

Walking Our Own Path and Making Innovations in Chinese Animated Filmmaking

By Duan Xiaoxuan; translated by Nick Stember

(Panel Chair) Thank you, Ms. Mochinaga, for your wonderful speech. It was very moving. It really took us back to that special historical era. The next speaker is Teacher Duan Xiaoxuan. Teacher Duan was born in 1934, and first entered the Chinese animation industry at the Northeast Film Studio in 1948. After 1950, she served as the Deputy Head of the animation division at the Shanghai Film Studio, later serving as the Chief Engineer of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, and also working as an animation camerawoman and photographer. Her film credits include the feature-length cel animated films *Uproar in Heaven* (1961-1964) and *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979), ink-painting animations *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* (1960), *The Herd Boy's Flute* (1963), *The Deer's Bell* (1982), and *Feelings of Mountains and Rivers* (1988), to name just a few of the over 30 films she has worked on over her career. Please, let us welcome Teacher Duan!

(Duan Xiaoxuan) Hello everyone! I'm so happy to have been able to accept the invitation from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology to be here today and have the chance to reminisce about the development of Chinese animation with our friends and the students in Hong Kong. Animated films go back more than 60 years in socialist New China, and this year is the 60th anniversary of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. As for me, I've spent almost 70 years of my life working on animated films. I started when I was 14, and I haven't left the profession or the work unit since. I've seen and experienced a lot of the developments first-hand, so I'm quite partial to animated films. In my talk, I'll sketch out the early days of animation, how things grew from there, and some of the problems that developed. Those topics will make up the first part of my talk, and for the second part of my talk, I'll touch on some of the challenges we encountered in the four ink-painting animated films that I worked on. I'll do my best to try to keep everything under thirty minutes.

In 1948, after graduating from the third class of trainees at the Northeast Film Studio, I was assigned to the cartoon section of the Art Department. At the time, the Northeast Film Studio was located in the mountains, in a valley. That was Xingshan, the place that Ms. Mochinaga brought up just now in her talk. During the Civil War, the studio had retreated to there. At the time, the Art Department had a cartoon section that specialized in making animation. What kind of animation? We made those maps with arrows that they used in newsreels to show all of the victories of the People's Liberation Army, one by one. That's what we were doing when I first got there. But our department also made two animated films: *The Dream to Be an Emperor* (1947) and *Capturing the Turtle in a Jar* (1948).

The Dream to Be an Emperor was the first film that our department worked on. Originally, *The Dream to Be an Emperor* was a comic by Hua Junwu that was published in the newspaper. Thanks to Comrade Chen Bo'er's support, it was made into a puppet animated film. You've heard all about that just now, so I won't go into too much detail. But I will say I know that it was an incredibly tough film to produce. To make the puppets, they needed all kinds of materials for the puppets' joints, for example, and for the puppets' heads. The "heads" in *The Dream to Be an*

Emperor were made out of newspaper pulp dipped in starch. There were supply shortages of everything then, so it was really difficult. There simply weren't good conditions for making animation, so they had to overcome all kinds of challenges to make the puppets and finish the film. I hadn't joined the team then yet, but I was already there when we started working on *Capturing the Turtle in a Jar*. This was the second film we made, a cel animated film. It showed the victories of the Liberation Army, how Chiang Kai-shek was being encircled and trapped, just like a turtle in a jar. When I arrived there, Mochinaga Tadahito became my first teacher. You've just heard about his contributions to Chinese animation.

At the time I was still a young girl. We were all young. I was 14, and practically everyone I worked with was a teenager like me, fresh out of middle school in Northeast China. There were also some students from military academies. We all studied together, but there were only 5 or 6 of us who worked on this film. After the two films were finished and we showed them to the troops, the reaction was really something else. After the troops watched the films, it was a big boost to their morale. Some of them got so hooked on them, two times wasn't enough, so we played them four times in a row. So this film was very successful. The two films had an enormous impact on the northeastern part of China.

