by local spectators as the bald-faced copy of Disney and Pixar's 3D counterpart *Cars* (2006, and its sequel 2011). Moreover, this parody from China features extremely low quality (fig 4.6). It also deliberately misleads the filmgoers in poster and character design. Take an example of this film's poster which shares the similar visual composition and tone with *Cars 2*. As illustrated in the figure (fig 4.7), the Chinese title of *The Autobots* is 汽车人总动员, in the film's poster the Chinese character 人 is almost completely covered by a car wheel. As a result, the Chinese title becomes visually as 汽车总动员, which makes it even more analogous to the Chinese title of *Cars 2* as 赛车总动员 2. As a result, many misguided audiences chose to watch *The Autobots* because they thought the latter is a sequel of *Cars 2*. Such a notorious scandal has also called the attention of overseas critics and netizens, who alleged that *The Autobots* is a 'shameless' and 'blatant' rip-off or knock-off of the Hollywood products, or at least the copyright infringement of the latter.⁴²³

⁴²³ See Master Blaster. 'Chinese animation "The Autobots" to be released, but don't worry, it's not a Transformers Rip-off'. Available from: <<http://en.rocketnews24.com/2015/06/09/chinese-animation-the-autobots-to-be-released-but-dont-worry-its-not-a-transformers-rip-off/>>. [Accessed: 14 November 2016]. See also Editorial Staff. 'Chinese Filmmakers Get Sued For Their Shameless Rip Off of "Cars"'. Available from: <<http://nextshark.com/china-pixar-rip-off-cars/>> [Accessed: 14 November 2016]. See also Adam Jourdan. 'Cars vs. Autobots: Disney sues China Firms in Copyright Dispute'. Available from: <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-disney-china-copyright-idUSKCN0Z80JG>> [Accessed: 14 November 2016].

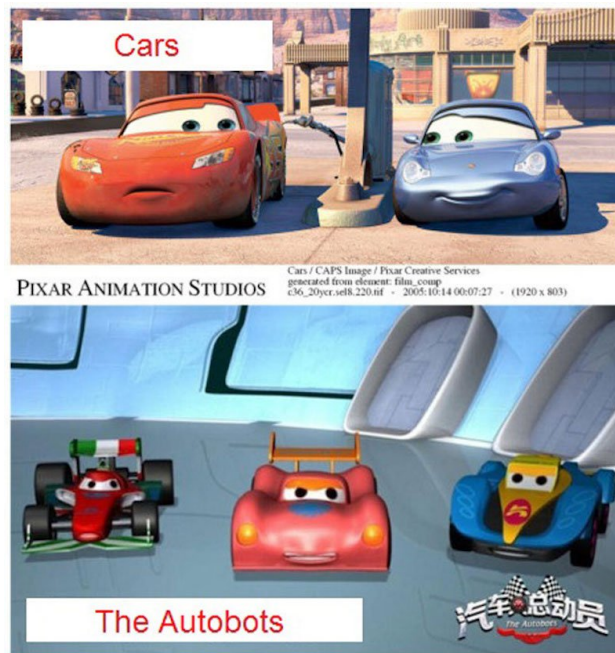


Fig 4.6: *Cars* (Up) and *The Autobots* (Down)



Fig 4.7: The Chinese Poster of *The Autobots* (Left) and *Cars 2* (Right)

Although the above extreme sample cannot represent the whole Chinese animation industry, but it still, to some extent, reflects the common quandary faced by the whole sector in terms of the uncertainty and confusion on the visual aspect of animation creation. In the context of a post-Chinese School era which is characterised by the ongoing multidimensional exploration in visual design, the absence of an easily recognizable 'national style' forces many domestic creators to reference the exotic styles and elements that are mainly from Japanese and

American animated works which have been proved as successful and competitive products. At the same time, the actual visual result of an individual work decide whether the above 'reference' process will be identified as the deliberate plagiarism or a form of aesthetic borrowing. The *Kuiba* series aims to borrow experiences from the Western world's *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* in the respect of worldview construction and franchising development. While in terms of the specific conceptual design (character, background, props, etc.), as suggested in the introduction of this chapter, the *Kuiba* films' relevance with Japanese Shonen manga and anime has also been noticed by Western fans that are familiar with the aesthetic paradigm of the Japanese productions. For example, an Internet user translated a Chinese-language opinion piece into English, which revealed that the *Kuiba* series' distinct Japanese style in tone and character has always been mentioned by Chinese netizens, especially its analogy with *Dragon Ball*.⁴²⁴ Similarly, a blogger considered *Kuiba 1* as a Chinese nostalgia film about *Dragon Ball*.⁴²⁵ This reviewer explained the above observations in an earlier post that,

It (*Kuiba*) has elements of the iconic classic *The Journey to the West* in the same sense that *Dragon Ball* has elements of it. *Kuiba* as a child reminds me very much of the headstrong, naive, and kind Son Goku... *Kuiba*, as a whole reminds me of *Dragon Ball*, *Tenchi Muyo* with a mix of *Saiyuki Reloaded*. But it works.⁴²⁶

Similar opinions can also be easily found in Chinese-language social networks and film review websites. In other words, the originality of *Kuiba 1* has always been under suspicion regarding its aesthetic individuality. Even the director Wang Chuan also admitted in an interview that,

⁴²⁴ *Dragon Ball* is one of the most classic and influential Japanese media franchises which include manga, anime, cinema animation, live action film, etc. See Rachel Tackett. 'Imitation is the Greatest Form of Flattery: Is Chinese Animation really a "Rip-off"?'. Available from: <<http://en.rocketnews24.com/2013/09/04/imitation-is-the-greatest-form-of-flattery-is-chinese-animation-really-a-rip-off/>>. [Accessed: 16 November 2016].

⁴²⁵ Eric Jou. 'Five Homegrown Chinese Cartoons That Every Anime Fan Should Watch'. Available from: <<http://www.kotaku.com.au/2013/12/these-are-chinas-top-five-home-grown-cartoons/>>. [Accessed: 17 November 2016].

⁴²⁶ Son Goku is the protagonist in *Dragon Ball*. *Tenchi Muyo* and *Saiyuki* are both Japanese anime, novel, video games, stage play franchises which originate from Shonen manga under the same name. See Eric Jou. 'One Of China's Best Anime Spans Five Films'. Available from: <<http://www.kotaku.com.au/2013/10/chinese-anime-doesnt-get-better-than-this/>>. [Accessed: 17 November 2016].

(The reason for *Kuiba 1*'s conspicuous Japanese style is because) Japanese anime/manga style is more acceptable to Chinese audiences on large screen in terms of both pictorial form and audio-visual effect. In addition, Japanese Shonen manga and anime have also always been in the mainstream of the international market. Regarding this, we (Vasoon) need to cater to the above market demand.⁴²⁷

It is clear from what has been discussed above that *Kuiba 1* has explicitly associated itself with the Japanese style in visual aspect. Within this context, one main topic in which *Kuiba*'s ingenuity could be questioned is the conspicuous analogy between Vasoon's production and Japanese Shonen manga and anime in terms of the character design, particularly for the visual composition of the protagonist and other key figures. The above concern can be illustrated by the resemblance between Manji and Son Goku. As illustrated in the figure (fig 4.8), the overall costume design of the childhood Manji is largely analogous to its mature Son Goku counterparts.⁴²⁸ To be specific, the above two leading actors wear the similar bright orange fighting uniform with wristbands, belt and strapped boots, the latter three garments are similar in silhouette and different in colour. Moreover, as a descendant of the extra-terrestrial warrior race Saiyans, Son Goku's pupil changes from black to willow green after ascending to a super Saiyan. This setting is also referenced by *Kuiba 1*, in which Manji's pupil transforms from black to pink when his inner Kuiba demon awakens (fig 4.9). Besides the above similarities between Manji and Son Goku in the visual aspect, the former may also easily associate himself with his teenager ninja counterpart Uzumaki Naruto in anime and manga franchise *Naruto*. The correlation between Manji and Naruto is not only embodied in the discernible orange outwear, but more about the similar background stories between both characters (fig 4.10). Briefly speaking, a Nine-Tailed Demon Fox is sealed into Naruto's body by his parents at the cost of their lives, which causes Naruto is being isolated by the ninja village Konohagakure. The suppressed Fox will be awakened in several fatal

⁴²⁷ CNTV. 'The Director of *Kuiba 1* responds the Question about the Film's Japanese Feel'. Available from: <<http://news.cntv.cn/20110704/102967.shtml>>. [Accessed: 24 May 2017] [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴²⁸ There are some differences between the juvenile and grown-up Son Goku in costume design, such as the changes in undershirt and footwear design. The overall appearance of Manji is more like the mature Goku.

battles. Naturally Naruto, as a self-contradictory righteousness/viciousness Binity, echoes the background setting of Manji whose suppressed inner demon as Kuiba will summon the pulse beast when Manji is in dangerous situation.



Fig 4.8: Childhood Manji (Left) and Mature Son Goku (Right)



Fig 4.9 The Kuiba-awaken Manji (Left) and Super Saiyan Son Goku (Right)



Fig 4.10 Uzumaki Naruto and the Nine-Tailed Demon Fox

The aesthetic comparability between *Kuiba 1* and Japanese manga and anime is reflected not only in the design of leading actor, but also in other main characters. For instance, the deity Jingxin, who is the heroine of the first three instalments of

the *Kuiba* series, is always characterised by a calm and expressionless personality (especially in the first instalment). It can be argued that this character is a Chinese version of ‘inhospitable, expressionless and silent girl’, the latter stems from manga and anime and then becomes a cultural icon firstly among Japanese ‘otaku’ community. The otaku normally refers to a person who is particularly enthusiastic about anime or manga that can substantially affect daily life. The otaku phenomenon is often being considered as an important subcategory of Japanese popular culture. Casey Brienza in her 2014 study considers the otaku is a ‘suspicious, socially awkward character who is more comfortable around two-dimensional cartoons than real, three-dimensional people’.⁴²⁹ The ‘inhospitable, expressionless and silent girl’ is represented by the heroine Ayanami Rei in Shonen anime and manga franchise *Evangelion*, Ayanami Rei has gradually received great popularity among both the otaku group and Chinese viewers (fig 4.11). Hiroki Azuma (2009) observes that even ‘the character bearing a close resemblance to Ayanami Rei have been produced and consumed on a massive scale—in comics, anime, and novelizations, both in the commercial market and the fanzine market’ since the late 1990s.⁴³⁰ In the case of *Kuiba 1*, Vasoon attempted to borrow the influence of Rei and the otaku subculture she represents through the creation of Jingxin, in order to replicate the successful practice of Japanese manga and anime. Other examples indicate *Kuiba 1*’s analogy with the Japanese style include the affinity between Xuelun and the characters in dark fantasy anime and manga *Claymore* (fig 4.12), Man Xiaoman’s similarity with Shinemon Ninagawa in anime *Ikkyū-san* in terms of hair style and facial design (fig 4.13).

⁴²⁹ Casey Brienza. ‘Objects of Otaku Affection: Animism, Anime Fandom, and the Gods of...Consumerism’, in Graham Harvey ed. *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) pp.479-490, p.479.

⁴³⁰ Hiroki Azuma. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, translated by Jonathan Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. 2009) p. 51.



Fig 4.11: Jingxin (Left) and Ayanami Rei (Right)



Fig 4.12: Xuelun (Left) and Character in *Claymore* (Right)

Fig 4.13: Man Xiaoman (Left) and Shinemon Ninagawa (Right)

4.2.1 Chineseness and Japaneseness: *Kuiba 1* as a Culturally Hybrid Work

In this section, I examine *Kuiba 1* as a culturally hybrid work that borrows symbolic Japanese and Chinese iconography. I consider the Japanese feeling in pictorial form is a process of aesthetic borrowing rather than mechanical mimicry. I argue that the spiritual core of *Kuiba 1* is still Chinese (discussed later). First, I examine the notion of hybridity in cultural production within the discipline of Film and Media studies. Second, I review the ‘familiarity’ and ‘alienation’ in original Chinese animated works which feature Japanese manga and anime iconography in pictorial form. Third, I analyse the ancient Chinese cultural elements in the construction of Yuan Yang world from three aspects: the time-space concept in the whole fictional Yuan Yang fantasy land; the visual design of mortal races that live in the earth; and the hierarchical Wen Yao system in the earth.

The character design of *Kuiba 1*, especially in the aspect of visual construction and personality-shaping, strongly associates itself with the Japanese Shonen manga and anime. Nevertheless, this does not mean that *Kuiba 1* is Chinese animators' organised mimicking of Japanese productions, which results from a lingering Japanese influence accumulated through the practice on long-term uncreative and time-consuming outsourcing jobs from Japanese companies.⁴³¹ Instead, I argue that *Kuiba 1* is a hybrid cultural product created within the context of Chinese animation's multi-directional aesthetic exploration over the last two decades.

The notion of hybridity in cultural production has been the subject of heated debate within the discipline of media studies. Taking New Hollywood movies as an example, Steve Neale (2000) examines the hybridity and pastiche in film production. He argues that the New Hollywood movies mix and recycle new and old and low art and high art media creations in the modern or post-modern world. He also believes the above genre is inclined to pastiche the multi-media synergies in contemporary artistic production.⁴³² Sabine Sielke (2011) believes that all cultures and literatures have an inner existence in the form of hybridity within the context of globalization. She further argues that 'as part of a conceptual complex including heteroglossia and pastiche, hybridity references blends of aesthetic forms and genre'.⁴³³ Jeffrey Partridge in his 2009 study considers cultural hybridity as 'an attempt to conceptualize the identity of a person or a group in terms that recognize the existence of cultural differences as well as the roles of *invention* and *agency* in the articulation of those differences'.⁴³⁴ He also examines Homi Bhabha's view on hybridity, which is 'marked by the "in-betweeness," the "interstitiality", caused by the continuous

⁴³¹ María Martín. 'Animation Industry in China: Managed Creativity or State Discourse', in Michael Keane ed. *Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in China* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016) pp.276-292, p.280.

⁴³² Steve Neale. *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 233.

⁴³³ Sabine Sielke. 'Biology', in Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini eds. *The Routledge companion to literature and science* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009) pp.29-40, p.36.

⁴³⁴ Jeffrey Partridge. 'Beyond Multicultural: Cultural Hybridity in the Novels of Gish Jen', in Harold Bloom ed. *Asian-American Writers* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009) pp.169-192, p.170.

negotiation between the foreign and the familiar'.⁴³⁵ Partridge and Bhabha's arguments both highlight the differences/foreign and agency/in-betweeness in cultural hybridity. In other words, the hybridization in cultural production is more like an interstitial status between the domestic and exotic experiences.

In the case of *Kuiba 1*, this film, as a culturally hybrid work, locates itself at the intersection of familiarity and alienation. To be specific, the 'familiarity' here refers to Chinese audiences' pre-existing knowledge in perceiving the Japanese style pictorial form, and the 'alienation' can be considered as the viewers' feeling of being alienated in the unaccustomed Yuan Yang World which involves the symbolic representations from traditional and modern Chinese culture (discussed later). This is to say, the acquaintanceship between the exotic Japanese anime and manga and Chinese audiences makes the Japanese style characters to be more locally responsive than its domestically-made Yuan Yang world counterpart. Nevertheless, under normal circumstances, filmgoers should have a greater knowledge of the indigenous representations, which come from the social and cultural environment he or she grows up, in domestic filmic creations. Correspondingly, they shall feel relatively unfamiliar with the exotic cinematic experiences which have a certain distance from their everyday life. However, the process of reception of *Kuiba 1* witnesses a reversal of the above general rules about familiar/unfamiliar.

The cause of the above conversion between familiarity and alienation can be summarised as twofold. Firstly, as suggested in the Thesis's Introduction, Japanese manga and anime have been playing a dominant role in the Chinese market over the last two decades especially in the aesthetic paradigm. In the overwhelming majority of cases, Japanese manga equals comics in the Chinese market, which can be exhibited by the content of Chinese-language textbooks that teach the readers how to draw comics. As illustrated in the figure, with few exceptions, these books feature a distinct manga iconography such as the

⁴³⁵ Same as above.

disproportionate large eye and tiny mouth in facial design and extremely exaggerated leg length in body proportion (fig 4.14). Laikwan Pang (2009) considers 'Japaneseness' in pictorial form is difficult to clearly define,⁴³⁶ but the representations of the above comics-drawing tutorial books indicate that the Japanese-style cartoon, at least in China, can be identified through several typical aesthetic paradigms. Secondly, as suggested in the previous section, Vasoon's ambition of creating a high-fantasy Yuan Yang world in *Kuiba 1* proved to be an over-eager pursuit which rarely considers the audience's receptivity. Moreover, *Kuiba 1* is the first domestic cinema animation which tries to re-imagine and transform a full set of traditional and contemporary Chinese cultural elements to create a fictional fantasy land counts as 'Chineseness' (discussed later). The above practices are rare to be seen in cinema animations before the pioneering work of *Kuiba 1*. In the meantime, the vast background information provided in the first instalment, especially in the five-minutes opening sequences, makes it even more difficult for viewers to understand the connection between the worldview/setting/system in fictional world and their real-world archetypes at first glance.



Fig 4.14: Two Chinese Language Comics-drawing Tutorial Books

⁴³⁶ Laikwan Pang, p.130.

Within this context, I argue that *Kuiba 1* straddles the line between ‘Chineseness’ and ‘Japaneseness’ in the respect of pictorial form and worldview construction. This argument is based on the following interpretations on the Yuan Yang world and the corresponding fictional settings (race, hierarchical system, etc.). As suggested earlier, *Kuiba 1*’s character design bears some conspicuous analogy to Japanese Shonen manga and anime in terms of the visual composition and personality. While besides the superficial similarities between the above artistic creations, in essence, I argue that the spiritual core of *Kuiba 1* is still Chinese. What I mean here is that the Yuan Yang world, which is an imaginary land that the film characters existing in, is an animated metaphor for the traditional Chinese society, and a result of creative transformation from the real world to filmic reality. Moreover, through examination of the worldview/settings/systems building of the Yuan Yang world, it can be said that this world features the aesthetic and methodical borrowing of symbolic representations from both Han group and other ethnic minorities in China. In this sense, the animated world in *Kuiba 1* may be viewed as another form of cultural hybridity which entangles various Chinese cultural resources with inner diversity such as mythology, philosophy, concept of space and time, supernatural evil-spirit stories from ancient culture; the sense of hierarchy in traditional Chinese feudal society; and visual symbols in ethnic costume and adornment.

The relevance between the Yuan Yang world and traditional and modern Chinese society will be analysed in three aspects, which is based on the detailed description of the *Kuiba* series’ worldview setting in its official website in 4399dmw.⁴³⁷ Firstly, the time-space setting in *Kuiba 1* echoes its counterpart in traditional Chinese religion and society. As suggested earlier, the destructive Kuiba reappears in the Yuan Yang world every 333 years and the story of *Kuiba 1* starts with the reincarnation of the six generation of Kuiba, and the calendar of the Yuan Yang world is known as Kuiba epoch. After checking the chronology of

⁴³⁷ 4399dmw is one of the largest cartoon web portals in China. The worldview setting of the *Kuiba* series can be seen from 4399dmw. ‘Worldview Setting of *Kuiba 3*’. Available from: <<http://www.4399dmw.com/kuiba/sjg/>>. [Accessed: 20 November 2016] [in Chinese].

Yuan Yang, I find that the Kuiba epoch begins with the birth of the first Kuiba.⁴³⁸ Afterwards, the time and important incidents in Yuan Yang is recorded in Kuiba epoch. This form of chronological position in time sequence corresponds with its traditional Chinese feudal society counterpart, in which the concept of time is always formed with the reign title or posthumous name of the emperor plus the number of years he or she is on the throne.

The use of reign title first appeared in ancient China. Emperor Wen of Han Dynasty (reign: 180-157 BC) was the first ruler to adopt a reign title, which was used to indicate a date during his reign like the first year of the Houyuan epoch. Dorothy Perkins (2013) notes that the above practice had been followed by the subsequent emperors who may change titles during their reign, for the purpose of reversing bad fortune and achieving good fortune.⁴³⁹ That is to say, one emperor might have various reign titles. This form of reign title system was also used by other East Asian countries like Korea (sixth century onwards), Japan (seventh century onwards) and Vietnam (tenth century onwards) which are all heavily influenced by Chinese culture.⁴⁴⁰ Dorothy Perkins (2013) also finds that in the Ming dynasty and Qing Dynasty, the ruler started to adopt an era name that was consistently used during his reign.⁴⁴¹ This was largely due to the fact that the authority of the Ming and Qing emperors had become unchallenged and almost unlimited.⁴⁴² They did believe the fortune or destiny of a nation could be dominated by their own power. For example, Chenghua was the only reign title of Chenghua emperor in the Ming Dynasty, therefore the fourth year of the reign of Chenghua emperor is known as Chenghua epoch 4. As suggested earlier, the concept of time in the Yuan Yang world is formed with Kuiba epoch and a date

⁴³⁸ 4399dmw. 'The Chronology in The Book of Kuiba'. Available from: <<http://www.4399dmw.com/kuiba/sjg/20120511-97756-2.html>>. [Accessed: 22 November 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴³⁹ Dorothy Perkins. *Encyclopaedia of China: History and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013) p. 144.

⁴⁴⁰ Qi Wang. 'Reign Title and the relevant Historical Knowledge', *Journal of Literature and History*, 03(2016), pp. 115-117, p.115 [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴⁴¹ Dorothy Perkins, p.144.

