A Theory of Suspended Animation: The Aesthetics and Politics of (E)motion and Stillness

Daisy Yan Du
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, daisyyandu@ust.hk

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Animation has long been defined and analyzed as an art of movement. Drawing attention to the fluid movement of outlines in animated cartoon characters, Sergei Eisenstein proposes the concept of "plasmaticness," which refers to the stretching, elongating, inflating, deflating, transforming, and deforming of bodily forms, registering "a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form."[1] Animation has also been regarded as a moving art, capable of moving and transforming itself across media, space, and time.[2] Other scholars, such as Sianne Ngai, draw attention to the affective dimensions of animation by foregrounding its power in expressing emotions and moving audiences.[3]

Following this train of thought, we can see how Monkey, the main character of the epic Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*, has become a defining figure of Chinese animation because Monkey embodies the animation principles of movement and plasmaticness. The first animated feature film in China, and indeed Asia, was *Princess Iron Fan* (*Tieshan gongzhu*, Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan, 1941), featuring the battle between Monkey and the Bull Demon King. *Uproar in Heaven* (*Danao tiangong*, Wan Laiming and

Tang Cheng, 1961–1964), revolving around Monkey's rebellion against the Jade Emperor, represented the highest achievement of Chinese cel animation. Even the more recent *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015) marked the renaissance of Chinese animation in the digital age.[4] Moreover, the origin of anime's media mix in Japan today can be traced back to Monkey. According to a report from Japan-occupied Manchukuo (1932–1945), when *Princess Iron Fan* was released in Japan in 1942, toys featuring Monkey and other characters were selling well at many department stores, especially among Japanese people.[5]

Monkey's prominence in Chinese animation, and thus the prominence of conceptualizing animation as movement, provokes questions about Chinese animation's less explored side: if Monkey is the prime figure of Chinese animation, who is not? If Monkey has been overanimated in the history of Chinese animation, who remains less animated or even unanimatable? If Monkey represents animation's fundamental principles of constant motion and plasmatic movement, who represents inertia, stasis, inanimation, de-animation, and even resistance against animation? If "the medium is the message," what does it mean to use animation to animate or not animate someone or something?[6] While Monkey is not the focus here, these questions draw the contours of the aims of this essay.

Generally speaking, animation is often used to portray animals, supernatural and fantastic beings, and less privileged and socially marginalized people, such as children and racialized Others. In my study of animation during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), I observe that ethnic minorities have been overanimated in terms of both quantity and quality in the history of Chinese animation. First, numerous animated films have portrayed ethnic minorities as objects of representation, leading to the rise of the "minority genre" in Chinese animation. Second, ethnic girls in animation frequently undergo metamorphosis, or the plasmatic bodily transformation from human to animal, and are often portrayed with excessive physical gestures and movements. This kind of quantitative and qualitative excess is what I call the "overanimation" of ethnic minorities.[7]

While I mainly focus on the connection between physical movements and ethnicity, Sianne Ngai draws attention to the ties between emotions and race as represented in animated American TV series. She notes a kind of "exaggerated emotional expressiveness" and "liveliness" (overemotionality), which she calls "animatedness," in the representation of racialized Others, African Americans in particular.[8] Drawing on Rey Chow's ideas in "Post-

modern Automatons," Ngai suggests that such "animatedness," rather than liberating racialized bodies from their ossified forms à la Eisenstein, reveals the very racialized otherness and social power-lessness of the animated objects who, due to their subjection to power, become "a spectacle whose aesthetic power increases with one's increasing awkwardness and helplessness."[9] In animation, the racialized Others, overcharged with animatedness as aesthetic objects, are impotent social beings incapable of political agency and action.

Rather than focusing on movement, this essay examines sus-pended animation as an aesthetic category of representation to unravel its spectacular political power derived from its tendency toward stillness and stasis. Hence, while overanimation and ani-matedness are defined by excessive physical movements and emo-tions, suspended animation is about the excessive lack of them even to the very brink of the point before inanimation and death. Suspended animation is ambiguously situated between animation and inanimation, and there is no clear boundary between the two, as (in)animation can often turn into (en)animation. Over-animation and animatedness are often deployed to portray socially powerless and marginalized people who, trapped in their height-ened animatability, are incapable of political agency. In contrast, suspended animation is frequently used to portray less or unani-matable figures, what I call the sublime figures of (in)animation, a term inspired by Ban Wang's "sublime figure of history" to refer to lofty history-driving figures who transcend humanity to become superhumans, immortals, and gods.[10] The charismatic power and political agency of the sublime figures of (in)animation increase with their decreased physical movements and emotions. In other words, their political aura decreases when their aesthetic value as a figure of animation increases.

Although it certainly has more expansive theoretical uses and aesthetic manifestations, here I mainly use "suspended animation" to discuss the freeze or nearly freeze-frames in animated films. The aesthetics of suspended animation are created and determined by the number of drawings used in a second. In full animation, such as the feature films made by Disney and Toei, there are twenty-four drawings with slight variations in a second, thereby creating smooth, fluid, and lifelike movements. In limited animation, such as the anime style in Tezuka Osamu's *Astro Boy* (1963), there are around eight drawings used three times in a second, which gener-ates jerky movements. Suspended animation can be understood as an extreme form of limited animation in the sense that limited ani-mation still gestures toward animation and movement, no matter

how slight, and suspended animation is more oriented toward immobility. The purpose of limited animation is to animate, while the goal of suspended animation is to de-animate. There can be fewer than eight drawings in a second, which creates less movement and more stasis, and in freeze-frames there is only one drawing used twenty-four times per second. Even as the intervals between different frames are 1/24th of a second in full animation and 3/24ths of a second in limited animation, in suspended animation they can be extended to a few seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years, and even decades (e.g., Mao Zedong's different portraits in Tiananmen Square, as I will discuss later). These extended suspensions can go beyond the realms of the persistence of vision and optical human perception.[11]

My theorization of suspended animation differs from existing studies of stillness and immobility in limited animation, optical toys, films, and media in that I draw particular attention to the power relations between movement and stillness. Indeed, Thomas Lamarre's "full limited animation," Marc Steinberg's "dynamic immobility," Yuriko Furuhata's "still-image media," Esther Leslie's "animation's petrified unrest," and Yiman Wang's "staccato animation" all acknowledge the importance of stillness in the moving image.[12] However, none of them consider the ideological implications of stillness and power politics, nor do they analyze Chinese animation (except Wang), which has long been marginalized in current animation scholarship dominated by studies on Japanese, American, and European animation.

In the following sections, I first explore the dialectical tension between physical movements and emotions in a few animated films, including *Princess Iron Fan*, *Uproar in Heaven*, *The Fiery Cliff Slogans* (*Huohong de yanbiao*, 1977), *The Peasants* (Soviet, 1934), and *Sunrise over Tiananmen Square* (Canada, 1998). Unlike traditional studies that unanimously focus on Monkey, I draw attention to the sublime figures of (in)animation who resist being animated: Tripitaka, Jade Emperor, Mao, and Joseph Stalin. In sharp contrast to the kinetic and emotional Monkey, whose body is always exhibiting (e)motion, these sublime figures are often underanimated through the aesthetics of suspended animation, appearing almost as impassive and static portraits or statues. Their charismatic power increases with more ossification and immobility and inversely decreases with more movement and animatedness.