After we finished this film, our leaders knew what we could do, and they learned how difficult the conditions that we finished this film under were. When we made animated films, we didn't have any film of our own. So where did we get it? The sound recording team. It wasn't official, but we took whatever they had left over, and we put it in our cameras to shoot with. Sometimes we'd get halfway done only to find out that the film had already been exposed. There was nothing for it, except to stay up all night shooting it all again. That's all we could do. Later, we used up all our paper, too, so we had to go to the second-hand market in Harbin to buy more. We had to make the colors ourselves, by hand. The conditions were really tough. But we were all dedicated to the cause, and we nurtured an important habit: Even under very difficult conditions, we could finish a film. Our spirit of hard work and struggle, of self-reliance, the foundations come from this time. I think my colleagues at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio were always able to do a good job after, because we had this conviction. No matter how bad the conditions were, we could overcome them to finish a film. After we finished this film, everyone was overjoyed. Even if it was still relatively rough, from a technical perspective, it still has a special place in my heart. But the more important thing was that our film established a solid foundation for the development of Chinese animation. That's why I still feel this is the most noteworthy thing we accomplished while we were working together in Xingshan.

By April 1949, most of the northeast had already been liberated, and the whole studio moved back to Changchun. That was when the Animation Team (*katong zu/gu*) was established, during the National Literary and Art Workers Congress. Te Wei, Jin Xi, and Jin Jin were assigned to join us in making animated films. Te Wei was a cartoonist, and Jin Xi had served in the army, making art. Jin Jin specialized in writing scripts for children's stories. Why did they pick these three? Because we had been given the directive, among other things, that going forward, our animated films were to serve the children. That was the general policy. The second thing that was decided was that in the past, animated films were called "cartoons" because they came from outside of China. But after Te Wei arrived, we looked into the words that were used to describe animated films. That's how we came to use the term "Chinese fine arts films" (*meishu pian*), as

we now call them, instead. We called them that because we had cel animation and puppet animation, and they both fell under the umbrella of fine arts. So we started calling them fine arts films. And we were called the Fine Arts Film Division (Animation Division) at the time. The third thing that was decided then was that we would move the base of development for our animated films from the Northeast Film Studio south, to Shanghai. That was because the material conditions were better there. It was easier to find talent, and the whole cultural atmosphere was better suited to the development of animated films. These are the three big directives that changed our work after that point.

At the same time, we started work on our next film. The script for *Thank You, Kitty* (1950) was already written. The director, Fang Ming (Mochinaga Tadahito's Chinese name), and the screenwriter, Jin Jin, took the five or six of us (pictured here) to the countryside, just outside of Changchun. We were supposed to spend some time delving into daily life there. We had to take guns with us, though, Type 38 rifles. That was because there were still bandits in the countryside even then. We did the prep work at the Northeast Film Studio and put everything we hadn't finished yet into big boxes, in preparation for the big move down to Shanghai. Te Wei and Fang Ming went ahead of us, to start setting everything up.

When we arrived in Shanghai in 1950, the first thing we had to do was start recruiting. You can see our core team at the time here, in this photo from before we left Changchun. In the middle, this is the president of the Northeast Film Studio, Wu Yinxian. We had more than 20 people by then, and 18 of us came to Shanghai and we were all young. After we arrived in Shanghai, one thing that we did first was recruit senior animation masters, such as the three Wan brothers (Wan Laiming, Wan Guchan, and Wan Chaochen); in 1953 Qian Jiajun; Yu Zheguang; and some other old hands who joined us. At the time, our main concern was recruiting artists, and teaching them how to animate using both cel animation and puppet animation. Fang Ming hadn't left yet. He went back to Japan in 1953. Thanks to his specialized training in cel and puppet animation, we all learned how to make animations really fast. We made animated films while still learning and practicing. *Thank You, Kitty* was finished in 1950. The whole crew was in Shanghai, in front of the recording studio of the Shanghai Film Technology Studio.

I think that during this period our most important work was making children's movies. Some of those films include *Kitty Goes Fishing* (1952) and *Good Friends* (1954), which were both made during this time period in the 1950s. Another characteristic of the time is the new technology we were using, like in 1953 when we made our first color film, *A Little Hero*. There weren't any color films being made in China at all before that. Everyone shot their movies in black and white, including narrative live-action films. We decided to work hard to start making color films, beginning with our animated films. That's something unique about animated films – they were always at the forefront. That's because we were willing to experiment. We experimented with *A Little Hero* (puppet, 1953), and the result was a big success, with the Ministry of Culture making a point of commending us for it. After we finished *A Little Hero*, we had established a good foundation for China's first color narrative film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (aka *The Butterfly Lovers*, Shanghai Film Studio, 1953). At the same time, we were working on *Why is the Crow Black* (1955), which was our first color cel animated film. Before that, all of our children's films were in black and white. But after that, all of our films were in color. The Shanghai Animation Film Studio started making all-color films. That same year, we also made our first puppet

animation that was mixed with live-action footage, *The Dream of Xiaomei* (1955). As you can see, we were trying new technology again.

