

The Urban Fringes of Contemporary Chinese Animation

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In the first two decades of the twentieth century, animation in Mainland China (and, indeed, the world over) has seen a remarkable efflorescence, as advances in digital technology and diversification of viewing platforms have allowed for an unsettled, shifting multiplicity of animated expression. Through examining the work of several contemporary Chinese animators, I argue that this new wave of non-mainstream Chinese animation is linked to wider trends of digitization, globalization and urbanization across visual culture, from fine art and avant-garde film to web-series and advertising. Today's animators continue to redefine what animation can and should be, but what they are seeking to express is not a unified national myth but their own regional, local or personal stories, which are colored by the cities where they predominantly live and work.

Mainland Chinese animation has in fact been in a state of flux since the 1980s. In the years after the reform and opening, its clear-cut purpose — to serve the children and to express China's national style on a local and global stage — has slowly been eroded, leading to a crisis of identity which is far from fully resolved. This can even be seen in the plethora of words for “animation” in Mandarin. As Duan Tianran summarizes: “In today's lexicon, animation as a form of visual representation has wildly proliferated; it has spread without limits across every type of cultural background... Animation, animated film, anime, cartoon, moving image, motion graphics, motion picture and so on are used indiscriminately, constantly causing semantic difficulties.”¹ From lowbrow “cartoons” to highbrow “new media art,” Mainland Chinese animation has become increasingly difficult to define and contain.

Over the last two decades, however, this porous, uneasy definition of “animation” has also allowed for great diversification and innovation. Nowhere is this more obvious than in China's cities, which are increasingly dominating the nation's economy, society and culture.² From smartphones to billboards to gallery spaces to screens in subway carriages, animation is everywhere, a key cog in what De Kloet and Scheen dub the “scopic machines” of contemporary Chinese cities.³ Chinese animation, described by Zhang Ailing in 1937 as the “beautiful little sister” of live-action film, has grown up, becoming intrinsic to the image and the self-image of the Chinese city.⁴ Just as animation has become more diverse and independent, so has its portrayals of urban life and urban space. Animations produced by the state-run Shanghai Animation Film Stu-

¹ Duan, “Cong donghua dao dongtai yingxiang,” 47.

² Visser, “Cities Surround the Countryside,” 1.

³ De Kloet and Scheen, *Spectacle and the City*, 14.

⁴ Chang, “On the Future of Cartoons (1937).”

dio (SAFS) during the early reform period (1978-1989) portray city life with an optimistic futurism.⁵ By contrast, the city of contemporary independent animation is more complex, often bleaker, a pluralistic reflection of China's present urban reality. Perhaps the most important change, however, is that technological advances have allowed animation to become an art form with the capacity to express the experiences of the individual citizen: in this case, usually the urban animator, or to use Paola Voci's term, the "animateur."⁶

In this article I will begin by outlining — very briefly — the role of the city in pre-20th century animation, highlighting its comparative lack of importance in works of this period. I will then go on to offer a few examples of the individual animateurs (and in some cases their small studios) who have been at the frontiers of China's new urban and digital cultures, not simply moving with visual trends but actively influencing them. I have divided this analysis into three sections. The first deals with culturally mobile digital animators who share work on both "high" and "low" platforms; the second, fine artists who work in animation or "new media" as one medium among many; and the third, self-professed independent animators whose work has come to represent China on the international stage. It will quickly become apparent, though, that these animators and their animation are difficult if not impossible to categorize using conventional genre or form, so there is much overlap between sections.

Each artist approaches the city as subject matter in a different fashion. Their portrayals range from the emotive and nostalgic to the sterile and hyper-modern; from the slick and glamorous to the gritty and dystopic; from angst to black humor to gentle parody. In short, these works encompass multifarious contemporary imaginings of the Chinese city. Furthermore, although they seldom make it into Mainland Chinese cinemas, these imaginings also form part of the lived urban environment. Spilling out of phone screens, billboards or exhibition spaces, they literally animate the city. In the words of James Tweedie and Yomi Braester, they exist at the city's edge, "where urban environments and the media fuse into a historically new formation."⁷ Most of them push the boundaries of what "animation" has meant historically in China, and, in fact, what it means to be an "animator."