Examining the aesthetics and politics of suspended animation, this essay demonstrates that the sublime figures of (in)animation, with their low or even absent animatability, have defined Chinese animation and its histories as much as Monkey, though in negative

ways. Suspended animation complements the animation principle of movement and is part and parcel of it, like the dark side of the moon that is always there but goes unnoticed unless one looks for it. Given its dormant but never dead energy, suspended animation can often be turned into an animated and animating suspension.[13]

Tripitaka

In *Princess Iron Fan*, almost everything is animatable except Tripitaka. Portrayed with the aesthetics of suspended animation, Tripitaka is a figure of antianimation. Unlike Monkey who is constantly moving, Tripitaka is a sitter. When out, Tripitaka always sits on his white horse, and once he gets inside a room, he keeps sitting, seldom standing or walking around. There are altogether three sequences portraying how Tripitaka interacts with the local villagers. In the first sequence, Tripitaka keeps sitting in front of a book table, listening to an old villager's explanation of the origin of the Fiery Mountain (figure 1). His body movements are minimal, and his facial expressions are distanced and nonchalant. He utters no single word, looking like a static portrait. The second sequence, in which Tripitaka explains why he embarks on his journey to the West, similarly depicts him as static.

In the third sequence, Tripitaka stands and delivers a speech to unite his disciples and the villagers in the fight against the Bull Demon King. Tripitaka's body movements are still minimal, despite what is an important speech. While addressing his disciples, he

Figure 1. Tripitaka in a sitting position.

Figure 2. Tripitaka frozen and merges with the background layer.

turns his head to the right and assumes a profile gesture, saying "You fail this time because you are not united and collaborative. If you three are of one mind in your fight against Bull Demon King, you can definitely succeed." After the three disciples answer his call for collaboration, Tripitaka assumes a frontal position to address the villagers and says "You have suffered a lot from his misdeeds. I hope you all can contribute your power to subdue Bull Demon King together with my disciples and annihilate the disaster of the Fiery Mountain once and for all." After saying this, Tripitaka is suddenly frozen into a static figure that merges with the background architecture (figure 2), while a villager dressed in black in the foreground (on the left of the frame) walks toward him to shout slogans for collective action.

The aesthetics of suspended animation were also used to portray the empowered masses, thus granting them a certain sublimity, be it authentic or superficial. While the beginning of the film revolves around the heroism of Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy, who all fail to borrow the fan, the end of the film features the masses as the real protagonists who finally win the war and drive history forward. Suspended animation (the freeze-frames of the villagers) was used at the very crucial moments when the masses are enlightened, empowered, and transformed into historical agents by Tripitaka's speeches.

In the second sequence mentioned above, a freeze-frame of the villagers shows them gathered together in the room listening to Tripitaka's preaching. They are all standing, with their backs facing the film's audience (figure 3). The camera keeps zooming in on the villagers and then, with a dissolve effect, cuts to Tripitaka

Figure 3 (*top*). The first freeze-frame of the villagers.
Figure 4 (*middle*). The second freeze-frame of the villagers.
Figure 5 (*bottom*). The third freeze-frame of the villagers.

lecturing inside the room. In the third sequence, when Tripitaka is urging the three disciples to fight together, another freeze-frame of the masses is shown. It is the same drawing seen in the previous sequence, a zoomed-in view of it (figure 4). A few seconds later another freeze-frame of the masses appears, showing the villagers' faces clearly with a three-quarter view unlike the first two frames that show their backs only (figure 5). They are all looking at Tripitaka, who is offscreen, and listening to him attentively, with some bearing a slight smile. These adult male cartoon figures are soon to be mobilized into male soldiers. The three freeze-frames have a prominent visual effect on the audience because the suspension of the animation lasts for quite a few seconds.

Although both Tripitaka and the villagers are portrayed via suspended animation and thus granted a certain sublimity, the connotations of their sublimity are different. Tripitaka is singled out as an individual, whose sublimity and charismatic power are derived from his tendency toward immobility. In contrast, the villagers are always captured as a group when they are most affected and enlightened by Tripitaka's speech. Although their physical movements come to a halt, their facial and emotional expressions are nonetheless dramatized. They are represented as sentient and emotional beings, in sharp contrast to Tripitaka's composure, detachment, and impassivity. While Tripitaka is nearly always portrayed by suspended animation, it is just a temporary deviation to portray the villagers as they soon spring into violent action against the Bull Demon King in the final battle scene. If suspended animation lends sublimity and power to Tripitaka, it draws more attention to the affectability and collectivity of the masses. Of course, it can also lend certain sublimity to the masses, who are portrayed as the real heroes and history makers in this film. The masses were used as an example to educate the Chinese to unite in their collective fight against Japan, allegorized by the Bull Demon King.

The use of suspended animation as exceptions to the continuous flow of animation forces the audience to pause and pay particular attention to these aberrations to the flow. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin contends that film's continuous movement of frames causes a shocking effect on the viewers, leaving no time or room for them to dwell on the moving images. The viewers are therefore constantly distracted, unable to focus and contemplate as they would with a painting.[14] Benjamin thus associates moving images (film) with distraction and static images (painting) with attention and absorbed contemplation. For him, as film is continuously moving, and so are viewers' perceptions, Benjamin does not consider the interruptions to

a moving image to be temporary suspensions (suspended animation) that also suspend viewers' normative distraction. These irruptive suspensions generate what Jonathan Crary calls a "suspension of perception," which is "a looking or listening so rapt that it is an exemption from ordinary conditions, that it becomes a suspended temporality, a hovering out of time."[15] As a state of exception, suspended animation makes attention and contemplation possible by disrupting the continuous moving image, thereby disrupting viewers' state of normative distraction. Such disruptions underscore the significance of the suspended image in the entire film and make viewers more aware of its exceptionality through an interplay between distraction and attention, which "cannot be thought outside of a continuum in which the two ceaselessly flow into one another, as part of a social field in which the same imperatives and forces incite one and the other."[16] Although Crary is mainly concerned with the production of attentive bodies in industrial capitalist modernity in late nineteenth-century Europe, his theorization of "attention" can help us understand the production of attentive and politicized bodies in wartime and revolutionary socialist China. For both cases, capitalism and nationalist politics function similarly to discipline the laboring bodies so that they can be more productive and molded to fit into industrial capitalism in Europe or the political agenda in revolutionary China.

The use of suspended animation to portray Tripitaka and the masses functions formally against the animation principle that is predicated on movement. When *Princess Iron Fan* was introduced in wartime Japan, Japanese critics praised its overanimation of Monkey and Pigsy and criticized the film's use of extremely limited animation to depict Tripitaka and the utilization of freeze-frames to portray the masses, which was considered to be a tactic to save labor and cost by recycling the same drawings, a bad practice common in the wartime Japanese animation industry.[17] However, from a thematic perspective, the freeze-frames accentuate the very significance and sublimity of the masses, thereby making the audience pay more attention to their role in the film. Indeed, the real heroes in *Princess Iron Fan* are not the kinetic Monkey and Pigsy but rather the empowered masses who win the war with their collective wisdom and efforts. This is the message that the Wan Brothers tried to deliver in wartime Shanghai: the Chinese people, whether they sided with the Nationalist Party or the Communist Party, should reunite in a joint effort to resist the Japanese.[18] In light of their intention, the use of the freeze-frames was less about saving labor and cost as wartime Japanese critics said and more about accentuating the film's theme with nonnormative aesthetics.[19]

Suspended animation does not mean a complete and eternal stop and inanimation arrested from the normative flow of life and movement; rather, it can be turned into an animated and animating suspension, given its dormant yet never dead energy. In the freeze-frames of the villagers, although the animation movement temporarily comes to a halt, the villagers, with their bodies physically frozen, are nonetheless undergoing drastic transformations in their mind while hearing Tripitaka's illuminative preaches—an animated suspension. Moved and enlightened, they soon spring into action, animate the rest of the story, and drive history forward—an animating suspension indeed.

