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Suspended animation: The Wan Brothers and the (In)animate Mainland-Hong Kong Encounter, 1947–1956

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ABSTRACT

The Wan Brothers produced *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), the first animated feature film in Asia in wartime Shanghai. In order to produce their second animated feature film, *The World of Insects*, the Wan Brothers went to Hong Kong in the late 1940s and did not go back to Shanghai until the mid-1950s. The Wan Brothers' encounter with Hong Kong was noneventful and non-spectacular, because the production of *The World of Insects* was suspended due to the lack of funds and artistic talents in postwar Hong Kong. The Wan Brothers' sojourn in Hong Kong can be concluded as a period of suspended animation, a state of deep hibernation in history of Chinese animation. If we locate the Wan Brothers' encounter with Hong Kong in the longue durée, however, we can see that it was still a necessary and important springboard for their later integration into the animation industry in socialist Shanghai and also for the belated emergence of the local animation industry in Hong Kong. The Wan Brothers' inanimate encounter with Hong Kong would soon be reanimated and would even explode with outbursts of repressed artistic creativities and energies on both sides of the border, despite being belated.

KEYWORDS

Wan Brothers; Wan Laiming;
Wan Guchan; Chinese
Animation; Princess Iron Fan;
Hong Kong animation

The Wan Brothers, including Wan Laiming (1899–1997), his twin brother Wan Guchan (1899–1995), Wan Chaochen (1906–1992), and Wan Dihuan (1907–present), were the so-called forefathers of Chinese animation. Born in Nanjing, Wan Laiming launched his career by working as an illustrator and cartoonist in the Fine Arts Department of the Shanghai Commercial Press in 1917. His brothers soon joined him in Shanghai. After watching some animated shorts imported from the West, they were fascinated by this new medium and decided to produce animated film themselves. They began to experiment with animation technology in a shabby pavilion room in 1920s Shanghai. After many trials and errors, they finally produced an animated fragment entitled *Su Zhendong de zhongwen daziji/Su Zhendong's Chinese Typewriter* (1922), an animated advertisement for the Shanghai Commercial Press. This animation fragment is widely regarded as the birth of Chinese animation. The Wan Brothers later joined the film industry in Shanghai and produced *Danao huashi/Uproar in an Art Studio* (1926), which is commonly regarded as the first animated film short in China. Although recent scholarship has begun

to challenge the various firsts credited to the Wan Brothers (Lent and Xu 2003; Fu 2012), there is no denying the fact that they were the most active and productive animators in the early history of Chinese animation.

When the full-scale Sino-Japanese war broke out in 1937, the first three Wan Brothers left Shanghai for the hinterlands of China to continue their animation career while the fourth brother gave up on animation and began to run a photography studio in order to earn money to support the extended Wan family, who stayed put in wartime Shanghai. The first two brothers, Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan, returned to the unoccupied International Settlement and French Concession of Shanghai (known as Orphan/Solitary Island) in April 1939 and produced *Tieshan gongzhu/Princess Iron Fan* (1941), the first animated feature film in Asia. It became an instant hit and traveled to Japan, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Canada, and America. Riding on the coattails of the international success of *Princess Iron Fan*, the ambitious twin brothers decided to try to make their second animated feature film, *Kunchong shijie/The World of Insects*, but their efforts were thwarted by the Japanese occupation of Orphan Island and later by the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists (1946–1949). In order to continue their animation career, Wan Guchan (Cantonese name: James Man Gu-Sim) went to Hong Kong in 1947 for better opportunities, soon followed by his brother Wan Laiming (Cantonese name: Man Lai-Ming) in 1949. The twin brothers stayed in Hong Kong for nearly a decade and returned to socialist Shanghai in 1954 (Wan Laiming) and 1956 (Wan Guchan).

The Wan Brothers' encounter with Hong Kong has been neglected in studies of both Chinese animation and postwar Hong Kong cinema. On the one hand, studies of Chinese animation always focus on the National Style and Chineseness, deliberately disavowing the transnational movements that have contributed to the rise of national cinema and national culture (Du 2012, 1–14). On the other hand, studies of postwar Hong Kong cinema usually focus on live-action feature film and neglect animation, which is overshadowed by the internationally renowned *kung fu* and martial arts films. By tracking the Wan Brothers' (in)activities in Hong Kong across the historical threshold of 1949, this article will highlight the neglected role of Hong Kong in the history of Chinese animation. It will also cast new light on the role of Chinese animation in postwar Hong Kong cinema.

As I have argued in my forthcoming book, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation*, animated encounters in the contact zone often trigger outbursts of artistic creativity and productivity during the process of friction and reconciliation. They always lead to the 'animation' of cultures on both sides of the border (Du 2018). The travel of *Princess Iron Fan* to Tokyo in 1942 triggered the birth of *Momotarō's Sea Eagles* (1943) and *Momotarō's Divine Sea Warriors* (the first animated feature film in Japan) and later inspired Tezuka Osamu to create his *Astro Boy* (1963) (Du 2012, 15–60). Mochinaga Tadahito, a wartime Japanese animator, migrated to Manchuria in the summer of 1945 and later became one of the founders of the animation industry in early socialist China (Du 2012, 61–102). Poshek Fu also demonstrates that in the field of live-action film, the two movements of Shanghai filmmakers to Hong Kong (1937–1941 and 1945–1950) reanimated the local film industry and brought about the golden age of Hong Kong cinema (Fu 2008, 2008).

