

An Authentic Animator

By Yan Dingxian; translated by Nick Stember

(Panel Chair) Thank you, Teacher Duan, for your wonderful speech. I believe everyone has learned a lot. Our next speaker will be Teacher Yan Dingxian. He was born in 1936 and graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1953. That same year, he joined the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, working as an animation designer, director, and president (1984-1988). He served as lead animation designer for *Uproar in Heaven* (1961-1964), and director for *Ginseng Fruit* (1981), *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979), *Golden Monkey Subdues the Demon* (1985), and *Shook and Beta* (1989-1992), among other films. He is the recipient of the Golden Rooster Award, the Government Award, and the Calf Award, in addition to five international awards. From 1985 to 1997, he served as a judge for domestic and international film festivals. Let us welcome Teacher Yan Dingxian.

(Yan Dingxian) If you want me to speak at this conference, my old comrades will just have to grin and bear it, because they've heard it all before. I chose the title "An Authentic Animator" for my talk because the main thing I want to talk about is how the word "animation" really defines my life. I can break it down into five phases: I watched animation when I was little, studied animation when I grew up, made animation after I graduated, wrote about animation after I retired, and now I'm here to talk about animation. My situation is the same as a lot of my colleagues here who have shared with us today, but I can only speak as an individual, even if that individual experience includes some shared experiences too.

When I was little, I watched animation, and that's a little unique because we are talking about the 1940s. I went to primary school in Shanghai, so I had the privilege of watching animated films. If I had been in Wuxi or another small town, I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to watch animated films. At the time, I lived on Gordon Road near Jing'an Temple, today's Shaanxi South Road. Shaanxi South Road had three movie theatres at the far end, so it was a pretty exciting place in Shanghai at the time. The three movie theatres were the Ping'an, the Meiqi, and the Dahua. All three theatres played animated films, which were called cartoons then. Of course, we watched American cartoons the most. Around then, I heard about the Wan brothers being the first to make animations in China, but I never saw any of their films at the time. Who were the Wan brothers? What was their animation like? I never got to see their animated films as a child. It was really a shame. So later on, when the oldest Wan brother came back from Hong Kong to work with me on the same animated filmmaking team, I didn't know what to say. I couldn't say something like "I watched your animations in the late 1940s before the PRC was founded, or maybe in the early 1950s." I couldn't lie like this, but I did hear their names back then... Maybe it's because their films didn't have many copies, and some theatres never ran them, so I never had a chance to watch them. I never would have thought that after the Wan brothers came back they would work with me on the same animation team at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. That's what I mean when I say "when I was little I watched animation."

Now I will discuss what I mean by "when I grew up I studied animation." What I mean is different from most people, who made animation after graduating from fine arts academies. At the time, I'd finished middle school in Wuxi and my art teacher

introduced me to Yan Wenliang, who at the time was serving as the president of the Suzhou Art Academy. After studying abroad, he brought back a bunch of plaster reproductions, and his students included the really important teacher Qian Jiajun, who worked in animation later. He also had a student named Fan Jingxiang, who set up an animation studio that made animations for the Health Bureau. My art teacher said, "After you graduate from middle school, you can go to the Suzhou Fine Arts Academy. They have an animation major." Because at the time I liked drawing, especially the kinds of things you see in animation.

After summer break started, I went to the Pavilion of Surging Waves to sign up for the entrance exam for the animation major at the Suzhou Fine Arts Academy. I remember the Dean of Teaching Affairs asking me, "Your family background is good, why don't you spend five years studying for a college diploma? Why spend less than that studying animation?" At the time private art schools charged tuition. I said, "I don't care about the tuition. The main thing is that when I was little I like watching animated films. The way that things you draw can move around on a screen, I think that's really exciting. Compared to sketching or spending five years studying oil painting for a fine arts major, I think I'd rather do animation." He said, "Oh, so the reason you want to write the entrance exam isn't because your family doesn't have the means to support you. That's not the reason you're signing up for two or three years in an animation program instead of five years of painting." Summer break was almost over when I was surprised to receive a letter of acceptance at my house. It was for the animation major at the Suzhou Fine Arts Academy. I'd been accepted. They told me to come in early September to sign up for classes.

After about one term, schools and departments across the whole country were reformed. The Suzhou Fine Arts Academy was private and private schools all had to become public. So my major was combined with the animation major in the Department of Fine Arts of the Beijing Film Academy. In this way, I transferred from a private school, a school that charged for tuition and board, to a special animation training course at the Beijing Film Academy, a public school.