The Jade Emperor

Made by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio in the early 1960s, *Uproar in Heaven* remains a masterpiece in China today because it fully demonstrates the central animation principles: smooth movement and plasmaticness, those exemplified by Monkey. In the film, all characters are animatable to some extent except the Jade Emperor. The Jade Emperor, in the film and Chinese culture, is a figure of antianimation who is less or even unanimatable. When Chinese animators were working on the film, no one wanted to take on animating the Jade Emperor because of how challenging it is to animate a sublime figure of (in)animation such as him: in almost all depictions, he is monumental and immobile, always sitting on his throne. As the renowned animation designer Du Chunfu once said, "Animation is *donghua* [moving pictures]. It's easy to animate the moving ones and difficult to animate the immobile ones."[20] Lu Qing, a key animator, was assigned the task of animating the Jade Emperor. She initially refused until she was finally persuaded to accept the job for the sake of collective glory. The film's director, Wan Laiming, advised her to use close-ups and focus only on the Jade Emperor's minimal facial expressions and hand gestures but not too much, because "if there is too much animation and movement, he will cease to be an emperor."[21] Lu Qing successfully animated and de-animated the Jade Emperor at the same time, establishing her name in the skill of animating sublime figures at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio.[22]

Wan Laiming had always been fascinated with Monkey when he was still a child, and his ultimate animation dreams revolved around Monkey.[23] To foreground the heroism of Monkey, Wan Laiming constructed the Jade Emperor as a villain, a supreme feudal ruler of the celestial world. The image of the Jade Emperor was

designed by the renowned artist Zhang Guangyu, who drew inspi-
ration from the stove gods in traditional New Year Paintings (*nian-
hua*) (figure 6). Although he was satirizing the Jade Emperor, Wan
Laiming also wanted to grant him the magnitude and aura of an
emperor with good fortune. To fulfill such a role, he identified Fu
Runsheng, a voice actor from the Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio.
Fu Runsheng became the model for the Jade Emperor and also
his voice actor (figure 7).[24] The image of the Jade Emperor in the
animated film is thus a mixture of his voice actor and stove gods.

There are altogether eight sequences featuring the Jade Em-
peror in *Uproar in Heaven*. The first sequence unfolds when Dragon

Figure 6 (*above*).
Stove God in New
Year paintings.

Figure 7 (*right*). The
voice actor for Jade
Emperor.

Figure 8. The static *liangxiang* pose of the Jade Emperor.

King goes to the celestial court to ask the Jade Emperor to punish Monkey for taking his golden cudgel. The second sequence takes place when Monkey is brought to the celestial court and first encounters the Jade Emperor. When Monkey arrives at the foot of the Jade Emperor he cannot see him and asks Venus, "Where is he?" Venus asks him to look up and pay his respects. Monkey looks up, and the looming image of the Jade Emperor is shown from Monkey's viewpoint (figure 8). The Jade Emperor wears a royal robe and crown, reminiscent of the Song dynasty style, that are huge and heavy, making it impossible for him to move. He has a broad white face shaped like a rectangle, with two blushes on his cheeks. The Jade Emperor's earlobes are elongated like Tripitaka's and Buddha's; his eyes are very small, looking like just two lines; and he dons a thin moustache that is suggestive of the stove gods. The extremely low-angle shot lends even more monumentality to the high-status Jade Emperor, forming a sharp contrast against the small size and low status of Monkey. Sitting on his throne in frontal and symmetrical view and flanked by two diminished female attendants in the back, the Jade Emperor is immobile, expressionless, and speechless. He is a static image merged with the background layer, reminiscent of the emperors in imperial portraits. Suspended animation was used to introduce the Jade Emperor's *liangxiang* (striking a first-impression frozen pose in Peking opera) to Monkey, thus granting him sublimity, monumentality, and superiority. After suspending for a few seconds, the flow of animation resumes when General Li Jing, standing by the foot of the Jade Emperor, suddenly points at Monkey and orders him to "get down on your knees."

In a different context, Laikwan Pang also notes the connection between stillness and sublimity in the *liangxiang* poses in model opera works during the Cultural Revolution by arguing that the stillness captured in the frozen postures accentuates the "sublime" spiritual dimension of the protagonist, be it a Chinese Communist Party leader or an oppressed but enlightened peasant, by "turning a living character into a motionless statue and fixing certain fleeting qualities into eternity."[25] I would like to contend that the *liangxiang* poses in model opera works can be regarded as a form of suspended animation. The intermittent static *liangxiang* poses were often used on the sublime positive heroes, while the villains seldom pause from constant motion and movement. Ossified in their arrested *liangxiang* poses, the positive heroes even do not blink their eyes for minutes so as to keep their stillness complete and elevate their status to eternal.

In *Death 24x a Second*, Laura Mulvey discusses the function of freeze-frames in live-action cinema. Going beyond the movement principle, she redefines cinema as "death 24 times a second." She regards the filmstrip as a combination of still photographs that, when projected, can be animated to generate the illusion of movement. For Mulvey, photographs are associated with death and mortality because they freeze reality, thus turning the animate into the inanimate, or life into death. Cinema reverses this process by animating the inanimate photographs. Audiences usually cannot perceive this animation process when the film is projected continuously at the speed of twenty-four frames a second due to the human eye's persistence of vision. The interruptive freeze-frames that appear in films, however, bring to fore the "photographic take" on film and force audiences to confront the photographic origin of films and acknowledge the hidden stillness of the moving image.[26]

While Mulvey associates the freeze-frames in live-action cinema with death and mortality, I regard the freeze-frames in animated films as suspended animation situated between life and death, the animate and the inanimate. While the freeze-frames reveal the "photographic take" on a live-action film, they often disclose the "portrait take" on animation. The image of the Jade Emperor is modeled on imperial portraits of Chinese emperors, which were often used in ancestral worship rituals—a tradition that probably began with the founder of the Song dynasty, Taizu, who housed his parents' portraits in a Buddhist temple as a memorial.[27] Like the Jade Emperor, almost all the emperors in imperial portraits are iconized and deified sitters on a throne.

Burdened with the imperial portrait tradition, Chinese animators modeled the Jade Emperor after the Song emperors, Song

Figure 9. A posthumous imperial portrait of Song Xuanzu Zhao Hongyin (899–956).

Xuanzu Zhao Hongyin in particular (figure 9), but they still struggled with the precarious job of animating and (de)animating this sublime figure. To accomplish this hefty task, suspended animation is well suited because it temporarily halts the flow of animation and reveals the portrait take of an animated film. This exceptional moment of stillness grants the Jade Emperor with an aura of sublimity, power, and authority.

While the *liangxiang* sequence presents the Jade Emperor as unanimatable through suspended animation à la imperial portrait tradition, the following sequences gradually transform him into an object of animation and animatedness with more bodily movements and lively facial and emotional expressions. The

increasing animation coincides with the slow desacralization and even dethroning of the Jade Emperor, culminating in the last sequence when he is forced to leave his throne and flees in a hurry. As the Jade Emperor gradually becomes a figure of animation, his power, sublimity, dignity, and aura diminish proportionately. Monkey's rebellion against the Jade Emperor is thus an artistic and aesthetic rebellion against the animation principle through a series of interconnected transformations: turning a portrait into animation, the unanimatable into the animatable, and suspended animation into overanimation and animatedness.

During this process of animation, the Jade Emperor and Monkey mutually animate each other by making one another move, act, react and express fervent emotions. With his power to animate derived from stasis and immobility, the Jade Emperor orders his subordinates (Venus and General Li Jing) to either co-opt Monkey through humble celestial positions or kill him through military power. With each move he provokes Monkey into further action, relishing the aesthetic spectacle of Monkey's overanimation and animatedness. Monkey fights back by gradually turning the Jade Emperor into a figure of animation; thus, Monkey transforms the powerlessness of his own animatedness into an animating power in and of itself.