In sharp contrast, the Wan Brothers' encounter with Hong Kong was different. They hardly made any animated film there as originally planned, nor did they immediately trigger the rise of a local animation industry. Their stay in Hong Kong was neither productive

nor eventful in its immediate context. It was a period of suspended animation, if not regression and termination. First, 'suspended animation' literally means a state of being neither dead nor alive, similar to the mode of deep hibernation. I use it here to describe the status of the Wan Brothers' stay in Hong Kong, which was characterized by their desperate desire to drive animation history forward and yet constant entrapment in their helpless situation. It was a dormant, if not regressive, period for Chinese animation. Second, 'suspended animation' refers to any ongoing animation project that is aborted and uncompleted. Here it specifically refers to *The World of Insects*, an unfinished animated film in postwar Hong Kong. Third, it refers to the art form of *lianhuanhua*/linked-pictures/picture books, which have dormant movements and a potential life force between its unanimated and sequential still images (Op de Beeck 2010). I will demonstrate in this article that when an animated film is suspended, it often assumes the form of linked-pictures. The Wan Brothers' encounter with Hong Kong was not animated in its immediate context, but if we locate it in the *longue durée*, however, we can see that it was still a necessary and important springboard for their later integration into the animation industry in socialist Shanghai and also for the belated emergence of the local animation industry in Hong Kong. The Wan Brothers' inanimate encounter with Hong Kong would soon be reanimated and would even explode with outbursts of repressed artistic creativities and energies on both sides of the border, despite being belated.

Animating the journeys: the Wan Brothers' travel to Hong Kong in the late 1940s

After the fall of Shanghai in 1937, numerous filmmakers, actors, writers, journalists, intellectuals, and artists fled to Hong Kong for refuge until this free port city was also occupied by Japanese soldiers in 1941. Their arrival brought about what Poshek Fu calls the 'golden age' of Hong Kong cinema (2003, 90). During the Civil War between 1945 and 1950, millions of people, including prominent filmmakers such as Cai Chusheng, Zhang Shankun, Zhu Shilin, and Yue Feng, left the mainland for Hong Kong. They played an important role in revitalizing the local film industry in post-war Hong Kong and in establishing the foundation for its ascent into becoming the capital of a global pan-Chinese cinema in the 1960s and 1970s (Fu 2008, 380). The two movements of people brought much capital, cheap labor, and artistic talents to Hong Kong and contributed to the economic and cultural prosperity of the city.

The Wan Brothers were part of these two exoduses to Hong Kong. After the fall of Shanghai in Dec 1937, the first three Wan Brothers went to Wuhan and Chongqing and joined *Zhongguo dianying zhipian chang* (China Productions), which was sponsored by the Nationalist Army. During their stay there, the three brothers produced many anti-Japanese animated shorts. Because it became more difficult to make a living in wartime capital Chongqing, the twin brothers decided to return to Shanghai in 1938. They got their passports in Kunming and then went to Hong Kong via Vietnam (Wan 1986, 85; Fu 2003, 7; Fu 2012, 14). During their brief stay in Hong Kong, the twins probably produced an anti-Japanese animated film short entitled *Huan wo heshan/Return Our Motherland* (Huang 1952). They then took a Taikoo ship to go back to Shanghai in April 1939 (Wan 1986, 85).¹ Later, the twins joined Xinhua/New China Productions under the aegis of Zhang Shankun and produced *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) in Orphan Island, Shanghai.

When the International Settlement and French Concession were occupied by the Japanese on December 8, 1941 (time in China), the Wan Brothers found it impossible to produce any animated film. After the Sino-Japanese war ended in 1945, the Wan Brothers' animation career faced unprecedented crises. Many filmmakers, including Zhang Shankun, were accused of treason because they stayed in wartime Shanghai and did not go to Chongqing for resistance activities. Their film studios were confiscated by the returned Nationalist agents and there seemed to be no future for them in Shanghai (Fu 2008, 383). The Wan Brothers could no longer work with Zhang Shankun for their planned second animated feature film. At that time, film studios owned by the Nationalist government refused to make animated films due to the high cost and extensive labor needed for animation. Some relatively progressive film studios, such as Kunlun, were struggling for survival and did not have the money to spend on animation. In order to make a living, the Wan Brothers temporarily gave up their animation career and worked as sculptors, art designers, painters, and photographers, but their modest salaries were quickly devalued due to rapid inflation (Wan 1986, 100–101). The Wan Brothers found it difficult to sustain their family. The social turmoil and insecurities caused by the Civil War made matters even worse. In order to make a living and continue their animation career, Wan Guchan fled to Hong Kong in 1947, soon joined by his brother Wan Laiming in early 1949.

Suspended animation: the failed making of *The World Of Insects* in Hong Kong

Postwar Hong Kong's film industry recovered quickly with the influx of Shanghai talents. Shanghai film tycoon Zhang Shankun and capitalist Li Zuyong founded Yonghua/Forever China Film Company in Hong Kong in early 1948. As the most well-equipped film studio in postwar Hong Kong, Yonghua produced the finest films at that time, such as *Guohun/The Soul of China* (1948) and *Qinggong mishi/The Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (1949). Due to financial and political problems, Zhang had conflicts with Li and resigned in 1949. After Zhang's departure, Yonghua declined until it was closed in 1956. With financial support from capitalists such as Yuan Yang'an and Lu Jiankang, Zhang Shankun founded Changcheng/Great Wall Productions in mid-1949 and continued to produce Mandarin-language films (Figure 1). After the Communist Party took power in China in 1949, staff at Great Wall Productions were divided by their political loyalties to either the Communists in Beijing or to the Nationalists in Taiwan. Zhang wanted to sever all business ties with the mainland market and sell his films to Taiwan. However, Yuan Yang'an and others tended to be pro-mainland. In 1950, Zhang Shankun was forced to resign. From then on, the studio was under the leadership of progressive filmmakers and investors who were supporters of Beijing. Great Wall Productions gradually became one of the most important leftist film studios in postwar Hong Kong (Fu 2008, 383–389).²

Wan Guchan first worked as a set designer in Yonghua and later joined Great Wall together with his newly arrived brother Wan Laiming. The twins' activities were partially recorded in *Changcheng huabao/The Great Wall Pictorial*, which was a film magazine affiliated with Great Wall Productions. It was Yuan Yang'an who invited the Wan Brothers to produce an animated feature film for educating children. The Wan Brothers proposed to produce *Mifeng yu huangchong/Bees and Grasshoppers*, which was adapted from *Huangchong yu mayi/The Grasshopper and the Ant*, a story from Aesop's Fables. *The*



Figure 1. Great Wall Productions from *Changcheng huabao* 11 (1951).