⁴⁴² Zhengyuan Fu. *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 86.

after the appearance of the first generation of Kuiba. The extraordinarily powerful Kuiba here, as a destructive creature in the form of continuous reincarnation, in Yuan Yang hints at the numerous rulers in ancient China (especially those in Ming and Qing Dynasty) like a perpetual emperor-cycle. In this sense, they share the consistently dominating role in the world they live in.

The cinematic construction of the fictional space in Yuan Yang draws lessons from the worldview of Taoism. According to the contextual setting, Mai (literally means 'veins' in Chinese language) forms the basis of the Yuan Yang world, Vasoon further explains Mai that,

Generally speaking, different Mai at different frequencies form different substances. The circulation and transformation between various kinds of Mai constitute the world (Yuan Yang) and sustain the basic balance of the latter. Mai is the source of energy for everything in this world.⁴⁴³

Through examination of several fundamental viewpoints of Taoism, it can be argued that Mai in *Kuiba 1* is the animated version of Tao (*Dao*) in Taoism. Tao is the supreme faith of the Taoists (the adherents of Taoism), which is identified as the origin of our universe. Laozi, an ancient Chinese philosopher and the founder of Taoism, in his philosophical work *Tao Te Ching/Dao De Jing* expresses how nature works by introducing the notion of Tao. He writes that,

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before Heaven and Earth.
Soundless and formless it depends on nothing and does not change.
It operates everywhere and is free from danger.
It may be considered the mother of the universe.
I do not know its name; I call it Tao.⁴⁴⁴

Moreover, Tao means an ultimate way or method, it is 'conceived as the void out of which reality emerges' and then 'underlying and permeating reality'.⁴⁴⁵

Similarly, Mai in Yuan Yang has about the same significance as Tao in Taoism,

⁴⁴³ 4399dmw. 'The Worldview of Kuiba: The Foundation of Mai'. Available from: <<http://www.4399dmw.com/kuiba/sjg/20120330-86703.html>>. [Accessed: 22 November 2016] [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴⁴⁴ Jeffrey Brodd. *World Religions: A Voyage of Discovery* (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 2009) p. 143.

⁴⁴⁵ Stephen Little et al. *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago and Berkeley: The Art Institute of Chicago and University of California Press, 2000) p. 13.

which forms the foundation of a fictional world. The countless combination of Mai has given rise to the material basis of the heaven and the earth in the Yuan Yang world.

Besides the analogous relationship between Mai in Yuan Yang and Tao in Taoism, Vasoon also creates a fictional celestial pedigree (setting of deities in the heaven) that is based on the Five-element theory in Taoism. The five elements are wood, fire, earth, metal and water, which are generated from Tao and often being considered as the five basic strings of the nature of our universe (fig 4.15).⁴⁴⁶ All the activities of the nature, in the eyes of the Taoists, are the results of the interaction of the above five elements.⁴⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, in the prologue of *Kuiba 1*, Pu, Yanshuo, Luo Chen and Yangche are illustrated as the chief god of wood, fire, earth and water faction in the heaven respectively. In addition, according to the *Kuiba* series' official setting, Jingxin is the chief god of metal faction.⁴⁴⁸ In this sense, the division of deities in the heaven is in one-to-one correspondence with its Taoism Five-element counterparts, which reveals the former's Chinese cultural attributes in terms of worldview formation.

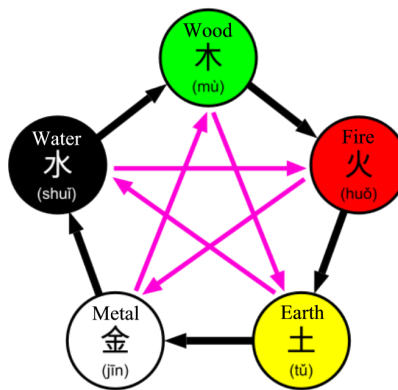


Fig 4.15: The Five-element Theory in Taoism

⁴⁴⁶ Xuezhui Bai and William Roberts. 'Taoism and its Model of Traits of Successful Leaders', *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 39, Issue 7/8, 2011, pp. 724-739, p.726.

⁴⁴⁷ Eric Yudelove. *Taoist Yoga and Sexual Energy: Transforming Your Body, Mind, and Spirit* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2000) p. 50.

⁴⁴⁸ 4399dmw. 'The Worldview of Kuiba: Deities'. Available from: <<http://www.4399dmw.com/kuiba/sjg/20120416-90121-2.html>>. [Accessed: 23 November 2016] [in Chinese].

Secondly, the setting of racial group in the earth is largely affected by the visual appearance of imaginary creatures in traditional Chinese mythology. The Chinese name of *Kuiba* is 魁拔, but according to Wu Hanqing, this series' original name is 魁魁.⁴⁴⁹ In Chinese language, 魁 and 拔 share the same pronunciation but has different meanings. The former (魁) is an evil spirit in ancient Chinese myths that brings drought damage. It originates from *Classic of Mountains and Seas/Shan Hai Jing*, which is a Chinese classic text that depicts the immemorial China as a mythical-like world. According to relevant statistics, *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, with only approximately 31 thousand words in length, records 400 mythical creatures besides other depictions.⁴⁵⁰

Deyan Wang (2015) interprets the visual composition of the above supernatural beings in *Classic of Mountains and Seas* using formalistic approach. He summarises seven constitutive rules, yielding the silhouettes of these creatures: the extreme exaggeration of large or small in parts of body or overall appearance (long-arm race and the Chinese version Lilliput, etc.); the reduction or increase of the number of body parts (nine-headed phoenix and three-feet tortoise, etc.); the displacement of body parts (goat-like creature with eyes on the back, etc.); the emphasis on certain physical features (no-intestinal country in which the inhabitants are characterised by tall stature and no intestine in belly, etc.) and the combination between human beings and animal (or between different kinds of animal) in body composition (fig 4.16).⁴⁵¹ In the meantime, the combination is the most important approach in formatting the above imaginary figures, which had also largely affected the creation of fictional creatures in traditional Chinese supernatural evil-spirit literatures. For instance, as illustrated in the figure, the body of one-legged Long Xu Hu, who is a deity in gods and demon novel *Investiture of the Gods/Fengshen Yanyi*, is made up of camel (head), goose (neck),

⁴⁴⁹ Tianyang Zhong, Section D01.

⁴⁵⁰ Jie Xu. 'A Brief Introduction to The Legendary Creatures of the Shan Hai Ching', *The Documentation*, 03(1981), pp. 256-257, p. 256 [in Chinese].

⁴⁵¹ Deyan Wang. 'The Supernatural Being World in Classic of Mountains and Seas', *Chinese Book Review Monthly*, 11(2015), pp. 93-99, p. 95-98 [in Chinese, my translation].

shrimp (whiskers), fish (torso), eagle (claw) and tiger (foot) (fig 4.17). The archetype of Long Xu Hu is the imaginary monster Kui (夔), which is a legendary creature features one-legged running and cattle-like appearance (fig 4.18). Kui firstly appears in *Classic of the Great Wilderness: East*, the thirteenth chapter of *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The body composition of Long Xu Hu borrows iconic characteristics of Kui as a one-legged supernatural being. Moreover, Long Xu Hu is characterised by a pastiche of several animals, which echoes with the above-mentioned combination approach.



Fig 4.16: Imaginary Creatures in *Classic of Mountains and Seas*



Fig 4.17: Long Xu Hu in *Investiture of the Gods*

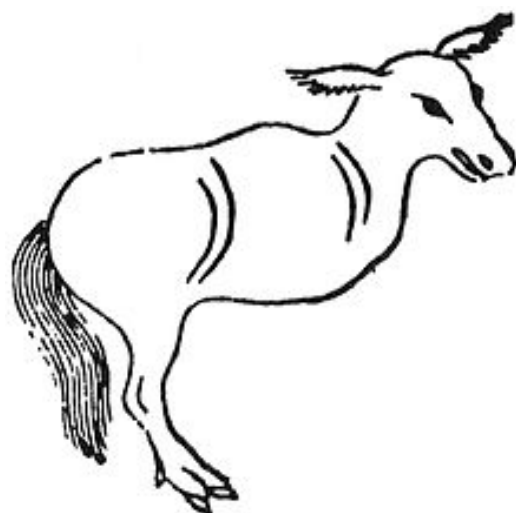


Fig 4.18: Kui in *Classic of Mountains and Seas*

In the case of *Kuiba 1* and the whole series, the racial group setting follows the above combination method, which is reflected in the visual aspect of the mortal beings in the earth where includes 11 racial groups (Geluomohe people, Huiyao, Jisika people, Linyao, Dragon Race, Motuo people, Saku people, Beast race, Winged race, Zhe race and Wuyao).⁴⁵² Compared with the deities in the heaven who share the similar human-like appearance, some of the above imaginary creatures in the earth show variation in size and appearance while feature the combination between human and animal in body composition. For instance, the Beast race is portrayed as the animal-headed warrior group with the overall humanoid silhouette (fig 4.19). Meanwhile, the Winged race is characterised by the combination between the eagle-like wing and human body (fig 4.20). Figures belong to Linyao group feature the night-elf-like point ear under the human silhouette (fig 4.21). In other words, the above creatures are a hybrid between the partial animal elements and the overall human-like appearance, which is analogous to their counterparts in *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and other Chinese mythical texts.

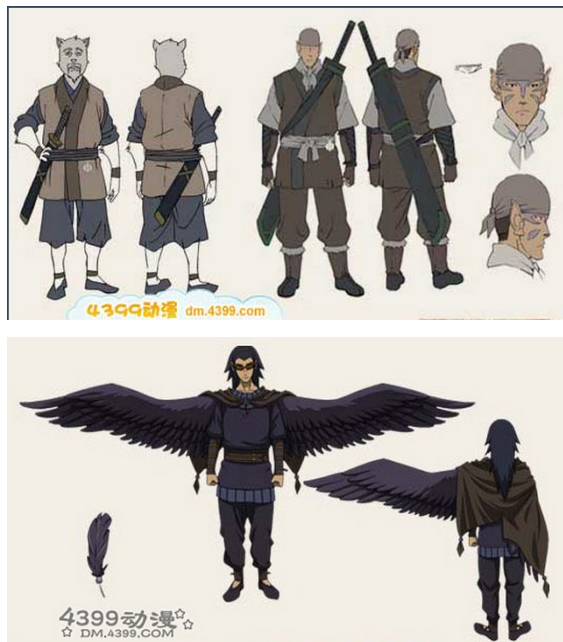


Fig 4.19 and 4.20: Beast Race (Up) and Winged Race (Down)



Fig 4.21: Linyao

⁴⁵² 4399dmw. 'Worldview Setting of Kuiba 3: Race in the Earth'. Available from: <<http://www.4399dmw.com/kuiba/sjg/20120509-96860.html>>. [Accessed: 21 November 2016] [in Chinese].

Other races in the earth share the similar humanoid form and differentiate from each other through wearing different costume and accessories. For example, the costume and adornment design of the female character Youruoli, who is one of the twelve main underlings of the fourth generation of Kuiba, reflects the extraction and reconstruction of ethnic elements in the clothing fashion of Wa and Dai ethnic minorities who live in Southwestern China. Xueming Li (2010) analyses the female costume of Wa people. He summarises that head cloth, off-shoulder sleeveless top and short skirt are the most common costumes for young women in Wa group, who also always wear silver or bronze bracelet.⁴⁵³ Lixia Yang (2015) notices that the expansive long skirt is one of the most important characteristics of female clothing within the boundaries of ethnic Dai community (fig 4.22).⁴⁵⁴ The costume design of Youruoli, features the use of head cloth, silver and bronze bracelet, off-shoulder top and long skirt, can be considered as a form of creative recreation of the above visual elements in Wa and Dai women's clothes (fig 4.23).



Fig 4.22: Wa People (Up) and Dai People (Down)



Fig 4.23: Youruoli

⁴⁵³ Xueming Li. 'A Brief Introduction to Wa Group Costume', *Ethnic Today*, 04(2010), pp. 22-23, p. 23 [in Chinese, my translation].

⁴⁵⁴ Lixia Yang. 'An Analysis of Costume in Ethnic Dai Community', *Popular Literature and Art*, 19(2015), pp. 70-71, p. 70 [in Chinese, my translation].

Thirdly, the Wen Yao system in the earth is created partly as a metaphorical extension of the waist tag (Yaopai in Chinese) system in traditional Chinese feudal society. As discussed in the previous section, the spirit warrior Man Xiaoman and his apprentice Manji are scorned and rejected by a hotel keeper in Holy Tree Kingdom. The embarrassment is largely due to their fake Wen Yao, which is a pendant-like token that is essential to every spirit warrior. The Wen Yao system, which includes six subcategories and four internal grades, has a set of social meanings in the hierarchical earth. It not only symbolizes the identity and strength of the individual warrior, but also serves as the necessary props of the latter. Similarly, the waist tag, a round or oblong shape badge which is carved with the holder's name and duty, was also used in ancient China as a token of both civil and military government officials. The texture of a waist tag was normally based on the status hierarchy of the possessor. For example, the ivory waist tag was often being considered as a symbol of highest-ranking civil officials (fig 4.24). In the case of *Kuiba 1*, the stratification position of a Wen Yao and its holder in the spiritual warrior community is also largely based on the Wen Yao's texture. In this sense, the Wen Yao symbol also clearly carries a hierarchical or sometimes even discriminatory implication in the earth, which is represented by the innkeeper's attitude differences between Man Xiaoman and Manji with a no-ranking self-made wooden Wen Yao and the spirit warrior who holds a high-ranking metal Dragon race Wen Yao which is awarded by the emperor of Holy Dragon Kingdom (fig 4.25).⁴⁵⁵ That is to say, Wen Yao, especially the higher-ranking ones, can be considered as a form of identity authentication among spiritual warriors and a totem symbolizes priority and privilege in the earth, which is an extended metaphor of ordinary people's idolization of power holders (senior civil and military officials) in traditional Chinese society.

⁴⁵⁵ In *Kuiba 1*, Manji and Man Xiaoman are told that the hotel is fully booked. However, afterwards the hotel keeper offers four rooms to the late-come but high-ranking spiritual warrior who holds a Dragon race Wen Yao.



Fig 4.24 An Ivory Waist Tag with the Chinese Dragon Pattern (owned by a senior Government Civil Official in Ming Dynasty)



Fig 4.25 Man Xiaoman and Manji's Wooden Wenyao (Up) and Dragon race Wenyao (Down)

4.3 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter examined the typical significance of the *Kuiba* films among all the original NGCCA creations. Starting from a broad view of comparison between original works and their derivative counterparts, I found that the year of 2011 witnessed the largest disparity in commercial performance between the above two subcategories of NGCCA, which was marked by the unexpected box office flop of *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog*. Although aiming at the summer film season to attract young student audiences, they both suffered extremely low box office outcomes when comparing with the derivative competitors. In the meantime, the initial failure of *Kuiba 1* has not impeded the ambition of the production company Vasoon studio because this film is just the first part of the planned five-part grand narrative. Instead, Vasoon has devoted to make *Kuiba* a 'high-end animation' and sustainable franchise by using serialization strategy and then successively launched the second and third instalments. The discussion in this chapter is mainly based on the analysis of the first instalment *Kuiba 1*, because it

not only represents the series' commercial dilemma to a large extent, but can also be considered as the foundation of the whole series in terms of the worldview construction and aesthetic tone.

The reason for *Kuiba 1*'s box office failure can be summarised as two-fold. Firstly, Vasoon attempted to build the *Kuiba* series as the first Chinese epic animated fantasies. In reaching a believable background for the film regarding this matter, the animators tried to create the fictional and grand Yuan Yang world as an alternate universe against the reality. Aiming at building itself as the privileged text like *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* novels in worldview construction, the cinema animation *Kuiba 1* attempted to immerse audiences as quickly as possible by introducing a large number of impenetrable concepts in a five-minute prologue without foreshadowing any other kinds of texts. However, the lack of pre-existing audience familiarity made Vasoon's efforts backfire. The prologue not only fails to function as a carrier of supplying background information, but also disconnects with the later narrations. In the meantime, the tactical error in the naming strategy of the first instalment of the *Kuiba* series led to the audience's further confusion on the film's identity.

Secondly, the ineffective promotional activities have made *Kuiba 1*'s market difficulties even worse. As the main distributor of the film, Toonmax mistakenly transplanted its successful practices in circulating *Pleasant Goat* series to the distribution of *Kuiba 1* without consideration of two works' conspicuous divergence in the target audience. Toonmax also showed little efforts on the placement of marketing materials. The low-level awareness and recognition of *Kuiba 1* among potential audience members forced Vasoon to promote the film by itself. Nevertheless, the promotional effect has been proved very limited due to the constraints on extent and depth of publicity. Moreover, the case of *Kuiba 1* shows how some original NGCCA works have been dragged down by the disreputable image of their crudely-made counterparts from the eyes of the exhibition sector. Conversely, many ordinary viewers have expressed sporadic supports for *Kuiba 1* accompanied with the spread of the film's positive feedbacks online and offline.

This chapter also analysed *Kuiba 1* as a cultural hybridity which mixes Japanese and Chinese elements in terms of pictorial form and worldview construction. The originality issue has always been discussed in the reception of Chinese cinema animation. In this sense, the aesthetic individuality of *Kuiba 1* has also been thrown into doubt. It is admitted that figures in *Kuiba 1* (both leading and supporting ones) show many similarities with their Japanese Shonen manga and anime counterparts in the respects of visual composition and personality. But this does not mean that *Kuiba 1* is a copycat of Japanese productions. Instead, I considered *Kuiba 1* as a hybridization within the context of the audience's familiarities with Japanese style anime and manga iconography, and their textual strangeness with the traditional Chinese iconography in the Yuan Yang world.

I argued that *Kuiba 1* is a culturally hybrid with Japaneseness on surface and Chineseness in essence. The construction of the Yuan Yang world borrows elements from ancient Chinese culture. First, the creation of *Kuiba 1* is inspired by the traditional Chinese religion and feudal society in terms of time-space concept. In addition to the similar method for recording the times and significant incidents in Chinese feudal society, the construction of the imaginary Yuan Yang space is largely based on several basic philosophic principles of Taoism such as Tao and Five-element theory. Second, the graphic design of some races in the earth follows the creative principle originated from its traditional Chinese mythology predecessors, which is represented by the combination between human and animal in overall appearance. The design practice of other more human-like mortal races draws lessons from Chinese ethnic minorities' costume and adornment. Thirdly, the earth mirrors its traditional Chinese feudal society counterpart through the establishment of Wen Yao system, which symbolizes ordinary people's superstition on power holders.

The last chapter of this thesis will analyse *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) as a box office miracle among all the NGCCA works. The first section will examine the inevitability and contingency in *Monkey King: Hero is Back's* phenomenal popularity among Internet users, and how online public opinions overcome industry

expectations. The second section shall consider the reinterpretation of Sun Wukong in this film.

Chapter 5 *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) and the New Direction of Chinese Cinema Animation

5.0 The Monkey King's Box Office Miracle and the Main Aims of this Chapter

Starring almost all the original cast members in *Journey to the West* like the Monkey King (Sun Wukong), Jiang Liuer (the pet name of childhood Xuan Zang), Pigsy and White Dragon Horse, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (henceforth referred to as *Hero is Back*) tells a completely new story of how the downhearted Sun Wukong, after a five hundred year imprisonment by the Grand Buddha, gradually reclaims his supernatural abilities and confidence through a series of fantastic adventures (fig 5.1). As suggested in the Introduction of this thesis, the tales of Sun Wukong and *Journey to the West* have become a part of Chinese people's collective memories. Therefore it can be argued here that the seemingly original *Hero is Back*, which aims at attracting Chinese viewers at all ages, owns considerable potential customers due to the possible advantage of the audience's pre-existing familiarity with the characters and stories. But this does not mean that Sun Wukong will definitely serve as a box office panacea for NGCCA works. Instead, there have been several examples of domestic animated pictures, which starring Sun Wukong, suffered both box office and reputational failure.

Regarding the above-mentioned phenomena, the main aims of this chapter are to consider what factors led to *Hero is Back*'s smash commercial success and widely acclaimed reputation. Moreover, this chapter will also illuminate this thesis by considering the significance of *Hero is Back*, which points the subsequent NGCCA works in a new direction in the respects of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) marketing and way of storytelling and character establishment (based on the relatively high quality). The first section of this chapter reviews the Chinese film and animation market in 2015 especially the summer film season, when witnessed the box office smash of both domestically-made live action and animated (principally *Hero is*

Back) pictures within the context of government interventions. The second section analyses the film's phenomenal popularity both online and offline, and how WOM communications overcome industry expectations. The third section examines the reinterpretation of Sun Wukong in this film. This section analyses the shaping of multiple identities of this anti-heroic figure, namely the combination of the animal-like action, human nature and the remaining thought of immortality.



Fig 5.1: Poster of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*

5.0.1 Chinese Film and Animation Market in 2015: Annual Review and Summer Film Season

In this section, I examine the domestically-made live action and animated films' box office revenue in the Chinese market in 2015 particularly the summer film season. I argue that the commercial performance of Chinese-language cinematic creations in the above period was, in some degree, affected by the government intervention. First, I analyse the derivative animated films' competitive advantage when comparing with their original competitors up to the mid-2015. Second, I review the booming Chinese-language films in the same year, and then consider how and to what extent the government intervention contributed to the phenomenal box office success of domestically-made live action pictures in summer film season.