Something else important I need to mention is that throughout the 1950s, we started nationalizing animated films by using more and more elements of traditional Chinese folk art. When we were making *The Dream to Be an Emperor*, Comrade Chen Bo'er made it in the style of Beijing opera. When we went to Shanghai, because of our experience, the films we mostly watched and studied were Japanese animated films, Soviet animated films, and also American animated films. We watched a lot and became very serious students of foreign animation. For example, we studied the Soviet film *Little Gray Neck* (1948) for how they did all the movements, going over them one by one. We learned everything we could from them, and they all influenced us to a certain extent. So how were we supposed to make something actually Chinese? After watching so many foreign animations, how were we supposed to develop our own style? That's the question that was raised at the time.

That's why the first puppet film, *Magic Brush* (1955), was based on a Chinese folk story, so all of the paintings and artistic creations would be national forms. The first cel animated film in this style was *The Conceited General* (1956), directed by Te Wei. At the time, Te Wei proposed two slogans: "Blaze the trail for a national art style," and "Leave the door open for humor." That was when we started taking the nationalization of our films as our goal. Our films strove to make this a reality. At the same time, many young artists who had graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, the China Central Art Academy of Fine Arts, or Suzhou Polytechnic gradually joined us. More and more of them arrived over time. The Animation Division was getting younger. We were the young reserves of the Shanghai Film Studio, always on the cutting edge. Because young people tend to be more open-minded, and it's easier for them to accept new things. The Animation Division took advantage of this to offer all sorts of training courses. For example, the people who had graduated from fine arts academies didn't know how to make animation, since they just had basic art training. So we had an animation class for them. And there were art training classes where the students went out to sketch from life. The Animation Division also offered all sorts of lectures on acting, music, ink painting, and all kinds of other topics. We also invited theater and opera performers to give talks. So back then people outside said that the Animation Division at the Shanghai Film Studio was like a big school, where we worked part of the time and studied part of the time. That way the young folks could learn the ropes quickly. After this stage, the Animation Division kept producing films and produced more than twenty films. In a lot of different regards, I think you could say we were moving toward a more mature period, setting the foundation for the Animation Division's future expansion into the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. You might call this phase the growing phase.

So, on April 1, 1957, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio was established. The first of April of this year will be its 60th anniversary. During this next period, which came after the studio was officially established, the rate of production ramped up quite quickly. At the same time, if you consider the quality, the content, and the subject matter, there was really quite a broad range. It wasn't just kids who were watching our films—they could be enjoyed by the young and old alike. That's because there were all kinds of things coming out, a real diversification process. Film after film achieved unheard of levels of quality and technical achievement. After so many years of exploring and developing animation with Chinese characteristics, we'd already had

some success in following the path of national style and produced many films accordingly. That was something that all of the animators felt, deep down inside. We knew the right direction for Chinese animation. There were a lot of outstanding films, and outstanding talent kept appearing, too. In terms of international influence, we won awards in China, and then we started gaining a good reputation abroad, too. The fact that Chinese films were able to break into the international film festivals and start having some international influence, it all really started with our animated films. During this period, I remember Premier Zhou En'lai saying in a speech that animated films had a relatively unique style and that we were a relatively outstanding department in the film industry. So this encouraged the employees of the studio even more to create their own new films. In terms of quality, we had reached a new peak.