Grasshopper and the Ant was the second animated feature film the Wan Brothers tried in vain to make in Republican Shanghai (Li 1951; “Ji Tieshan” 1940, 2). Their fascination with it was understandable, because the four Wan Brothers had already made an animated short with the same title *The Grasshopper and the Ant* as early as 1932 (Fu 2012, 4). In his memoir, Wan Laiming recalls this film as *The World of Insects*, which was an allegory for Japan’s invasion of China. The film script was originally written by Zhou Yibai (1900–1977), who later also came to Hong Kong and worked as a scriptwriter for Yonghua in 1947 (Wan 1986, 92). Excited about the possible fruition of their second animated feature film, the two Wan Brothers soon finished the first draft of the drawings, parts of which were published in *The Great Wall Pictorial* in 1951. The film is about two groups of insects: good and diligent bees pitted against lazy grasshoppers who try to exploit and take advantage of the bees. A human boy named Xiaoniou/Little Ox sides with the bees and helps them in their final battle against the grasshoppers and their allies (Figure 2) (Li 1951). Obviously, the grasshoppers allude to the Japanese while the bees symbolize the hard-working Chinese during the war.

The production of a cel animated feature film at that time was very expensive. *The World of Insects* needed more than 600 storyboards, 9000 scenarios, 300 backgrounds, and 150,000 character drawings, involving around 200 animation professionals who would be on the payroll for at least one year (Li 1951). *The World of Insects* would be a luxury in Hong Kong – at that time many film studios spent only several days to produce a live-action Cantonese feature film in order to save money. When the Wan Brothers published parts of their drawings in *The Great Wall Pictorial* in 1951, it was estimated that it would take at least one year for them to complete it. However, by the end of 1951, the Wan Brothers had not made much progress. In their New Year speeches welcoming the

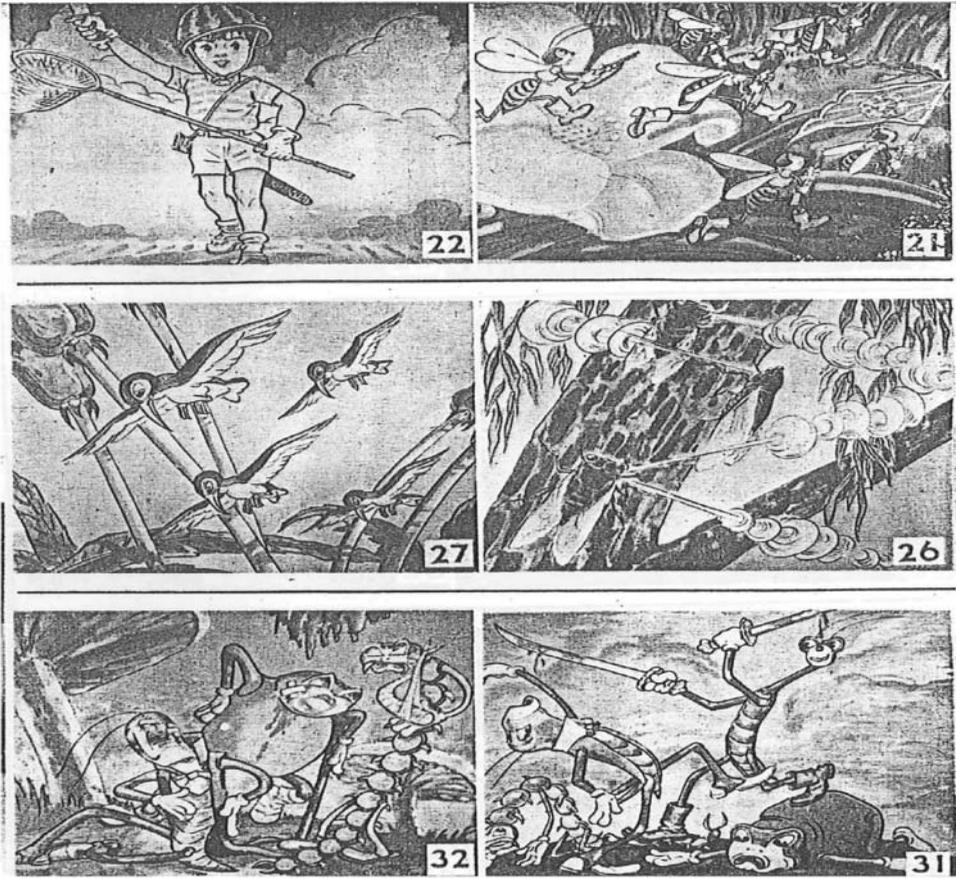


Figure 2. The final battle scene from the storyboard of *The World of Insects* from *Changcheng huabao* 4 (1951).

arrival of 1952, the Wan Brothers expressed their frustrations and hoped that they could overcome their difficulties with this animated feature film within the coming year (Wan 1952). However, to their disappointment, *The World of Insects* was never completed.