The Jade Emperor's increasing physical movements and emotions unfold incrementally in the following sequences. The most telling of these is the last sequence, which portrays the Jade Emperor as a figure of full animation. After Supreme Lord Laozi fails to use his alchemy burner to burn Monkey to death, Monkey reemerges even more powerful and wreaks havoc in heaven. He knocks out every celestial guard along the way until he arrives at the imperial court to confront the Jade Emperor. Unlike the previous encounters, when the Jade Emperor was depicted from a low-angle shot to dominate Monkey physically and psychologically from a higher and more monumental position, the reverse is true in this sequence. When Monkey rushes to the imperial court, the Jade Emperor looks small and vulnerable, with his left sleeve covering his head in fear. He is shown through the space between Monkey's parted legs (figure 10), a framing technique that depowers, belittles, and even humiliates the Jade Emperor. With all his guards taken down by Monkey, the Jade Emperor only has General Li Jing and Venus by his side. Struck by panic, the Jade Emperor stands up for the first time in the film, discards his throne, and flies away quickly. The Jade Emperor flees like an ordinary creature in American chase animation featuring a predator and prey such as Tom and Jerry (figure 11). The dethroning, physically and symbolically,

Figure 10 (*top*). The Jade Emperor seen through Monkey's parted legs.
Figure 11 (*bottom*). The Jade Emperor stands up, abandons the throne, and flees.

thus strips the Jade Emperor of the aura of sublimity, power, and authority. Now, the unanimatable Jade Emperor has been transformed from a sublime figure of inanimation to an (un)pleasant figure of (over)animation. Having derived his sacred power from stasis and expressionlessness iconized in imperial portraits, the Jade Emperor's increasing overanimation (body movements and

gestures) and animatedness (emotions) now bespeak his increasing powerlessness and degraded status.

Considering the film's historical context, Lu Qing's doubt and anxiety over animating the Jade Emperor were not ungrounded. *Uproar in Heaven* was made in the early 1960s, the era of high socialism. The political and cultural environment responded neutrally to the first episode of *Uproar in Heaven* when released in 1961. When the second episode was completed in 1964, however, it was soon criticized for its portrayal of the Jade Emperor, who was said to resemble Chairman Mao because the Jade Emperor has a mole on his chin like Mao. The Jade Emperor's celestial court was regarded as an allusion to Mao's government, a crime against revolution. The film was quickly banned, not released to the public until the late 1970s. Wan Laiming and other animators on the team were persecuted. Yan Dingxian, who designed the animation image of Monkey based on Zhang Guangyu's drawings, told me in a conversation in Hong Kong in April 2017 that the mole is actually a small beard, drawn from the image of stove gods in folk tradition (see figure 6). Supporting this, we can also see a small beard that resembles a mole under the lips of Song Xuanzu and even other emperors of the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties (see figure 9). Whether or not the animators intended to model the Jade Emperor on Mao cannot be verified, but this anecdote does tell us an important message: emperors and Mao are equally unanimatable.

Mao and Stalin

It may seem difficult or even arbitrary to make a connection between Mao and Chinese animation. During the Seventeen Years (1949–1966), animated films mostly revolved around anthropomorphic animals and fairy tales and seldom featured any humans at all, let alone Mao. In the mid-1960s, Chinese animation underwent a revolutionary realist turn and shifted away from fantasy to realism by portraying politicized humans. I have identified *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland* (*Caoyuan yingxiong xiao jiemei*, December 1965) as the transitional film from the Seventeen Years to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The film is based on the true story of two Mongolian sisters who almost sacrificed their lives to protect the sheep of the people's commune during a snowstorm in 1964.[28] It is also the first animated film to portray Mao and praised him directly in the theme songs, marking the beginning of the Mao cult in animated filmmaking during the Cultural Revolution.

The film opens with an extremely long shot to present a pan-

Figure 12. Mao portrait and poster in *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grassland.*

oramic view of the Mongolian grassland. As the opening theme song sings "Dear Chairman Mao . . . ," the camera cuts to the interior of a Mongolian home through a dissolve effect, showing a Mao portrait on the wall that looks even bigger than the children playing with a toy lamb in the foreground (figure 12, left). The Mao portrait, looming large monumentally in the center of the static background frame, is flanked by couplets in red that read "Follow the Communist Party; Obey Chairman Mao." It is based on the Mao portrait that hung in Tiananmen Square between 1964 and 1967, and as the film is set in 1964, the portrait was hanging at the time. Following the imperial portrait tradition, Mao is presented in a nearly frontal orientation. Captured from above the chest, he exhibits no animated gestures, movements, or emotions. Having merged with the static background of the wall, Mao remains immobile, distanced, and impassive, like an iconic immortal or god looking into the present and the future with his omniscient gaze.

Though Mao is presented as a static image, he is sometimes "animated" in this film. Toward the end of the film, the camera freezes on a poster for a few seconds and then tilts down to show the two sisters reading a book, surrounded by numerous letters and gifts. This poster, titled "Our Dear Chairman Mao," was popular in 1965 when the film was made (see figure 12, right). Differing from the portrait seen earlier, the entire poster is lively, charged with animated movements, gestures, glances, and emotions. The poster shows Mao in a standing position, which suggests imminent motion and temporality. He is presented in a three-quarter view, with his head slightly turned to his right. His gestures are animated, with his left hand resting on the shoulder of a girl in a green skirt in the foreground. Even more, here Mao is grinning happily, and his glance is also animated, with his eyes looking into the distance with an air of satisfaction and joy. The increased animation of Mao is hardly discernible due to the long temporal gap between the

portrait and the poster at end of the film, but if we juxtapose them like an extreme jump cut (see figure 12), the animation tendency is obvious, showing Mao's recognition and endorsement of the sisters' heroic deeds. This is how Mao was "animated" in many animated films during the Cultural Revolution.

While suspended animation often emerges as a momentary disruption to the regular flow of animation, there is an animated short that is based entirely on the aesthetics of suspended animation. Titled *The Fiery Cliff Slogans*, this animated short is about Tibetans' mourning and worship of Mao right after he died in 1976. It was directed by Chen Zhenghong, a puppet animation director at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. Featuring sculpted characters, the film has long been recorded as a puppet animated film in the history of Chinese animation; however, it is not a conventional stop-motion animation.

In this film, most of the sculpted figures appear like a snapshot that captures them in their most expressive postures. A sense of motion is created through dynamic camera movements and cuts, similar to the use of montage in a live-action film. In cel-animated filmmaking, key animators first draw several key frames that represent the most typical and important movements and moments, while the in-between animators draw the intermediate frames to make the animated movements smooth and natural. In *The Fiery Cliff Slogan*, only a few key frames (i.e., sculptures) were made and shown onscreen, while the intermediate ones were omitted, thus creating the aesthetics of suspended animation. As such, the film's figures are not literally animated as with stop-motion, which can generate smooth movement to the eye; the use of camera effects helps viewers imagine the movements.

The film begins with a close-up of a neighing horse head, with its mouth open wide and its eyes terrified (figure 13). The camera freezes on this image for a few seconds and then zooms out hastily to reveal the whole sculpture: frozen in time, the horse is leaping upward, standing on its back legs with its front legs bent inward and suspended in the air. The audience is led to imagine that the horse has been startled. Then, the camera zooms in to show the stern face of the horse rider, a militant Tibetan man, from a low-angle shot and then cuts to another close-up of his face from a high angle. He appears tense, as his eyebrows are knitted together, and his mouth is tightly clenched. His eyes exhibit a touch of sadness and even tragic heroism. Positioned along the diagonal axis across the frame, the horse and the man, though not animated literally, are imbued with the dynamism of motion and movement through camera effects. It appears that they are running forward but stop

Figure 13. The Tibetan horse rider.

suddenly and freeze into this sculpture after hearing the shocking news of Mao's death.