As soon as we arrived there, the situation totally changed for us. At the time, they were using the "supply system," so when the weather got hot in the summer, everyone was issued a grey uniform, along with a hat. In the winter we got blue padded-cotton jackets. I still remember one time, when Galina Ulanova's ballet troupe came to China on an official visit from the Soviet Union. When they arrived at the train station, it was summer, and our art academies were supposed to go and welcome them. As soon as they opened the doors of the train, we saw the ballet troupe was all dressed up. Oh man! Young women in all sorts of colors, ballet dancers, all wearing dresses. And there we were, in grey uniforms and grey hats, the spitting image of the Eighth Route Army. They thought it was really funny, asking how come our whole school was dressed up this way. The Soviets didn't understand the situation in China, because our school used the supply system, which meant the school didn't charge for tuition, and they provided room and board, plus one grey uniform in the summer when the weather got hot, and a cotton-padded jacket, a cotton-padded uniform, and a cotton-padded hat when winter came. They were all the same. The dolled-up girls from the Galina Ulanova ballet troupe got off the train and saw a sea of blue, because even the female students from the Beijing Film Academy who were holding fresh flowers to welcome them were dressed in uniforms, too. They didn't know we were a supply system school. That's my

anecdote.

After I graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, I was assigned to the Shanghai Animation Film Studio because I was an animation major. There were a lot of old hands who had been making animation their whole lives, as Teacher Duan Xiaoxuan knows. I remember when all of us students reported for duty, Teacher Duan Xiaoxuan was the one who came to meet us at the train station. Of my classmates who graduated in Beijing that year, eight of us were assigned to the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, where all eight of us worked until we retired. So that's why I can say that my life really has been watching animation since I was little, studying animation when I grew up, making animation after I graduated, and never changing careers. Most of us who study animation spend the rest of our lives making animation. Teacher Duan Xiaoxuan knows this best, because she was the team leader. We were all very professional. If we studied this profession, we didn't worry about job hopping, but rather stuck with it to the end. This was also the case with the older generation of students who graduated from the Suzhou Fine Arts Academy one year ahead of me. They made animation for the rest of their lives too. They were animators for life and they made animation a subject of professional study. At the time there were lots of people who said making animation was childish. When some of the students who graduated from fine arts schools and came to the Shanghai Animation Film Studio were told to draw according to the models done up by the animation production team, they would say, "I studied fine arts, and I have my own ideas." Some of them would take the models and change them, so that they were different from the official models for the film. People who study fine arts have a very independent way of looking at things and won't follow other people's visuals to make animation. Some of these students ended up getting transferred to fine arts presses. But since we studied animation, we persevered with making animation for our whole lives. We felt that making animation was the responsibility of all animation majors after graduating, and that we should do a good job of it.

Eventually, I took part in making *The Conceited General* (1956), directed by Te Wei, the president of the studio. Later on, there was Qian Jiajun's *A Zhuang Brocade* (1959), Wan Laiming's *The Picture on the Wall* (1958) and *Uproar in Heaven*. We took part in drawing the key frames for all of these films. We had to think up each movement ourselves, and then draw the main movements, the key frame movements, and carefully fill in the in-between cels in the animation. Then we'd shoot the pencil roughs for a final review by the director before painting in the colors and putting together the finished animation. From 1984 to 1989, I was chosen in a studio-wide election to serve as the president of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. President Te Wei was getting old. He was already over sixty and needed a successor after he retired. So I became President Te Wei's successor. In the four years I served, there were three important things I did, which I'm going to share with everyone today.

The first was to change the bonus system into a reward system. In the past there were first place, second place, and third place bonuses. The quality and the workload didn't matter if you got the first-place bonus for the quarter. But then you might be embarrassed to take the first-place bonus again the next quarter, so you'd let someone else take it, and cycle through the places, one, two, three. So that wasn't much of an incentive. Instead, I thought whoever drew the most and the best animation should get first place. With everyone humbly declining like that it didn't feel like a reward. After I became the studio president, I changed it to a reward system. There were some people

with a talent for art, an ability for drawing, who preferred to stay in their dormitory drawing comics for publishers because the salary was higher than what you would earn for a film. So the bonus wasn't working as a reward, a stimulus to get everyone working. This was the first thing I did.