When the Wan Brothers realized that it was impossible for Great Wall to produce such an expensive animated feature film, they tried alternative ways to bring the story to life. During their stay at Great Wall, they became acquainted with an artist in exile named Han Zhaoxiang, who was good at *tixian muou*/string puppet (marionette) performance, a time-honored folk art that was very popular in Cantonese-speaking areas at the time. Han Zhaoxiang even had plans to establish a string puppet performance troupe when he returned to Mainland China. Inspired by this local artistic form, the Wan Brothers made string puppets of the characters in *The World of Insects* and tried to shoot a live-action feature film recording the puppet performance in a theater (Figure 3) (“Dianying” 1951). In this way, the production cost would be lowered considerably. Unfortunately, this alternative plan also fell through.

In addition to local Cantonese influence, the Wan Brothers may have been inspired by Russian puppet animation as well. The original title of *The World of Insects* was *The*

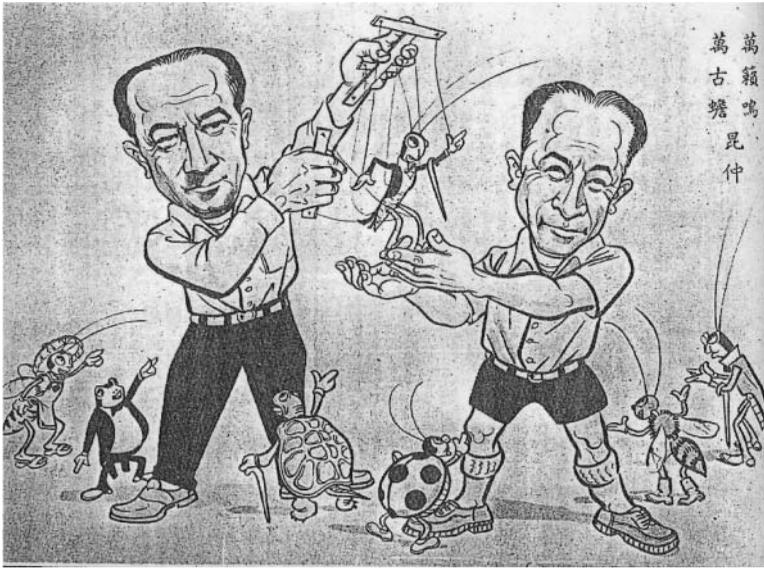


Figure 3. The Wan Brothers experimenting with string puppet performance from *Changcheng huabao* 7 (1951).

Grasshopper and the Ant, which is reminiscent of a Russian stop-motion puppet animated film also entitled *The Grasshopper and the Ant* (Vladislav Starevich, 1911). In the Russian film, the ant is hard-working while the grasshopper is lazy and hedonistic. While the ant is busy with building a house, the grasshopper enjoys life by drinking and playing. When the winter comes, the ant has a warm house to stay inside while the grasshopper has nowhere to shelter himself. He tries to enter the ant's house but is shut outside, where he dies in the cold weather. Similarly, in the Wan Brothers' *The World of Insects*, the hard-working bees are portrayed in sharp contrast with the merry-making and exploitative grasshoppers. It is quite possible that the Wan Brothers originally used ants and grasshoppers as protagonists, as indicated by the original title of their film *The Grasshopper and the Ant*, but later replaced the ants with bees, which are also associated with diligence, after they relocated to Hong Kong. Foreign animated films were popular in Republican Shanghai and the Wan Brothers acknowledged their indebtedness to films such as those by Fleischer and Disney. They specifically mentioned that German and Russian animations (puppet animation in particular) were superior to American animations (Wan 1936). It was highly likely that the Wan Brothers were inspired by Starevich's puppet animated films featuring insects, such as *The Grasshopper and the Ant* and *The Cameraman's Revenge* (1912).

The Wan Brothers' ambitious plan for technological innovation in animated filmmaking was temporarily suspended during their stay in Hong Kong. They originally planned to make further technological innovations by rendering *The World of Insects* into a color animated film. *Princess Iron Fan* received very positive comments after it was released in wartime China and Japan, but some audiences lamented that it was not in color – a defect compared to Disney's *Snow White*, which premiered in Shanghai in 1938. The Wan Brothers planned to take one step further in animation history by making *The World of*



Figure 4. The Wan Brothers advertising their animated short 'No Spitting' from *Changcheng huabao* 10 (1951).

Insects into a color film, but they did not carry it out at all during their stay in Hong Kong. Otherwise, *The World of Insects* would have become a very important milestone in the history of Chinese animation. Similar to what they did prior to making *Princess Iron Fan*, the Wan Brothers only made a few animated shorts for educational purposes. A report from *The Great Wall Pictorial* shows that the Wan Brothers did make an animated film short entitled *Jinzhi tutan/No Spitting* for hygienic education in Hong Kong (Figure 4). This animated short was released in more than 20 theaters in Hong Kong Island and Kowloon ("Er Wan" 1951). It was probably the only animated film short they made during their stay in postwar Hong Kong.

Animating the stage: the Wan Brothers as set designers and art directors

Due to the suspension of their animation project, the Wan Brothers mainly worked as set designers and art directors for live-action films at Great Wall. During their stay there, they set the stage and designed the art for numerous films, such as *Xue ran haitang hong/Blood-Stained Begonia* (1949), *Niangre/Nyonyah* (1952), *Xin honglou meng/Modern Red Chamber Dream* (1952), *Fang maozi/A Bachelor is Born* (1952), *Kuangfeng zhi ye/The Stormy Night* (1952), *Juedai jiaoren/The Peerless Beauty* (1953), *Niehai hua/A Torn Lily* (1953), and *Ernü jing/Aren't the Kids Lovely?* (1953).³ Stage setting was very important at that time, because film technology was not yet advanced enough to shoot outdoors freely. In addition, the budget for a film was very tight and shooting a film inside the studio saved money. For the film *The Stormy Night*, the Wan Brothers made a miniature model of the courtyard, in which the story takes place (Figure 5) ("Waijing" 1951). For the film *A Bachelor is Born*, they used the film technique of the glass shot. During that time, sets were



Figure 5. The Wan Brothers working on the miniature model of the courtyard in *The Stormy Night* from *Changcheng huabao* 5 (1951).

usually only one level and did not have ceilings or upper stories. This way, it was easier to install cameras overhead and also allow more light inside for better exposure. If the film called for an elaborate ceiling or a high-rise building, the set designer would paint them onto a piece of glass and place that glass between the camera and the roofless room, in a technique called glass shot. By adjusting shooting angles, the paint on the glass would dovetail with the roofless room, creating a composite image of a decorated ceiling or a high-rise building. Filmmakers would therefore not need to construct the whole building or shoot on location, thus saving a lot of money. This technique has been called *jieding* (matching roofs) in Chinese. In *A Bachelor Is Born*, the dormitory and the library only had one level and did not have any ceilings. With glass painted by the Wan Brothers, they were turned into a two-level dormitory and a spacious library with ornate roof (“Chaichuan” 1950).⁴

The Wan Brothers also worked as illustrators and art designers for the film magazine *The Great Wall Pictorial*. They published many cartoons with single and multiple panels. Some of them vividly portrayed the filmmaking activities at the Great Wall. In a cartoon series entitled ‘Jingu qiguan/The Spectacular Encounters between Ancient and Contemporary Times’, actors and actresses in ancient costumes engage in modern activities, such as driving a car, using an electric fan, and drinking soft drinks, thus creating humorous juxtapositions (“Jingu” 1953). The two brothers also published illustrations for serialized novels such as *Caoyuan liange/Love on the Grassland* (“Caoyuan” 1953). In addition, they made silhouette cutouts for actors and actresses in the studio and designed costumes for characters in films like *Lanhuahua/When You Were not with Me* (1958) (“Ernü” 1952; “Lanhuahua” 1953). They also drew many portraits for Xia Meng (Hsia Moon,

1933–present), the renowned actress at Great Wall. The Wan Brothers were involved in many kinds of pre-animation activities in the studio and were deeply appreciated by their colleagues. The studio even held a grand party for their 50th birthday, an important event that was published in *The Great Wall Pictorial* in 1954.

Lianhuanhua as suspended animation: the afterlife of *Princess Iron Fan* in Hong Kong

As the first animated feature film in Asia, *Princess Iron Fan* premiered in Shanghai on 19 November 1941 and became an instant hit. It was dubbed into Japanese and subsequently premiered in Tokyo on 10 September 1942. It triggered the birth of *Momotarō's Sea Eagles* (1943) and *Momotarō's Divine Sea Warriors* (1945), the first animated feature film in Japan.⁵ It also exerted tremendous influence on the animation career of Tezuka Osamu, known as the 'God' of modern Japanese manga and anime (Du 2012, 15–60).

While *Princess Iron Fan* had a high profile in wartime Japan, it was invisible in wartime Hong Kong. *Princess Iron Fan* might have been released in occupied Hong Kong as well, but so far there have been no documents found that can verify the exact date of its release due to the scarcity of primary resources on occupied Hong Kong (Guan 1993, 137–153). When Hong Kong was under Japanese occupation between 25 December 1941 and 15 August 1945, no local films were made, but various films were still released in local theaters. Altogether there were 137 films released in occupied Hong Kong, including 67 films that were made in Shanghai, Northern China, and Manchuria, 56 films that were made in Japan, 10 films that were made but not released in prewar Hong Kong, 3 films that were imported from Nazi Germany, and 1 film from occupied France (Zhao 2007, 74). *Princess Iron Fan* may be one of the 67 films from Mainland China. During the wartime era, only three Chinese films, all made in Shanghai, were introduced to Japan, including *Chahuanü/Camille* (1938), *Mulan congjun/Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), and *Princess Iron Fan*, through Zhonghua dianying gongsi/China Movie Company, which was set up in Shanghai by the Japanese to make propaganda shorts and distribute both Japanese and Chinese films in occupied areas (Yau 2010, 36). These three Shanghai films may have been released in occupied Hong Kong as well, considering their Japanese connections in terms of production, distribution, and Pan-Asian screening. According to a historical record, *Mulan Joins the Army* was released in occupied Hong Kong (Zhou 2005, 300). It is highly likely that *Princess Iron Fan* may have been released in occupied Hong Kong as well.

Although it is difficult to verify *Princess Iron Fan's* presence in occupied Hong Kong, it was definitely introduced to postwar Hong Kong. Since the Wan Brothers failed to make their second animated feature film, they were more than eager to introduce *Princess Iron Fan* to postwar Hong Kong. When local filmmakers approached the Wan Brothers for permission to use footage of *Princess Iron Fan* in a Cantonese film, the Wan Brothers happily agreed. As a result, *Princess Iron Fan* was incorporated into a black and white Cantonese film entitled *Fu zhi guo/Blame It on Father*, released in Hong Kong on 27 September 1953. Twenty minutes of footage from *Princess Iron Fan* appeared in this Cantonese film. Local filmmakers had planned to change its title into *Wangzi qu qiuxian/The Prince Goes to Seek Gods*, but they ended up keeping the original title *Blame it on Father* ("Wanshi" 1953).