The use of suspended animation undoubtedly lends certain sublimity to the Tibetans in a way similar to the villagers in *Princess Iron Fan*. Like the villagers, the Tibetans are portrayed as historical agents entrusted with a sacred mission for sociohistorical change: overthrowing serfdom in Tibet. Freezing them into motionless sculptures was a socialist modeling and molding strategy to transform them into lofty and sublime revolutionary subjects, making them figures to remember.

For the sublimated and empowered ordinary and even marginalized people, their power is derivative and thus discounted. They are sublimated and subordinated subjects all rolled into one. The film therefore displays a seeming contradiction by portraying the Tibetans with suspended animation yet charged with the momentum for motion and movement. In this film, animation often suspends at the most "animated" moment. Taken together, the Tibetans' most animated moments—their dynamic poses, exaggerated bodily gestures and movements, animated facial expressions, and intense emotions—are captured as snapshots. The underanimation and underanimatedness, typical attributes of suspended animation, backfire and become overanimation and

Figure 14. The Tibetan woman and Mao portrait.

overanimatedness in disguise. This acts to draw viewers' attention to the high degree of animatability and animatedness of the Tibetans, an aesthetic spectacle par excellence accentuated by aggressive camera effects such as multiple angles, short shots, fast cutting, panning, tilting, and dynamic zooming.[29]

Amid this disguised overanimation and animatedness of the Tibetans, the film's true sublime figure of (in)animation is Mao. The beginning of the film shows a sculpture of an old Tibetan woman presenting a white *khata* (ceremonial scarf) and looking up longingly from a high angle (figure 14). To "animate" her, the camera slowly tilts down to show the woman and other figures from a low angle. Then the camera cuts to a black-and-white Mao portrait, which is framed by a broad black ribbon often used at funerals, suggesting the death of Mao. A sign of historical accuracy, the portrait is the same version as the one in Tiananmen Square, hanging in memoriam from October 1, 1967, to the present. The camera then zooms out slowly, showing Mao's portrait hanging on a building flanked by cypress trees with white flowers. It becomes obvious that the old Tibetan woman is presenting the *khata* to Mao's portrait for mourning purposes. Following the imperial portrait tradition, Mao is presented in frontal view, with detached and nonanimated facial expressions. The stillness and impassivity make him look like an iconic god.

By the end of the film another portrait of Mao in full color appears onscreen, which is based on a photo taken by Edgar Snow in 1936 when Mao was in his early forties. The color of this portrait suddenly "animates" Mao and gives him life (figure 15). With a blush on his cheeks (like the Jade Emperor), his face radiates with liveliness and vital life force. The cap he wears also humanizes him and makes him one of the ordinary Red Army soldiers. Positioned in a three-quarter view with his head slightly turned to his right, he casts a soulful glance at the spectator. The younger and living Mao is evoked here to illustrate the narrator's words that Mao is going to lead the Tibetans to a brighter future. The impulse to "animate" Mao is almost imperceptible because the two portraits in the film are far apart and Mao does not literally move, but if we put the two portraits together like a radical jump cut, the tendency to "animate" Mao is clear.

The portrait of Mao in figure 14 is the last of eight versions that have been displayed at Tiananmen Square. The first Mao portrait made its debut at Tiananmen Square on February 12, 1949, to celebrate the "liberation" of Peking. The second version appeared on July 7, 1949; the third version on October 1, 1949; the fourth version on May 1, 1950; the fifth version between October 1, 1950, and May 1, 1952; the sixth version between October 1, 1952, and May 1, 1963; and the seventh version between October 1, 1963, and September 30, 1967. The eighth one remains at Tiananmen

Figure 15. Portrait of young Mao.

Figure 16. Mao's eight portraits over time in Tiananmen Square, chrono-
logical from left to right.

to this day since October 1, 1967. The very succession of the eight
Mao portraits shows the process of suspended animation (figure
16) as if they are key frames without intermediate ones to "ani-
mate" Mao. They are suspended over a long period, and through
examining them all we can see a movement in the eight key frames
as they show the aging process of Mao. The first ones look younger,
the latter ones looks older, and the last one looks the oldest. They
have captured Mao at different stages of his life. Of course, the por-
traits lagged behind the real-life cycle of Mao, as they always looked
much younger than the real Mao at that time.

The eight portraits also demonstrate the progression from a
more "animated" portrayal of Mao to a more "de-animated" ap-
proach. Erasing the humanizing features of Mao to elevate him to a
god status is a deification and empowering process that culminated
during the Cultural Revolution. The earlier versions demonstrate
a kind of animatedness with a smile. In the second version Mao's
collar is unbuttoned, exhibiting informality and humanity, but in
the third version it is buttoned neatly to achieve formality. Mao
wears the ordinary octagonal cap of the soldiers in the second and
third versions, but it is removed in later versions. In the early ver-
sions Mao's postures and orientations are more diversified, with
a frontal view, a three-quarter view, and even a profile view, but
from the sixth version onward iconic frontality becomes the norm.
Also, in the earlier versions Mao gazes offscreen, not engaging the
world in front of him. Beginning from the sixth version, Mao gazes
at the spectator with detached and impassive facial expressions.
Hung Wu notes that starting from the sixth version, the individual
artistic style was erased from the portrait, and a more impersonal

style was reinforced. The creators of the Mao portraits were no longer well-known artists but instead were anonymous ones to give the portraits an acheiropoietic effect for autonomy.[30] In addition, the earlier versions were replaced more frequently, in a just few months or one or two years, but starting from the sixth version, the portraits were replaced less frequently, lasting over a decade. The last version has been hanging in Tiananmen Square for more than half a century without any sign of replacement. With the temporal duration in between extended infinitely, these later versions gesture toward inanimation, constancy, and permanence. The eighth and final portrait, with its irreplaceability, especially reflects timelessness and immortality.

To literally animate Mao and make him move (physically) and be moved (emotionally) would be a blasphemous act of depowerment during the socialist years, very much like the Jade Emperor's overanimation and dethroning in *Uproar in Heaven*. As such, due to its depowering effects, overanimation was often used to portray the sublime figures being de-sublimed by the Chinese Communist Party. This aesthetic tradition can be traced back to *Dreaming to be Emperor* (*Huangdi meng*, 1947), a puppet film directed by Chen Bo'er and animated by Mochinaga Tadahito. In this film Jiang Jieshi, the leader of the Nationalist Party, becomes an (un)pleasant figure of animation whose power decreases with increasing animated physical movements and facial expressions. In *Capturing the Turtle in the Jar* (*Wengzhong zhuobie*, 1948), a cel-animated film directed by Mochinaga Tadahito, Jiang is overanimated and metamorphizes into a turtle, suggesting his degraded status and loss of political power.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a new genre emerged called "international-motif animation" that revolves around the capitalist West. American presidents, Mao's rivals during the Cold War, were all overanimated, just like the ethnic minorities featured in the genre of "minority animation" at that time. In *The Dream of Gold* (*Huangjin meng*, 1963), President John F. Kennedy is caricatured as the Egg Manager, whose head is an egg that ends up being broken, while other Western presidents were transformed into gold coins in the film. In *Showing True Colors* (*Yuanxing bilu*, 1960), President Dwight Eisenhower transforms into a U-2 spy plane. These Western leaders go through a kind of metal-morphosis; their bodies become metal objects unlike Jiang, who becomes an animal.[31] Overanimated with the animation principle of plasmaticness and movement, these de-sublimed figures become an aesthetic spectacle losing their political power and agency.