⁵ Li, "Animating Science and Technology."

⁶ Voci, *China on Video*, 39.

⁷ Braester and Tweedie, "Introduction: The City's Edge," 11.

Urban Themes in pre-21st Century Animation

A number of early Chinese animations, such as Wan Laiming's *Scene of the City* (1935) and Zhang Guangyu's *Cartoon Journey to the West* (1945), use urban settings combined with more fantastical elements for comedic or satirical effect.⁸ Similarly, in 1962, the SAFS released a short animation entitled *Mr. No-Brain and Mr. Not-Happy* about two children who are transformed into adults for the day. The absent-minded "No-Brain" is given the job of being an architect, and decides to build a nine-hundred and ninety-nine-story amusement center — for which he forgets to add a lift. This architectural folly is used to represent childish pride and irresponsibility.

However, urban themes did not begin to regularly feature in Chinese animations until after the reform and opening some twenty years later, when the Chinese School of animation entered the second high point of its so-called "golden age."⁹ By this time they were being used to serve a very different purpose: to support central policies of modernization and economic progress. Early 1980s animations such as *Dingding Fights the Monkey King* (1980) and *Hens Find a New Home* (1980) present urban modernity in a positive fashion, in line with modernization efforts at the time.¹⁰ With electronic music, futuristic environments and idealized visions of consumerism, these animations represent a dream of prosperous Chinese urban life. As Hua Li summarizes, these films "reveal China's rapid and extensive urbanization and the emergence of a new culture of consumerism during that period."¹¹ However, as the 1980's progressed, a number of more nuanced — or even negative — perspectives on urbanization emerged. A Da's *The New Doorbell* (1986) is a satirical but slightly sad depiction of urban society — and, crucially, it is less didactic in tone than previous SAFS works. In 1984, the SAFS released their four-part series *The Wanderings of San Mao*, which depicts the unequal society of semi-colonial Shanghai. By the late 1980s, urban environments had become familiar enough that animations featuring charmingly realistic domestic scenes, such as *Mama, Please Rest!* (1987) could take place in an urban apartment with a wide variety of modern appliances. At the end of the century, China's cities were being showcased to the rest of the world through one of China's first 3D animations: a promotional video for the Beijing Olympics.¹²

Furthermore, over this period the influence of foreign animation in Mainland China became more and more pronounced, starting with the Japanese television series *Astro Boy* in 1982, followed by Western series such as *Transformers*. Many of these foreign imports incorporated technological, futuristic and urban themes, contributing to the aura of modernity which helped to cement their

⁸ Macdonald, *Animation in China*, 36-41.

⁹ Wu, *Chinese Animation*, 60.

¹⁰ Li, "Animating Science and Technology."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Wu, *Chinese Animation*, 108.

popularity at the time.¹³ Chinese animators looked to these foreign works for inspiration; iconic Japanese anime in which urban themes feature prominently, such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1996) and *Akira*, remain popular and influential today.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Chinese animation from the 1980s and 1990s focusses on rural and pastoral themes — partially in response to China’s breakneck modernity and the faltering of established Chinese animated tradition. As Wu Weihua asserts in his analysis of the animation of this period: “an obsession with culture has led animators to tactically rewrite the artistic memories and loyalties of the Mao era by making rural, ethnic and minority images both extremely visible and ideologically masked in order to formulate the mythological language that mimics artistic heritage.”¹⁴ In other words, the exclusion of urban images from the majority of mainstream Chinese animation of this period formed a defense against the encroachments of a globalized culture.