Third, I examine the supportive government policies for the purpose of buttressing the exhibition of NGCCA works in the same period. I also compare the effectiveness of the above protectionism between the live action productions and their animation counterparts.

In the previous chapter I analysed not only the factors leading to the commercial failure of the *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013 and 2014) especially the first instalment *Kuiba 1*, but also examined the latter as a cultural hybridity by analysing its formal qualities. The first section of Chapter 4 also briefly introduced a disparity in the box office grosses between the original NGCCA productions and their derivative films competitors in the year of 2011. This situation had continued up to the summer film season of 2015. According to relevant statistics, the top ten animated films in attendance in the Chinese market were either imported works (mostly from Hollywood) or domestically-made derivative films in 2013 and 2014.⁴⁵⁶ The last day of 2014 witnessed the release of the 2D animation comedy *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes/Shiwange Lengxiaohua* (Lu and Li, 2014), which was a full-length film adaptation of the online-exclusive comic strips and animated shorts under the same name. *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* comics and network dramas have enjoyed a great popularity among Chinese netizens. It is reported that the above two categories of works both achieved two billion click-through rates by mid-January 2015,⁴⁵⁷ thus laying a foundation for the cinematic creation which earned box office grosses of 119.87 million Chinese Yuan.⁴⁵⁸ As suggested in Chapter 3, the box office of *Boonie Bears* franchise's second film production *Winter* (released on 30 January 2015) was 295.72 million Chinese Yuan. It is also worth noting here that *Winter* and *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* were two of three NGCCA works made more than 100 million Chinese Yuan in box office in 2015,

⁴⁵⁶ Wei He and Yinqiu Zhao, 'Comparison and Analysis between Domestic and Imported Animated Film', p. 37. See also Xiaoshan Li, p.87.

⁴⁵⁷ Chen Chen. 'One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes: A Cardiotonic for Chinese Cinema Animation?' Available from: <<http://news.163.com/15/0114/10/AFT00FJU00014SEH.html>>. [Accessed: 01 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁵⁸ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/628995>>. [Accessed: 02 May 2017] [in Chinese].

which revealed the dominant role of derivative films in Lunar New Year Festival Season.⁴⁵⁹

The year of 2015 also witnessed the most explosive growth of the domestically-made theatrical films and Chinese film market. Compared with the previous year, there was an astonishing increase of 48.7 per cent in total box office revenue which reached a record-breaking high of over 44.06 billion Chinese Yuan.⁴⁶⁰ More importantly, seven of the top ten box office hits in China were Chinese language films.⁴⁶¹ The imported revenue-sharing Hollywood movies made up 38.4 per cent of the Chinese box office this year, falling from a 45.5 percent market share in 2014.⁴⁶² The above phenomenon was further highlighted by the box office surge of local films in the summer film season under the influence of government intervention (screen quota and supportive policy).

Since 2004 Chinese government authorities have imposed a verbal notice, which discouraged major cinema chains from exhibiting overseas revenue-sharing films every summer (normally one month) for the purpose of making room for their domestic competitors.⁴⁶³ The annual period is often known as ‘domestic film protection month’ or ‘summer blackout period’, in which foreign productions have been totally prohibited from Chinese cinema screens. That is to say, foreign-made products in the Chinese film market still encounter hindrances.⁴⁶⁴ Darrell William Davis in his 2010 study considers such screen quota system ‘allows protectionism

⁴⁵⁹ Having examined the relevant materials, I found that most authors tended to classify *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* as a 2015 production because the film was exhibited almost in 2015 besides the premiere day (31 December 2014). I adopt the above view in this thesis.

⁴⁶⁰ Xinhua News Agency. ‘*The Total Box Office Revenue in Chinese Market surged to 44.069 Billion Chinese Yuan in 2015*’ Available from: <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/31/content_5030030.htm>. [Accessed: 02 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁶¹ China Box Office. ‘*2015 China Yearly Box Office Results*’ Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/year?year=2015>>. [Accessed: 03 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁶² Patrick Brzeski. ‘*China Box Office Grows Astonishing 48.7 Percent in 2015, Hits \$6.78 Billion*’ Available from: <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/china-box-office-grows-astonishing-851629>>. [Accessed: 04 May 2017].

⁴⁶³ Xing Zhou. ‘The Cultural and Industrial Dilemma of Chinese Film: Discussions about Summer “Protection Period”’, *Arts Criticism*, 09(2012), pp. 64-66, p. 64 [in Chinese].

⁴⁶⁴ Zhihong Gao, p.429.

and preferential handling, allocating market share for domestic pictures'.⁴⁶⁵ Davis and Yeh (2008) also notice that the blackout periods are handled by the state-owned CFGC, which 'must cease from releasing Hollywood pictures, including those already approved' for the purpose of not only reinforcing political solidarity and national sentiment, but preventing infiltration of foreign influences.⁴⁶⁶

It is reported that the year of 2015 had much longer protective duration that ran from 19 June until 23 August.⁴⁶⁷ The extension of summer blackout period, which kept forceful US rivals such as Universal Picture's *Minions* (Balda and Coffin, 2015), Pixar's *Inside Out* (Docter, 2015) and Paramount Pictures' *Terminator Genisys* (Taylor, 2015) out of cinema chains, had directly resulted in the great box office success of live action Chinese-language films.⁴⁶⁸ The superhero parody *Jian Bing Man/Jianbing Xia* (2015), which was the directorial debut of Dong Chengpeng (formerly known as a comedian and TV presenter) and released on 17 July 2015, achieved 1.16 billion Chinese Yuan in box office.⁴⁶⁹ Furthermore, the 3D animation/live action hybrid comedy adventure *Monster Hunt/Zhuoyao Ji* (Hui, 2015), released on the same day as *Jian Bing Man*, had become the highest-grossing domestic film (2.44 billion Chinese Yuan), breaking the box office record previously held by *Furious 7* (2015) (Wan, 2.42 billion).⁴⁷⁰

As the live action films have boomed since the blackout period, supportive government policies have also involved in response to the exhibition of NGCCA

⁴⁶⁵ Darrell William Davis, p.123.

⁴⁶⁶ Emily Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis. 'Re-nationalizing China's Film Industry: Case Study on the China Film Group and Film Marketization', p.43.

⁴⁶⁷ Rob Cain. 'Another Monster Month at China's Box Office' Available from: <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/robcairn/2015/07/31/another-monster-month-at-chinas-box-office/#723bfc96a561>>. [Accessed: 04 May 2017].

⁴⁶⁸ Julie Makinen. 'Chinese Movie draws Fire as A Copycat of Pixar's Cars' Available from: <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/film/70475153/Chinese-movie-draws-fire-as-a-copycat-of-Pixars-Cars>>. [Accessed: 04 May 2017].

⁴⁶⁹ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of Jian Bing Man' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/629410>>. [Accessed: 05 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁷⁰ The box office record of *Monster Hunt* was surpassed by Stephen Chow's *The Mermaid/Mei Ren Yu* in 2016 and then Jing Wu's *Wolf Warriors 2/Zhanlang 2* in 2017. See China Box Office. 'All Time Box Office Chart for the Chinese Film Market' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/Alltimedomestic>>. [Accessed: 05 May 2017] [in Chinese].

works. The government-leading half-compulsory promotional activity ‘Good Morning Animation!’ (*Donghua Nizao*), which was initiated and promoted by SAPPRFT, aimed at ‘adding an extra three hours special exhibition of domestic animated films every day (9pm to 12pm) in more than 2,000 theatres from 11 July 2015, during which the audiences will enjoy ticket discounts’.⁴⁷¹ Moreover, the state media CCTV Film Channel (CCTV-6) organized the ‘Good Morning Animation!’ promotional ceremony on 10 July 2015 in Beijing city. This event recommended 18 Chinese-language cinema animations to the audience of children nationwide through inviting well-known singers and actors as the spokespersons.⁴⁷² It can be said that the combination between the absence of imported animation blockbusters (mainly from Hollywood and Japan) and the requirements from the government have expanded the space of NGCCA’s commercial performance to some extent. As suggested earlier, the total box office of the Chinese film market in 2015 grew at a 48.7 per cent rate. Within this context, NGCCA works earned 1.9 billion Chinese Yuan in theatres this year, which almost doubled the figure of 2014 (1.1 billion).⁴⁷³ But Ye Tao (2015) finds that excluding *Hero is back*, the box office return of both original and derivative NGCCA works which were screened in summer 2015 was 347 million Chinese Yuan. The figure was even less than its summer 2014 counterpart (394 million) within the context of the former (13) outnumbered the latter (8).⁴⁷⁴ That is to say, the box office receipts of the majority of domestic animated pictures, contrary to the expectations of the government, have largely been eclipsed when compared with their live action counterparts.

⁴⁷¹ Wei Nie and Liang Du. ‘Context of “Internet Plus”, Screen Subjectivity and Chinese Film New Power’, *Contemporary Cinema*, 10(2015), pp. 10-14, p.12 [in Chinese, my translation]

⁴⁷² People’s Daily Online. ‘“Good Morning Animation!” creates a New Mode, Domestically-made Animated Films are due to hit Cinemas this Summer’ Available from: <<http://ent.people.com.cn/n/2015/0714/c1012-27303930.html>>. [Accessed: 06 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁷³ Haiyue Sun. ‘Blue Book of Animation 2016: The Year of 2015 witnessed a Continuous Rise of Cinema Animation Box Office’ Available from: <http://www.ce.cn/culture/gd/201612/01/t20161201_18299226.shtml>. [Accessed: 06 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁷⁴ Ye Tao. ‘The Thoughts of Chinese Animation’s Breakthrough in Summer 2015’, *Contemporary Cinema*, 10 (2015), pp. 14-18, p. 15 [in Chinese]

5.0.2 *Hero is Back's* Box Office Success in Summer 2015

In this section, I review the phenomenal box office success of *Hero is Back* in the 2015 summer film season. I argue that this film can be considered a box office miracle among all the NGCCA works. First, I examine the creation context of *Hero is Back*. Second, I briefly introduce how the film became a box office hits under great pressure from two live action competitors.

The previous section examined the lukewarm box office performance of NGCCA works in summer 2015 except *Hero is Back*. Within this context, the box office miracle of *Hero is Back* is more like only one branch of the tree is thriving rather than the revival of the whole cinema animation sector. Unlike its NGCCA counterparts which are always created by one animation studio, *Hero is Back*, at least superficially, was jointly-produced by 11 companies. However, according to an article in *People's Daily Online*, this eight-years-to-create film is more like an individual project produced by Beijing October Media (formerly known as Beijing October Digital Animation Studio), which was found by the director Tian Xiaopeng. Tian revealed in an interview that he had almost personally financed the film with insufficient investment in the initial production stage until the first half of 2014.⁴⁷⁵ Then one of the earliest-joined co-producers Beijing Castle in the Sky Cultural Creativity initiated a crowdfunding plan through a social network platform in November 2014 (discussed in the next section). The *Hero is Back* project, with the growing visibility in the animation market, was to become a favoured investment for other nine companies, thus bringing more resources for the film (marketing, distribution, exhibition, etc.).

However, on its opening day (10 July 2015), the film found itself in an underdog market position in the Chinese film market. On a national scale, only nine per cent of all showing that day were for *Hero is Back* besides the attention and positive

⁴⁷⁵ Pengfei Yan. 'Tian Xiaopeng talks about the Production of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*'. Available from: <<http://media.people.com.cn/n/2015/0720/c14677-27330575.html>>. [Accessed in 10 May 2017] [In Chinese].

acclaim accumulated in the advance publicity such as limited release and online marketing (discussed in the next section).⁴⁷⁶ Moreover, the film was squeezed by two fan-based and coming-of-age live action pictures *Tiny Times 4.0/Xiaoshidai 4: Linghun Jintou* (Guo, 2015) and *Forever Young/Zhizi Huakai* (He, 2015), of which each took 30-plus per cent on the same day.⁴⁷⁷ However, somewhat unexpectedly, *Hero is Back's* screen occupancy rates surged to more than 14 per cent on 13 July 2015 to become the champion of the single-day box office in the Chinese film market (39.56 million Yuan) along with its massive popularity on the Internet.⁴⁷⁸ This animated film kept its throne in the next two days with the screen share peaked at 24 per cent on 15 July 2015, though still less than the proportion of *Tiny Times 4.0* and *Forever Young*, by earning 65.87 million Yuan, which accounted for approximately 51 per cent of the daily box office receipts in China (chart 5.1).⁴⁷⁹ Then *Hero is Back's* screening proportion had stabilized between 15 and 10 per cent up to 29 July 2015 (chart 5.2).⁴⁸⁰

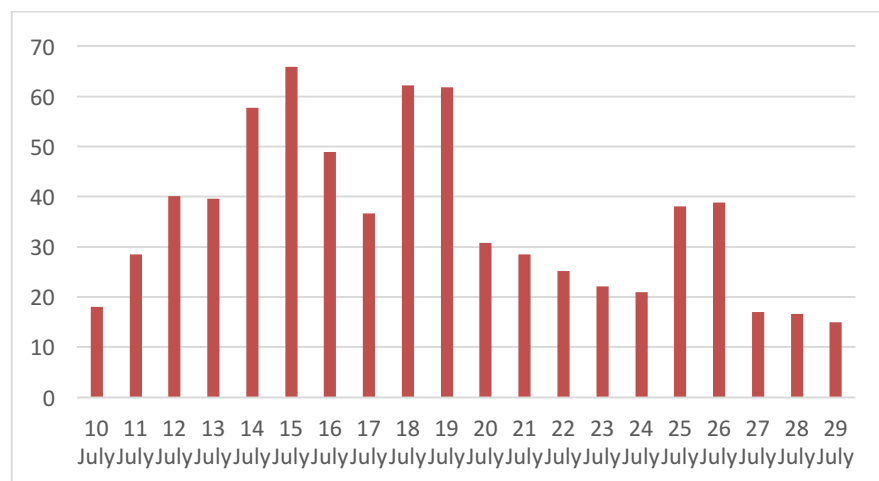


Chart 5.1: Daily Box Office Results of *Hero is Back* between 10 July and 29 July 2015 (Million Chinese Yuan)

⁴⁷⁶ Shuangjie Sun. 'A Problem with Plots' Available from:

<<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/993305.shtml>>. [Accessed: 07 May 2017].

⁴⁷⁷ *Tiny Times 4.0* and *Forever Young* were publicly screened from 9 July 2015 and 10 July 2015 respectively. See China Box Office. 'The Box Office of *Tiny Times 4.0*' Available from:

<<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=617351>>. [Accessed: 08 May 2017] [in Chinese]. See also China Box Office. 'The Box Office of *Forever Young*' Available from: <

<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=629465>>. [Accessed: 08 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁷⁸ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*' Available from:

<<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=630887>>. [Accessed: 08 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁷⁹ Same as above.

⁴⁸⁰ Same as above.

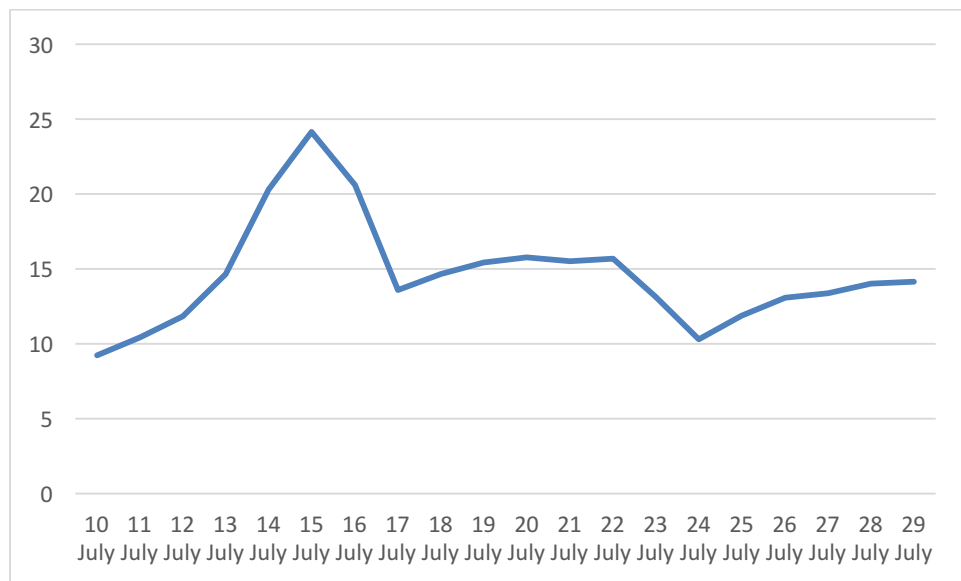


Chart 5.2: Daily Screen Share of *Hero is Back* between 10 July and 29 July 2015 (per cent)

As a result, *Hero is Back* achieved over 0.95 billion Chinese Yuan after 62 days screening in theatres, which broke the historical record of cinema animation box office previously held by Jennifer Yuh's *Kung Fu Panda 2* in 2011 (0.61 billion Yuan).⁴⁸¹ In other words, the former's commercial return equals half the total box office grossing of domestic animated films in 2015. Meanwhile, the revenue of the totally original *Hero is Back* far exceeded its derivative films counterparts released in the summer period (65.88 million at most).⁴⁸² It should also be noted here that *Hero is Back* is the first ever NGCCA work to appear in the annual top-ten highest grossing films released in the Chinese film market (10th, include both live action and animated works) (table 5.1).⁴⁸³ The director Tian Xiaopeng maintains that the phenomenal success of *Hero is Back* has exerted positive influences on Chinese audiences by changing their stereotypical attitudes toward the domestically

⁴⁸¹ Julie Makinen. "‘Monkey King’ breaks ‘Kung Fu Panda 2’ Record in China as ‘Monster Hunt’ surges". Available from: <<http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-et-ct-monkey-king-monster-hunt-china-20150728-story.html>>. [Accessed: 09 May 2017].

⁴⁸² Ye Tao, p.15.

⁴⁸³ China Box Office. '2015 China Yearly Box Office Results' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/year?year=2015>>. [Accessed: 09 May 2017] [in Chinese].

produced animations, which have often been considered as ‘just made for children, or don't have good quality’.⁴⁸⁴

Title	Countries or Regions	Box Office Receipts
<i>Monster Hunt</i> (2015)	China	2.43
<i>Fast & Furious 7</i> (2015)	U.S./Japan	2.42
<i>Lost In Hong Kong/Gang Jiong</i> (2015)	China	1.61
<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> (2015)	U.S.	1.46
<i>Goodbye Mr. Loser/Xialuo Te Fannao</i> (2015)	China	1.44
<i>Jurassic World</i> (2015)	U.S.	1.42
<i>Mojin-The Lost Legend/Xunlong Jue</i> (2015)	China	1.37
<i>Jian Bing Man</i> (2015)	China	1.16
<i>The Man From Macau II /Aomen Fenyun 2</i> (2015)	Hong Kong China/China	0.97
<i>Monkey King: Hero is Back</i> (2015)	China	0.95

Table 5.1: 2015 China Yearly Box Office Results (Billion Chinese Yuan)

5.1 The Triumph of the Word-Of-Mouth Marketing: *Hero is Back* as A Box Office Miracle

5.1.1 The Adoption of WOM Marketing and Formation of Online Fan Community

In this section, I examine *Hero is Back*'s overall marketing strategies, which were epitomized by the transition from individual and fragmented promotional activities to organized WOM marketing. As a result, the online fan community of the film has gradually formed along with the above process. I argue that the members of the above group have played a decisive role in contributing to the film's success. First, I

⁴⁸⁴ Xinhua Net. 'The Man behind Screen hit Animation *Monkey King*'. Available from: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/photo/2015-07/31/c_134467757_3.htm>. [Accessed: 09 May 2017].

examine the crowdfunding campaign of the film that inadvertently started advance publicity activities. Second, I review the film's transformation from traditional marketing methods to WOM marketing. Third, I examine the two rounds of limited releases before the film's public screening, which have helped to cultivate the initial supporters.

The market share of NGCCA works in domestic cinema chains have been subjectively protected by the government intervention (blackout period for overseas competitors) and supportive efforts (Good Morning Animation! promotional activity) in summer 2015. However, the box office results in the overwhelming majority of cases have been proved unsatisfactory except *Hero is Back*. Therefore, it is important to examine the reasons behind the latter's individual success from an industry rather than film policy perspective. As suggested in the previous section, the crowdfunding project for *Hero is Back* was launched by Beijing Castle in the Sky Cultural Creativity in November 2014. This activity, named as Bright Future Film Fund, was actually initiated by the founder of the company Lu Wei through the social networking WeChat Moments (Pengyou Quan in Chinese, literally means friends circle) which is a platform like Facebook to share the latest information to friends. WeChat Moments is one of most important functions in instant messaging mobile device-based application WeChat (the importance of WeChat and WeChat Moments in the marketing of *Hero is Back* will be discussed later).⁴⁸⁵ Lu posted a message on WeChat Moments to ask his contacts to give monetary support to the film's promotion and exhibition. In other words, the campaign was based more on ties of personal loyalty and trust between individuals rather than a considerate plan of commercial activity. It is reported that 7.8 million Chinese Yuan was fundraised by 89 individuals, and the 'final investment return for the backers reached a combined 30 million Yuan with yield of nearly

⁴⁸⁵ Yue Qu et al. 'Social Aware Mobile Payment Service Popularity Analysis: The Case of WeChat Payment in China' in Lina Yao et al eds., *Advances in Services Computing: 9th Asia-Pacific Services Computing Conference, APSCC 2015, Bangkok, Thailand, December 7-9, 2015, Proceedings* (Cham: Springer, 2015) pp.289-299, p.293.