One type of film that was pretty representative of this period, and one that can speak to some of the issues discussed above, is papercutting film. First produced in 1958, papercutting films brought the folk tradition of papercutting together with animation to create a new art form. Eventually, a lot of really excellent papercutting films were made, the first being *Pigsy Eats Watermelon* (1958). Two years later, in 1960, the first ink-painting animation, *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* came out, using the technology of ink-painting animation that we invented that year. I'll talk more about this in a moment, so I won't say any more for now. The third type of film was paperfolding animation, which we also invented. Paperfolding films are a relatively simple art form. Young kids, preschoolers for example, found them quite easy to accept. It's a really interesting way to make animation. So paperfolding film was very popular among children. The first paperfolding film we produced back then was *The Wise Duck* (1960), also called *Little Duck Quack Quack*. More importantly, by my count we produced dozens of films during this period. The subject matter was getting more and more diverse, and we had a real bumper crop of creativity. I won't go into all of them, but there were a few big ones, like *Uproar in Heaven*, *The Herd Boy's Flute*, *Peacock Princess* (1963), and *The Golden Conch* (1963). For every type of film that we produced, there were some great films coming out. The whole studio was already at a very mature stage in its development by this point.

Generally speaking, after the Shanghai Animation Film Studio was built, we achieved a lot during its developmental stage. Something I've realized is the most important is that the original directive for our films, to serve the children, was the correct one. Later, when we developed further, in the spirit of "letting one hundred flowers bloom," we made even more films for people of all ages, all sorts of films. But I think that this original directive really laid out a path for us to follow. The other part of our success is that the studio really nurtured a tradition that helped us create, helped us imagine, helped us express ourselves. Back then, we had a saying: Don't copy others, and don't repeat yourself. Like with our ink-painting animations, we didn't want to just make the same film over and over again. Aside from that, we were all expected to play to our strengths. Some of the creative staff would write up these big plans for themselves. You could work on what you wanted, and the same went for everybody else. This was something that was really unique about the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. The creative spirit there was really outstanding.

The other side to this was our team spirit. Animated films had to be made collectively. You couldn't make one by all yourself, unlike art, for example. I can paint a painting on my own. But animation requires a whole team, working hard together. We had a meticulous division of labor.

For example, who directed, who designed, which animation was designed by who, the background design, who did the cinematography, the sound recording, or composed the music, things like that. All of these things came together in a single production. The team spirit at the studio was really great. I remember when we first started, when some of the senior directors, like the Wan brothers, Te Wei, and Qian Jiajun, directed films, there was always a middle-aged or young director working closely with him. For example, when Wan Laiming directed films, a young woman named Tang Cheng worked closely with him. Yan Dingxian and other young directors also worked with a senior animator. During this process, the senior animator would come up with ideas, and the younger animators would pitch in and do the concrete things. A lot of our comrades got their mettle tested and trained well like this. A lot of these young folks had their own opinions about how things should be done. I remember that at that time we were making films collectively and later established the Youth Creative Collective (in 1958). There were always fresh faces, young ones, who could make films on their own. So that's why we were able to make so many good films.

Something else that was very unique about the Shanghai Animation Film Studio at the time is that the studio was the first in over a dozen categories. The first in what? The first color puppet-animation, the first papercutting-animation, the first ink-painting animation, the first three-dimensional animation. *A Big Prize Medal* (three-dimensional puppet, 1960) was the first one we made. We were always ahead of live-action film. We made the first wide-screen animated film, the first paperfolding film, even porcelain dolls, chinaware, bamboo toys, we animated all of them. We were the first in a lot of areas. We were quite famous for this in film circles. This is one aspect that was unique about us.

Another aspect was that from a technical perspective, you couldn't separate our work from the hard work of the technicians. Animated film is a special technology, somewhat different from live-action films in that regard. The equipment used on live-action films, the cameras, we couldn't use them without adapting them first. But there were a lot of things that were needed, and you couldn't expect the state to design and build specialized equipment for just the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, so we had to rely on ourselves. If you needed a machine that did something special, then the animators would have to go and find a machine shop to co-design and co-build it. The animation stands, the cameras, and the frame-by-frame cameras, we built them all, one by one. For example, the colors in color film at the time were a problem, globally, not just in China. At the time, the Soviets and people from all the other countries couldn't figure it out. Finally, we invented 102 Film when we made color animated films. Under the direction of Qian Jiajun, once we had 102 Film, we supplied it to the whole country. Our studio was basically turned into a color mixing plant. In addition, our studio invented and produced stabilizers, which were used by all in animated filmmaking around the country. The technicians were just as willing to rack their brains and to try new things as the artists.