It is in the new, independent animation of the 21st century that urban themes have finally taken center stage — and received a truly nuanced range of depictions. Created beyond the boundaries of China’s now-established animation industry, these works paint a rich and nuanced picture of life in Mainland Chinese cities. The most obvious difference between these works and those which have gone before is the age of their intended audiences: while the works of the 1980s and 1990s were primarily made to inform and educate young children, the intended recipient of these sophisticated works of the 21st century is a growing audience of adult animation fans — who hail from a rich variety of subcultures both in China and abroad. These independent animated networks overlap with China’s historical structures of animation production in important ways. However, animators have also fostered links with new communities in order to carve out a unique space for their productions.¹⁵ I argue that the success of these new animations is, in turn, inextricably linked to urban technologies, platforms and communities, and that this is reflected in the prevalence of urban themes in these works.

Zeng Xiaolin, Pi San and Bu Hua — Re-drawing Cultural Boundaries

As outlined above, many independent animators operate across a number of cultural arenas, such as fine art, film, online streaming sites and even advertising. Different media and format offer

¹³ Ibid, 12.

¹⁴ Wu, *Chinese Animation*, 114.

¹⁵ For a fuller account of the emergence of what he has called the “genuinely new phenomenon” of independent Chinese animation, please see chapter 6 of Weihua Wu’s book *Chinese Animation*.

different lenses through which to view the subject of urbanization and the city. Here I will analyze the works of three Chinese animators whose practice spans an unprecedentedly wide variety of visual venues.

Pi San and Bu Hua's first works were short videos which were platformed on social media and animation sites such as the now-defunct Flash Empire.¹⁶ They gained attention in China and abroad through their viral, attention-grabbing content and, in some cases, their political volatility. They deconstruct the monumentality of Chinese cities, borrowing the language of its "urbanist spectacle" to offer their own, often irreverent perspectives.¹⁷ Bu Hua has exhibited in shows in Europe and Australia, while Pi San collaborated with world-renowned director Jia Zhangke on his 2004 feature film *The World*. Interestingly, Pi San has now moved back into the realm of popular culture.¹⁸ His web-series *Miss Puff* (2011), which charts the day-to-day life of a young woman living in an unnamed Chinese city, recently began its 6th season.

Zeng Xiaolin's work is similarly diverse. He is a largely self-taught animator whose previous work has included short works for corporate clients, contemporary art exhibitions and publicly accessible personal projects. For many young Chinese animators, this versatility is born out of economic necessity; few animators would be able to spend their time solely on independent creative work, even if they wanted to.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the wide variety of work completed by artists such as Zeng demonstrate the ever-growing versatility of the animated medium across a variety of visual spaces, feeding into the concept of the contemporary city as a "laboratory for new media."²⁰

Along with this versatility of space has come a new versatility of style. Pi San and Bu Hua both make use of cartoonish, childlike imagery in their work to subversive effect, making the often-dark content of their animations all the more hard-hitting. They reclaim whimsical, cartoonish aesthetics to undermine the oversimplified rhetoric of Communism or consumerism, drawing attention to the way in which these narratives differ from lived experience. In her work *Maomao's Summer*, created in 2002 as Beijing began to undergo a wave of demolition and relocation (*chaiqian*), Bu Hua's child protagonist Maomao recreates her own miniature world out of leftover scraps from the alleyways (*hutong*) that have been destroyed. A later work, *Savage Growth* (2008) goes still further, as the heroine uses a slingshot to shoot down the monstrous mechanical birds which fly over her city, killing the organic ones. The protagonist's neat, doll-like appearance and almost callous optimism in the face of chaos — tropes which appear again and again in

¹⁶ Wu, "Individuality, State Discourse and Visual Representation," 57.

¹⁷ Kloet and Scheen, *Spectacle and the City*, 14.

¹⁸ Liu, "Pi San: A Leading Figure in Chinese Animation."

¹⁹ Colman, "Lei Lei: China's Indie Rising Star."

²⁰ Braester and Tweedie, "Introduction: The City's Edge," 1.

Bu Hua's work — offer a postsocialist twist on the model children of Maoist propaganda, drawing attention to the impossible resilience which this ideal exhorts.

Similarly, Pi San's animated characters in *The World* inhabit oversaturated, superhuman fantasies. They fleetingly imagine stylized versions of themselves galloping on horseback or taking to the skies before snapping back into their undersaturated urban realities. Though these fantastical interludes in an otherwise bleakly realistic film seem gaudy and even jarring, their very incongruence brings home the disconnect between fantasy and reality for many urbanites. This fantasy of flight parallels the dominance of flight imagery in late-1990s' urban literature described by Robin Visser: "the persistent metaphor of flying evokes a sense of breathtaking freedom and empowerment in some works, reckless speed and rootless disorientation."²¹ Pi San's recent web-series *Miss Puff*, meanwhile, appeals to an entirely different type of urban imagination, with a narrative tone which is reminiscent of popular literature, particularly internet literature: the chic heroine embodies "nationwide fantasies of the *xiaozhi*, or 'petty-bourgeois' urban consumer."²²

Zeng Xiaolin's work, meanwhile, goes to a different extreme. His imaginings of the modern city are hyper-realistic, by turns muted and psychedelically colorful. His cityscapes are notably devoid of people — the only sign of life is the occasional car or cat — suggesting a futuristic, post-human urban environment. Even when he portrays human life in his *Organic Machines* (2016) videos, the forms resemble those found in medical diagrams. It is perhaps this absence of life — the characterless or abstract city — which makes Zeng's work so versatile, a *tabula rasa* upon which the viewer projects their own imaginings. Zeng does not offer an overt social critique of contemporary China; nor does his style hark back to traditional Chinese art styles. Instead, Zeng's animations foreground the technological, liminal, anonymous backdrops of China's here and now, challenging these blank slates to speak for themselves. Zeng's work takes as its backdrop the parallel structures of the world's global cities.²³ His works reflect the "glitzy hypermodernization" of these environments whilst also drawing attention to their capacity for "stagnation and neglect."²⁴ His own influences include such futuristic, urbanist works such as the iconic Japanese anime *Akira*, reinforcing the transnational bent of much of his work.²⁵

What draws these artists together is, conversely, their versatility, both of subject matter and of platform. They move fleetingly across projects, websites and studios, meaning that it is often difficult to track their work. Bu Hua, for example, has been active in animation across the span of two decades, and her work has continued to develop and evolve over that time period. This state

²¹ Visser, "Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-socialist China," 6.

²² Ibid, 20.

²³ Sassen, *Global Networks: Linked Cities*, 2.

²⁴ Braester and Tweedie, "Introduction: The City's Edge," 5.

²⁵ Zeng, "Personal website."

of flux is an important aspect of what Paola Voci calls amateur cinema: “the liminal space of cultural practices that *can only* originate in and be defined by transitional temporalities.”²⁶ Voci draws an important link between these animated practices and DV cinema, pointing out that apart from their urban origins, the two are similar in their individualistic, experimental creative stances which remain somewhat distanced from mainstream mass media animation.²⁷ As Pi San has said of his own practice: “I don’t want to repeat things, but to be curious like a child... I want to make a work that cannot be easily recognized as my typical work.”²⁸

Zhang Xiaotao, Chen Shaoxiong and Sun Yunfan—Animation as Fine Art²⁹

New technologies mean that it is possible for artists to define animation as one tool in their arsenal rather than describing themselves as animators per se. As Sun Yunfan has pronounced, “For today’s artists, cross-disciplinary practice is becoming the norm... I’m not interested in the modernistic endeavor of revealing the ‘limit’ or ‘essence’ of different mediums. I’m interested in finding what can be done with them.”³⁰ There may be other motives to this reluctance among some in the Chinese art world against the terms “animator” and “animation” to decisively aggregate creatives and their works. The term “new media” is often used almost euphemistically in exhibitions and catalogues, “animation” as a term being, perhaps, too redolent of lowbrow cartoons and anime. Conversely, these fine-art practitioners’ work is sometimes dismissed by Chinese animators as not reflecting “real” Chinese animation practice, usually defined as the domestic mass media animation industry.