Such power relationships symbolized through the characters'

animatability are also seen in Western animations. In *Snow White* (1937), the first Disney animated feature film, the white body of Snow White always stays intact, resisting transformation and shape-shifting. She is frozen in a glass coffin and put in a state of "suspended animation" (between life and death). Scott Bukatman notes that in *Little Nemo* (1911), Nemo's normative white body does not experience any metamorphosis and distortion unlike other characters, nor is he subject to other characters' domination and control.[32] In a similar vein, Ursula K. Heise observes that in many American chase animations such as *Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner* (1949–2018), the animation principle of plasmaticness often applies to oppressor/predator rather than the oppressed/prey to mock, ridicule, and depower those in power.[33]

In the Soviet Union, there was also a tendency to animate and de-animate the sublime figures of (in)animation through suspended animation. In *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power,* Jan Plamper analyzes Stalin portraiture, oil paintings in particular, and observes that "Stalin's distinction was further marked by portraying him as motionless whereas other people were shown in a state of movement. Stability, in general, became one of the key tropes in representations of Stalin, and the words 'calm' (*spokoinyi*) and 'confident' (*uverennyi*) proliferated."[34] The sharp contrast between a de-animated sublime figure of (in)animation and animated figures resting in motion has also been noted by Susan Sontag in her observation of fascism: "Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, 'virile' posing."[35]

Stalin was also represented in live-action films, historical films in particular, when he was still alive. *Lenin in October* (1937) was the first live-action film featuring an actor playing Stalin. André Bazin uses several words indicating inanimation such as "dead" to describe how these films portray Stalin as a static icon: "This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that Stalin furnished sufficient proof of his devotion to the Party, as well as of his genius, and that a hypothetical treason was so improbable that there was no risk involved in treating him, while alive, as a dead hero."[36] Bazin also uses "mummification" to refer to Stalin's cinematic appearance: "Stalin's cinematic mummification is no less symbolic than Lenin's embalmment. The former signifies that Stalin's relationship to Soviet politics and to what we normally refer to as 'humanness' is no longer contingent or relative. The asymptote of 'Man' and 'History' is surpassed. Stalin is History incarnate. As such, he could not be endowed in character, psychology, or personality, with the qualities of the common herd. . . . As History, he is omniscient, infallible, irresistible."[37] In other words, these films portray Stalin

not as a living human being but instead as a monumentalized and mummified god.

Stalin was unique not only because he allowed historical films to represent him when he was still alive but also because he even applauded an animated version of himself that was inserted in a black-and-white live-action film titled *The Peasants* (1934). In contrast, there were no live-action cinematic representations of Lenin when he was alive, let alone animation. In the 1960s, Lurii Norshtein tried to animate Lenin but failed. In the 1980s, Aleksandr Tatarskii attempted to animate Lenin based on Mikhail Zoschchenko's *Stories of Lenin* but also fell through because the sublime figure of Lenin was unanimatable, even after his death. Differing from Lenin, Stalin was fascinated by cinema, including animation, as he was personally involved in the founding of Soiuzmultfilm, the first centralized animation studio in the Soviet Union. As a fan of Disney animations, Stalin even praised Disney animation in public at a time when the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States was hostile.

The Peasants' animation insert has been widely regarded as an oddity in the history of Soviet cinema. It remains the only one to feature Stalin until perestroika in the 1980s. Its singularity, especially in Stalin's time, bespeaks the very sensitivity of the subject matter and the low animatability of Stalin, despite Stalin's final approval of it. Directed by Fridrihk Ermler, *The Peasants* is about the peasants' struggle against the *kulaks* (rich peasants) on a collective pig farm. The villain is Gerasim, a former *kulak*. His pregnant wife Varvara is a swineherd who has the correct ideological consciousness per Soviet politics. Looking forward to the birth of her son, Varvara has a dream that is represented by an animation insert that lasts for around thirty-five seconds. In her dream, she is featured in a newspaper with a headline next to her smiling portrait that says "I congratulate Varvara Nechaeva, the best swineherd in the Swan Hills Collective Farm, on the birth of her child. Signed, I. Stalin."[38] Then she is seen walking arm in arm with Stalin on the collective farm, with Stalin carrying her son. In the background a tractor, a symbol of socialist modernity, moves along (figure 17).[39] The animated dream is suddenly interrupted by her husband, who wakes her to reveal his true nature. When she tries to flee and report him, her husband kills her and their unborn child and makes it look like a suicide to cover up his crime.

Although Stalin is literally animated in the dream sequence, he is de-animated as well. In this animation insert he is in profile orientation, wearing his military uniform. His movement is quite limited, mechanical, and stiff, like a flat cardboard figure. Anecdote

Figure 17. Stalin in *The Peasants*, 1934.

has it that in the late 1940s an animator named Iurii Merkulov tried many times to feature Stalin when he was still alive as the protagonist of an animated film, but Soiuzmultfilm did not approve his proposal.[40] When asked about his thoughts on the animation sequence in *The Peasants*, Stalin showed some mild concern: "It's well-made. But people might think that the child is my own." When reassured that it was only the peasant woman's dream and that the animation sequence was well made with a good meaning and purpose, Stalin was finally put at ease.

After Stalin died the animation insert was deleted, as were other references to him in the film. The identities of the animators behind this sequence have long remained mysterious. According to Peter Bagrov, it was created by the best animators and artists of the Soviet Union, but strangely they made it look rather primitive, crude, and banal. Why such a paradox? This is because the animators knew the nature of the task, as Bagrov puts it: "What was needed was an icon. And—as I mentioned above—not just an icon, but an alabaster idol. The more primitive, the better. And the fact that it turned out not only primitive, but also rather crass . . . well, that, probably, is a reflection of the irony brought to it by talented artists!"[41] In other words, the animators did not exert themselves to "animate" this sublime figure of (in)animation at all, for what was needed was a static and mummified image, an icon, or an alabaster

idol. Probably only the best Soviet animators could understand the nature of this task and deliver this challenging and dangerous job satisfactorily by simultaneously animating and de-animating Stalin with the aesthetics of suspended animation.

In a puppet animated film titled *The Death of Stalinism in Bohemia* (1990), directed by Jan Švankmajer and made in response to the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989, the statue of Stalin was grotesquely animated with stop-motion techniques, suggesting the demise of Stalinism in the nation.

Unlike Stalin, Mao was never represented in live-action films while he was alive. After he died in 1976, he first appeared in a historical film titled *Crossing the Red Water River Four Times* (*Sidu Chishui*, 1983), played by the famous actor Gu Yue. Since then, numerous historical films have been made that star Mao's various impersonators. The live-action cinematic representation of Mao in postsocialist China, according to Haiyan Lee, was "in fact the beginning of Mao's depoliticization, or de-Maoification."[42] I argue further that the animation of Mao in postsocialist China was even more radical and iconoclastic, not only depoliticizing and depowering him but also caricaturing, ridiculing, and vilifying him.

Mao was finally animated in *Sunrise over Tiananmen Square*, a roughly thirty-minute animated documentary directed by Shuibo Wang for the National Film Board of Canada in 1998. Shuibo Wang, a Chinese Canadian, received his training from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. This film is an autobiographical account of his life and career against the background of a tumultuous and revolutionary China. Narrated by the director himself, it shows how his belief in Mao turned into disillusionment and skepticism after the June Fourth Incident in 1989.