250,000 Yuan for each investor'.⁴⁸⁶ Moreover, a special clip (starring the investors' families) appears after the film's end credits, which described the crowdfunding campaign as 'a future gift' for 109 children (with an average of under four years old) and the corresponding 89 families (fig 5.2). At the same time, the above-mentioned children have also been listed as the joint producers of the film.



Fig 5.2: A Special Clip features the Investors and their Families

The combination between expected investment returns and the role of courtesy in the film has turned the investors into the initial endorsers and promoters of their investee, thus inadvertently starting *Hero is Back's* preliminary marketing. Lu said in an interview that,

The investors have reposted almost every piece of promotional information for the film on their social networking accounts. Some of them even put the commercials for the film on outdoor advertising screens in several first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. A few people have also made block bookings, inviting their family and friends to watch the film'.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁶ Emma Lee. 'Top Chinese Film Animation Boosted by Crowdfunding'. Available from: <<http://chinafilm insider.com/top-chinese-film-animation-boosted-crowdfunding/>>. [Accessed: 10 May 2017].

⁴⁸⁷ Ji Jing. 'Monkey King Rules, China's Biggest Animated Film Success in History raises the Bar for the Domestic Industry'. Available from: <http://www.bjreview.com.cn/culture/txt/2015-08/24/content_701208.htm>. [Accessed: 11 May 2017].

According to Collins Dictionary, the term ‘crowdfunding’ means ‘the funding of a project by a large number of supporters who each contribute a small amount’.⁴⁸⁸ Generally speaking, the above-mentioned ‘supporters’ should be a mix of people, such as students, teachers, waiters, office managers and salespeople. However, the so-called ‘crowdfunding’ project of *Hero is Back* was initiated in WeChat Moments which shares information among friends. Moreover, most of the backers are professional investors like enterprise legal persons and venture capitalists instead of the experienced marketing personnel. While not denying the effects of their campaigns, but the above-mentioned individual and fragmented promotional activities, besides the outdoor advertisements, are often restricted to interpersonal communications in a relatively closed circle which appeared to exert little impact on the whole film market (like the commercial failure of *Kuiba 1*).

Nevertheless, the situation has gradually started to change with the production company and distributor’s decision to adopt the WOM marketing strategy, which could not be simply viewed as an isolated and voluntary event like the way its *Kuiba 1* counterpart did, but rather as a collection of motivated and well-organized decisions. Johan Arndt (1967) was one of the earlier researchers explore the role of WOM on consumer behaviour. He defines WOM as ‘oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service’.⁴⁸⁹ Barbara Stern (1994) considers WOM ‘differ from text precisely in its lack of boundaries: it exists in the everyday real world’, in which WOM communication vanishes as soon as it is uttered, for it occurs in a spontaneous manner and then disappears.⁴⁹⁰ While in terms of the WOM in film marketing, Yong Liu (2006) finds that WOM plays the most active role during the film’s pre-release and opening week, when witnesses the audience’s gradual attitude transformation from relatively high expectation

⁴⁸⁸ Collins Dictionary. ‘Crowdfunding’. Available from: <
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/crowdfunding>>. [Accessed: 23 July 2017].

⁴⁸⁹ Francis Buttle. ‘Word of mouth: Understanding and Managing Referral Marketing’, *Journal of Strategic Marketing*. Vol. 6, Issue.3, 1998, pp. 241-254, p.242.

⁴⁹⁰ Barbara Stern. ‘A Revised Communication Model for Advertising: Multiple Dimensions of the Source, the Message, and the Recipient’, *Journal of Advertising*. Vol. 23, No. 3, 1994, pp. 5-15, p.7.

(before release) to more critical (opening week). Liu further argues that ‘WOM information offers significant explanatory power for both aggregate and weekly box office revenue, especially in the early weeks after a movie opens’.⁴⁹¹ Finola Kerrigan in her 2010 study considers WOM is manageable, film marketers can create ‘want to see’ through the marketing campaign, thus achieving audience enjoyment and therefore good WOM in order to sustain the film in the market.⁴⁹²

In the case of *Hero is Back*, Beijing United Entertainment Partners was chosen as the main distributor in May 2015, when the company devoted to maximize the film’s chances through strategic actions before and after the release. By positioning the film as a product suitable for all age groups, United Entertainment Partners organized a series of assorted limited releases in order to attract the largest audience possible at various ages, occupations and aesthetic tastes. The first round aimed at testing the viewing experience of *Hero is Back* from the perspective of professional groups. To be specific, on 7 June 2015 the film debuted at a free screening in Beijing that invited over one hundred teachers and students specialising in animation, fine arts and music from several most renowned art colleges such as Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing Film Academy, Communication University of China and China Conservatory of Music.⁴⁹³ Afterwards, on 18 June 2015 the distributor organized an advance screening in Shanghai International Film Festival, in which the audiences are mainly media practitioners like film journalists and influential critics.⁴⁹⁴ Flew (2012) believes a specialist critic’s critical opinion and endorsement for a cultural product ‘can provide a “gatekeeper” for consumers in decisions about what they will consumer and how they will spend available leisure times’.⁴⁹⁵ In the case of *Hero is Back*, the

⁴⁹¹ Yong Liu. ‘Word of Mouth for Movies: Its Dynamics and Impact on Box Office Revenue’, *Journal of Marketing*. Vol. 70, Issue. 3, 2006, pp. 74-89, p.74.

⁴⁹² Finola Kerrigan. *Film Marketing* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2010) p. 115.

⁴⁹³ Tencent Entertainment. ‘*The Debut of Monkey King: Hero is Back wins Massive Praise from over One Hundred Teachers and Students in Art Colleges*’. Available from: <<http://ent.qq.com/a/20150611/009850.htm>>. [Accessed: 12 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁹⁴ Xi Yang. ‘*Monkey King: Hero is Back ignites the Passion of Chinese Audience in Shanghai International Film Festival*’. Available from: <http://movie.67.com/hyzz/2015/06/19/800520_2.html>. [Accessed: 12 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁹⁵ Flew, p.121.

film won huge praise and acceptance from the above-mentioned viewers as well as specialist critics, who also became the earliest voluntary promoters of the film plus the investors.⁴⁹⁶ Furthermore, the theoretic and relatively rational online comments from professionals, who are more influential than investors in persuading others' film-viewing decision, have gradually spread to a wide range of Internet users, thus building an initial foundation for the second round limited release.

The second-round, large-scale limited theatrical release, which targeted at normal audiences, can be regarded as one of the key turning-points in *Hero is Back's* WOM marketing campaign. On 28 June 2015 the film was exclusively exhibited in a small number of cinemas which achieved 2.78 million Yuan in box office.⁴⁹⁷ At the same day the theme song *Once I/Cengjing Dewo* was uploaded to AcFun.tv and Bilibili.com which are the two most famous Chinese-language video share platforms that promote ACG (Anime, Comic and Games) culture. The above two sites also served as the largest online gathering places for young ACG fans, who are often being considered as active viewers of animated films at the same time. Sung by Kit Chan (Chen Jieyi in Mandarin Chinese), a Singaporean artist who has gained massive awareness in China through her performance in the sensational singing talent show *I am a Singer/Woshi Geshou*, *Once I* was being watched over two million times on its debut day and attracted 13 thousand bullet screens in Bilibili.com.⁴⁹⁸

Based on the awareness accumulated online and offline, on 4 and 5 July 2015 *Hero is Back* was given limited release on a nationwide scale. Tian Xiaopeng's work was screened about 12,000 times in the two-day event and earned approximately ten

⁴⁹⁶ Tencent Entertainment. 'The Debut of Monkey King: Hero is Back wins Massive Praise from over One Hundred Teachers and Students in Art Colleges'.

⁴⁹⁷ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of Monkey King: Hero is Back' Available from: <<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=630887>>. [Accessed: 12 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁴⁹⁸ Mengdie Zhang and Wenzhu Qin. 'Monkey King: Hero is Back, the Counter back of Chinese Animation—Analysis from a Cultural Industry Perspective', *Media*, 09(2015), pp. 72-74, p.73 [in Chinese]

million Chinese Yuan at the box office.⁴⁹⁹ According to an article from *Southern Urban Daily*, ordinary viewers wrote and uploaded approximately 200 long reviews (800 Chinese characters or more) for *Hero is Back* on the film's official website on Douban Movie between the second round limited release and wide release. Furthermore, *Hero is Back* attracted more than 6,000 daily active users who discussed the film on Douban Movie during the above period.⁵⁰⁰ In this context, the outcome of the distributor's WOM marketing efforts during the film's pre-release was twofold. On one hand, *Hero is Back*'s online reputation did not directly translate into the competitive advantage in the real-world film market, which can be illustrated by its low debut share in cinemas. That is to say, Chinese exhibitors expected the film did not seem to hold much market potential.⁵⁰¹ While, on the other hand, the 'Zi Lai Shui' online fan group has emerged from the positive WOM communication in relation to *Hero is Back*. The former undoubtedly has played a deciding role in contributing to the film's smash box office success before and after wide release.

Zi Lai Shui (literally means tap water) refers to the semi-spontaneous *Hero is Back* online fan community that parodies the Wangluo Shuijun (means Internet water army) who are the netizens employed by Public Relations companies to publicize or present positive comments to products disregarding the actual quality.⁵⁰² Cheng Chen, Kui Wu, Venkatesh Srinivasan and Xudong Zhang (2011) consider the Internet water army as the paid mercenaries who post comments, threads and articles on various online platforms for the purpose of influencing the public opinion towards certain social events and consumer products. They believe that the above group may impose an important negative impact on the online community because their

⁴⁹⁹ Mtime. 'The Box office Earnings of Monkey King: Hero is Back exceeds Ten Million on Two-day Limited Release: The Dark Horse provokes the Summer Film Market' Available from: <<http://news.mtime.com/2015/07/07/1544376.html>>. [Accessed: 12 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵⁰⁰ Zhu Yanxia and Zhao Jingwen. 'The Greatness of Great Sage', *Southern Urban Daily*, 16 December 2015, Section RB01 [in Chinese].

⁵⁰¹ Xu Fan. 'Box office rallies to a Ready-made Hero' Available from: <http://english.gov.cn/news/photos/2015/07/23/content_281475152677163.htm>. [Accessed: 13 May 2017].

⁵⁰² Eileen Cheng ed. 'Monkey King: Hero Is Back' Available from: <<http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/culture/movies/1507/1115-1.htm>>. [Accessed: 12 May 2017].

posts are usually not trustworthy (interest-driven).⁵⁰³ Brad Olsen (2016) also argues that the Internet water army ‘pose as ordinary people writing comments on blogs and discussion forums that can demolish the consumer ranking of products and services, create false images, or provide the rationale for opposing perceptions to destroy the truth’.⁵⁰⁴ Scoffing at the paid and well-organized Internet water army, the tap-waters (members of the tap water group) have been always proud to have publicized the film for free like freely coming water. Deeming themselves carrying out the obligations to promote *Hero is Back* from purely enthusiastic motives, the tap water group has supported the film on several most-used social networking sites like WeChat and Weibo, and film review aggregator sites Douban Movie and Mtime.

It should be noted here that the formation of tap water group, includes the pioneers and latecomers, has always been actively guided by the film’s production and distribution companies rather than a result of entirely spontaneous enthusiasts’ activities (discussed later). The previously mentioned crowdfunded investors and audiences who attended the limited release were among the earliest members of tap water, whose efforts not only laid a foundation for the film’s WOM explosion after wide release, but also induced more potential viewers to join the community. As suggested earlier, their WOM promotion activities did not seem to change the view from the exhibition sector. However, the gradually accumulated online WOM and awareness of the film have indeed countered back the real-world market expectations. *Hero is Back* still earned box office grosses of 86.68 million in the first three days of the opening week, which had already exceeded the revenue of all its derivative films counterparts exhibited during the summer period.⁵⁰⁵ The film’s opening week (10 to 16 July 2015) also witnessed the explosive growth of tap water members and how and to what extent their online behaviours have

⁵⁰³ Cheng Chen, Kui Wu, Venkatesh Srinivasan and Xudong Zhang. ‘*Battling the Internet Water Army: Detection of Hidden Paid Posters*’ Available from: <<https://arxiv.org/pdf/1111.4297.pdf>>. [Accessed: 27 July 2017].

⁵⁰⁴ Brad Olsen. *Future Esoteric: The Unseen Realms (2nd edition)* (San Francisco: Consortium of Collective Consciousness Publishing, 2016) p. 39.

⁵⁰⁵ China Box Office. ‘*The Box Office of Monkey King: Hero is Back*’ Available from: <<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=630887>>. [Accessed: 13 May 2017] [in Chinese].

contributed to the box office surge. The following discussion shall mainly focus on their specific act of manifestation in Weibo and WeChat platforms, which will be analysed separately.

5.1.2 *Hero is Back's* WOM Communication on Weibo

In this section, I examine *Hero is Back's* WOM communication on Weibo platform. I argue that the above online promotional activities, which have been actively guided by the film's production company and distributor, served as an important component of the overall WOM marketing campaign. First, I analyse how the individual tap-waters have been associated with each other by a purpose-built Weibo account. Second, I review the role of Weibo celebrities in promoting the film's WOM reputation. Third, I examine the WOM communication strategies implemented by *Hero is Back's* official Weibo account.

As suggested in Chapter 3, the microblogging service Weibo is known as the 'Chinese twitter', which indicates its popularity among Chinese netizens. Weibo, launched in 2010, reported approximately 282 million (monthly) and 126 million (daily) active users by the end of the second quarter of 2016.⁵⁰⁶ Lars Willnat, Lu Wei and Jason Martin (2015) notice that the Weibo users are most likely to engage in activities such as reading news and information, watching video and chatting with social contacts. Therefore they maintain that the popularity of Chinese-language microblogs like Weibo is partly due to their 'Twitter-like function, the ability to allow relatively free discussions online, and the way they are accessed by most people'.⁵⁰⁷ They also find that the booming market for smartphone in China has also contributed to the prevalence of Weibo, in which the most of Chinese mobile phone users tend to log in their accounts through the Weibo application.⁵⁰⁸ Unlike

⁵⁰⁶ Ifeng Finance. 'Weibo releases Second-quarter 2016 Earnings: The Number of Monthly Active Users achieve 282 Million' Available from:

<http://finance.ifeng.com/a/20160809/14712761_0.shtml>. [Accessed: 14 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵⁰⁷ Lars Willnat, Lu Wei and Jason Martin. 'Politics and Social Media in China' in Gary Rawnsley and Ming-yeh Rawnsley eds., *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015) pp.181-202, p.187.

⁵⁰⁸ Same as above.

Twitter users, Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margarete Roberts (2013) argue that Chinese netizens prefer to engage in more interactive dialogue, using platform (Weibo) more as an online forum with long chains of discussion on specific topics.⁵⁰⁹

Initially, individual enthusiasts of *Hero is Back* posted short reviews of the film (less than 140 Chinese characters) on their Weibo accounts that are publicly viewable online, which had accumulated a considerable amount of WOM reputations.⁵¹⁰ However, the above highly fragmented information given by ordinary Weibo users, with a small number of followers (less than one thousand in most cases), normally exerted impact only on their social contacts within a corresponding narrow range. In other words, there have been a large number of unorganized and scattered tap-waters who share the similar problems in spreading *Hero is Back*, namely the very limited influence compared with that of the vast ocean of information in Weibo.

Nevertheless, the association between the above fight-alone tap-waters have become increasingly active through their interaction with a purpose-built Weibo account. Shuilian Dong Dasheng Zilaishui Gongsi (literally means Water Curtain Cave Great Sage Tap Water Company, later referred to as Tap Water Company),⁵¹¹ which explicitly described itself as the 'non-official platform for fans of animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, (the platform) shares fan-made works and imaginations', has started to operate from 1 July 2015 at a frequency of over 100 posts per day.⁵¹² It is not clear whether the production or distribution companies of

⁵⁰⁹ Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margarete Roberts. 'How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression', *American Political Science Review*. Vol. 107, Issue.2, 2013, pp. 1-18, p.3.

⁵¹⁰ In normal circumstances, Weibo messages are publicly viewable online by default unless specifically set as 'exclusively visible to the publisher' or 'exclusively visible to the friend circle'.

⁵¹¹ The Water Curtain Cave, situated in the Flowers and Fruits Mountain, is 'a legendary place for Sun Wukong to live in his earliest years' in *Journey to the West*. See Cultural China. 'Water Curtain Cave (Shuilian Dong)' Available from: <<http://www.cultural-china.com/chinaWH/html/en/History125bye512.html>>. [Accessed: 14 May 2017].

⁵¹² The homepage of Tap Water Company can be achieved from Sina Weibo. 'Homepage of Water Curtain Cave Great Sage Tap Water Company'. Available from: <http://www.weibo.com/dashengshuichang?profile_ftype=1&is_all=1#_0>. [Accessed: 15 May 2017] [in Chinese].

the film have been involved in the operation of this account. After examining the Weibo posts of Tap Water Company, I find that this account has rarely published original content. Instead, it mainly reposts fan-made black and white or coloured GIFs, illustrations, mini comics, cosplay photos and so on, which are based on the characters and storylines of the film (fig 5.3). For instance, as illustrated in the figure, a fan-made comic reposted by Tap Water Company account has been re-reposted 224 times and attracted 12 comments. At the same time, the original content (the above-mentioned comic firstly published in the author's individual Weibo account) has also been reposted 468 times (fig 5.4).⁵¹³ In this sense, the enthusiasts have actively evolved from the 'passive consumers' to 'creative producers'.⁵¹⁴ The efforts from Tap Water Company have also connected the individual tap-waters nationwide.



Fig 5.3: Fan-made Works Reposted by Tap Water Company Account

⁵¹³ The above statistics is achieved on 21 July 2017.

⁵¹⁴ Hartley et al, p.16.



Fig 5.4: Fan-made Comics reposted by Tap Water Company Weibo Account (in Chinese)

David Popenoe (1995) proposes the concept of ‘social group’, which refers to ‘two or more people who have a common identity and some feeling of unity, and who share certain goals and expectations about each other’s behaviour’.⁵¹⁵ A social group can generate a form of subculture which owns its unique significance and value based on the mutually connected engagement model. Popenoe summarises two basic reasons why people form social groups, besides ‘instrumental needs’, the formation of many other groups are due to the ‘expressive needs’ which support to accomplish their member’s sentimental aspirations, usually for aid and self-expression.⁵¹⁶ As social networking sites like Weibo have become increasingly popular across China, the online group within it is emerging correspondingly. Unlike the social group in the traditional sense, many members of online group do not have any contact with each other in the real world (like the case of tap water group). Instead, they often express their own point of view by sending pictures and network emoticons or engaging in interactions via text-based online chat, which reveal the outstanding expressive needs. By following the Tap Water Company account which has kept a high frequency of posting before and after *Hero is Back’s*

⁵¹⁵ David Popenoe. *Sociology* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1995) p. 158.

⁵¹⁶ Popenoe, p.141.

wide release (as mentioned earlier), the followers can easily find their fellow enthusiasts online, thus enhancing the identification of being a member of tap water group. Moreover, as Popenoe suggests, the reposting behaviours by Tap Water Company platform also help to fulfil emotional desire of individual tap-waters that are eager for attention and sense of belonging, and then further encourage the subsequent WOM promotional activities. The above activities have been referenced by *Hero is Back*'s official Weibo account, which will be discussed later.

Besides the above ordinary tap-waters who took part in either spontaneous or organized WOM marketing campaigns, a large number of socially elite members as well as Weibo users, who have a greater influence in forming and guiding online opinions, have also been deeply involved in promoting *Hero is Back*. Willnat, Wei and Martin (2015) note that in comparison with other similar microblogging services, Weibo 'is regarded having an elite orientation that attracts celebrities, professionals, marketers and users of higher social-economic status'.⁵¹⁷ Similar to the blue verified badge on Twitter that lets users realize that an account of public interest is authentic,⁵¹⁸ a golden badge 'V' will be attached to the certified individual Weibo users, thus clearly differentiating themselves from other unidentified users. Among the verified ones, the most influential microbloggers are known as 'Big V' (*Da V*) who have one thing in common—a considerable amount of fans and followers. Weiyu Zhang in her 2016 study argues that Weibo intensifies both 'the instant and constant interactions between fans and celebrities', which allows the flow of message, opinion and emotion. She also observes that 'Weibo celebrities successfully turned their fans publics into issues publics through performing on social issues and eliciting the fans' performance on the same issues'.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁷ Willnat, Wei and Martin, p.187.

⁵¹⁸ Twitter. 'About Verified Accounts'. Available from: <<https://support.twitter.com/groups/31-twitter-basics/topics/111-features/articles/119135-about-verified-accounts>>. [Accessed: 16 May 2017].

⁵¹⁹ Weiyu Zhang. *The Internet and New Social Formation in China: Fandom Publics in the Making* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) p. 119.