The second thing I did was to develop the production of animated series. As everyone knows, back then they played the news before live-action movies, plus a ten to twenty-minute-long animated short. The theatres wanted to increase the number of screenings, so they got rid of these shorts to schedule as many feature films as they could and increase their income a little. So then animation films were broadcast on TV, and for TV they wanted series. The first episode this month, the second episode the next month, the third episode the month after that, and so on. That way the viewers could see a new animated film every month. We had to make this change, using animation series to show something new on TV.

The third thing was organizing an international animation film festival. At the time, I had a coworker who noted that we were always sending our films to other countries to participate in their film festivals. That's like making fireworks and letting someone else set them off! When other countries all around the world invite you to take your film to be screened at their film festival, you're actually expanding the pool of their films and making their festival more diversified. So why not put on our own festival and let people give us their fireworks to set off? He really hit the nail on the head. We were taking all that trouble to make animations and not bothering to put on a film festival ourselves, in the international arena. If we didn't organize a film festival, then other people wouldn't send their films to us. So eventually we decided we had to organize an international film festival in the hopes that other people would send us their fireworks to set them off over here, for the sake of international communication, and also give us the chance to see cultural products from other countries.

These three things were suggested by some old comrades at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio and I enacted them while I served as president: changing the bonus system to a reward system, developing animation series, and organizing an international film festival to increase the scope of international communication.

After my four-year term, I decided to resign, saying, "I'm only serving one term, so one of you, whoever is able to do so, is going to have to succeed me as the president of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio." When I went back to my position making animation afterwards, some people said I had done nothing wrong and shouldn't resign. The Shanghai Film Studio had a director named Zhao Huanzhang, who everyone knows directed rural films. We were pretty close, and he said, "How come you aren't the studio president anymore? Did you do something wrong? How come a new president replaced you after only four years?" I said, "No, I didn't. I still have some time left to do some more work and I would rather give up the position and go back to my job making animation." Because when I assumed my duties as the president, there was a director of the production office and a director of the creative office. One had been a background designer, and the other worked on cinematography. I told them that from then on, since they were officials of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, they should not deal with film production firsthand anymore, but should devote themselves whole-heartedly to administrative affairs. During my three- or four-year term as the president of the studio, I wouldn't make an animated film. It wasn't that I couldn't make animated films as a

president, but I was worried that I would not be able to handle the studio's administrative affairs well if I spent time on film production. Later, our mid-level cadres also kept this commitment. Only after they finished their four-year terms serving as the director of the production office or the creative office could they go back to making animated films. That way everyone could focus on their administrative work. At the end of my term, I told the chief of the Shanghai Film Bureau, Wu Yigong, a live-action feature film director, that I wanted to do a fixed term and did not plan on serving another term. During my term I had accomplished the three achievements I described. With that, he approved my letter of resignation.

Finally, I want to speak on the topic of "writing about animation" after I retired in 1996. I summarized my experience making animation for the better part of my life in the four books I wrote. *Animation Skills and Methods* (1981) sold very well, going on to seven printings. The publisher, China Film Press, said that this book sold well because it popularized animation knowledge. Some people taught themselves; they bought the book and studied it so carefully that they ended up getting hired by some animation studios to make animations. In 2006 I wrote the book *Animation Directing, Fundamentals and Creation* (Hunan Fine Arts Press) and in 2009, I wrote another book, *Character Acting for Animation* (Hubei Fine Arts Press). The last book I should mention is *Examples from Chinese Animation* (Publishing House of the Electronics Industry, 2004), where I took some examples from outstanding films of the past and collected them together in one book. I wrote these four books as textbooks to teach students, and *Animation Skills and Methods* being reprinted seven times made the publisher very happy. Why did this book sell so well? I told the publisher it was because nobody had written about the basic knowledge of animation before, so people thought it was really mysterious. With a few simple sentences I was able to explain it. He asked why people didn't make animation themselves independently, and I said, "There's no way, because animation is a collective process that requires each department working together."