After so many years together, I think the thing that I value the most is our devoted professionalism. We weren't afraid of hardship and exhaustion. We were of one mind and focused on one thing—making animated films. I think this is what allowed us to make so many great films. A lot of masterpieces. So that's the first part of my talk today.

For the second part of my talk, I want to discuss ink-painting animation. We spent a long time trying to figure it out, inviting ink-painting artists to give talks, taking up mulberry paper ourselves to paint this and that. We wanted to bring the uniqueness of Chinese ink painting to the silver screen, because we felt that China was moving in the direction of national style. Because cel animation used “single line and flat color” drawings, if our ink paintings were unable to overcome the limits of these “single line and flat color” drawings, then we wouldn’t be able to recreate the effect of ink-painting brush strokes on mulberry paper. To make a truly new kind of ink-painting animation would require technical innovation, a complete overthrow of the established methods of artistic production. That was the only way you could make it happen. We racked our brains, but the idea was always there, throughout the 1950s.

It wasn’t until 1959, though, that the time was ripe for technical innovation. Our studio held an exhibition in Beijing, where we took all of the things we used to produce animated films and put them together, like a painting exhibition. During the Spring Festival that year, Vice-Premier Chen Yi came to see our exhibition. That was because when he was still the mayor of Shanghai and we had just arrived in the city, our offices happened to be in the same building, the Hamilton House. There we were, fresh from the northeast, in this enormous building, and he came to meet us. He was a big supporter of our animated films, and he brought his whole family with him that day. He even wrote an inscription for us, in his own hand. I have a photo here of his inscription, which reads, “Watching Animation during the Spring Festival.” At that time, the deputy head of the studio, Lu Yihao, reported to him that some of the younger comrades at the studio wanted to make ink-painting animations. As soon as he heard that, Vice-Premier Chen Yi said, “Very good. It would be even better if you could animate the paintings of Qi Baishi.” After he said that, our deputy head called the studio on the same night to tell us he supported us.

It just so happened that in 1959 we were working on some big new technical innovations, with projects of all kinds. We’d already proposed ink-painting animation and delivered a report about that innovation to the head of our studio, so we were already thinking about how we could do it. But then the Vice-Premier brought it up, and that got the whole studio talking about it. Everyone was talking about it, all of the animators, over forty people in total by then. We soon launched our experiments. Eventually, Xu Jingda worked up a scene with a frog jumping off a lotus pad, and we shot the film right after. As soon as we finished shooting, we immediately developed the film that night. We shot it ourselves, in black and white, and developed the negatives ourselves. As soon as they were ready, we took them to the screening room to take a look. Our studio’s leader said, “Good, we’re starting to get the idea!” Everybody thought it was great, and they all jumped in to help out. The leaders really pushed us, too. They had the lead animators, some of whom are here with us today, working late into the night. There were four teams of lead animators: one working on the chicks, one on the fish and shrimp, one on the frog and tadpoles, and one team working on the horses. The horses were really complicated. Since we used Xu Beihong’s style, the brushstrokes for the horses were too complicated, so we set that aside for the time being. Using Qi Baishi’s painting, we put together maybe fifty scenes. That took us roughly one month, to do fifty scenes. That was all of us working together, more than forty people. At the time, Tang Cheng was the head coordinator of the animation team. After we finished these fifty scenes, we took them to the Film Bureau to share the good news. We made such a big to-do about it that as soon as they saw the scenes, the leaders said, “Excellent work, you can immediately start on a film straight-away!”

It just so happened that we'd just come across the script for *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* in a primary school textbook by Fang Huizhen. There were parts of the story that we had already done scenes for in our experimental films. Everyone look at these; the first part is our experimental segments, those fifty successful scenes. I've chosen some other scenes to show you, later in the film clip. So later, when we were making *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*, we chose some of Qi Baishi's paintings, and analyzed the brushstrokes to figure out how we could recreate them. We used the core creative team's method of organization to put this together. The team consisted of Tang Cheng, Yan Dingxian, Wu Qiang, Xu Jingda, and myself, five people in total. The whole animation department worked on *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*, and the whole photography department did, too. So this scene of the frog jumping is from those fifty experimental scenes. The shrimp came from those too, from the earliest black and white experimental segments. During the production of *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*, Te Wei served as art director, and Qian Jiajun as technical director. The first part was black and white, later we figured out how to do color. So we're going to play the film clip of *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* now.

