Animation in Postsocialist China: Visual Narrative, Modernity, and Digital Culture, **Ph.D. dissertation, by Weihua Wu, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2006. 272 pp.**

By Shaopeng Chen

Weihua Wu's PhD dissertation examines how literature, arts, social text, and the circumstances of new media form what he calls "digital cinema," "computer graphics," the "cultural interface," "visual effects," and "new animation" in a postsocialist China, by using an interdisciplinary approach that includes visual anthropology, film history, literary criticism, and cultural studies and by taking into account the relationship among image, narrative and modernity beneath the crust of Chinese postsocialist culture. Wu's primary concern is to explore the relations between "Chineseness of modernity" and "digitalization of visuality" works in various media and multimedia platforms. He argues that the digitalization of animated filmmaking (mainly Flash animation) in China becomes not only a new beat for a new generation, but also a refracting social mirror, the digital narrator of a prominent contemporary cultural zeitgeist, and a paradigm of China's version of the hyperreality encompassing increasingly visually-centred cultures around the world.

The dissertation includes five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One introduces the historical background of Chinese animation, which plays a vital role in understanding contemporary China. This chapter also reviews how the concept of "fine arts film" (*meishu dianying*) has been improperly used in socialist China. Wu first reviews the visual history of Chinese animation within a broader social and cultural context. He then analyses how English-language critics and Chinese scholars interpret Chinese animations (especially those created before the 1990s) respectively. Then the discussion moves to the conceptualization of the Chinese School of animation in terms of issues like the national style (*minzu fengge*), ideological homogeny, cultural consciousness, and nationalization. Wu also examines the interplay between the Chinese School animations, which mainly target children, and Hollywood and Soviet animation aesthetics. Afterwards, Wu discusses the notion of *meishu dianying* as a catachresis of Chinese cinematic animation.

Chapter Two focuses on the reconceptualization of the Chinese School, its aesthetic practice, and its second historical rise and fall in the post-Cultural Revolution new era. Wu argues that the cultural identity defined in relation to the "Chinese School of *meishu dianying*" constitutes a narrative paradigm and an institutionalized form of spectatorship. Wu first reviews animation production between 1976 and 1980 (after the end of the Cultural Revolution). This period showed three mainstream narratives: the expression of patriotic little heroes, minority subjects, and didactic fairytales. Wu goes on to consider the international reputation of the Chinese School and its main artistic forms. Afterwards, Wu analyses how visual representations of the Chinese School have been impacted by the broadcasting of imported commercial animation works in China since 1982. He also considers how the changing economic terrain has contributed to the above transformations. This changed social

discourse has directly lead to a cultural dislocation, which destabilizes a unified and discourse-based recognition of animation spectatorship and thwarts the assumption of cultural autonomy in this market economy.

Chapter Three focuses on the cultural implications of the reconfigured animation industry that was gradually institutionalized as a state discourse under globalization, and offers a mapping of the prevalent models and local development of industrialized Chinese animation. In Wu's view, the development of Chinese animation is divided into two parts: the New Era (from the end of the Cultural Revolution to 1989) and the post-New Era (after 1989). He also calls the post-New Era a post-*meishu dianying* or post-animation era, which is a profound process of redefinition and examination with links to a restructured visual system, animation discourses and cultural landscapes. Wu then reviews early experimental computer animation in China since 1990, which in the following years led to increasingly elaborate children-oriented melodramatic animated TV series. He argues that the above works were characterised by a marriage of convenience between bureaus of political authority and a still-fragile industrializing animation sector. Afterwards, Wu discusses the diversification of animated subjects and state-sponsored control strategies such as the gradual establishment of a TV screen quota system and national animation bases, for the purpose of promoting the industrialization of a domestic animation sector. Emphasizing issues of oriental spectacle, tradition, homogeneity, and the pastiche of ethnic bodies, Wu focuses on the problematic of visual modernity by introducing several case studies like *The Lotus Lamp* (*Baolian deng*, directed by Chang Guangxi, 1999).

Chapter Four opens up a theoretical critique of the emergence of Chinese independent animation, including Flash animations, experimental animations, and computer graphic creations, which pays more heed to the porous boundaries between the overlapping concerns of the national style (*minzu fengge*) and the folk (*minjian*, which means among the people) discourses. Wu begins with an introduction to the social and economic background in which Chinese independent animation emerged after the late 1990s. Wu argues that independent animation can be considered a reflexive individual resistance to mainstream styles and values, a sense of free expression, and an often-unabashed link with consumer society. He analyses the *minjian* discourse as a starting point for exploring the cultural significance of independent animation in terms of the latter's originality and transformation. Wu moves on to discuss the emergence of independent animation in China, which was encouraged by the arrival of digital technology. He maps out the convergence and divergence among notions of "films animated by personality," "individual animation," and "independent animation." Afterwards, Wu proposes that independent animation negotiates the aesthetic boundaries between an illusion of the present (social reality) and a nostalgia for the past (Chinese School), which is buttressed by computer graphics. He concludes that digitization and the status of the culture industry in China offer independent animators some flexibility to fulfil their dreams of self-expression, despite the dominance of an industrialized animation market.

Chapter Five focuses on Chinese Flash animation and its connection to digital culture and the postmodern aesthetic practice in China. Wu begins with an introduction of FlashEmpire.com, which is the first website devoted to Chinese Flash animation and the original locus of Chinese Flash culture. He divides Flash animation into two categories: functional Flash and aesthetic Flash. Afterwards, Wu examines Flash animation aesthetics and their development in China. Considering Flash culture in China as part of a much wider trend incorporating various forms of creative expression, he believes that with few exceptions, both aesthetic Flash (as an expression of an individual's creative identity) and functional Flash (as a commercial design tool) have yet to achieve maturity or to become multicultural practices in China. Wu then moves to Chinese Shanke (flash animator), discussing issues of Shanke subculture, Flash-animated music videos, avant-garde dramatists, ideological image, and poetry in Flash animation production. Afterwards, Wu interprets the representative works of the first generation of Flash animators such as *Rock 'N' Roll on the New Long March* (Jiang Jianqiu, 2001), *Xiaoxiao* Movies (Zhu Zhiqiang) and *People from the Northeast Are All Living Lei Fengs* (Babylon, 2001) in terms of these films' digital identities and postmodern aesthetics. Lastly, He analyses the second and third generation Flash animators' creative characteristics (2002 to 2004), which transferred from a primary interest in aspects of personal self-examination and experiments with narrative form in the context of a new media environment to a prevalent desire to find mainstream acceptance and commercial success.

Weihua Wu's dissertation offers a comprehensive and systematic study of animation in postsocialist China, especially of Chinese Flash animation as an important new media subculture in a historical conjuncture and a global context. This project is thus timely in addressing significant new areas of Chinese animation, a field that is badly in need of theoretical support.

Bio:

Shaopeng Chen is a Film Studies PhD student in University of Southampton, UK. He is sponsored by the China Scholarship Council (CSC). He holds a MA degree in Animation Arts from Nanjing University of the Arts (China), but his research covers both Chinese animation and live-action Chinese film. Previously, he taught animation production courses at Nanjing Normal University of Special Education. His research interests include style of animation character, general aesthetics in animation, film industry in China, government policies of Chinese culture creative industries, the cartoon brand in the Chinese animation industry, and new generation cinema animation in China.