Now, let's deal with the topic of "talking about animation." In the last couple of years, I have received a lot of invitations from the media and from vocational colleges to talk to their students about some key animation knowledge. I've had a fair number of opportunities to talk about animation. Today I'm in Hong Kong, also to talk about animation. This is one aspect of the topic. What's more, I want to talk about the Chinese animator Wan Laiming, and his twenty-year-long dream, which gave me a lot of inspiration. After he came back to Shanghai from Hong Kong he made a couple of short films, but he always wanted to make *Uproar in Heaven* (1961-1964), which had been his twenty-year-long dream by then. Why twenty years? Twenty years before that, back in the 1940s, he'd gotten a crew together and trained them, but he couldn't buy the film stock because at the time, color film stock was really costly. They preferred to sell color film stock to other filmmakers, and the boss didn't want to buy color film stock to make animation. Wan Laiming, who early on directed *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), once recalled, "Making *Uproar in Heaven* was a twenty-year-long dream for me. Why is that? Film stock was too expensive, we couldn't afford it, and the boss didn't want to pay for it." It wasn't until twenty years later, when he came back to Shanghai from Hong Kong, that he was finally able to succeed in realizing his dream. *Uproar in Heaven* concentrated the strengths of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio in one place, and everyone was really willing to go all out for this film. We asked him, "How did you make *Princess Iron Fan*?" He said, "I spent a lot of money inviting people to help

me draw. If I didn't pay enough, they wouldn't come. We got halfway done and couldn't keep going." From this you can see how difficult things were for the older generation of animators.

I'll say a few more things about *Uproar in Heaven*. The preparations for the film began in 1959, and the top artists in China, the Zhangs—Zhang Guangyu and his brother Zhang Zhengyu—were invited first to design the character models and then to design the backgrounds. They were both invited to Shanghai and put up in the Overseas Chinese Hotel so that they could begin working on character and background designs. While they were there, I would bring paint and paper from the Shanghai Animation Film Studio to the Overseas Chinese Hotel, and I got to hear them chatting about their creative process. That really gave me some new ways of looking at things. They asked me, "Where are you from?" I said, "I'm from Wuxi." They said, "Do you know about, or have you seen what the Kitchen God looks like?" I said, "I saw him when I was little, on the wall of my maternal grandma's house, a picture pasted up in the kitchen." They said, "That's who our design for the Jade Emperor in *Uproar in Heaven* is based on, with a white face and a five-strand beard. We went out into the folk tradition, took an everyday god that was pasted up in kitchens, put a tall hat on him, a circle of rouge on each cheek, added the five-strand beard, and he was transformed into the supreme Jade Emperor."

That was the inspiration this old artist gave me. He would use handicrafts from folk art and turn them into character designs, instead of racking his brain and coming up with something from scratch. That's how good things are made. For example, *Uproar in Heaven* incorporates some good things from the folk tradition of mural painting. So that's the creative principle that I heard from the Zhang brothers when bringing them supplies. This really inspired me, the fact that these old artists wouldn't come up with something from scratch. If they were going to use something in their work, it had to have a source, to be developed on the foundation of the folk tradition, so you can say this foundation was a relatively solid one. These things inspired me a lot and taught me a lot. If I hadn't met these two old experts, hadn't worked with these older artists, I wouldn't have been able to hear these things.

There is also Sun Wukong's character design in *Uproar in Heaven*. Mr. Zhang Guangyu drew three versions of Sun Wukong's character design, with printed versions and drafts for each. One version was in the style of a forest bandit, with a pheasant feather headdress. It looked really good, but the director wasn't satisfied. Another version was a cartoon style. Zhang Guangyu used to draw comics, that was something all of us working on *Uproar in Heaven* already knew. That version was orange, very much a cartoon style, and the director wasn't satisfied with that one either. The third version was based on stage makeup. If the stage makeup was too over-the-top, it would be hard to animate. Director Wan Laiming wasn't satisfied with any of these three versions but Mr. Zhang Guangyu had already gone back to Beijing. He had been on summer vacation when we invited him to come and draw for us while staying at the Overseas Chinese Hotel. He had already gone back to teach at the Central Craft Art Academy. What could we do? Well, Wan Laiming said, "Yan Dingxian, it's up to you to revise the design for Sun Wukong for *Uproar in Heaven*." I asked how I was supposed to go about changing a big expert's designs. He said, "So you have to be an expert to draw? Why can't you draw?" These words from Old Wan really got me going, and later he said, "Gods are mortal, the only difference is that mortals are not persistent and give up

halfway. He was only able to get to this level through real-world practice.” He said, “I’m giving you an opportunity to practice. Whether you succeed or fail is in my hands as the director, so do your best.” So now I can tell everyone, the final design for Sun Wukong was essentially completed by me. Later, after I’d finished, Old Wan happily said, “Just look at you now, wasn’t Sun Wukong’s character designed by you? If I’d asked you to design it at the time, you wouldn’t have done it and would have invited someone else to do the design, to do the drawing. Then you wouldn’t have had a chance to practice.” When he said this, it really got me thinking. Whenever you want to make a film, you have to start from basic knowledge, and then practice and work hard at scaling the obstacles. If you just go and draw something easily without thinking about it, then why would anyone ask you to do it? Someone else can do it. So this really inspired me. It was a very good opportunity.