The chicks were animated by Pu Jiexiang, and the tadpoles by Lin Wenxiao, who will be talking about those. Animating this film brought together a lot of key animators and talented people, including Dai Tielang, who animated the goldfish, the shrimp, and other things. He wasn't able to come today. This is how *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* got made. After this film was finished, we wanted to send it to the International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary, in Czechoslovakia. We pushed ourselves for three months to complete the film, and Tang Cheng took it to the film festival. When she came back, the part with the goldfish was missing. It had been stolen, cut right out of the film. But this shows how influential the film was internationally. When they showed it in Beijing, all of the experts in the art world praised the film. Mao Dun even wrote a poem about it. Our *Little Tadpoles* had such a big impact at the time that we all felt like this first attempt to make an ink-painting film was a real success. Even now, when people re-watch the film, they never feel tired of it. After we finished *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*, we started working on the second ink-painting animation, *The Herd Boy's Flute*.

So why were we in such a rush to make *The Herd Boy's Flute*? The first reason was that *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* was our first ink-painting animation, and we felt this kind of animation could best represent the unique qualities of China. There are a lot of different styles in Chinese painting, and we wanted to try our hand at depicting all sorts of things. At the same time, from the perspective of art production, we wanted to improve and standardize our technique. When we made *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*, we avoided complicated backgrounds on purpose because the painting style allowed us to do this. However, in *The Herd Boy's Flute*, the layers and effects of ink diffusion of the water buffalo were much more sophisticated than in *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*. At the time, the team and Te Wei chose the script *The Herd Boy's Flute*. Since we were using Li Keran's painting style for this film, we asked him to paint the character model sheets. He did maybe eight to ten paintings, which we hung up in our office for everyone to observe and study his brush strokes. This was the first part of the process, to find out all of the unique characteristics of his paintings. But the way we shot a film was different from painting. Ink painting was originally a two-dimensional art form, but we divided it into many layers. The following sequence was about the butterfly, and the water buffalo catching the butterfly was

really difficult to animate. A big water buffalo catching a tiny butterfly. Dai Tielang animated it. We did more than ten different versions, until we were all crying. At the time Te Wei said the following to encourage us, “Eat something bitter today, and everything will taste sweeter tomorrow.”

Scenes like this one, with the girl chopping wood, the one just now, were from real life. We really delved into everyday life, spending two and half months in the countryside in Guangzhou. We didn't even come back for Spring Festival. In 1962, when we had hardships, Lin Wenxiao's child, who was very young at the time, went with us to experience life in the countryside. There are some photos here. For *The Herd Boy's Flute*, we spent two months delving into everyday life, and we learned a lot from those two months. While we were there, every day we went out with the herd boys and their water buffaloes. We were with them every day. And we were always on the road. This is a photograph of the production crew on location. Lin Wenxiao, that's Te Wei, Dai Tielang, Wu Yingju, we all lived there.

One morning, on our way to delving into everyday life, Wu Yingju started humming, and came up with the melody of the theme song for *The Herd Boy's Flute* right there, on the spot. He asked, “What do you think, any good?” We all thought it was really distinct. We liked it a lot. This is a photograph of Lin Wenxiao, Wu Yingju, and myself, on that trip. This is when we heard him humming. During the day we did the hard job of taking the water buffalo out to pasture. We had to film the movements these animals made. The part with the waterfall, we really went there, too. Anything in the film that required first-hand experience, out we went. We went out to collect creative materials during the day, and then came back at night to discuss what we'd found. This movement is something the herd boy did. Everything here is something we photographed and filmed to take back to the animators in charge of animating movements. In the part here, where the water buffalo is playing in the stream, that's from the materials we collected during this time. When we came back at night, we discussed how to storyboard the script. The script was something that Te Wei and the rest had sketched out an outline for in his hotel room, and then added things from our studies of everyday life, to fill out the shots.