In terms of *Hero is Back*, the distributor United Entertainment Partners aims to harness the influence and popularity of celebrities, who are also Big V at the same time, to reach the maximum number of fans. It released a short clip, features endorsements from over one hundred celebrities such as high profile sport stars, film stars, directors, TV presenters and singers who are all household names in China, on several largest Chinese-language online video platforms.⁵²⁰ Take Tencent Video as an example, the clip has been viewed more than 1.41 million times in this video streaming website which achieved approximately 130.57 million actively monthly users in May 2015.⁵²¹ Furthermore, the above-mentioned celebrities have also publicly expressed support for *Hero is Back* by posting or reposting messages on their Weibo accounts, which have been subsequently reposted or commented by millions or even tens of millions of the followers. For example, Huang Xiaoming, a Chinese male film star who owns 52.94 million followers in Weibo, reposted the content from *Hero is Back*'s official Weibo account and added a short comment as 'support the domestically-made animation/zhichi guochan donghua' on 10 July 2015.⁵²² As illustrated in the figure, Huang's repost has been re-reposted 2,457 times and commented 2,888 times (fig 5.5). Similarly, on 5 July 2015 the Chinese writer Ma Boyong, who has approximately 3.54 million Weibo fans, posted a positive review of *Hero is Back* which has also been re-reposted 4,870 times and commented 1,254 times (fig 5.6).⁵²³ Shiyang Gong, Juanjuan Zhang, Ping Zhao and Xuping Jiang (2014) conducted a randomized field experiment, in order to explore how the viewing share of a major global media company's documentary television shows in China was affected by the company's own Weibo posts and the corresponding reposts from Weibo influential. They found that besides the effectiveness of the company tweets, average daily viewing increased by an

⁵²⁰ Deshu Yu. 'Over One Hundred Stars endorse Monkey King: Hero is Back that pioneers Film Marketing in China'. Available from: <<http://ent.qq.com/a/20150629/000879.htm>>. [Accessed: 16 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵²¹ The above statistics is achieved on 23 July 2017. See Tencent Video. 'More than One Hundred Celebrities endorse Monkey King: Hero is Back'. Available from: <<https://v.qq.com/x/cover/3o56brnhunm5bwx/n0016vayfw.html>>. [Accessed: 28 July 2017] [in Chinese]. See also CNSoftnews. 'IQiyi, Youku and Tencent Video owned more than 100 Million Active Monthly Users in May 2015'. Available from: <<http://www.cnsoftnews.com/news/201507/21461.html>>. [Accessed: 28 July 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵²² The above statistics is achieved on 28 July 2017.

⁵²³ Same as above.

additional 33 per cent when an influential retweeted the former. Moreover, 'influential retweets increase show viewing either by informing the influential's followers about the show, or by bringing new followers to the company'.⁵²⁴ They also notice that celebrity reposts are more efficient at boosting show viewing if the influential's posts tend to be more actively shared in the follower network.⁵²⁵



Fig 5.5: Huang Xiaoming's Repost and Comment (in Chinese)

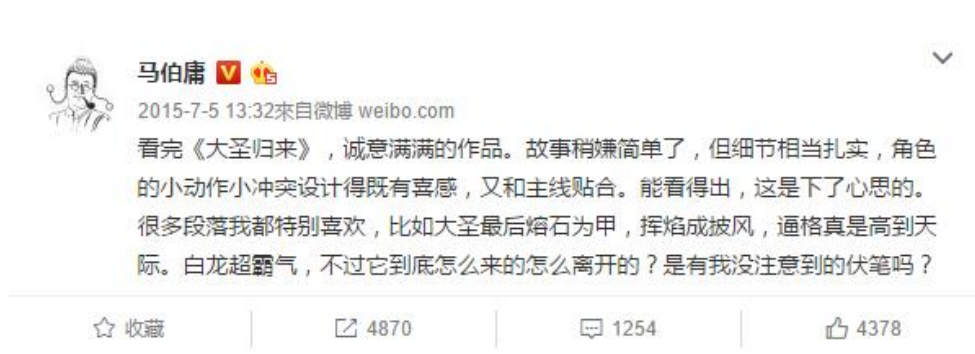


Fig 5.6: Ma Boyong's Post (in Chinese)

Therefore, in essence, the celebrity endorsement on Weibo can be identified as a disguised form of WOM advertising. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Hesmondhalgh in his 2013 study believes that the association between the names

⁵²⁴ Shiyang Gong, Juanjuan Zhang, Ping Zhao and Xuping Jiang. 'Tweeting as a Marketing Tool – Field Experiment in the TV Industry'. Available from: <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2461370>. [Accessed: 16 May 2017] p.3.

⁵²⁵ Gong, Zhang, Zhao and Jiang. p.22.

of star writers, performers and the texts can effectively reduce the commercial risk and unpredictability when releasing cultural products. Although *Hero is Back* was unable to link the above celebrities directly to the filmic content in the production stage like the live action blockbusters did, but this film found another way. The Weibo celebrities (Huang Xiaoming, Ma Boyong, etc.) endorsed *Hero is Back* based on their credibility and popularity among followers, thus creating positive association between the endorsers and the film. That is to say, the Big V backers have directly affected their followers' viewing choice. After watching the film, many of the followers have also become endorsers, thus further expanding the scope of tap-waters. In this sense, Weibo celebrities can be regarded as the 'vertically opinion leaders' derived from Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's 'two-step flow of communication' theory. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) maintain that vertically opinion leaders 'seek out mass media messages relevant to their expertise and disseminate these through vertical flows in their local community'.⁵²⁶ That is to say, there exists a vertical information flow within public communication, which transits from mass media to opinion leaders and from them to their followers. The Big V endorsers, who are experts in media content creation (except the sport stars), vertically propagate the information of *Hero is Back* to the followers, the difference is the 'local community' has migrated from the real world to the Internet.

The self-organized Tap Water Company served as an unofficial platform for promoting and sharing *Hero is Back*, of which the successful practices have resonated the operation of the film's official Weibo account especially after the public release. Created and posted the first message in February 2012, the official *Hero is Back* Weibo account was actually not very dynamic in promoting the film until the end of 2014. It posted only ten original messages, in which most of them were pictures and videos directly relevant to the various visual images of Sun Wukong and the film's production process (fig 5.7), and reposted two messages

⁵²⁶ Sonia Livingstone. 'The Work of Elihu Katz: Conceptualizing Media Effects in Context' in John Corner, Philip Schlesinger and Roger Silverstone eds., *International Media Research: A Critical Survey* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) pp.18-47, p.40.

within almost two years.⁵²⁷ The account has become more active in posting microblogs about the film after January 2015 when the production company announced the theme song would be sung by Kit Chan. It is worth noting here that the official account's pattern of WOM publicity and persuasion has experienced significant transformations before and after the limited release. The first-hand marketing-relevant information, such as the promotional activities at film festivals and limited release schedule, had been intensively published by the account during the limited pre-release period. Afterwards, especially after the second-round large-scale limited release (28 June 2015), *Hero is Back* has tailored its Weibo account to make it a more diversified, interactive and enthusiasts-based platform for ordinary filmgoers similar to its earlier discussed Tap Water Company counterpart.

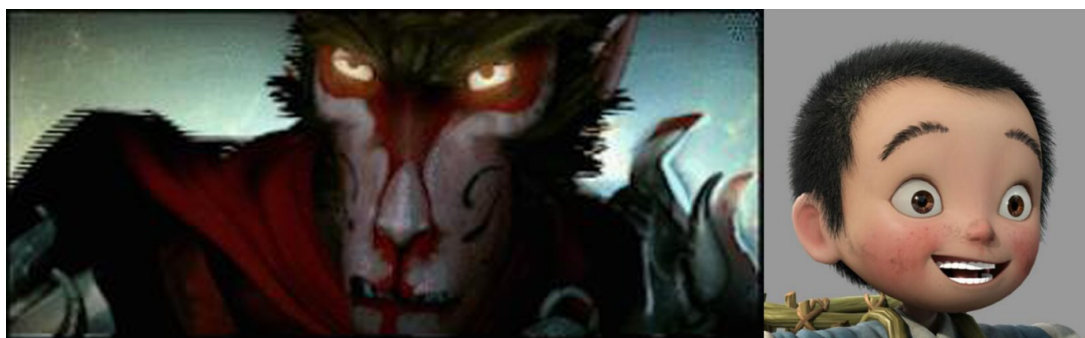


Fig 5.7: The Film's Production Process: Sun Wukong (left) and Jiang Liuer (right)

Besides the original posts in a small number of cases, the official account has focused almost entirely on reposting other users' contents related to the topic on *Hero is Back*, and then adding comments in addition to the initial posts after the second round limited release. The sources of reposted messages can be broadly divided into two categories: the first comes from the previously mentioned Big V's endorsements of the film, and then the second derives from fan-made works such as film reviews, illustrations, emoji packages and figurines (fig 5.8). That is to say, the official account has tried to combine the marketing communications between

⁵²⁷ Sina Weibo. 'Monkey King: *Hero is Back*, Page 25'. Available from: <http://www.weibo.com/u/2569047271?is_search=0&visible=0&is_all=1&is_tag=0&profile_ftype=1&page=25#1484996315627>. [Accessed: 17 May 2017] [in Chinese].

the endorsements from vertically opinion leaders (Weibo celebrities) and widespread WOM produced by ordinary users who have watched the film. Numerically, the latter has largely outnumbered the former. Luyang Zhang (2016) observes that *Hero is Back* Weibo account published 793 messages up to 14 August 2015, in which consisted of 192 original posts and 601 reposts.⁵²⁸ Meanwhile, the interaction between the official account and ordinary enthusiasts accounted for about 90 per cent among all the reposted messages.



Fig 5.8: Fan-made Works reposted by *Hero is Back* Official Weibo Account

Weibo messages, which contain hashtags as #Monkey King: Hero is Back#, #10 July Hero is Back# (7.10 Dasheng Guilai) or other topics relevant to the film and @ the film's official account, have had the opportunity to be reposted by the account, which is similar to the operating model of Tap Water Company. But the divergences between the above two tap-waters gathering platforms are the number of fans and the corresponding differences in WOM influence. The official account owned 240,393 followers that were nearly eight times its Tap Water Company counterpart (31,245).⁵²⁹ In this sense, the former is more influential than the latter in Weibo world, which can be illustrated by the amount of re-reposts and comments. Compared with the messages reposted by Tap Water Company which would be normally re-reposted and commented less than 300 times, fan-made works

⁵²⁸ Luyang Zhang. 'The WOM Marketing of Monkey King: Hero is Back—The Formation of Tap-Waters and their Self-gratification', *Journal of News Research*, 01(2016), pp. 102 and 114, p. 114 [in Chinese].

⁵²⁹ The number of followers of these two accounts is accessed on 21 May 2017.

reposted by *Hero is Back* official account have been re-reposted and commented several thousands of times in most cases (among them the most popular ones achieved tens of thousands times). Moreover, the original posts chosen by the official account have also attracted correspondingly high numbers of reposts and comments, an accomplishment that can normally be achieved by Weibo celebrities. For example, as illustrated in the figure, a fan-made comic reposted by the official account has been re-reposted 2,438 times and the original content has also been reposted 9,551 times (fig 5.9).⁵³⁰



Fig 5.9: Fan-made Comics reposted by *Hero is Back* Official Weibo Account (in Chinese)

Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz in their 'Uses and Gratifications Theory' consider the media users as the individuals have specific needs, who not only 'take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their media use', but 'seek out media source that best fulfils their needs' under both social and psychological motives.⁵³¹ The interaction between *Hero is Back*'s official account and tap-waters,

⁵³⁰ The above statistics is achieved on 21 May 2017.

⁵³¹ University of Kentucky. 'Mass Communication Context: Uses and Gratification Theory'. Available from: <<http://www.uky.edu/~drlane/capstone/mass/uses.htm>>. [Accessed: 21 May 2017].

in essence, can be regarded as a form of encouraging positive behaviour that helps the latter to achieve their self-esteem needs and even vanity. Chosen tap-waters use the surrounding gaze on Weibo to reassure their status not only in the tap water group but in the whole Weibo network, thus stimulating the enthusiasm of other tap water members, and then further encouraging more ordinary users to participate in the discussion through creating and disseminating contents related to *Hero is Back*.

The multi-directional WOM promotional activities (Tap Water Company, celebrity endorsements, official account) on Weibo have made *Hero is Back* a sensational cultural phenomenon online. According to Weibo statistics, the film has achieved 8.9 points on this social networking service based on the ten-point system, of which 79 per cent of the 558,364 reviewers have rated *Hero is Back* as a five-star film.⁵³² In the meantime, Chinese netizens have written and uploaded 623 long reviews (800 Chinese characters or more) for *Hero is Back* on Weibo.⁵³³ Furthermore, the Weibo topics #Monkey King: Hero is Back#, #10 July Hero is Back#, #Great Sage and Tap# (*Dasheng Shuilongtou in Chinese*) and #Did you Worship Great Sage Today# (*Jintian Ni Miansheng Lema*) have also been read 2.13, 0.71, 0.33 and 0.23 billion times.⁵³⁴

5.1.3 *Hero is Back*'s WOM Communication on WeChat and the Overall WOM Effectiveness

In this section, I examine *Hero is Back*'s WOM communications on WeChat platform. I also review the overall WOM effectiveness both online and offline. I argue that the multi-step WOM promotional activities, on Weibo and WeChat

⁵³² Sina Weibo. '*Homepage of Monkey King Hero is Back*'. Available from: <http://www.weibo.com/p/100120177325/home?from=page_100120&mod=TAB&pids=plc_main#place>. [Accessed: 28 July 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵³³ Same as above.

⁵³⁴ Same as above.

platforms, have cultivated a large number of tap-waters, whose efforts have directly lead to the film's both critical and commercial success. First, I compare the divergences between Weibo and WeChat. Second, I analyse the WOM marketing of *Hero is Back* on WeChat, which was mainly reflected in the virus-like spreading of WeChat Moments Articles that were actively guided by the film's production company and distributor. Third, I examine the final WOM communication effectiveness both online and offline.

It is clear from what has been discussed in the previous section that *Hero is Back's* WOM marketing efforts on Weibo, as a microblogging service with its open access and anonymous identity attributes, provide an effective communication model features the multiple-level interactive relationships among tap-waters, celebrities, Tap Water Company account and the film's official account. At the same time, launched in 2011, WeChat has also played a vital role in promoting the film. According to Tencent Holdings' (developer and owner of WeChat) third-quarter 2016 earnings, WeChat owned approximately 846 million monthly active users, a triple quantity of its Weibo counterpart in roughly the same period (282 million).⁵³⁵ Similarly, Han Shen and Xing Liu in their 2016 studies summarise the use preference of social media in China, they find that the coverage rate of instant messaging social media like WeChat and QQ (another cross-platform instant messaging application developed by Tencent) among all the Chinese netizens was 61.7 per cent, the corresponding rate of Weibo was 43.6 per cent.⁵³⁶ That is to say, WeChat has become a daily necessity for Chinese people in recent years. Compared to Weibo as an open stage in which almost all the online contents are publicly viewable by the users, WeChat is more like a platform that aims at providing more confidential and exclusive communication among close contacts than other applications.⁵³⁷ This

⁵³⁵ Jing Li and Li Wang eds. '*Tencent releases Third-quarter 2016 Earnings as Retained Profits achieve 10.6 Billion Chinese Yuan*'. Available from: <<http://mt.sohu.com/20161117/n473404622.shtml>>. [Accessed: 21 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵³⁶ Han Shen and Xing Liu. 'Application of Social Media among Chinese Outbound Tourists: Platforms and Behaviors' in Xiang (Robert) Li ed., *Chinese Outbound Tourism 2.0* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2016) pp.259-272, p.266.

⁵³⁷ Yu Zhang. 'The Personalized and Personal "Mass Media" — From "We-Broadcast" to "We-Chat": Reflection on the Case of Bi Fujian Incident' in Alison Novak and Imaani El-Burki eds., *Defining Identity and the Changing Scope of Culture in the Digital Age* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2016) pp.29-42, p.32.

reflects that the WeChat discussion is thus largely bound up with interpersonal communication between real-world acquaintances such as friends, clients, colleagues and relatives. In other words, interactions on WeChat platform are often restricted to a rather small circle of people. Although initially the above pattern of communication often exerts relatively limited influence regarding the whole WeChat network, but over time this model may ultimately result in considerable amount of publicity under the impact of appropriate catalysts, which will be discussed later.

In terms of the WOM marketing of *Hero is Back* on WeChat, the scattered individual users as well as pioneering tap-waters would first spread the positive WOM of the film either by posting contents on their WeChat Moments (exclusively visible to the WeChat contacts) or by sending instant messages to their contacts directly within an intimate sphere of influence. With a greater opportunity to share their opinions in a small circle, other users might comment on the posted contents (on WeChat Moments) and click the 'like' button (perform the same function in Twitter and Facebook), which were also visible for the mutual friends between the publisher and responder. Some of the affected users might watch the film under the influence of the above interactive behaviours. They have had a chance to become the newly joined tap-waters if the viewing experiences meet expectations. In this sense, newer tap-waters may copy the WOM-promoting practices initiated by the predecessors, thus forming a virtuous circle and then further affecting more contacts. As a result, numerous spontaneously organized tap water groups have been formed within a small circle.

Different small circles are somewhat independent from each other, but they can also be connected by sharing the articles on a specific topic, which are often viewed and reposted in WeChat Moments by cross-circle members. The above form of articles, which are normally being pushed to followers who subscribe various kinds

of WeChat official subscription accounts (*Weixin Gongzhonghao*),⁵³⁸ can be regarded as the catalysts of *Hero is Back*'s virus-like spreading on WeChat. In comparing with the relatively shorter, fragmented and text-based WOM evaluations from ordinary tap-waters, most of the WeChat articles on the topic of *Hero is Back* have been produced by professional media practitioners, which are often characterised by their comprehensive, informative and fully-illustrated features.

As mentioned in the Introduction of this chapter, *Hero is Back* began to fight back in cinema chains from 13 July 2015. The film's massive growth in screen occupancy could be partly due to the virus-like spreading of relevant articles on WeChat Moments besides the WOM communication in Weibo. On 12 July 2015 an article titled '*Original Production Drawings and Concept Arts of Hero is Back has been released! It is so Gorgeous! (Dasheng Guilai Yuanhua Shougao Liuchu! Tai Jingyan Le!)*' was published by an official account 'Vision' (fig 5.10). This piece, features the behind-the-scenes story of *Hero is Back*, has been quickly reposted by its over-300 fellow official accounts in their daily news feed including 'People's Daily' which topped the ranking for most viewed WeChat official accounts in October 2015 (40 million views).⁵³⁹ Although it is not possible to identify the precise number of reposts of this article on WeChat Moments due to a lack of relevant research, but

⁵³⁸ The so-called 'WeChat official subscription accounts' are actually not the official services operated by WeChat service, instead it served as a free-to-register and free-to-use public platform that is often used much like a daily news feed, which can push one new update a day to their followers. The news feed could be 'single article or multiple articles bundled together into one larger news update'. According to the operation teams of WeChat, Subscription accounts 'provide a new information propagation means for media and individuals to build up better communication and management with readers'. See Matthew Brennan. '*What Are WeChat Official Accounts? The Basics: WeChat Essential Tips*'. Available from: <<http://chinachannel.co/what-are-wechat-official-accounts-the-basics-wechat-essential-tips/>>. [Accessed: 22 May 2017]. See also WeChat Official Account Admin Platform. '*Registration Instructions*'. Available from: <https://admin.wechat.com/cgi-bin/readtemplate?t=ibg_en/en_faq_tmpl&type=info&lang=en_US>. [Accessed: 22 May 2017].

⁵³⁹ Thomas Graziani. '*What are the Top Performing WeChat Accounts?*'. Available from: <<https://walkthechat.com/what-are-the-top-performing-wechat-accounts/>>. [Accessed: 23 May 2017].

Yan Yang (2016) notes that the article itself was viewed approximately three million times during *Hero is Back*'s wide theatrical release.⁵⁴⁰

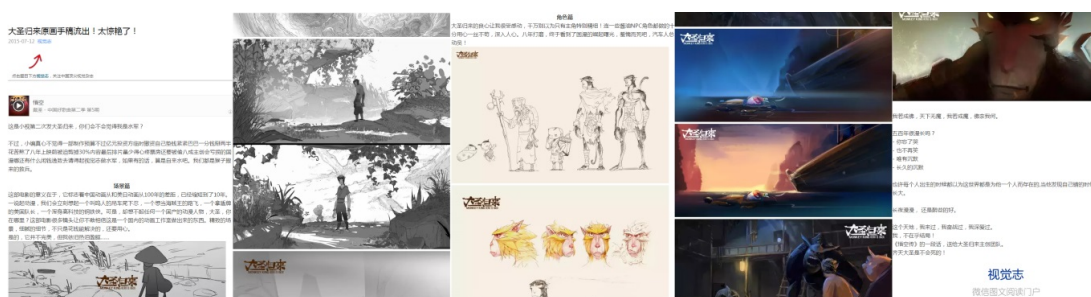


Fig 5.10: WeChat Article *Original Production Drawings and Concept Arts of Hero is Back has been released! It is so Gorgeous!* (in Chinese)

Meanwhile, another piece of promotional material named 'Why it (*Hero is Back*) suffers Poor Box Office Sales besides the High Reputation' (*Weishenme Ta Pingfen Name Gao, Piaofang Name 'Di'*), which voiced the author's discontent on *Hero is Back*'s low market share, was first released on the same day (12 July 2015) by 'Dsmovie' account (fig 5.11). This article has also rapidly spread on WeChat Moments and been viewed one million-plus times to date.⁵⁴¹ Afterwards, a large amount of similar articles have been produced and disseminated. While in fact the above WOM marketing campaigns on WeChat and WeChat Moments were not a series of spontaneous activities, instead they have been actively guided by the film's production company and distributor which admitted that over one hundred articles were actually produced and promoted by themselves.⁵⁴² By sharing the above articles on WeChat Moments, scattered enthusiasts in small groups can be associated through such inter-circle linkages. Therefore, a much larger and invisibly connected tap water community on WeChat has been formed based on the members' expressive needs for self-expression and communication, thus quickly synchronizing and reconciling the discussion topic to a large extent.