Blame It on Father was directed by Sun Wei and made by Dacheng Film Studio, a small studio that produced only a few films, including *Qinhuai yuexia zaisheng yuan/Under the Moon, By the Qinhuai River, We Meet Again* (1953), directed by Sun Wei and *Jinshang tianhua/The Best of Everything* (1954), directed by Fang Zhou. *Blame It on Father* revolves around a child protagonist named Huazai (literally means the child of China) (Figure 6). He is always spoiled by his father at home and bullied outside by an older child named Dayan Gou/Big-Eyed Dog, played by a young Bruce Lee. Huazai is obsessed with reading *lianhuan hua*/linked-pictures, especially the story about Monkey King and Bull Demon King. In order to stand up to his enemy Big-Eyed Dog, Huazai and his friend flee to a mountain in hopes of learning magic powers from gods like the Monkey King. They meet a monk, who reads them a *lianhuan hua* about Monkey King and Bull Demon King. While he is reading the story, footage of *Princess Iron Fan* is shown on screen. The monk educates them on how gods are just fictional characters and do not exist in the real world. He then sends the two children back home and the families are reunited.

In this Cantonese film, *Princess Iron Fan* is transformed into an animated *lianhuan hua*, an artistic form that had long existed prior to the birth of animation. *Lianhuan hua* can be regarded as a form of suspended animation caught between still images (death) and animation (life), with its dormant meanings and potential movements only animated when readers read over a series of pages. In addition to this change in form, there is also another transformation in terms of content. When *Princess Iron Fan* was released in wartime China and Japan, it was usually regarded as a progressive anti-Japanese film. In the beginning of the film, the Wan Brothers declare that the film focuses more on children's heart/*tongxin* and does not dramatize *shenguai*/god-spirit. However, when it is transformed into an animated *lianhuan hua*, *Princess Iron Fan* becomes associated with what is considered negative in *Blame It on Father*. The film, while criticizing how parent improperly educate their children, also highlights the negative influence of *lianhuan hua* on children, as the protagonist Huazai and his friend are *lianhuan hua* addicts. The original nationalist meanings of *Princess Iron Fan* were lost, while the film's association with *shenguai* was foregrounded to illustrate *lianhuan hua*'s negative impact on children in postwar Hong Kong.

The Communist Party launched various campaigns to criticize and adapt old *lianhuan hua* and local Cantonese films after it took power around 1949. A major controversy revolving around *lianhuan hua* and Cantonese films was their association with *shenguai wuxia*/god-spirit martial arts, which were deemed superstitious and unhealthy, contrary to the Communist Party's preference for realism and social education. While Shanghai and Beijing were successful in transforming old *lianhuan hua* into new socialist ones, Hong Kong was criticized for its lack of enthusiasm in these campaigns. In order to take over the market of old *lianhuan hua*, some people advocated that new *lianhuan hua* should borrow the visual and narrative techniques of the old ones to attract more readers and gradually occupy the market of old *lianhuan hua* (Wang 1950). At the same time, Cai Chusheng, together with other mainland émigrés, launched the Cantonese film 'clean-up' movement, advocating for the production of healthy and progressive local dialect films with fine artistic quality for the interests of the society, nation, and country. The British colonial government in Hong Kong, while tightening its censorship on revolutionary films imported from Mainland China (Ng 2008), also censored 'unhealthy' local Cantonese films, for example a censor Helen Yu's banning of *Dien Cheung Par* (sic, should be

Duen Cheung Fa/Broken Hearted Flower) (Hong Kong Public Records 1948). When filmmakers were making the Cantonese film *Blame It on Father* under the multiple surveillances of different political parties, they probably self-censored and presented *Princess Iron Fan* as a negative example for its association with *shenguai wuxia* popular in *lianhuan hua*.

Suspended in time: the belated rise of animated feature film in Hong Kong

While the Wan Brothers and *Princess Iron Fan* played an indispensable role in the formation of early Japanese animation (Du 2012), they seem to be less influential in Hong Kong. Despite the Wan Brothers' commitment, no animated feature film was produced during their stay in postwar Hong Kong. There may be several reasons for this failure. First, the cost of making an animated feature film was much higher than a live-action film at that time. Many local film studios could spend only several days to produce a live-action film, while making an animated feature film took around one year and involved hundreds of people on the payroll. No film studios wanted to take the risk of losing profits. Second, the lack of animation talent in postwar Hong Kong made things extremely difficult. When *Princess Iron Fan* was introduced to wartime Tokyo, there were already numerous animation professionals working in a relatively well-developed animation industry in Japan. Hong Kong was different. There was hardly any local animated filmmaking in the late 1940s and early 1950s, let alone an emerging animation industry. The Wan Brothers found it difficult to hire animators and artists in Hong Kong, and even if they could find any by chance, they still could not afford to offer an attractive salary for them. Third, the lack of institutional and governmental support was also a big issue. The generous support from the Imperial Navy helped wartime Japanese animators quickly catch up with their Chinese peers by producing Japan's own animated feature films. In Hong Kong, the local film industry was largely driven by the free market, and it was impossible for animators to secure financial support from the local government.