So that's why we spent two and a half months preparing the outdoor scenes to make *The Herd Boy's Flute*. Afterwards, we went back to Shanghai and started on the enormous task of animating the water buffalo. But using a brush to paint meticulously is as complicated as trying to draw a map by hand. How are you supposed to get started? We did a lot of experiments. There was one scene, the running one that we played just now. I remember we had to redo it sixteen times before we finally got it right. Sixteen times just trying to figure out how to use the ink and strokes to capture the water buffalo. Qian Jiajun was leading the group, and Yan Shanchun joined us on our arduous task around this time. During the process of making *The Herd Boy's Flute*, we really did solve a lot of problems we hadn't dealt with before. The scenes in *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama* were relatively simple, but *The Herd Boy's Flute* had a lot of scenes of zooming in, zooming out, panning, and tracking. Capturing these things in ink-painting animation was extremely difficult.

In ink-painting animation, you can't shoot a scene just once, you have to shoot it several times. From a technical perspective, doing the same thing several times is incredibly difficult. To deal with some of the technical problems, we had to come up with a relatively set process for

producing ink-painting animation after we finished the film. Once we had that, we thought the state would support us, but then the Cultural Revolution started. So we had to stop, and couldn't keep going. Completing *The Herd Boy's Flute* was really important for ink-painting animation, not just because of the process I was just describing, but also because of the artistic quality of *The Herd Boy's Flute*. At the time, the director of the film, Te Wei, came up with the slogan, "Our art must be higher than real life." This theme was really exquisite and thoughtful, because actually every frame of the film had to be its own complete ink-painting. Afterwards, everyone who saw *The Herd Boy's Flute* felt it had achieved a very high artistic level. That's what we did when we worked on this film.

Cultural Revolution started right at this time, so *The Herd Boy's Flute* got put away before the official release. It was criticized as a "poisonous weed," among other things. It was criticized for not having any content related to class struggle, so they cast it aside. Later on, staff at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio had to go to the "May 7" Cadre Schools, and we didn't come back to make animations until twenty years later, in 1983. We made quite a few films in the 1980s. Eventually, the leaders suggested we make another ink-painting animation. But what should we make? That was *The Deer's Bell*, based on a script by Sang Hu, about a young girl and a deer. But twenty years had passed, and the technical requirements, from the film to the technology we were using, had all changed. Originally, we had been using German film, Akfa G334, but by the 1980s everyone was using Eastman. So the technical conditions were different; and also in the twenty years that had passed our crew had changed too. Some of us had been promoted to directors. For *The Deer's Bell* we invited Mr. Cheng Shifa to paint the deer, and we went to Mount Emei together to delve into everyday life there. We took a lot of photos at the deer farms of Mount Emei and Mount Qingcheng, and also met a lot of hunters, too. We collected all kinds of creative raw materials there. At the time, I think quite a few of us went together. This photograph shows some of the outdoor scenery. The one wearing the white shirt is you (Lin Wenxiao), and the opposite is Tang Cheng. This is a deer field. It wasn't an easy trip to Mount Emei. When we came down from the mountain, some of us had high blood pressure.

When we got back, we were busy with preparing, getting restarted, and training animators for the making of this film. Tang Cheng was the director, but she got sick halfway through. The film wasn't finished, and she'd fallen ill. So we helped her finish the work afterward, the sound recording and everything else. I think her contribution to ink-painting animation is something we really need to mention here. That includes the earliest film, *Little Tadpoles Look for Mama*, and also the fact that when she was working on *The Deer's Bell*, she completely collapsed from exhaustion. She was the big sister of our animated films, the team leader, the leading light of that era. She served as the assistant director on *Uproar in Heaven*; she was a "March 8th" red-banner holder; and she was a delegate to the National People's Congress. She was selfless, because she didn't care about personal gains or loss. She worked without complaint, and so people at the studio really admired her spirit. Whenever I start talking about *The Deer's Bell*, I really start to miss her. After we finished that film, the state recognized it as the third ink-painting animation, praising it for its high technical achievement, especially because we managed to do it again, twenty years later. They invited us to apply for the National Innovation Award for the film. When we'd finished it, we were awarded First Place for Technical Achievement by the Ministry of Culture, and second place for the National Innovation Award. Just our ink-painting animation technology alone won these two awards. That was the situation with regards to *The Deer's Bell*.