The contemporary preoccupation of the Chinese fine arts with the urban environment has been well-documented: Robin Visser’s *Cities Surround the Countryside* and Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen’s *Spectacle and the City* are two recent examples among many others. As objects of fine art, the works of Zhang and Chen deal with topical and serious themes such as deindustrialization, rapid urbanization and the conflict between local and global.

Zhang Xiaotao, Chen Shaoxiong and Sun Yunfan are all among those who have trained in more traditional fine arts before moving into animation. Chen Shaoxiong studied printmaking and Zhang Xiaotao and Sun Yunfan were both painters. For all these artists, a preoccupation with the

²⁶ Voci, “DV and the Amateur Cinema,” 263.

²⁷ Ibid, 17.

²⁸ Liu, “Pi San: A Leading Figure in Chinese Animation.”

²⁹ This was the phrase used to describe Sun Yunfan, one of the artists in this section, at the beginning of a recent overview of her work. Yan and Yen, “The Art of Sun Yunfan.”

³⁰ Ibid.

urban environment comes clearly to the fore in their animation. As China's identity has undertaken its "turn towards the city," becoming "the prevailing condition of art making in contemporary China" artists across all media have taken on the city as their subject matter.³¹ They have adopted its language of spectacle — including animation — to give voice to their own realities, and in doing so have broken down the barriers between high art and mass media which might have kept animation out of the Chinese gallery as a means of educating children.³²

In Chen Shaoxiong's work *Ink City* (2005), for example, the artist uses indexical snapshots of everyday city life as the basis for impressionistic ink drawings, which he then combines into an animatic with a soundtrack of city sounds. This multimedia process self-consciously combines the ultra-traditional aesthetic of ink painting (and by extension ink-painting animation, one of traditional Chinese animation's trademarks) with transnational, digital photography and film. There is a tension here between the local, the national and the global, a tension which is played out in the film's subject matter. *Ink City* is indicative of a wider preoccupation in Chen's work with the topic of urban development; his art created with the Big Tail Elephant Group explicitly takes on the dramatic urbanization of China's South-East as its venue and its subject matter. Animation is one weapon in his arsenal for confronting and exploring this subject, but it is on a more-or-less equal footing with other more established media such as ink painting and installation art.³³

Zhang Xiaotao commits even more thoroughly to the medium of animation. A painter who made a name for himself with his morbidly fantastical surrealist works, he has since emerged at the forefront of experimental Chinese animation. Though his works usually have a central narrative thread, they are replete with flashbacks, dream/nightmare sequences, fantasies and symbolism. In his semi-autobiographical film *The Spring of Huangjueping* (2016), for example, a character sprints through a blood-red dreamscape filled with rusting, crumbling buildings: a symbol of postindustrial anxiety in Chongqing is visually tied to the protagonist's anxieties. Zhang's work grapples with issues which, though particular to Chongqing, have parallels across the urban world.³⁴ The increased competition brought about by globalization and China's shift away from heavy industry lend a uniquely backdrop to the narrative's interpersonal conflicts. Through his experimental use of animation, Zhang Xiaotao draws on the symbolic language previously used in his paintings to go beyond the indexical in a cinematic context.

Both Zhang Xiaotao and Chen Shaoxiong have become champions of the Chinese independent

³¹ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 35.