Although the Wan Brothers did not make their second animated feature film as planned, they passionately introduced the art of animation to Hong Kong. They arrived in Hong Kong at a time when there was hardly any local animated filmmaking. The history of Hong Kong animation began in the 1950s, when advertising companies started to use animation in commercials (Fu 2006, 31). When Wan Laiming decided to leave Hong Kong for Shanghai in early 1954, some advertising companies invited him to work on commercial animation, he gently declined (Wan 1986, 110). Local animated filmmaking in 1950s Hong Kong, although limited to commercial advertisements at that time, might have been stimulated, if not directly triggered, by the arrival of the Wan Brothers in the late 1940s. During their stay in Hong Kong, the Wan Brothers had a high profile and published many reports and interviews introducing the art of animation to the local people through *The Great Wall Pictorial* and other forms of media.⁶ For instance they introduced the four-level multi-planar camera and explained its function in animated filmmaking to Hong Kong audiences. During their stay at the Great Wall, they also trained numerous local film art talents, who later became interested in animation. King Hu, the renowned martial arts film director, worked as the Wan Brothers' art assistant at the Great Wall after he migrated from the mainland to Hong Kong in 1949 (Lam 2006, 19). He became

interested in animation and later tried to produce an animated feature film *Zhang Yu Zhuhai/Zhang Yu Boils the Sea* together with Fung Yuk-sung, a professional animator who left the Shanghai Animation Film Studio for Hong Kong in the late 1970s. As if haunted by the Wan Brothers' suspended animation *The World of Insects*, the production of *Zhang Yu Boils the Sea* was also suspended due to lack of financial support in the mid-1980s (Fung 2015).

In the late 1940s and 1950s, puppet film emerged as a new film art in Hong Kong. It was not stop-motion animation, but rather a precursor to animation. At that time, marionette theaters were very popular in Cantonese areas. Puppets were manipulated through strings by performers from above a theater, while a live-action film camera recorded the puppet performance continuously. The jerky movements of the puppets on stage was reminiscent of stop-motion animation. *Dashu wangzi/Prince of the Big Tree* (Tan Xinfeng, 1948) and *Furong xianzi/Princess Hibiscus* (Huang Yu, 1957) were the earliest puppet films.⁷ Although they were not animated films, they nonetheless harbingered the arrival of local animated filmmaking in Hong Kong.

No animated feature films were produced in Hong Kong until the early 1980s. During the 1960s and 1970s, comic strips featuring Lao Fuzi (Old Master Q) were very popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the Chinese diasporic communities. Wu Sau Yee, a Hong Kong film director, adapted the comic strips into three animated feature films in 1981, 1982, and 1983. The first one, entitled *Old Master Q*, did very well at the box office while the second and third ones did not enjoy the same success. It should be noted that the *Old Master Q* series were co-productions between Hong Kong and Taiwan. The majority of the staff, such as Cai Zhizhong and Xie Jintu, were from Taiwan. Hong Kong animation witnessed another milestone when Tsui Hark produced a computer generated animated feature film entitled *Siu Sin* in Cantonese or *Xiaoqian/A Chinese Ghost Story* in Mandarin in 1997. This animated feature film was adapted from a well-known live-action film series of the same title produced by Tsui Hark. These films revolve around the love story between a scholar and a female ghost in ancient China. Due to the lack of animation talent in Hong Kong, the production of *A Chinese Ghost Story* largely depended on animation professionals and studios in Taiwan, Japan, and Mainland China. However, compared to the *Old Master Q* series, *A Chinese Ghost Story* involved more local efforts in Hong Kong (Hu 2001, 108–111).

It was not until 2001 that a locally made animated feature film emerged in Hong Kong. The credit was given to *My Life as McDull*, directed by Toe Yuen. The story was written by Brian Tse and the images were drawn by a graphic artist named Alice Mak. This animated feature film was adapted from a popular TV animation series, which was further adapted from a well-known comic strip published in *Ming Pao Weekly* in 1991. The film is about the ordinary life of McDull, a pink piglet in Hong Kong. The film became very popular and achieved great commercial success upon its release in Hong Kong and abroad. It has been regarded as the first fully authentic animated feature film made in Hong Kong, influenced neither by anime from Japan nor by Hollywood (Hu 2001, 113–114). Looking at the history of Hong Kong animation in retrospect, the Wan Brothers did make a wise choice by returning to Shanghai in the mid-1950s. The difficulties and challenges they encountered in the 1950s are still the same faced by local animators today in Hong Kong.

Reanimation: the Wan Brothers' return to Shanghai and the rise of the National Style

Feeling hopeless in Hong Kong, Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan returned to Shanghai in 1954 and 1956 and joined their third brother Wan Chaochen at the Animation Division of Shanghai Film Studio, which in 1957 became the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the only state-owned animation studio in socialist China (1949-1976). The twin brothers were attracted by the relatively large scale of animation production there. It had an abundance of animation talent, advanced animation technology and equipment, and most importantly generous financial support of the animation industry from the socialist state, which were all impossible in capitalist Hong Kong. From then on, the Wan Brothers no longer worked together. Rather, each was in charge of a specific type of animation. Wan Laiming mainly worked on cel animation; Wan Guchan worked on papercutting animation; Wan Chaochen on puppet animation.

After he returned to Shanghai, Wan Laiming immediately made quite a few cel animated film shorts, but it was not until 1961 that he finally realized his dream by producing *Danao tiangong/Uproar in Heaven* (1961-1964), his second animated feature film. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio promoted the National Style in animated filmmaking. Animators were encouraged to draw inspiration from traditional Chinese art, literature, and culture to construct a distinct Chinese identity in animated films.⁸ With the guiding spirit of the National Style, Wan Laiming turned to the story of Monkey King in *Xiyouji/Journey to the West* and made *Uproar in Heaven*. The images of the characters were based on traditional Chinese art, such as the painted faces from Peking opera and new-year paintings. Monkey King in *Princess Iron Fan* looks like Mickey Mouse, but he is much more Sinicized with national characteristics in *Uproar in Heaven*. When *Uproar in Heaven* was released in 1961, it became an instant hit in China and even overseas. Encouraged by its great success, Wan Laiming and his colleagues produced the second episode of *Uproar in Heaven* in 1964. However, the Cultural Revolution had already begun with the criticism of several live-action feature films such as *Zaochun eryue/Early Spring in February* in 1964 (Clark 2008, 18–19). Monkey's rebellion against the Jade Emperor was soon interpreted as representative of the people's rebellion against Chairman Mao, because the Jade Emperor seems to have a mole on his chin like Mao (Macdonald 2016, 29). The second episode of *Uproar in Heaven* was therefore banned and was not released until the late 1970s.