Mao is animated when the director introduces the Cultural Revolution. This animation sequence first presents Mao as a static portrait in the middle ground, sandwiched between a blue sky in the background and communist icons in the foreground. Mao is portrayed in a near-profile orientation looking offscreen, with his right hand lifted as if to greet someone. His closed mouth paints him as impassive and serious. In the background layer clouds move rapidly across the blue sky, lending monumentality and immortality to Mao. In the foreground layer, communist icons move across the screen one by one. Suddenly, Mao becomes animated right as the director narrates Mao's speech to millions of Red Guards in Tiananmen Square: "You young people are like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed in you" (figure 18). Mao gradually turns his head to look directly at the film's audience, opens his mouth with a smile, and points his right index finger at

Figure 18. Mao animated in *Sunrise over Tiananmen Square.*

us viewers. When the narrator speaks Mao's last sentence—"The world belongs to you; China's future belongs to you"—Mao suddenly stops smiling and resumes his stern look at the film viewers with a complete frontal position, a gesture that is soon frozen into an inert image. The camera zooms in on Mao's stern face, which together with his pointing finger mimics Uncle Sam's "I Want You for U.S. Army" poster circulated during World War II, successfully transforming Mao into a mock American icon.

The conscious interplay between stillness and movement, freeze-frame and animation, makes Mao a perfect sublime figure of (in)animation. He is much more animated than the static, mechanical, and expressionless Stalin in *The Peasants*: Mao makes a 180-degree turn and moves his hand, exhibiting vivid facial expressions and emotions. He is also depicted in bright colors of red, green, blue, and white, unlike the black-and-white Stalin. Reminiscent of the pop art style, this animation sequence looks comical and absurd, vilifying Mao and mocking his authority with the aesthetics of suspended animation. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and censorship laws, it would have been impossible for Shuibo Wang to make such an iconoclastic film in mainland China. He only could have made it after he migrated to Canada.

Mao was only first animated in mainland China in 2013. *Teenage Mao Zedong* (*Shaonian Mao Zedong*), a 3-D CGI animated feature film, was directed by female animator Lei Junlin and produced by several film studios in Hunan Province, Mao's hometown. Released in 2015, it is the first animated film that features Mao in mainland China. For many years, it has been taboo to animate Mao in postsocialist China because he is too grand and controversial of a figure, making him unanimatable if not unrepresentable by

live-action films as well. No animators dared to animate him. Lei Junlin thought that her idea would be censored by the Chinese government, but to her surprise it was approved by the communist authority and even selected as one of the three films to celebrate the 120th anniversary of Mao's birth in 2013.[43] This approval can be easily explained by the relatively relaxed ideological control in postsocialist China. Another more important reason is that the film focuses on Mao as a child, not the political Mao as an adult. Portraying Mao's apolitical childhood increases the animatability of him, thanks to the longtime kinship between children and animation.

Still, Chinese animators struggled with this difficult task of animating and de-animating Mao in *Teenage Mao Zedong*. How does one use animation, an art form of lightness, suppositionality, and exaggeration, to effectively deliver such weighted and grand historical subject matter to educate Chinese children? Chinese animators finally decided to adopt a realist approach similar to a documentary. Around six hundred volunteers were sent to Mao's hometown in Shaoshan to collect anecdotes about him.[44] At the same time, they tried to portray teenage Mao as a humanized child who can be naughty and play tricks like any other ordinary child, not a sublime god assuming a transcendental position. The teenage Mao is playful and kinetic, often moving around but never plasmatic; his bodily form stays intact and ossified. Teenage Mao cannot be overanimated, for although he is desacralized, he is still revered as an extraordinary human being if not feared as a god. Later, the Chinese Communist Party even commissioned a work animating Karl Marx, *The Leader* (*Lingfeng zhe*, 2019), an animated web series. Ironically, it was the Chinese Communist Party itself that initiated such a self-desacralizing and self-depowering process via the medium of animation in the digital age.

From Suspended Animation to Animated/Animating Suspension

In this essay, I have detailed how there is a spectrum of animatability. While animals, supernatural beings, and racialized Others have the highest animatability, the sublime figures of (in)animation, such as Tripitaka, Jade Emperor, Mao, and Stalin, are less and even unanimatable, because to animate them is to depower them. When the sublime figures of (in)animation are animated in films, they are often portrayed through suspended animation, with a tendency toward inanimation, stasis, and stillness. Suspended animation is also used to portray others, such as the villagers and the Tibetans, who are simultaneously empowered and subordinated

subjects. As such, in these cases suspended animation suggests a curious duality: while granting them a certain sublimity through stillness and immobility, it also (over)animates them, dramatizes their very animatability and animatedness, and accentuates their collective identity as a group. Suspended animation and (over)animation are neither arbitrary nor rigid binaries; they can flow into each other to portray the fluidity of power relations. In most cases, political agency, power, and aura are generated from the inclination toward immobility and image building, which I coin as the portrait take, rather than from the animation principles of movement and plasmaticness.

Although my case studies are mainly based on Chinese animations, my theorization of "suspended animation" can widely be applied to other animations, live-action films, and visual representations in China and beyond. In the Chinese live-action film *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo jinhua*, 1959), for instance, we can see a similar power relationship structured on movement and stillness as well as on nature and culture between the two Han male intellectuals from the Changchun Film Studio and the indigenous ethnic minorities. While the ethnic minorities are overanimated with excessive physical movements (climbing the mountains swiftly, diving to the sea, horse racing, running) and animatedness (overemotionality, such as falling in love quickly, sadness, ecstasy, jealousy, anger), the two Han male intellectuals are always portrayed in their inability or awkwardness to move (losing their way and disoriented, failure to drive the horse cart, blocking the communication of the two lovers). They are associated with sedentary jobs and still images (drawing stills and recording folk songs, realms of representations/culture) and are more emotionally detached and restrained than the ethnic minorities.[45]

In a similar vein, the theory can be used to examine the positive heroes' intermittent *liangxiang* poses (a form of suspended animation) vis-à-vis the villains' constant motion and movement in model opera works during the Cultural Revolution, as analyzed earlier. Also, the power relations between stillness and movement can be found in many religious and nonreligious animations, films, and images elsewhere in the world, such as the portrayals of Buddha, the Goddess of Mercy, God, Jesus Christ, emperors, presidents, dictators, and other sublime figures of (in)animation.

The power relations between movement and stillness even exist in different art forms such as animation and painting. Animation has long been regarded as a nonserious and immature art form precisely because it moves too much and thus loses power, authority, and solemnity. The Chinese solution to elevate its status is to

link animation with fine arts tradition and suppress its movements as much as possible, as evident in the Chinese name for animation, *meishu dianying* (fine arts film). Based on traditional Chinese paintings, Chinese animated films, especially the National Style such as ink-painting animation, are often "reduced and flattened into an isolated, still, seamless, and pure image that contains national essence and identity," exhibiting a painterly quality and tranquility.[46] Stills from these painterly animated films are often taken out to be displayed and relished as art and analyzed as an object of study for art historical research.

Although I focus my case studies on the freeze- or nearly freeze-frames in animated films, my theorization of "suspended animation" can be extended to explain the real-life situation as well if we understand "animation" more broadly as life force, not just "animated films."[47] The various rituals in Tiananmen Square, such as Mao's greetings of Red Guards, the June Fourth Incident in 1989, and the National Day parade on October 1, are all structured on the power relations between stillness and movement: a few immobile and impassive leaders on the balcony profiled with the portrait take vis-á-vis the overanimated masses with constant movement and fervent emotions on the square.[48]

Suspended animation does not mean a complete stop and death; rather, it can be turned into an animated and animating suspension, given its dormant but never dead energy and vital life force. For the freeze-frames of the villagers in *Princess Iron Fan*, for instance, the suspended animation as physical stoppage allows for mental transformation. The status of suspended animation, an arrested exceptionality, is thus interlaced with dynamic undercurrents, functioning as a springboard that gathers impetus and momentum for future powerful actions and movement. It works like the temporary "suspended animation," or the life-death of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, whose brief hibernation and pause in life pave the way for more powerful dramas and actions later.