³² Holmes, *Moving Ink: Myths and Modernity in Contemporary Chinese Animation*, 56.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 8.

animation movement after adopting the medium.³⁵ Sun Yunfan's relationship with animation, however, follows a different trajectory, and the tone of her work is, on the whole, lighter. In her role as one half of creative duo the Shanghai Restoration Project, Sun produced animations such as *Mung Bean Mash* (2015), the music video for a remixed Shanghai tongue-twister. The Shanghai of Sun's animation (and music) is not the contemporary, ultra-modern city, but rather the "chintzy past" of Old Shanghai.³⁶ Sun's work avoids kitsch through its incorporation of motion graphics (visually) and electronic beats (aurally) to add a playful, digital twist to the hackneyed images of the old city. Nevertheless, the nostalgia in Sun's work is for a long-vanished, well-varnished past, overlaid with futuristic electronics. To borrow Margaret Hillenbrand's expression, the recent past is treated as "a sort of flyover zone, a space skipped past with eyes averted on the journey from a chintzy past to a glossy, high-spec future."³⁷

Since creating *Mung Bean Mash*, Sun Yunfan has taken a more explicitly transnational and multi-media creative stance, moving away from the labels of either "Chinese" or "animator." To quote her self-assessment in a recent interview: "I see myself as a cook, and depending on what produce and inspiration I have, I might cook a soup in the morning and then bake a dessert at night. They are different projects."³⁸ Sun is nonetheless important as she demonstrates a creative practitioner who uses animation as a medium for conveying creative concepts across an audiovisual spectrum, demonstrating its integration into an even wider set of creative practices.

For Zhang, Chen and Sun, animation is a tool for conveying the lived reality of urban life, not just the hypermodern, futuristic city. Other animators have also used the medium for this purpose — conveying the rough edges of everyday Chinese life, often using post-digital, unvarnished aesthetics — and in doing so they have pushed amateur cinema to its limits. It is their work which has gained the most recognition internationally as the new standard bearers for Chinese animation.

Liu Jian and Lei Lei — Representing Mainland Chinese Animation

Liu Jian and Lei Lei's art has been entered into animation festivals all over the world, participating successfully in the international animation culture which was once the territory of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. Though their work is very different, both animators demonstrate high levels of craftsmanship — foregrounded by their use of painstaking hand-drawn and crafted animation techniques — combined with their novel and lively storytelling. Internationally, they are

³⁵ Zhang, "Experimental Animation SAGYA."

³⁶ Hillenbrand, "Nostalgia, Place, and Making Peace with Modernity in East Asia," 391.

³⁷ Ibid, 36.

³⁸ Yan and Yen, "The Art of Sun Yunfan."

regarded as representative figures in contemporary Chinese animation, despite the fact that they are far from mainstream at home. It is undeniable that the audiences for their animation are primarily transnational; indeed, their works are often inaccessible to mainstream Chinese audiences, hosted on sites blocked by the Great Firewall and rarely screened within China.

There is a clear contradiction here. Both animators are often vocal about wishing for bigger audiences and better resources domestically, and there is an ambivalence about their transnational mode of creation.³⁹ They are conscious of a gulf between commercial and independent animation in China: one is internationally oriented, the other domestic, where the SAFS used to be both. This dissonance can be seen in everything from subject matter to aesthetics to dissemination platforms.

This is not to say that these animations are aesthetically or narratively deracinated. Liu Jian's films, in particular, draw heavily on social realism in their style, although his colors are darker and more muted than any propaganda poster. It is in the detail and the vignette—his intricate backgrounds or his characters' fantasies of rustic contentment—that the locality of Liu Jian's animation shines through. In *Have a Nice Day* (2017), Liu's latest work, the brightest scenes take place not in the city but rather the imagined countryside. Liu uses the exaggerative ability of animation to visualize the "prism of nostalgia" through which his urbanites dream of rural life: their imaginings appear onscreen as a montage of oversaturated social-realist tableaux.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the animation also draws on Western black comedy and, notably, iconic Japanese anime such as *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) for its sci-fi and action elements, demonstrating the mobility of urban tropes across the East Asian region. For Liu Jian, the city is a frontier zone: an unequal, often violent space in which new territories are created and contested. The borders which his characters attempt to cross are not national but economic and social, representing the urban shift from "geographic borders to transversally bordered spaces."⁴¹ For immigrants and other marginalized individuals, Liu suggests, cities offer both danger and opportunity. Liu Jian's work is characterized by what Visser terms "the renewed preoccupation with 'reality' in urban aesthetics;" he does not shy away from depicting urban life's banal dreams and unsavory details, but instead elevates them.⁴²