⁵⁴⁰ Yan Yang. 'Monkey King: Hero is Back: The Coexistence between Traditional Media and New New Media', *China Newspaper Industry*, 20 (2016), pp. 29-30, p. 30 [in Chinese].

⁵⁴¹ The number of views is accessed from the homepage of 'Dsmovie' on 24 May 2017.

⁵⁴² Bin Shi. 'Online WOM and Digitized Movie-Viewing Experience', *Contemporary Cinema*, 03(2016), pp. 175-178, p. 176 [in Chinese].



Fig 5.11: WeChat Article *Why it suffers poor Box Office Sales besides the High Reputation* (in Chinese)

The multi-step WOM promotional activities on Weibo and WeChat have, intentional or unintentional, cultivated a considerable amount of tap-waters, and then further formed a relatively organized and motivated tap water group. On 12 July 2015 several tap-waters exposed on Weibo that a part of *Hero is Back's* box office revenue was stolen by *Tiny Times 4.0* and *Forever Young*. Such widely spread commercial scandal has greatly influenced the latter two films, which was directly reflected in their market performance on 13 July 2015 when witnessed a nearly halved box office revenue compared to the previous day (the screening percentage of the two films on 13 July remained approximately the same as 12 July).⁵⁴³ Within this context, as suggested earlier, *Hero is Back* experienced a screen occupancy surge and became the single-day box office champion on 13 July 2015. Tap-waters became more enthusiastic and more involved in the process of promoting *Hero is Back* accompanied by the film's increasing popularity in the Chinese market. They have also endorsed the film with a flood of positive recommendations and reviews on Douban Movie and Mtime. Their efforts were even more prominent on Douban Movie, which has witnessed the procedure in terms of how *Hero is Back* becomes the most well-received NGCCA production (8.2 points).⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ Miao Zhang. 'Behind-the-Scenes Story of Hero is Back's Fight Back', *Business Management Review*, 08 (2015), pp. 29-31, p. 30 [in Chinese].

⁵⁴⁴ Douban Movie. 'Monkey King: Hero is Back'. Available from: <<https://movie.douban.com/subject/26277313/>>. [Accessed: 24 May 2017].

At the same time, tap-waters' online WOM communication activities have also extended offline. Similar to the promotional practices of the crowdfunding investors, a large number of tap-waters not only watched *Hero is Back* several times in cinema chains, but also made block bookings in order to invite their families and friends to watch the film. Thus, *Hero is Back* became a smash box office success motion picture, which earned approximately 300 million Chinese Yuan during the opening week and 600 million within 15 days after public release.⁵⁴⁵ Afterwards, regarding *Hero is Back's* phenomenal success in the cinema chains, the distributor announced on 5 August 2015 that the exhibition of the film would be increased for one more month due to the expanding demand from the market and satisfactory box office.⁵⁴⁶ As a result, the film has proved itself as a milestone among all the NGCCA works and has shown itself capable of indicating a new direction of film marketing in China.

Since the massive popularity of *Hero is Back*, there has been an increasingly number of NGCCA works that attempt to copy the former's successful online WOM promotional activities. Moreover, *Hero is Back's* pioneering practices have also been developed by its NGCCA successors. For example, the 2D feature-length animated fantasy *Big Fish & Begonia/Dayu Haitang* (Liang and Zhang, 2016) also used the WOM marketing strategy both online and offline. *Big Fish & Begonia* inherited *Hero is Back's* practical experiences like the celebrity endorsement on Weibo and the virus-like spread of WeChat Moment articles about the film. Furthermore, this film adopted crossover marketing, which featured the cooperation with other brands and franchises in various industries, to release peripheral products (cosmetics, clothes, accessories, musical instruments, stationaries, etc.).⁵⁴⁷ Thus, *Big Fish & Begonia* achieved high awareness in the mind of Chinese audiences before the wide release on 8 July 2016. Take Weibo as an

⁵⁴⁵ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of Monkey King: Hero is Back' Available from:

<<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=630887>>. [Accessed: 08 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵⁴⁶ Clifford Coonan. 'The Monkey King's Popularity in China Leads to Multiple New Projects' Available from: <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/monkey-kings-popularity-china-leads-813502>>. [Accessed: 25 May 2017].

⁵⁴⁷ Zhuolun Luo. 'The Marketing Mode of High-grossing Animated Film: Case Studies on Big Fish & Begonia and The Secret Life of Pets', *Chinese Film Market*, 11(2016), pp. 22-24, p. 23 [in Chinese].

example, the topic #Big Fish & Begonia# has been read 3.56 billion times on this platform.⁵⁴⁸ As a result, the film became a box office smash which earned 72.22 million Chinese Yuan in the premier day, its total box office receipts was 0.56 billion Chinese Yuan in the Chinese film market.⁵⁴⁹

5.2 Deconstruction and Reinterpretation: Sun Wukong in *Monkey King: Hero is Back*

5.2.1 Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back*: Reconstruction of Visual Appearance

In this section, I analyse the film's reconstruction of main characters in *Journey to the West* especially Sun Wukong. I also examine the entertainment value and storylines of *Hero is Back*. I argue that the overall appearance of Sun Wukong greatly subverts his counterparts in previous Chinese animation works. First, I briefly introduce the entertainment value of *Hero is Back*, which can be considered as the foundation of WOM marketing. Second, I examine the storyline of the film and the re-introduction of main cast (Xuan Zang, Sun Wukong, Pigsy, etc.) from *Journey to the West*. Third, I analyse how the creators rebuild the visual image of Sun Wukong from three aspects. Externally, Sun Wukong differentiates himself from the previous depictions on facial portrayal, body proportion and costume design. The above transformations not only illustrate how and to what extent the classic cartoon iconography of Sun Wukong has affected the creation of *Hero is Back*, but also reveals how the protagonist's fresh image helps to clarify the characterisation and storytelling.

The previous section examined how and to what extent online reviews, online recommendations and opinions have contributed to the phenomenal box office success of *Hero is Back*. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the WOM

⁵⁴⁸ Sina Weibo. 'Homepage of *Big Fish & Begonia*'. Available from: <<http://www.weibo.com/p/100120106020>>. [Accessed: 29 July 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵⁴⁹ China Box Office. 'The Box Office of *Big Fish & Begonia*'. Available from: <<http://m.cbooo.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=618087>>. [Accessed: 29 July 2017] [in Chinese].

communication will essentially serve as a panacea for all the subsequent NGCCA works. Finola Kerrigan, Andrew Hart and Sumanta Barua (2013) believe that 'the consumer's pre-perceptions and expectations of the film's quality will be examined alongside their views and assessments having consumed the film, and any negative correlations will be expressed verbally and undoubtedly affect future decisions regarding that film or similar'.⁵⁵⁰ In other words, the central premise of WOM marketing is the entertainment value of the specific film products which are perceived as having a higher quality than their counterparts in the market. Otherwise, the WOM connections between people, whether online or offline, would be like water without a source, a tree without roots.

In terms of *Hero is Back*, it can be argued that the film's WOM marketing was precisely built on the high standard production of its time. Made within eight years after initial project establishment, the 3D *Hero is Back* sets a new high bar on various technical aspects of animation creation such as 3D modelling, texturing, keyframe animation, cinematography, rendering and special effects that a lot of its NGCCA predecessors had considerable trouble in reaching a similar level. The production team had constantly improved the pictorial quality of the film. According to Tian Xiaopeng, an approximately one-minute chase footage, which features more than 1,500 frames, took six months to produce.⁵⁵¹ Correspondingly, the final appearance of *Hero is Back* was not only praised by the stunned Chinese audience, but also received compliment from Andrew Mason, the producer of Hollywood's *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, and its two sequels in 2003), who said that 'there is no involvement of a Hollywood team? According to my understanding of the industry, the cost of such a film will not be less than 100 million U.S. dollars'.⁵⁵²

⁵⁵⁰ Finola Kerrigan, Andrew Hart and Sumanta Barua. 'Film Marketing' in Daragh O'Reilly, Ruth Rentschler and Theresa A. Kirchner eds., *The Routledge Companion to Arts Marketing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013) pp.285-295, p.292.

⁵⁵¹ Qinghong Zhuang and Chaichai Tu. 'Young People behind the Scenes of Monkey King: Hero is Back' Available from: <http://tech.ifeng.com/a/20150731/41407676_0.shtml>. [Accessed: 30 May 2017] [in Chinese].

⁵⁵² Xinhua Net. 'The Man behind Screen hit Animation Monkey King'.

Furthermore, *Hero is Back* has established itself in the Chinese film market by both giving a fresh storytelling approach to the tale of *Journey to the West* and recreating several most well-known characters. The film, starring Sun Wukong, Jiang Liuer (childhood Xuan Zang), Pigsy and dragon-like White Dragon Horse, has stirred great enthusiasm among Chinese audiences by bringing back their collective memories. The creators use *Journey to the West* novel's ninth chapter *Chen Guangrui, going to his Post, meets Disaster; Monk River Float, avenging his Parents, repays his Roots/Chen Guangri Furen Fengzai; Jiangliuseng Fuchou Baoben* which depicts the family background of Xuan Zang, as a backdrop for *Hero is Back*.⁵⁵³ The film's prologue features a sequence of action scenes describing how the powerful and rebellious Sun Wukong fights against the divine troops descending from Heaven, then Sun Wukong was imprisoned under the Mountain of Five Elements after he had angered the Grand Buddha for his defiance against the Heaven. All Sun Wukong's magic power had been sealed by the mark of the Grand Buddha's punishment (a chain-like bracelet) correspondingly. Five hundred years later, the Mountain Trolls attack a group of migrating civilians and a male infant flees to the mountains. The surviving child floats on the river, where he is found and adopted by an old itinerant monk Fa Ming and then being named as Jiang Liuer (childhood Xuan Zang, literally means kid brought by the river). Afterwards, the juvenile monk Liuer and his master Fa Ming travel to a small mountain town, which is attacked by the Mountain Trolls who kidnap many children. Fa Ming and his apprentice get separated from each other in chaos. The latter saves a little girl (the Little One) and then releases the imprisoned Sun Wukong from the Mountain of Five Elements accidentally. Having heard of the Great Sage's legendary, Jiang Liuer begs the weakened Sun Wukong to save the remaining children who are abducted by the Mountain Trolls. However, Sun Wukong, who has lost superpower and more like a skilled martial artist, barely wins the fight against the formerly easily-beaten Mountain Lord (responsible for guarding Sun Wukong) with the help of Jiang Liuer. Therefore the decadent Sun Wukong rejects the young boy's appeal initially. As the story unfolds, Pigsy and White Dragon Horse subsequently join the former two's

⁵⁵³ Xuan Zang was born Chen Hui (the surname is Chen). Chen Guangrui is Xuan Zang's biological father in *Journey to the West* novel.

adventure. After a sequence of fast-paced fight scenes, Sun Wukong and his companions are roundly beaten by the Mountain Trolls and their ruthless leader Hun Dun the Demon King, who wants to pursue the immortality by extracting the essence of the kidnapped children. At the same time, the Little One is also captured by the evil-doers. Then the struggling Sun Wukong gradually regains his courage with the aid of Jiang Liuer's strong belief in him. On the day of the sacrificing ceremony, after fierce fighting with the antagonists, Sun Wukong finally rescues the seized children and reclaims all his superpower under the stimulus of Jiang Liuer's death.

It should be admitted here that in most cases the characterization of the above cast members is still not free from the set pattern formed in the original texts of *Journey to the West* and relevant media adaptations (talkative Xuan Zang, gluttonous and clownish Pigsy, etc.). Meanwhile, the deconstructive reinterpretation of Sun Wukong, a leading actor that is simultaneously strange and familiar, has won massive support from both children and young adult audiences as well as tap-waters, thus contributing further to *Hero is Back's* box office smash. As suggested in Chapter 2, Sun Wukong makes a guest appearance in *Lotus Lantern*, in which the character basically follows the visual design of its *Havoc in Heaven* predecessor with slight modifications. This practice has become a universal paradigm and then has been widely adopted by subsequent NGCCA works such as the Chinese-language animated TV series like *Monkey King Kid/Mei Houwang* (Chen, 2010) which starring the Monkey King (fig 5.12). However, the classic visual attributes of the animated Sun Wukong formed in the above-mentioned works, such as round ears, bright and decorative colour composition and leopard skirt, have been almost totally redesigned in *Hero is Back*. Within this context, the latter's creators build an unprecedented Sun Wukong by applying a series of fresh elements.



Fig 5.12: Sun Wukong in *Monkey King Kid*

The designers of *Hero is Back* reconstruct the overall appearance of Sun Wukong in three respects. First, compared with the previous depictions of the animated Sun Wukong as a young and energetic creature features round head and face, Tian Xiaopeng's creation shows viewers a middle-aged protagonist with long and narrow face as well as hollow cheeks. As illustrated in the figure, the Chinese Thunder God like mouth and ape-like flat nose has been kept in the process of creating a more simian-like face, which highlights Sun Wukong's nature as a monkey (fig 5.13). As discussed in Chapter 2, the classic facial image of Sun Wukong, inspired by the painted-face characters in Beijing Opera, is characterised by a sharp contrast between bright colours like willow green and luminous yellow. While in terms of *Hero is Back*, the adoption of natural skin and hair colours, which looks more like Sun Wukong's biological counterparts, forms a more realistic colour composition in the face design.



Fig 5.13: The Facial Design of Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back*

Second, the comparisons of body proportion between Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back* and past portrayal provide another example of Sun Wukong's wild nature. The character's proportion and relative size of body parts were shaped based on his human counterpart. To be specific, the ratio of head to body was often set as 1:5 features a slightly exaggerated head. The whole upper parts of the body, like human beings, were shorter than the lower parts and the ratio was approximately 1:1.3 (fig 5.14). In the case of *Hero is Back*, the proportion between Sun Wukong's head and body is stretched to the relatively lanky 1:7. Moreover, Sun Wukong's ratio of the upper body to the lower parts is reversed to 1.3:1 like his same species counterparts, which reflects the character's animal attributes (fig 5.15). Such transformations in the protagonist's physical appearance assist viewers to identify one of the character's key identities as a monkey-shaped warrior.

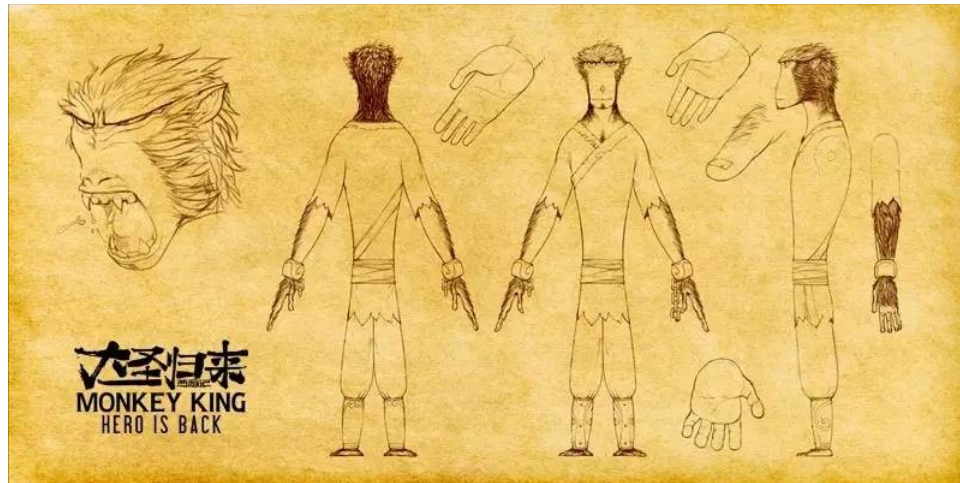


Fig 5.14: Sun Wukong's Body Design in *Hero is Back*

Third, Sun Wukong's clothing in *Hero is Back* is a good example of a functional costume design that helps to clarify the storytelling. In the film the animators created two distinct garments for Sun Wukong. The first set, worn by the irrepressible and all-powerful protagonist, initially appears in the film's prologue. Like his counterpart in the opening scenes of *Havoc in Heaven*, Sun Wukong is dressed in an oversized cloak, shoulder pauldron⁵⁵⁴ and two pheasant feathers (fig 5.15). As mentioned earlier, *Hero is Back* starts with the fierce battle between Sun Wukong and the divine troops (Four Heavenly Kings, Erlang Shen, etc.), which is a shorter version 3D replica of the climax of *Havoc in Heaven*.⁵⁵⁵ The costume along with the fast-moving action scenes not only salutes to its classic predecessor, but also immerses the audiences into a mysterious filmic world starring their most familiar hero. At the same time, *Hero is Back*'s climax illustrates the final battle between Sun Wukong and evil-doer Hun Dun. In the prologue and epilogue Sun Wukong is actually wearing the same outfit, which epitomizes the protagonist regains all his superpower under the stimulation of Jiang Liuer's sacrifice and an instance of the returning hero. Nevertheless, for the most part the film presents a

⁵⁵⁴ Pauldrons, as a type of armour, were 'large, shell-like pieces that covered the tops of the shoulders in front and back down to about the middle of the upper arm and attached to laces at the top of the shoulder of the arming doublet'. See Paul Newman. *Daily Life in the Middle Ages* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2001) p. 209.

⁵⁵⁵ In the Buddhist faith, the Four Heavenly Kings are four gods, each of whom watches over one cardinal direction of the world. See Shri Guru. *A Brief History of the Immortals of Non-Hindu Civilizations* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2015) p.67.

dispirited Sun Wukong that is reflected in his second garment. After five hundred years captivity in the Mountain of Five Elements, Sun Wukong loses his ornate outfits which symbolize his temporarily frozen magic powers. Correspondingly, the representative leopard skirt and thin-soled combat black boots have disappeared. Instead, the barefoot Sun Wukong wears shabby blue-grey trousers without any decorative items (fig 5.16). The only typical piece of clothing, which the leading actor has kept, is the yellow monk bonnet that foreshadows the later plots in terms of the character's transition from a wild monkey warrior to a Buddhist-like rescuer who fights for the kidnapped children.



Fig 5.15: Sun Wukong's First Garment in *Hero is Back*



Fig 5.16: Sun Wukong's Second Garment in *Hero is Back*

5.2.2 Sun Wukong as an Anti-heroic Character in the Context of Multiple Identities

In this section, I examine the anti-heroic Sun Wukong in the form of multiple identities. I argue that the reinterpretation of Sun Wukong in terms of personality has won support from viewers, thus further buttressing the film's WOM communication besides the overall entertainment value (as suggested earlier). First, I interpret how the film expresses Sun Wukong's divinity, animality and humanity. Overall, the former two identities are downplayed and the latter is greatly emphasized. Second, on the above basis, I analyse Sun Wukong as an antiheroic and

imperfect humanized character who largely contrasts with his animated predecessors. I examine how and to what extent the above transformations help the protagonist to achieve popularity among the audience members.

The subversive reconstruction of Sun Wukong's visual image in *Hero is Back*, which faces the challenge of meeting audience expectations in terms of the character's fidelity and innovation to the preceding representations, is actually not objectionable to the Chinese filmgoers. On the contrary, this most atypical image for Sun Wukong appears to have been in considerable favour with the public. Here, I argue that the above phenomenon is partly due to the reinterpretation of the character's multiple identities that mix and blend the divine spirit as a sacred animal, the monkey instinct and more importantly, the ordinary human nature. Overall, compared with the previous depictions, it can be said that the former two personalities have been relatively downplayed while the importance of the latter has been greatly emphasized. Previously, the animated Sun Wukong was always labelled as an intelligent sacred monkey with remarkable abilities, and the animators worked to maintain such stereotypical image. Since the above practices started with the creation of *Havoc in Heaven*, they have been deeply embedded within the understandings of what Sun Wukong should be like. It is also difficult to separate the character from his supernatural abilities and inherent recalcitrant enthusiasm.

Take as an example Sun Wukong's first animated adventure in PRC *Havoc in Heaven*. Single-handed battle with the whole divine troops and Laozi, the film ends with the thorough triumph of the protagonist who returns the Flowers and Fruits Mountain and re-hangs the flag as the 'Great Sage Equal to Heaven' (fig 5.17). Such epilogue largely contrasts with its original *Journey to the West* novel counterpart, which features the five hundred year's punishing imprisonment for Sun Wukong imposed by the Grand Buddha (similar to *Hero is Back*). On one hand, the viewers may indeed get infused with the omniscient Great Sage's rebellious spirits. While on the other hand, Sun Wukong's consistent mythical thoughts are rigorously organized into a God-human dichotomy, thus distancing him from the audience to

some extent. Similarly, the subsequent works especially the SAFS creations starred Sun Wukong have also been characterised as the sacred monkey legendary. In other words, Sun Wukong's typical divinities have been serving as a foundation for his characterisation.