After I’d finished drawing Sun Wukong’s character design, Old Wan, that is Mr. Wan Laiming, summed it up in three phrases when he said, “Simple lines, bright colors, outstanding image. All in all, you’ve met my requirements.” Looking back, I did the right thing in designing Sun Wukong’s character. He was right. If I hadn’t drawn the character design, someone else would have. But the work that was passed down in history would not have been mine. So I think for me this youthful attempt was really critical. Of course, the director was also willing to give me free rein. The expert had already left, and no one else could do it, so the next generation had to step in. I realized the truth of this then and there. The way we draw Sun Wukong now hadn’t ever appeared in any animations before *Uproar in Heaven*, and if I hadn’t drawn it, someone else would’ve had to really struggle to finish it. That’s the only way you can leave something behind. Some people ask, who drew this character design? Yan Dingxian drew it. I hadn’t ever seen green eyebrows and a red heart-shaped face before. That was the first time I’d seen a Sun Wukong like that. This also shows that Director Wan Laiming demanded that young people be willing to take chances. A good film depends on your hard work, on taking chances. That’s all, I won’t say any more about this.

I also want to say a few words about *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979). I was a co-director on *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. There were three co-directors working together on this widescreen animated film. Preparations began in May 1978, and shooting ended in August 1979. In total we spent a year and three months on it. Teacher Duan Xiaoxuan was the photographer. For this widescreen animated feature film, we used both wide and narrow format film, because at the time we had to consider that there weren’t many widescreen theatres, only Great World, Grand Cinema, and a few others. Usually animated films were shown on normal narrow format screens, so they had to do a lot of extra work by shooting it on two rolls, one roll of wide format, one roll of normal format. This made it convenient for areas and cities that had widescreen theatres to screen the film, and those that didn’t but had normal format could screen the film, too. It was more work for the photographer, but that was because widescreen hadn’t been established everywhere yet. So even though it was more work, it was still worth it because some small cities didn’t have wide screens. This was a comprehensive solution to resolving the problem of seeing this film.

Simply put, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* was an animated film adapted from the classic Ming novel *Investiture of the Gods*. At the time, the three directors of this film, who also designed the film, came up with a guiding principle using eight Chinese characters for the making of this film: “Matchless fantasy, unique skills, tragic heroism,

and cinematic beauty; life, death, resurrection, and uproar.” Later, I heard some Japanese people ask why we Chinese can use four characters to summarize things, why we can use just four characters as a guiding principle that we require our animated filmmaking crew to follow. They thought it was really strange the way that Chinese people can express so many meanings with just one character.

Let me explain the meanings of the eight-character saying for *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, “Matchless fantasy, unique skills, tragic heroism, and cinematic beauty; life, death, resurrection, and uproar.” First of all, Nezha’s birth was very fantastic, a ten-month-long (should be three years and six months) pregnancy, after which he was born as a meatball, which changed into a little boy. It was very strange, very fantastic. This is what we had to imagine in our animated film. Usually if someone is pregnant for ten months, you don’t need to show it. This is what we mean by “matchless fantasy.” By “unique skills” we mean unique ideas and techniques, majestic imagination, and ingenious design. By “tragic heroism” we refer to Nezha’s tragic self-sacrifice and suicide by cutting his own throat. By “cinematic beauty” we mean beautiful images, beautiful backgrounds, and beautiful cinematography.

When that Japanese person came for a tour, as soon as we explained, he said, “How did you Chinese come up with so many meanings for one character? ‘Matchless fantasy, unique skills, tragic heroism, and cinematic beauty; life, death, resurrection, and uproar,’ this eight-character saying summarizes all of the meanings of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*.” Whenever I bring this up, everyone remembers it very clearly, so I thought it was worth mentioning today.

The scene where Nezha cuts his throat really brings together Nezha’s image and personality as a fantastic animated protagonist, asking to spare the people by sacrificing his own life, and moving people with emotion. This includes Mr. Chang Guangxi and some other key animators who participated in the production of the film. We can invite them to tell us how they designed Nezha’s movements, including when he takes out his sword to cut his own throat, so that his death can drive back the Dragon King’s flood. These are things everyone can talk about. I’ll leave that to you all to discuss further and finish my talk here.

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.