Lei Lei's work is even more concerned with these details: his work is crammed with quirk, texture and the paraphernalia of everyday life. His stories seldom follow grand narratives in a traditional sense; instead they resemble children's stories, nonsensical but beautifully animated. In

³⁹ Colman, "Lei Lei: China's Indie Rising Star." Du, "Chinese Animation at International Film Festivals."

⁴⁰ Hillenbrand, "Nostalgia, Place, and Making Peace with Modernity in East Asia," 385.

⁴¹ Sassen, "When the Center no Longer Holds: Cities as Frontier Zones," 69.

⁴² Visser, "Cities Surround the Countryside," 18.

works such as *Magic Cube and Ping-Pong* (2009) and *Big Hands* (2012) the city has been internalized, the backdrop for dreams as well as reality; his moving image project *Recycled* (2013) harks back to *Maomao's Summer* in its imaginative archiving of the city's quickly vanishing past. The fragmented, textural aesthetic of his work does not shy away from flaws, but rather embraces them. When discussing the urban in Wong Kar-Wai's films, Hillenbrand has described the aesthetic of imperfection as a kind of "rapprochement with modernity—not as an infatuation with the possibilities of the future, but as an acceptance of the past."⁴³

This highly material aesthetic has led Lei Lei's work to be described as "post-digital," part of a lineage which can be traced back to the kinetic, "exhibitionist" cinema of attractions that preceded immersive narrative cinema.⁴⁴ Alternatively, it could be argued that viewers are drawn to Lei Lei's work because of their detail and their multimedia complexity: in their "ambient, interconnected, intense, informative, serendipitous" they become "interactive-images."⁴⁵ While it may be inappropriate to describe these animators as national representatives of Chinese animation, their work certainly has an international appeal.

Conclusion — "Contemporary Myth-Makers"?⁴⁶

The case studies which I have outlined above represent only a small sample of the independent animation works being created in mainland China today. Furthermore, the rather arbitrary boundaries between them could easily be remixed and redrawn: Liu Jian is also a painter, Bu Hua's work has been exhibited internationally, Sun Yunfan has an active social media presence and so on. However, the diversity of their work highlights the proliferation of short videos, web series, art installations and so on which together make up China's contemporary animation scene. If Chinese animation is currently suffering from a crisis of identity, it has so far at least been a fruitful one.

Nevertheless, this proliferation has brought its own difficulties. Perhaps unsurprisingly, throughout this study I have encountered problems when drawing boundaries between "independent animation" and other kinds of "new media," "moving image" or "digital" art. These relatively new terms are at times used interchangeably, making categorization and prioritization somewhat difficult: why should I privilege the content of auteur animators over that of those who work on Metro commercials, apps or VR? Should Cao Fei's iconic *RMB City* (2009) or the projections accompanying performance art be counted as "animation"? These questions are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this essay.

⁴³ Hillenbrand, "Nostalgia, Place, and Making Peace with Modernity in East Asia," 398.

⁴⁴ Voci, "Electric Shadows Reloaded," 200.

⁴⁵ Daly, "Cinema 3.0: The Interactive-image," 82.

⁴⁶ Levi, "New Myths for the Millenium: Japanese Animation," 33. In this chapter, Levi argues for the unique "myth-making" capabilities of animation in the twenty-first century, particularly in East Asia.