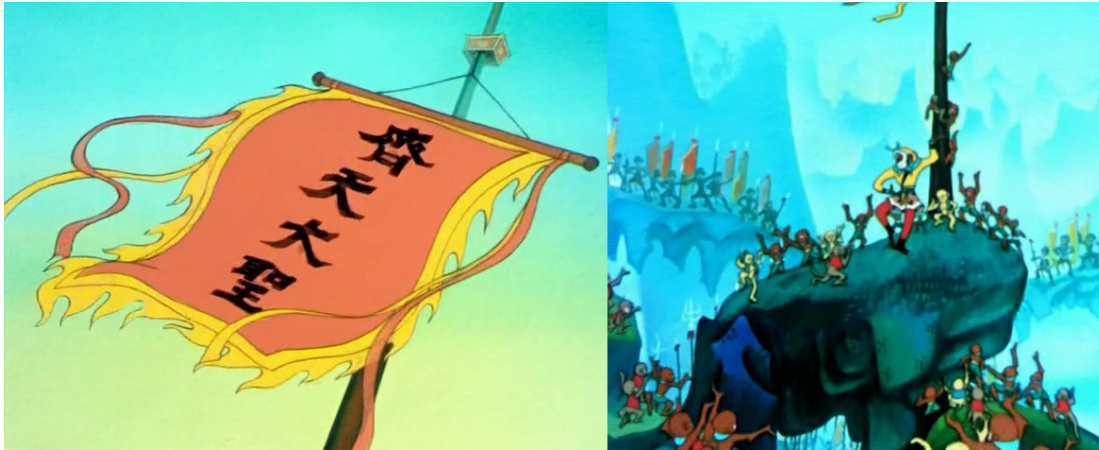


Fig 5.17: The Rehanging of 'Great Sage Equal to Heaven' Flag (left) and Sun Wukong returns to the Flowers and Fruits Mountain (right) in *Havoc in Heaven*

For instance, SAFS's science-popularized-themed cinema animation *The Monkey King and Ding Ding/Ding Ding Zhan Houwang* (Hu Jinqing, 1980) features the mythological Sun Wukong's adventure in modern society accompanied with an elementary school student named Ding Ding. In the film the traditional hero challenges Ding Ding, who holds the key to modern scientific knowledge, in a series of battles in places like deep sea and outer space. Beaten by the cutting-edge spacecraft and underwater exploration ship driven by Ding Ding, even Sun Wukong, who has magic powers like shape-shifting and cloud-travelling abilities, finally admits to his ignorance when it comes to scientific knowledge. Here the power of science is demonstrated by the contrast between the way it works and Sun Wukong's superhuman strength which sustains high levels of recognition and identification among audiences. In this sense, the story is largely built on the notion that Sun Wukong is an omnipotent creature. As discussed in Chapter 2, the guest appearance Sun Wukong ascends to Buddhahood and being rewarded as the Victorious Fighting Buddha in the first NGCCA production *Lotus Lantern*. Although for the most part the character is reluctant to help the protagonist due to both conscious mental restriction and unconscious bondage of authority around him, but

this does not mean the Victorious Fighting Buddha's strength has been undermined by his relatively listless behaviour. Rather, his assistance plays a vital role in Chen Xiang's saving mother campaign after he has finally awakened to a consciousness of the essence of his Buddhahood.

Whereas, in *Hero is Back*, Sun Wukong's symbolic divinities in the animation world are greatly suppressed besides the prologue and epilogue which feature the exposition about the character's background story and eventually awakening respectively. Instead, as suggested earlier, the film shows a sealed Sun Wukong who only keeps his martial art skills like an ordinary monkey warrior in most other scenarios, which emphasize the mortal quality of the character. Even the once despised Mountain Lord, during his battle with the lost magic power Sun Wukong, in turn scorns the leading actor by saying, 'Monkey King, you still bear the mark of Buddha's punishment. You are now only a useless monkey! What outdated attitude is that of yours. My fist will crush you!'. Mountain Lord's arrogant manifesto further splits the stereotyped image of Sun Wukong who was infinitely resourceful in previous depictions. Moreover, as illustrated in the figure, the floundering protagonist is constantly blocked from becoming and being himself (a sacred hero) under the constraint of the virtually indestructible seal of Grand Buddha (a chain-like bracelet) (fig 5.18). In this context of a coexistence of counter-divinity and secularity, Sun Wukong's repressed supernatural abilities can be considered as a mental bridge between the mortal protagonist and audience members. Thus, Tian Xiaopeng's production creates a relatively mortal Sun Wukong who falls in distress and dispossession and the audiences are invited to sympathize with him by contrasting and contradicting memories of the previous portrayal.



Fig 5.18: Sun Wukong is constrained by the seal of Grand Buddha

Besides the declining immortality, Sun Wukong's monkey nature and the corresponding behaviour pattern are also downplayed in *Hero is Back*. As suggested in Chapter 2, the character's visual design in *Havoc in Heaven* and subsequent cinema animation works is basically based on artistic creation of stage characters in Beijing opera. Similarly, the animated Sun Wukong on Chinese cinema screens is also characterised by his restless animal instinct such as the vivacious and wild nature, and his monkey-like habit of ear tweaking and cheek scratching which are mainly extracted and readapted from his counterpart's dramatic stage performance in Beijing opera. In other words, one of the main emphasises in constructing Sun Wukong in animations, though existing in various degrees in different creations, has always been the expression of his animal-like action. In the case of *Hero is Back*, Sun Wukong, at least on the surface, is more like his biological counterparts when comparing with the previous depictions in terms of facial design and body proportion. However, things are not always as what they seem to be. Interestingly, Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back* behaves exactly as an ordinary human being usually behaves such as the gestures and the way he or she walks. Meanwhile, the above mentioned monkey-like behaviour pattern is almost totally abandoned in the film, thus creating a fresh Sun Wukong in a more anthropomorphic form and laying a

foundation for the emphatic portrayal of the character's humanity that contrasts with its traditional image.

The above restrained immortality and animality radically return Sun Wukong to his humanity, in the sense that he is acting and performing in a way that may be regarded as an antihero protagonist who, trapped by circumstances beyond his control, finds himself in a dilemma between the heroic instinct and the realistic conditions of powerlessness. Peter Jonason, Gregory Webster, David Schmitt, Norman Li and Laura Crysel in their 2012 psychology studies maintain that the antihero is a leading actor whose personality is clearly contrary to a stereotypical hero.⁵⁵⁶ They also believe the antihero role is generally treated as male-specific by the public.⁵⁵⁷ Frank Beaver (2006) defines the terms antihero as 'a character in a film, play, or novel who is a sympathetic figure but who is presented as a non-heroic individual-often apathetic, angry, and indifferent to social, political, and moral concerns'.⁵⁵⁸ That is to say, the antihero, mostly as a protagonist, turns into the hero's opposite side. The former deconstructs the heroic qualities in the conventional sense, thus building an externally imperfect iconography. More importantly, the antihero focuses on ordinariness and on the mortal characteristics which turn heroism inward. In *Hero is Back*, an antihero like Sun Wukong is not only expressed in outward appearance and ability settings, but more importantly, in his personality portrayal. First, as mentioned earlier, *Hero is Back* starring a horse-faced and long-nosed monkey with old and decrepit costume on his body in most scenes, which largely contradicts the traditional heroic image of himself who features a handsome appearance. Furthermore, the sealed Sun Wukong loses almost all his magic powers like shape-shifting, cloud-travelling and golden-gaze fiery-eyes which symbolize his mythological identity as a Chinese superhero. Correspondingly, the character is often acutely upset by his helplessness in fighting

⁵⁵⁶ Peter Jonason, Gregory Webster, David Schmitt, Norman Li and Laura Crysel. 'The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits', *Review of General Psychology*. Vol. 16, No.3, 2012, pp. 192-199, p.192.

⁵⁵⁷ Peter Jonason, Gregory Webster, David Schmitt, Norman Li and Laura Crysel. p.195.

⁵⁵⁸ Frank Beaver. *Dictionary of Film Terms: The Aesthetic Companion to Film Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006) p. 15.

the evil-doers and rescuing the kidnapped children, which reveals the disparity between his remaining heroic qualities and a realistic dilemma situation. Second, Sun Wukong, as an antiheroic role, is portrayed by his personality transformation when comparing with previous depictions. Ganjian Lai (1995) argues that most of the fictional antiheroic characters tend to have a strong sense of self-awareness and rebelliousness, meanwhile their actions and the corresponding behavioural results often run directly counter to the original aspirations, thus entrapping them into an inner contradiction.⁵⁵⁹ As suggested in the plot summaries, in the film's rising action the sealed power Sun Wukong, Pigsy and Jiang Liuer are totally defeated by Hun Dun and his Mountain Troll subordinates. After the combat takes place on a river boat, the unconscious members of the righteous side are washed on the shore. Then the awakened Jiang Liu pleads Sun Wukong that (fig 5.19),

Jiang Liuer: Great Sage, please go and rescue the Little One! Great Sage!

Sun Wukong: She's not my problem.

Jiang Liuer: Great Sage!

Sun Wukong: Neither are you! I just need to go my own way. She's yours, you can take care of her.

Pigsy: He can't, you know that.

Sun Wukong: You want to be the hero? Go ahead! I didn't ask to be saddled with any of you!

Jiang Liuer: But... you are the protector! The legends say... (Sun Wukong keeps his head down)

⁵⁵⁹ Ganjian Lai. 'Antihero — An Important Role in Postmodern Literature', *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 01 (1995), pp. 140-146, p.144 [in Chinese].



Fig 5.19: The Conversation among Sun Wukong, Pigsy and Jiang Liuer

The above dialogues illustrate Sun Wukong's anxiety and frustrating emotions which arise from the discrepancy between his remaining heroic instinct and the nearly impossible child-rescuing campaign within the context of Grand Buddha bondage. The self-accused Sun Wukong not only distinctly differentiates himself from the previous media representations of what he is being understood as a sacred and power creature, but also contrasts his courageous counterpart in the original *Journey to the West* literature. In the novel Sun Wukong assures his master that 'You mustn't worry, for if you have old Monkey, everything will be all right even if the sky collapses. Don't be afraid of any tiger or wolf!' (Xuan Zang fears that tigers and other monsters might harm him and his disciples when they approach a tall mountain).⁵⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the anti-heroic Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back*, who rises from an underdog position to one control over his own destiny, does not jeopardize his image as an all-time favourite cartoon idol that enjoys cross-generational popularity among Chinese audiences. On one hand, Sun Wukong is constrained by the loss of all supernatural strengths in most scenes in the film. Whereas, the

⁵⁶⁰ Chengen Wu. *The Journey to the West*, Revised Edition, Volume 2, translated and edited by Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013) p.88.

protagonist still preserves his basic sense of righteousness as abhors anything which is evil. Such familiar setting reveals that Sun Wukong is still essentially virtuous, which does not alienate himself too far from viewers' nostalgic memories about this character that are formed through the recollections of a Sun Wukong repertoire.

While on the other hand, in *Hero is Back* Sun Wukong indeed lacks the conventional heroic elements shared by his predecessors like the indomitable spirit and moral courage, he is more like an ordinary people who is beset by the inner struggles. A major element of the main conflict situation in the film appears to be the mismatching between Sun Wukong's supernatural-ability-based heroic desire and the lost power reality, thus turning him into a hero's opposite side which is illustrated by his initial cowardice and escape when facing the evil and powerful Hun Dun. Ying Zhu (2015) maintains that *Hero is Back's* main contribution to Chinese cinema animation is to build an imperfect and individualistic Sun Wukong.⁵⁶¹ I agree with her argument because the film not only portrays an antiheroic Sun Wukong who lacks the typical fearless and aggressive qualities, but also reinterprets the character from a fresh perspective who epitomizes the process of a modern individual's continuous self-improvement and self-development. In this sense, Sun Wukong's pursuit of personal value and identity, which is mainly illustrated by his struggle to recover from lost power status, makes an intertextual connection to the growing concern with individual subjectivity within the context of the Internet age. Therefore, the leading actor, who finds himself in the embarrassing situation features the inherent anxiety, easily strike a chord with young audience members in their 20s and 30s who feel deeply bound by the stress that has been imposed by social reality and ability constraint, thus causing the latter to empathize the former in a way that closely resemble a real-life emotional response.

⁵⁶¹ Ying Zhu. 'Has Chinese Film Finally Produced a Real Hero?' Available from: <<https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/culture/has-chinese-film-finally-produced-real-hero>>. [Accessed: 08 February 2017].

Moreover, the approachable Sun Wukong's entertaining attitudes in *Hero is Back* differentiates himself from the more conventional depictions, such as the relentless fighting Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven* and top-status and preaching Victorious Fighting Buddha in *Lights Lantern*. For example, Sun Wukong and Jiang Liuer meet at the film's beginning when the protagonist is accidentally released by the latter from the Mountain of Five Elements. Liuer, a Great Sage worshipper, constantly keeps asking his idol about the latter's legendary,

Jiang Liuer: Great Sage, does God Juling really have the strength of a giant?

Sun Wukong: Of course.

Jiang Liuer: Are the Four Heavenly Kings brothers?

Sun Wukong: They are sisters.

Jiang Liuer: Is Nezha a boy?

Sun Wukong: A girl.

Jiang Liuer: How'd you get all your powers?

Sun Wukong: I ate a bunch of magic bananas.

In this dialogue, Sun Wukong deliberately inverts the relations and sexuality of the above Chinese mythological figures (actually the Four Heavenly Kings are brothers and Nezha is a boy) and the originality of his supernatural power, which highlights the character's unprecedented sense of humour. The above expression of Sun Wukong's ordinariness can also be regarded as an important component of being an antiheroic role, thus further deconstructing his archetypal heroic image in Chinese animation.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the analysis of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, which represents the new direction of not only original NGCCA works but the whole Chinese-language animated films in terms of WOM marketing and character establishment. Besides the continuous mighty imported productions, the derivative cinema animations had retained an overwhelming advantage relative to their original counterparts in terms of box office appeal until the first half of 2015. In the same year Chinese film market also experienced a blowout growth, which climaxed on the box office miracle of domestically-made feature-length

films in the summer blackout period when overseas competitors were totally banned from Chinese cinema screens. Such protectionism has, to some extent, led to the phenomenal box office success of live action cinematic creations. Established on this basis, government authorities have also tried to provide specific supportive policies to promote the development of NGCCA works. However, the government intervention received lukewarm reception in the animation market which was illustrated by the prevalent tepid box office results (both original and derivative animated films), the only exception was *Hero is Back*. Being challenged by the broad-based live action creations which were screened in similar timescale, the original *Hero is Back* made a counter back in the context of an initial adverse situation. As a consequence, the latter has become a critical and box office smash.

Initiated by one of the co-producers, the film's crowdfunding campaign attracted a certain amount of investment. The project also converted the investors into the voluntary propagandists for their investee. However, similar to its *Kuiba 1* counterpart, the above advance publicity efforts were confined to limited spaces and thus might have little impact on a national scale. Instead, the subsequent massive success of *Hero is Back* in cinema chains can be largely attributed to the use of WOM marketing strategy. Overall, the film's WOM communication process has been actively promoted and guided by the distributor. To be specific, the latter gave *Hero is Back* two rounds of limited release which resulted in not only considerable box office revenue, but more importantly, the accumulation of online enthusiasts—the tap water community which can be regarded as the vital driving force of the film's booming reputation and box office surge.

Members of tap water group have mainly promoted the film on Weibo and WeChat which are the two largest Chinese-language social networking services. At the beginning, the individual supporters of the film posted positive comments and reviews on their Weibo accounts. Then the above fragmented WOM promoting behaviours have been well connected by a purpose-built Weibo account (Tap Water Company) which serves as a self-organized interaction platform for tap-

waters by reposting fan-made works. Meanwhile, *Hero is Back's* WOM advertising has been fuelled by the endorsements from Weibo celebrities (organized by the distributor) who are more influential in pushing online opinions in particular directions. Through the above process, Big V endorsers, as the vertically opinion leaders, have exerted a direct impact on their followers' viewing choice. Moreover, *Hero is Back's* official Weibo account has also gradually transformed itself into a dynamic enthusiasts-based platform which is similar to the practices of its unofficial Tap Water Company counterpart, thus further igniting the enthusiasm of existing tap-waters and encouraging the potential participants.

Compared with Weibo in which the information is almost transparent, WeChat features a more intimate conversation between real-world acquaintances. Initially, scattered WeChat users as well as pioneering tap-waters spread the positive comments of film in a small circle. Correspondingly, the effects of WOM communication in WeChat platform has been limited by the spreading scope. However, separate small circles can be connected by the shared reading experiences of WeChat Moments articles reposted by cross-circles associates. The above contents produced by WeChat official accounts, which functioned as a soft-sell advertising approach, have provided a major impetus for the film's virus-like spreading across WeChat network. Meanwhile, the WOM promotional campaigns targeting WeChat users were not entirely spontaneous. Instead, like its Weibo counterpart, the above actions have also been intentionally managed by the production company and distributor. As a result, tap-waters, who are mainly accumulated and gathered in Weibo and WeChat, have exerted their influences both online and offline (especially during the *Hero is Back's* opening week), thus directly leading to the film's box office miracle.

It is worth noting that the WOM marketing of a certain film is essentially based on the latter's entertainment value. In the case of *Hero is Back*, it not only sustains its competitive advantage over domestic competitors in 3D animation techniques and pictorial quality, but also reinterprets a series of classic cast members in *Journey to the West* especially the protagonist Sun Wukong. Narrating the oldest

Chinese tales in a modern story-telling approach, *Hero is Back* recreates a brand new animated Sun Wukong that largely contrasts the previous depictions and wins massive support from audiences. First, the film largely reconstructs the overall appearance of Sun Wukong. Unlike its predecessors which basically adopted the design paradigm originated from *Havoc in Heaven* with minor adjustments, *Hero is Back*'s protagonist features several fresh elements. Tian Xiaopeng's creation displays a middle-aged Sun Wukong who features a more monkey-like facial design and body proportion. Moreover, besides the film's prologue and epilogue that recalls an acquainted handsome Sun Wukong, the leading actor is characterised by his tatter garment in most other scenes.

An atypical Sun Wukong is not rejected by viewers, but instead tends to be favoured by them. The reason can be partially attributed to the re-expression of the protagonist as a creature with different identifications. Previously, Sun Wukong was always characterised by his supernatural abilities such as cloud-travelling and shape-shifting, which differentiated himself from other non-sacred figures. However, in *Hero is Back* Sun Wukong's classic divinities are constrained by the Grand Buddha's seal. In the meantime, the character's distinctive monkey-like habitual behaviours are also being downplayed. On this basis, Sun Wukong is emphatically depicted as an antihero leading actor with complex human nature. On one hand, he still keeps his basic heroic instinct under the aspect of a basic dilemma of lose/restore power. On the other hand, the lack of the typical heroic qualities highlights Sun Wukong's ordinariness as an average person. Here the more humanized Sun Wukong serves as a mirror for audiences under the similar situation, thus helping the latter to identify themselves with the image of the former.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

This thesis has discussed the new generation Chinese cinema animation between 1995 and 2015 (NGCCA) both in the context of Chinese cinema and of Chinese cultural creative industries more broadly. The above period witnessed Chinese animators' multi-directional exploration of animation aesthetics, which can be considered as a result of interplay between local (fine art films, traditional Chinese cultures, etc.) and overseas (widely-recognized aesthetic paradigms of mainstream commercial animated works from Japan and America) creative practices.

Furthermore, since 1995, the production and circulation of the Chinese animation sector has transformed from the government-led initiatives to a market-oriented behaviour, which has been accompanied by the free flow of private capital to domestic animation market. Having examined current literature, I found that there were very few comprehensive studies of Chinese cinema animation, especially those produced over the past two decades. Recent scholarly and popular interest in Chinese cinema, as well as industry interest in the Chinese market, suggest that animation in China is a subject that has attracted massive attention. My research is thus timely in charting significant new areas of Chinese cinema animation which has been gaining increasingly economic importance, a field that is badly in need of theoretical support.

The NGCCA works can be broadly divided into two groups: one is the totally original productions without pre-existing audience awareness, the other is derivative films which are the cinematic creations of the broad-based entertainment franchises. On the whole, the latter has shown a stronger box office appeal than the former within the context of imported rival products' overall competitive advantage (except the box office of the original *Monkey King: Hero is Back*). Regarding the current market situation and development trend of NGCCA, I selected four distinct case studies which can best represent Chinese full-length animated films from 1995 to 2015 (*Lotus Lantern*, *Boonie Bear*, *Kuiba* and *Monkey King: Hero is Back*). These individual or serialized films also epitomize key aspects with regard to the role of original and derivative productions in shaping a Chinese cinema animation panorama over the

last two decades. For example, the *Boonie Bears* series and *Kuiba* series are chosen because they are the representative works of original and derivative films respectively. This thesis combines the industry/film policy focussed approach and aesthetic/textual analysis method for the purpose of highlighting the dual identity of NGCCA works, which served not only as a form of cultural product of the Chinese cultural creative industries, but as an important subgenre of Chinese cinema. I will rearticulate the contribution of this thesis separately by providing more details below, in order to further demonstrate what original observations about the industrial and aesthetic aspects of NGCCA works have been gained by this project.