To advance my argument from onscreen animation to the animating forces in real life, I conclude this essay with a self-reflexive metacomment. I wrote this essay during my own "suspended animation," the "freeze-frames" or arrested exceptionality of my life. In mid-November 2019 our campus was quite chaotic due to the surging social unrest in Hong Kong, exacerbated by the mysterious death of our student Chow Tsz-lok (1997–2019) on November 8.[49] I went to Boston for peace and shelter and started to write this essay. When I was about to fly back in early 2020, the coronavirus broke out in China, and I was stranded in Boston until the summer.

Teaching between midnight and 3:00 a.m. and overburdened with childcare, I found my energy and life force gradually drained out, living a suspended partial life like a ghost. It is ironic that after I restrained physical movements due to the restrictions of the pandemic, I became a better thinker, able to finish this overdue essay, thus turning my own suspended animation into an animated and animating suspension.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda (London: Methuen, 1988), 21. For other definitions of animation as movement, see Norman McLaren, quoted in Charles Solomon, "Animation: Notes on a Definition," *The Art of the Animated Image: An Anthology*, ed. Charles Solomon (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1987), 11; Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Maureen Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

2. See Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Daisy Yan Du, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation* (Honolulu: University of

Hawai'i Press, 2019), 21; Alexander Zahlten, "*Doraemon* and *Your Name* in China: The Complicated Business of Mediatized Memory in East Asia," *Screen* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 311–21; Alice Crawford, "The Digital Turn: Animation in the Age of Information Technologies," in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, ed. Carol A Stabile and Mark Harrison (London: Routledge, 2003): 110–30; Paola Voci, *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities* (London: Routledge, 2010).

3. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 89–125.

4. For discussions of this film, see Jason McGrath, "Suppositionality and Virtuality in Chinese Cinema," *Boundary 2*, forthcoming.

5. Bing Shi, "Manhua feng: Manhua jia yu zihuaxiang" [Cartoon Vogue: Cartoonists and Their Self-portraits], *Zhongguo manhua* [*China Cartoon*], no. 2 (1942): 55.

6. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (Berkeley: Gingko), 2001.

7. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 164–67.

8. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 94.

9. Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 61.

10. Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

11. Persistence of vision refers to the lingering effect of an image on the human eye after exposure to it. If static images succeed at a certain speed, the illusion of movement will be generated.

12. See Thomas Lamarre, "Full Limited Animation," in *The Anime Machine*, 184–208; Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 6-7; Yuriko Furuhata, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 43; Esther Leslie, "Animation's Petrified Unrest," in *Pervasive Animation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 76; Esther Leslie, "Loops and Joins: Muybridge and the Optics of Animation," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 11, no. 1 (2013): 28–40; Yiman Wang, "The Animation That Deconstructs Itself—Liu Jian's *Piercing I* and *Have a Nice Day*," Association for Chinese Animation Studies, December 14, 2018, https://acas.world/2018/12/14/the-animation-that-deconstructs-itself-liu-jians-piercing-i-and-have-a-nice-day/.

13. Here I was inspired by Lauren Berlant's discussion of the situation genre. "A situation is a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life. It is a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event." Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

14. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 239–40.

15. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 10.

16. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 51.

17. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 51.

18. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 42.

19. Miyazaki Hayao's films also have some "frozen" moments, similar to the freeze-frames in *Princess Iron Fan*, with some characters just sitting for a while, but not to advance the story. Miyazaki called it *ma* (emptiness) and explained that he made it intentionally to build tension and emotions, "If you just have non-stop action with no breathing space at all, it's just busyness, but if you take a moment, then the tension building in the film can grow into a wider dimension. If you just have constant tension at 80 degrees all the time you just get numb." This may explain why Miyazaki's films, which are emotionally charged, are more absorbing and involving than many American animations characterized by frenetically cheerful actions. See Roger Ebert, "Hayao Miyazaki Interview," September 12, 2002, https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/hayao-miyazaki-interview.

20. "Daonian Lu Qing," Baidu, September 10, 2017, https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=f008437b0f75fbb1922d26f7.

21. "Daonian Lu Qing," Baidu.

22. For example, Master Taiyi in *Nezha Makes Havoc in the Sea* (*Nezha naohai*, 1979) and the Taoist master Yuan Gong in *Secrets of the Heavenly Book* (*Tianshu qitan*, 1983) were both animated by Lu Qing.

23. Wan Laiming, *Wo yu Sun Wukong* (*Sun Wukong and I*) (Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi, 1986).

24. "Yuanlai Yuhuang dadi he Zao Wangye zhang le yizhang lian" (It Turns Out That Jade Emperor and Stove God Share the Same Face), Weibo, January, 20, 2017 https://www.weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404065792923692617&infeed =1.

25. Laikwan Pang, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's Cultural Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), 186.

26. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 15, 32, 66.

27. Jan Stuart and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 39.

28. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 160.

29. For studies of the Rent Collection Courtyard, a series of static sculptures featuring the landlord Liu Wencai and the oppressed peasants in socialist China, see Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 228; Denise Y. Ho and Jie Li, "From Landlord Manor to Red Memorabilia: Reincarnations of a Chinese Museum Town," *Modern China* 42, no. 1 (2016): 3–37.

30. Hung Wu, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 78–81.

31. Daisy Yan Du, "Political Immediacy, Metal-morphosis, and the Caricatured Western Leaders in Agitprop Animation in Socialist China, 1949–1965," paper presented at the Conference of Comparative Perspectives on Sense, Sensibility, and Sentimentality, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, May 2016.

32. Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 21.

33. Ursula K. Heise, "Plasmatic Nature: Environmentalism and Animated Film," *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 312.

34. Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 95.

35. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 91.

36. André Bazin, "The Stalin Myth in Soviet Cinema," trans. Georgia Gurrieri, *Film Criticism* 3, no. 1 (Fall, 1978): 24.

37. Bazin, "The Stalin Myth," 24.

38. Peter Bagrov, "Ermler, Stalin, and Animation: On the Film *The Peasants*," *Kinokultura*, 15 (2007), http://www.kinokultura.com/2007/15-bagrov.shtml.

39. Daisy Yan Du, "Socialist Modernity in the Wasteland: Changing Representations of the Female Tractor Driver in China, 1949–1964," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 29, no. (Spring 2017): 55–94.

40. Bagrov, "Ermler, Stalin, and Animation."

41. Bagrov, "Ermler, Stalin, and Animation."

42. Haiyan Lee, "Mao's Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman," in *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution*, ed. Jie Li and Enhua Zhang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), 253.

43. Ben Child, "Chairman Mao's Teen Years Set for 3D Cartoon," *The Guardian,* October 22, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/oct/22/chairman-mao-3d-cartoon-animation-zedong-chinese.

44. Child, "Chairman Mao's Teen Years."

45. Ling Zhang regards *Five Golden Flowers* as a road movie, but I think that the two male intellectuals have "antiroad" tendencies. See Ling Zhang, "Navigating Gender, Ethnicity and Space: *Five Golden Flowers* as a Socialist Road Movie," in *The Global Road Movie: Alternative Journeys around the World*, ed. José Duarte and Timothy Corrigan, 150–71 (Chicago: Intellect, 2018).

46. Du, *Animated Encounters*, 18.

47. Jane Bennett's "thing power" and Mel Chen's "animacies" represent this trend of thinking animation more broadly by acknowledging the potential life force in what we often regard as the inanimate and lifeless things such as stones and metals. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

48. For National Day parades in China, see Haiyan Lee, "The Charisma of Power and the Military Sublime in Tiananmen Square," *Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 2 (2011): 397–424.

49. For the 2019 social unrest in Hong Kong, see Jeffrey Wasserstrom, *Vigil: Hong Kong on the Brink* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020).