Wan Guchan came back to Shanghai exactly when the National Style was enthusiastically promoted at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio in the late 1950s. Following the guiding principles of the National Style, he began to experiment with papercutting, a time-honored folk art in China. He made the first papercutting animated film in history, *Zhu Bajie chi xigua/Pigsy Eats Watermelon* (1958), which received both domestic and international recognition for its artistic and technological contributions. Drawing on *Journey to the West*, this papercutting animated film is about the gluttony and selfishness of Pigsy, who eats his teammates' shares of a watermelon. While Wan Laiming focuses on Monkey in cel animation, Wan Guchan turns to Pigsy for the making of papercutting animated films. Monkey and Pigsy can be seen to symbolize the relationship between the two brothers as well: it was Wan Laiming the big brother who assumed a leading role in history of Chinese animation, while Wan Guchan went on to make many papercutting

animated films in the National Style, including *Yutong/The Fishing Boy* (1959), *Renshen wawa/The Ginseng Baby* (1961), and *Jinse de hailuo/The Golden Sea Snail* (1963). These papercutting animated films, like the cel animated films made by Wan Laiming, became unsurpassed masterpieces in history of Chinese animation. During the Cultural Revolution, however, the Wan Brothers' films were criticized and banned due to their association with myth, fantasy, and talking animals (Du 2016). After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, the Wan Brothers were no longer active in animated filmmaking due to their advanced age. They reached the summit of their animation career in socialist China.

Conclusion: from suspended animation to sustained animation

The Wan Brothers' encounter with Hong Kong seemed to be fruitless in its immediate context. The production of *The World of Insects*, their long-planned second animated feature film, was suspended due to the lack of funds and artistic talents in postwar Hong Kong. *Princess Iron Fan*, their first animated feature film, was introduced to local Cantonese cinema as footage to illustrate the story of a *lianhuanhua*, a form of suspended animation. The Wan Brothers' sojourn in Hong Kong can be concluded as a period of suspended animation, a state of deep hibernation in history of Chinese animation. Due to its noneventful and non-spectacular impact, the Wan Brothers' inanimate encounter with Hong Kong has been neglected in studies of both Chinese animation and postwar Hong Kong cinema.

However, from a longer and more positive perspective, their encounter with Hong Kong was a crucial pre-history for understanding the rise of the National Style in Mainland China and the delayed emergence of the local animation industry in postwar Hong Kong. Without the frustrations, desperations, and yearnings experienced in Hong Kong, it is questionable whether the Wan Brothers would have had equal enthusiasm and determination to make their National Style classics after returning to Shanghai. Their suspended animation in postwar Hong Kong was also the possible catalyst that later helped to stimulate, if not directly trigger, the rise of the local animation industry in postwar Hong Kong. Their frustrations and failures in the 1950s help us to better understand the difficulties and challenges the local animation industry always faced in the history of Hong Kong animation. Taking their experiences into consideration, perhaps it is no surprise that the local animation industry developed slowly and the first local animated feature film appeared very late in Hong Kong. In any case, the Wan Brothers' (in)animate encounter with Hong Kong, although uneventful in its immediate context, still had postponed and laid-back impact on the animation industries on both sides of the border. Their temporary suspended animation in Hong Kong would soon be transformed into sustained animation across the border in the longue durée. The moment the Wan Brothers traveled to Hong Kong, they were destined to leave their footprints in the (pre)histories of Chinese and Hong Kong animation.

Notes

1. Wan Chaochen was left alone in Chongqing to produce *Shang qianxian/Go to the Frontline* (1939), the first puppet animated film in China.
2. The other two well-known leftist film studios in postwar Hong Kong were Fenghuang/Phoenix and Xinlian/New United.

3. For a complete list of the live-action films that the Wan Brothers worked on during their stay in Hong Kong, please see the official websites on HKMDB: http://hkmdb.com/db/people/view.mhtml?id=30666&display_set=eng http://hkmdb.com/db/people/view.mhtml?id=40747&display_set=eng
4. In *Huoshao Hongliansi/Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (1928–1931), Dong Keyi the cameraman also used the technique of *jieding* (Zhang 2005, 63).
5. Most scholars regard *Momotarō's Divine Sea Warriors* (74 minutes, 1945) as the first animated feature film in Japan. However, there are some who regard *Momotarō's Sea Eagles* (37 minutes, 1943) as the first animated feature film in Japan.
6. The Wan Brothers did not enjoy writing but they were very passionate about drawing. Therefore these essays were often written by others, while the Wan Brothers drew the illustrations. These essays include 'Manhua katong xiongdi/On the Wan Brothers' by the renowned artist in exile Huang Yongyu (Huang 1952), and 'Donghua yingpian de shezhi guocheng/The Process of Making Animated Film' by Ren Shuang (Ren 1952).
7. I watched *Princess Hibiscus* at the Hong Kong Film Archive.
8. In my forthcoming book, I offered a critical reading of the National Style and questioned the concept of a pure Chineseness by highlighting the transnational undercurrents disavowed in history of Chinese animation (Du 2018).

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