6.1 The Main Findings of this Thesis: An Industry/Film Policy Focussed Approach

The production of cinema animation had long been considered as one of the chief components of socialist cultural undertakings in China. Accordingly, Chinese animations had been funded and circulated by the state-owned China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation before 1995. Under this background, the primary goal of Chinese animators and other creative crew members was to explore a distinctive Chinese style in animation aesthetics and to educate the children. That is to say, Chinese animations works, especially those known as the Chinese School style, were more like pure artistic creations without considering market response. However, this situation started to change in tandem with a process of marketization of Chinese animation sector since 1995. In the meantime, overseas blockbusters (mainly from Hollywood) have been re-imported into China for the purpose of stimulating the floundering domestic industry. Under the massive pressure from foreign competitors, Chinese industry practitioners have started to explore the possibilities of their own blockbuster films.

In Chapter 2 I examined *Lotus Lantern* (1999), I argued this film was the first attempt of the Chinese cinema animation blockbuster, which was created and promoted under the direct influence of Disney's *The Lion King* in China. This is also

the first time that Chinese animators learnt and adopted Hollywood animation techniques such as the internationally applied production standard and characters based on real-life people. *Lotus Lantern* was the first feature-length Chinese animated film that matched the animation part with the pre-recorded dialogue soundtrack, which produced a more natural motion of the main characters when compared to the previous works. As I have argued in this chapter, star dubbed performance has become a mature industrial mode in Hollywood. Regarding this, the pre-recorded sounds in *Lotus Lantern* were mainly dubbed by celebrated actors and actresses in Chinese-language films. Among all the film stars Jiang Wen played a pioneering role, albeit unintentionally, in the development of Chinese animation by applying his facial features to the main antagonist Erlang Shen. Like its Hollywood counterparts, *Lotus Lantern* also invited well-known popular music artists to perform the theme songs and interludes. These strategies laid a foundation for the film's advance publicity and promotion. On this basis, *Lotus Lantern* endeavoured to explore the possibilities of the industrial and massive circulation of Chinese cinema animation such as the advertisements on TV channels and development of derivatives. The above multi-level strategies have made *Lotus Lantern* the first ever full-length Chinese animated film that achieved commercial success. Moreover, the successful industrial practices (production, promotion, etc.) of *Lotus Lantern* presented a fresh and effective profit model for NGCCA at its initial stage, which has not only directly influenced the marketization of the state-owned SAFA, but also provided a plausible direction for the subsequent NGCCA works.

The production of cinema animation had remained a government-led behaviour until 2004, when SARFT/SAPPRFT released an official guidance document that encouraged the private capital to enter the Chinese animation market. Since then, privately-owned animation companies have gradually become the main market player in the cinema animation sector. Within this context, I argued that the derivative films (albeit with some limitations), which were mainly produced by private studios, have a stronger competitive advantage than their totally original counterparts. Chapter 3 focussed on the analysis of the derivative *Boonie Bears* series especially the first two films *Rescue* (2014) and *Winter* (2015), which were

the film adaptations of popular animated TV series. I selected *Boonie Bears* for a case study because compared with its derivative counterparts, the former has retained a durable high box office returns by competing with the most powerful domestic competitor *Pleasant Goat* series. I argued that the *Boonie Bears* series, which was created by the privately-owned Shenzhen Huaqiang Digital Animation Company, has also been playing a leading role in the industrial production and circulation of derivative works such as the effective promotional activities and product placement.

The marketing strategies of *Rescue* and *Winter* were analysed separately. In the case of *Rescue*, considering the vital roles of cartoon channels and Internet in accessing new animations in China, the distributors of the *Boonie Bears* series Mr. Cartoon and Le Vision implemented three tactics in the above platforms to achieve different potential audience members on the basis of high-intensity traditional marketing efforts (posters, stand advertising cardboards, etc.). To be specific, Mr. Cartoon published a large amount of advertisements on Chinese-language cartoon channels in order to maximize the film's awareness among the audience of children. In the meantime, Le Vision promoted *Rescue* using its mobile application *Leyingke* by formulating a series of limited releases, thus winning the Word-Of-Mouth reputation among young parents as well as Internet users. *Rescue's* marketing campaigns showed a synergistic effect between different platforms, which have directly lead to the film's box office success. *Winter* not only inherited the efficient practices which were explored by its *Rescue* predecessor, but also developed several new strategies regarding the changing thematic intention. The film positioned itself as a cultural product that was suitable for three-generation families' consumption, which also intensified its cross-generational appeal. *Winter* also played a pioneering role in promoting NGCCA works by inviting celebrity families in reality TV show as the spokespeople, thus creating an affirmative connection between the film and celebrities. Moreover, *Rescue* and *Winter* made several beneficial attempts for the product placement in NGCCA, which can be represented by its partnership with Fantawild Adventure Theme Park. The above cooperation has led to a win-win scenario for the two brands, which illustrated that

the derivative films can serve as an important link of the industry chain as I have argued in this chapter.

The year of 2011 witnessed the largest gap of the box office revenues between derivative and original NGCCA works particularly the commercial dilemma of the original *Kuiba 1* and *The Tibetan Dog*, two works that represent the sharpest contrast between the relatively sound reputation (online and offline) and box office failure. Vasoon Animation Studio, the production company of *Kuiba 1*, proceeded to produce two sequels despite the initial setback in terms of box office receipts, which epitomized Chinese animators' ambition to create a Chinese style high-end animated fantasy franchise. In this sense, *Kuiba 1* served as the first instalment and prelude of the five-part *Kuiba* stories. Moreover, *Kuiba 1* can be considered as the representative of the whole series. Chapter 4 analysed the deeper causes of the relatively critically acclaimed *Kuiba 1*'s box office failure by examining both the filmic content itself and the promotional activities.

I argued that the production of *Kuiba* series (2011, and its sequels 2013 and 2014) was another attempt by the Chinese animation sector to replicate the West's creative practices in terms of worldview construction besides *Lotus Lantern*'s initial exploration. Hoping to build itself as the privileged text like *Harry Potter* and *LOTR* novels for the purpose of laying a foundation for the later development of multimedia franchise, animators in Vasoon tried to create a fictional and immersive fantasy universe in *Kuiba* series even in the first instalment. Regarding the demand for franchise development, *Kuiba 1* arranged a five-minute opening sequence, which featured the grand scenarios and a large amount of obscure notions, for the purpose of immersing viewers in the Yuan Yang world as an alternate universe as quickly as possible. However, the actual result largely contrasted with the creators' expectation. As I have argued, the overly informative prologue failed to serve as the carrier of necessary contextual information of the *Kuiba* narrations. Furthermore, the opening scenes did not reconcile with the later plots, which also contrasted with perceptions from the audiences. Meanwhile, the market identity of *Kuiba 1*, as the 'introductory mark' of the serialized animated films, was not recognized by the

majority of the audience. The above misconception was largely due to the film's unclear and confusing narrative strategy. Worse still, the commercial dilemma of *Kuiba 1* was exasperated by the ineffective advance publicity. The main distributor Toonmax media misplaced the promotional information on the wrong media platforms due to tactical errors by the company, which suffered the consequences of being ignored by the target audiences. In the meantime, the influence of Vasoon's efforts in promoting *Kuiba 1* in Beijing city had also been proved pretty limited compared with the overall market situation. The distribution and exhibition process of *Kuiba 1* also demonstrated how the original NGCCA works have been dragged down by the stereotyped impressions of domestically produced animation.

Meanwhile, a large number of unorganized audiences have expressed scattered support for *Kuiba 1* accompanied with the spread of the film's positive feedbacks online and offline. The above efforts, however made little contribution to the film's total box office receipts, played an unintentionally pioneering role in promoting the Word-of-Mouth (WOM) reputation of NGCCA works, which provided the basis for the original *Hero is Back*'s massive box office success in 2015. The Chinese film market also experienced explosive growth in this year, which was represented by the box office blowout of domestically-made motion pictures in the summer film season. This phenomenon can be directly attributed to the screen quota policy imposed by the government (known as 'domestic film protection month' or 'summer blackout period'). At the same time, the relevant government authorities also implemented supportive policies, in order to protect the screening percentage of NGCCA works in domestic cinema chains. Nevertheless, the above government intervention solutions received a lukewarm result in the animation market except the box office miracle of *Hero is Back*. Regarding this issue, in Chapter 5 I examined the reasons behind the massive commercial success of this film and how this film made a counter back in the market under massive pressure from two fan-based live action competitive rivals.

In this chapter I argued that the phenomenal popularity of *Hero is Back* in theatres was largely due to the adoption of a WOM marketing strategy. Initially, the film's

advance publicity, like its *Kuiba 1* predecessor, was also limited to interpersonal communications in a relatively closed circle. This situation started to change through the gradually increasing WOM communication of the film online and offline, which was consciously guided by the distributor and production company. Tap Water Group, the semi-self-organized online fan community that formed at the same time as *Hero is Back*'s two rounds of limited release, can be regarded as the backbone in enhancing and promoting the film's positive reviews. Having examined the tap-waters' online activities, I found that they have primarily promoted *Hero is Back*'s WOM reputation on two most commonly used domestic social networks Weibo and WeChat. As an online social service with its open access and anonymous identity attributes, the scattered and fight-alone tap-waters have been well connected with the multi-level association between the purpose-built Weibo account (Tap Water Company as an online enthusiasts gathering place), Weibo celebrities and the film's official Weibo account. In the meantime, the once intimate WOM communications in WeChat, which were often limited to relatively isolated small circles, have been connected by the shared reading experiences of WeChat Moments articles reposted by cross-circles associates. I argued that the above-mentioned online activities have resulted in the expansion of tap water community and accumulation of the film's WOM reputation, thus directly leading to *Hero is Back*'s box office surge besides the initial adverse situation. The film's promotional practices also point the later Chinese animated films in a new direction in terms of WOM marketing like the case of *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016).

6.2 The Main Findings of this Thesis: An Aesthetic/Film Studies Method

As suggested earlier, *Lotus Lantern* was the first NGCCA work that adopted Hollywood techniques. In Chapter 2 I also argued that Chinese and Hollywood iconography has influenced the film's production on an aesthetic level. The story of *Lotus Lantern* is derived from the traditional Chinese tale *Splitting the Mountain to Save Mother* which was also being adapted to SAFS's feature-length puppet animation *Saving Mother* in 1980s. Unlike *Saving Mother* as a pure artistic creation,

the animators of *Lotus Lantern* considered the 1999 production as a market-oriented and audience-oriented animation. Therefore, they made several adjustments like the rearrangement of narrative sequences and the expression of ethnic minority cultures. More importantly, the classic pre-NGCCA cartoon idol, Sun Wukong, is reintroduced in the film as a guest appearance. In this chapter I examined the Buddha-like Sun Wukong using formalistic approach and textual analysis. The symbolic cartoon appearance of Sun Wukong is gradually formed through a series of fine art films such as *Havoc in Heaven* and *The Monkey King Conquers the Demon*. Sun Wukong in *Lotus Lantern* basically follows his above classic representations while replaces several visual elements (facial design, costume design, etc.) based on the character's identity change in the mythological world. Moreover, the film recreates a brand new Sun Wukong, albeit similar to his predecessors in visual appearance, by endowing him strong perceptual thoughts and normal human emotional responses. I analysed how this character transforms from a neutral bystander to an enthusiastic helper, thus playing a vital role in the protagonist Chen Xiang's saving mother campaign.

Chapter 2 also considered how *Lotus Lantern* borrows Hollywood iconography by comparing the characterization between the film and *The Lion King*. The Chinese-language live action children films and animations have had a long tradition of building a 'revolutionary hero-like' child as a protagonist especially the period before 1976. These leading actors were represented by Pan Dongzi in *Sparkling Red Star*, they were more like the politicized mini-adults rather than normal children with natural emotional responses. In the case of *Lotus Lantern*, the above old traces and creative inertia can still be found in the character building of the protagonist Chen Xiang, who abruptly changes from a simple-minded and obedient child to a tough-minded and courageous small soldier after making a decision to rescue his mother without foreshadowing his internal or external transformation. While compared to the characterization of Chen Xiang, the portrayal of Simba in *The Lion King*, which drew on a European tradition, shows how Hollywood studios interpret a leading character in animated film. This chapter also compared the differences between the design of antagonistic figures and supporting roles in the two films.

As I analysed in the Introduction of this thesis, the majority of NGCCA works feature a distinct child-oriented principle in content creation particularly for the derivative films. Nevertheless, in Chapter 3 I argued that the *Boonie Bears* series has differentiated itself from other derivative competitive rivals by considering the viewing demand from adult spectators. This chapter analysed how the narrative threads in *Rescue* help to attract young parents (in their late 20s and early 30s) to cinemas on the basis of maintaining the child audience. These endeavours are primarily represented by the refiguration of Logger Vick, the main antagonist in *Boonie Bears* animated TV series, in the film. The above transition in character establishment was analysed on four aspects. On the whole, in *Rescue* Vick transforms from a totally wicked character to an imperfect common person, who can be considered as the ‘spokespeople’ of Chinese young adults. This chapter also examined the media violence issue in *Rescue* and *Winter*, in order to explore how and to what extent the social pressure has impacted the cinematic creation of the two films. Previously, the depictions of violence, includes physically violent behaviours and verbally abusive dialogues, were pretty pervasive in *Boonie Bears* TV animations and its main competitive counterpart in Chinese animation market *Pleasant Goat* series. The above violent scenes on TV screen have been copied by child audience, which have caused dangerous imitation among children (especially young boys) and the corresponding serious injury incident, thus directly damaging the two franchises’ reputation.

The media violence issue in *Boonie Bears* TV animations has triggered a heated debate among different groups of people (parents, critics, mass media, etc.) in China. On one hand, young parents and state media have always been concerned about the uncontrolled violence and uncivilized language in the above productions. They often simplistically connect viewing with the seemingly corresponding actions. On the other hand, several scholars maintain that parents should pay more attention on educating and guiding their children while watching *Boonie Bears* programmes. I argued that the above universal social concern about the media portrayals of violence on TV screen is mainly attributed to the role of animation in cultural production, which has long been requested to undertake an important

social responsibility. Given the pressure imposed by the whole society, the production company Huaqiang has adopted a series of measures to readjust the media violence in the existing works and future productions, which are represented by the elimination of verbal attacks and recreation of action sequences in the film versions. To be specific, the once pervasive verbal aggression between the protagonists and antagonist has completely disappeared, instead the dialogue has become more moderate. Such transformation has also brought mixed results in terms of audience reception. The lethal weapons (shotgun, electric saw, etc.) have also been redesigned as the toy-like items, thus avoiding the dangerous imitation of children especially young boys. Huaqiang's efforts have been recognized and acclaimed by adult viewers, the purification of media violence has also contributed to the box office success of *Boonie Bears* film series.

In Chapter 4 I argued that *Kuiba 1* is a culturally hybrid work which mingles the Chinese and Japanese iconography in the respects of visual composition and worldview construction. I firstly examined the originality issue in Chinese cinema animation. The fading of Chinese School style has left a vacuum of a distinctive national identity in animation aesthetics. In this sense, many domestic animators have chosen to borrow exotic visual elements. The above reference process has directly triggered the discussion about the originality of the seemingly 'original' Chinese animations. As an extreme example, a 3D feature-length Chinese animated film has been blamed as a copycat of Hollywood production. In this context, the aesthetic individuality of *Kuiba 1* has also been mentioned in the reception of the film. In examining the leading and supporting roles in *Kuiba 1* and Japanese Shonen manga and anime, I found that the above two types of works show some convergence in terms of visual composition and personality, which have also been observed by fans who are familiar with the Japanese cartoon aesthetic paradigm. But this does not mean that the production of *Kuiba 1* was the Chinese animators' organized and intentional mimicking of Japanese productions. In this context, the concerns about the aesthetic individuality of *Kuiba 1* are largely due to the conversion between familiarity and alienation in film reception.

Here I argued that the spiritual core of *Kuiba 1* is still Chinese besides the Japanese iconography on surface, which is mainly represented by the construction of Yuan Yang world that borrows and recreates the symbolic representations from traditional Chinese culture. Firstly, the time-space concept in the fictional Yuan Yang world is created based on its counterpart in Taoism and feudal society in traditional China. The two worlds (Yuan Yang and feudal China) share a similar approach to record the times and momentous events. Moreover, like the role of Tao in Taoism, Mai forms a foundation for the imaginary Yuan Yang. The design of the five great gods in *Kuiba 1* can also be considered as a modern application of Taoism's Five-element theory. Secondly, the classic text *Classic of Mountains and Seas* offered a paradigm in terms of how ancient Chinese people created legendary creatures, which had been inherited by the subsequent Chinese mythological texts. In the case of *Kuiba 1*, the above creative principle is reflected in the visual design of several races in the earth that features the combination between human and animals. The symbolic elements of the costumes of the Chinese ethnic minorities are also being applied to the design of other more humanoid race. Thirdly, the Wen Yao system in the earth mirrors its waist tag counterpart in traditional Chinese feudal society, which epitomizes ordinary people's superstition on power holders.

As I argued in Chapter 5, the box office miracle of *Hero is Back* has been largely due to the adoption of WOM marketing, which was implemented based on the film's entertainment value and more importantly, the recreation of original cast members in *Journey to the West* particularly the protagonist Sun Wukong. The classic cartoon image of Sun Wukong first appeared in *Havoc in Heaven* and inherited and readjusted by the following animated works like *Lotus Lantern*. The above long practices have formed a stereotype in terms of how Sun Wukong should be like. However, In *Hero is Back* the overall appearance of this character largely reverts to his animated predecessors, which is reflected in three aspects. First, Tian Xiaopeng's creation shows viewers a middle-aged Sun Wukong with long and narrow face which contrasts with the once young and energetic simian. Second, the body proportion of Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back* is more like his biological counterparts. Third, besides the film's opening scenes and climax that

recalls an acquainted handsome Sun Wukong, the leading actor is characterised by his tatter garment in most other scenes.

The unprecedented Sun Wukong in *Hero is Back* has won massive support from young viewers as well as tap-waters. On the whole, this character transforms from an omniscient Chinese superhero to a monkey warrior who looks more like an ordinary martial artist. Sun Wukong's divinities are largely constrained in the most scenes of the film. Furthermore, the character behaves like his male human counterparts rather than the previous monkey-like habitual behaviours. In this sense, I argued that Sun Wukong is recreated as an antiheroic protagonist with complex human nature, thus mirroring the young viewers when facing a similar critical choice. Within this context, Sun Wukong, a Chinese superhero that is simultaneously strange and familiar, plays a vital role in promoting the film's WOM reputation online and offline. It can be said that the successful reinterpretation of Sun Wukong provides an example of how a classic cartoon icon could be reread to cater to the demand of viewers nowadays, thus giving a plausible direction of the future Chinese cinema animations in character design.

In summary, this study analysed NGCCA' dual identity, as a type of cultural product that is being produced with the aim of profit-making, and as an artistic creation and important component of Chinese cinema. Within this context, this project has explored for the first time, how government and social intervention and market forces exerted a double influence on Chinese cinema animation development and diversity between 1995 and 2015. Having analysed four case studies (*Lotus Lantern*, *Boonie Bears*, *Kuiba* and *Hero is Back*) which epitomize the above works' particular industry characteristics in different periods, this thesis argues that the production of feature length animated film in China is economically risky which have resulted in high variable commercial performance. In the meantime, this project argues that NGCCA works, as a whole, still lack a distinctive and easily-recognizable national identity in the respect of aesthetic paradigms like their fine art film predecessors. Instead, the above productions feature a multi-directional visual exploration in animation aesthetics. Therefore

this project, as the first thesis length study in the field of Chinese cinema animation over the last two decades, considers the NGCCA as a form of cultural hybridity, which witnesses the intensive interplay between the traditional and the contemporary, the local and the overseas practical experiences in animation creation.

Since 2015, as an industry, the Chinese cinema animation sector is experiencing growing trends toward diversity in various aspects. For example, the second instalment of *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* animated film series *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes 2/Shiwange Lengxiaohua 2* (Lu and Li, 2017) was released in the summer of 2017 and retained box office appeal by earning 133.63 million Chinese Yuan.⁵⁶² This box office success illustrates that the online-exclusive comics and animated shorts, besides TV animations and online children games, have indeed become an important source of inspiration for derivative animated films. This period also witnessed new possibilities for independent Chinese cinema animations which were once excluded from the mainstream system. The 2D hand-drawn dark comedy *Have a Nice Day/Dashijie* (Liu, 2017) was almost entirely co-produced by the director Liu Jian himself and members of staff and students in Nanjing University of the Arts. *Have a Nice Day*, which features a politically sensitive theme and a bleak description of social reality, seems destined to be blocked out from cinema chains in China. However, Liu Jian's production has achieved international fame by being selected as the first feature-length Chinese animated film to screen in competition at the 2017 Berlin Film Festival and winning the Best Animated Feature in 2017 Golden Horse award in Taipei, which assisted *Have a Nice Day* to pass Chinese censorship with slight adjustment to some extent.⁵⁶³ This film was publicly released on 12 January 2018, thus pointing independent Chinese animation in a possible new direction. The above-

⁵⁶² China Box Office. 'The Box Office of One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes 2' Available from: <<http://www.cbooo.cn/m/655319>>. [Accessed: 22 January 2018] [in Chinese].

⁵⁶³ James Mottram. 'Director of Chinese animation Have a Nice Day on bringing his lurid vision of China to the world, despite pressure from Beijing'. Available from: <<http://www.scmp.com/culture/film-tv/article/2127419/director-chinese-animation-have-nice-day-bringing-his-lurid-vision>>. [Accessed: 22 January 2018].

mentioned fresh trends and phenomena show how the Chinese cinema animation sector has developed since 2015, which is an area worthy of further study and investigation.

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