Questions of validity and priority are important, since these new forms of visual media remain a marginal feature of Mainland China's animation practice. It must be acknowledged that the majority of conventional, mainstream Chinese animation — that is, feature-length animations shown at cinemas or on TV in Mainland China — continues to be dominated by rural, pastoral or fantasy subject matter. Animation which takes contemporary urban realities as its explicit subject matter remains the exception rather than the rule.

That said, the animations and animators above have found considerable success in their depictions of cityscapes and city life, internationally but also in domestic subcultures. Furthermore, there is an increasing discontent with the “arbitrariness of semiotics” in recent blockbusters, their inability to reflect contemporary Chinese narratives.⁴⁷ As Yang Xiaolin writes in her article “How Can Chinese Animation Tell Good Chinese Stories?”

Contemporary Chinese society offers up many heart-warming stories; it also presents many worrying questions. The crisis of ethics, the one-child policy, the cult of celebrities, the pressures on those just entering the job market, caring for the elderly, the housing bubble, pollution, food hygiene, the rural exodus — all these problems are close to people's hearts. When audiences watch animations, they hope to see magic, to see wonders, but they also hope to see reality, to see their own circumstances... (to see something) which will encourage them in their own lives, and to give them confidence about the future.⁴⁸

“Urbanization” or “urban life” could easily be added to this list. Perhaps, with the increasing focus on the urban across Chinese visual culture, and the continued innovation in animated practice in China, a domestically-produced urban feature film is a possibility at the box office in the near future. And if not, newer platforms are growing ever more intrinsic to the way that audiences experience media: exhibition spaces, adverts, and a plethora of small screens increasingly hold sway. Cinema and television remain important, but they are no longer everything.

Braester and Tweedie describe the world city as “a laboratory for media produced, circulated, and consumed on a global scale and in a trice.”⁴⁹ Though this remark was originally made in relation to Chinese cinema, I think that it is at least as relevant to Chinese animation. The development of independent and experimental animation in China's cities has helped to redefine animation's status as an art form, both in China and internationally. Since its beginnings in the Republican period, animation has always been a key medium through which China has gone about its myth-making, its self-definition. Since the reform and opening, this definition has become far more heterogeneous and complex, and the city's role within it remains ambivalent. Hillenbrand writes of the “queasy trepidation about modernity” which characterizes an East Asian reluctance to portray lived urban spaces as sites of nostalgia.⁵⁰ A similar argument could be made in relation to animation, an art form which has strong historical ties to both traditional aesthetics and mythologized Communist ideology. Perhaps the mainland Chinese city is not yet internalized to the extent that it can become the stuff of legend.

⁴⁷ Chen, “In the Empty Name of Zhuangzi.”

⁴⁸ Yang, “Zhongguo donghua dianying ruhe jiang hao Zhongguo gushi,” 154.

⁴⁹ Braester and Tweedie, “Introduction: The City's Edge,” 1.

⁵⁰ Hillenbrand, “Nostalgia, Place, and Making Peace with Modernity in East Asia,” 384.

Mainland China's current top-down approach is concerned with the bottom line of industry, promoting recognizably Chinese aesthetics and, of course, serving the children. Animators, however, have their own ideas of what mainland Chinese animation should be, and why. Making use of urban, digital networks and technologies, animators — or, to borrow Paola Voci's term once more, amateurs — have taken it upon themselves to develop Chinese animation in new directions, thus adding to the "heterotopia" of contemporary Chinese cities.⁵¹ Though there is still a frustrating lack of recognition of animation art within the broader study of Chinese visual culture, the medium is becoming increasingly visible across all platforms, "animating" the city with its kinetic images. Weihua Wu has written that "Chinese animation should embody a heterogenous set of practices that could be considered a multi-cultural network attempting to represent itself on an interdisciplinary theoretical level."⁵² I would argue that independent Chinese animation is already there, engaging with the wider world and creating myths for the digital, urban age.

⁵¹ Voci, *China on Video*, 39. Lai, "Whither the Walker Goes," 207.

⁵² Wu, "The Genealogy of Chinese Animation," 29.

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