The fourth ink-painting animation was *Feelings of Mountains and Rivers*. After taking part in four ink-painting animated films, I realized something: every film we made was going to be different, because every film needs new creations, new inventions, and new thinking; you can't make each like the last. The script that Wang Shuchen wrote was excellent, and he was also credited as one of the directors, because his script gave us so much room to express ourselves in ink-painting animation. That happened to be around the time of the 1988 International Animated Film Festival. We needed a film that could represent China's animation abilities, so we put an all-out effort into this film. After we'd put together the production team, we asked Jin Fuzai to compose the music. There were five or six of us, and we drove out to the Fuchun River in Zhejiang, and other places like that, collecting creative raw materials and delving into everyday life, like before. Later, also in Zhejiang, we invited two teachers from the Zhejiang Institute of Art to be our art designers. The first was Wu Shanming, who was in charge of character design, and the other was Zhuo Hejun, who was in charge of background design. He did amazing work too. Here is a photo of us working on the film.

Feelings of Mountains and Rivers was pretty unique because we used splash-ink and freehand impressionistic painting styles. They were really appropriate for depicting our theme, which was the attachment between an old zither master and his student. We used a lot of different shots and scenes to depict this process, which you can see here. This is from when we were delving into everyday life, on Yan Ziling's fishing platform. Clouds gathered, and the sky turned red. We filmed the whole thing. The atmosphere of this scene was used in the film. When big rain drops appeared after the rain, we used brushes to paint the scene on the spot. Then we realized that it would be really hard to use the frame-by-frame animation method to capture the freehand impressionistic nature of splash-ink painting. So we used continuous shooting instead, splashing the ink onto the absorbent mulberry paper, and shooting the effect of ink diffusion with a live-action camera. That's how we used the continuous shooting technique on this film. *Feelings of Mountains and Rivers* was the first film where we used this technique. There are some scenes in the film where the mountain appears layer by layer. This is actually the ink flowing down the paper. Also in the scenes with the waves crashing, it's the same effect of ink flowing on paper. The whole effect really shows what ink-painting can do. You get a real sense of why people get so caught up in ink-paintings.

This film took a lot of work and a lot of experiments to finish. At that time, Qin Yizhen was with us. He was also an ink-painting artist. Before we made the film, we invited him to paint many scenes for us. Later, we invited two other ink-painters to paint for us, live in the studio. These two photos were taken then. *Feelings of Mountains and Rivers* was a real breakthrough for us. Also in terms of how we dealt with the art, we really made a big progress, even more than usual. For example, for the final scene, we only used line drawings, outlines with ink, and nothing else. The effect was really excellent. This is what we painted live on site, putting the ink directly onto the mulberry paper to achieve the ink-diffusion effect. For the walking and the boat, we used only white lines. The character is playing the zither and recalling his old master. This is an original painting by one of the artists. We used it for the film. We took this film to the first Shanghai International Film Festival, and the chairperson John Halas said: "It was like I discovered a new continent here in China." When he watched this film, he was really moved. At the film festival, our film received a gold medal. So I think that ink-painting animation isn't just

limited to ink-painting animation as a format in and of itself. China is a rich treasure house of painting, arts, and culture, and there is a lot that is worth tapping into. We need to keep digging. But of course, we'll have to depend on the younger generation for that. I think they'll keep working in this direction.

Also, in the last couple of years, with recent advances in technology, there are some problems you can now use computers to solve. Because the traditional methods that we used were pretty complicated, in 1995 we started using computers to produce ink-painting animations, at least in part. This was also very successful. For the 2010 Shanghai Expo, we applied with a film that used computer-generated ink-painting animation, and at the Expo itself, we had an official screening of *Harmonious China*, which used this kind of computer technology, too. Chang Guangxi and his team also produced *The Kite* (2000), which uses the technology partially in the film. And in the eight-minute animation sequence in *Harmonious China*, we used computer ink-painting animation. It means that there are a lot of ways to use Chinese ink-painting. The national traditions of China can be used in a wide range of artistic settings. As far as animated films go, as a veteran from the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, even as old as I am today, I'm not ready to give up yet. Even if I'm not as strong as I used to be, I still hope to do better in the future. The younger generation need to do even better than us, step by step! Okay, that's my talk.

Bio

[Nick Stember](#) is a translator and historian of Chinese comics and science fiction. Having completed an MA in Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia with his thesis on the Shanghai Manhua Society, in the fall of 2018 he will be starting a PhD in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK.