

Havoc in Heaven and the Golden Age of Chinese Animation

In March, 2013, an old Chinese Film Studio, Shanghai Animation Film Studio reclaimed that they will remake the famous Chinese old animation such as *Havoc in Heaven*, *Mr. Black*, and *Brother Calabash*. This is not the first time they tried to remake the glorious age of those classical animations. The 3D version *Havoc in Heaven*, released last year, showed the vanity of their attempt. The total box office is no more than \$3 million, which can only pay for the 3D production cost by an American 3D production company. (Chen) Shanghai Animation Film studio represented the highest level of the Chinese animation and had been gained the unduplicated success. Why can't it be glories again for Chinese animation? To find the solution to this problem, we should go back to the golden age of Chinese animation and research the reason for their success.



**1. *Havoc in Heaven*
Animation Cover**

The glories: Shanghai Animation Film Studio

Shanghai Animation Film Studio was founded in 1957. Ten years before that, Dongbei Film Studio, which is its predecessor, made some documentaries about

victory from war of liberation in Dongbei province. People in art departments have to study the most basic animation in order to make motion map for the story of the war in documentary. Those people in the art department made the earliest short animation, *Emperor Dream* and *Catch a Turtle in the Jar*, in order to satire the Kuo Ming Tang Government. Although those two animations are pretty simple, they gained good effects of publicity. (Chen) Before the establishment of the Republic of China in 1949, the leaders declared the art department should make good animation for the children of New China, which then established the Shanghai Animation Film Studio.



▲ 万籁天(中)、万古蟾(右)、万籁定(左)合影

The Wan brothers joined the studio when the first heard the news of the establishment of studio in Shanghai. Those three brothers were born into a merchandise family. The oldest brother Wan Laiming was attracted to Disney animation. He wanted make Chinese animation. He wrote a letter to Disney and asked the animators how to make things move, but got no response. Then he rented a small room and did the experiment of animation with his other brothers. From script, direction, art to shooting, flushing and projecting, they did all of this with just a few people. (Chen) They became the founders and pioneers of the Chinese animation industry and made the first Asian animation feature-length film, *Princess Iron Fan* in 1941. (Wikipedia) They are the mainly people who did the famous animation *Havoc in Heaven*.



2. The Wan Brothers

(Middle: Wan Laiming)

3. The Shanghai Animation Film Studio

4. *Princess Iron Fan* (1941)

Havoc in Heaven.

Havoc in Heaven (1962) is a Chinese classic animated feature film based on the novel *Journey to the West* written in Ming Dynasty (500 years ago). The main character is Sun Wukong, a monkey born out of a rock. He has great power and became the Monkey King of the Flower and Fruit Mountain. The story is mainly about how he rebels against the Jade Emperor of heaven and his warriors. Because of Sun Wukong's wild spirit, he can't stand the restrict law and rules of heaven and always makes tricks with those authorities in heaven. He even named himself as "Great Sage, Equal of Heaven" and made the Jade Emperor of heaven angry. A group of warriors and some leaders with great power tried to catch Sun Wukong but they failed. Finally he escapes from the trigram furnace and destroys most of the imperial palace and returns to his kingdom.

As the film director, Wan Laiming, said, "We think *Journal to the West* shows a deep practical significance, although it was written to a myth. It reflects the conflict and fight between the oppressor and the oppressed, which is Sun Wukong and the Jade Emperor as well as the dominator, shows the contradiction of this theatrical story." (Wan)

Before *Havoc in Heaven*, the animations in China mainly imitate the animation in Soviet and America. Soviet animations are dedicate and realistic. American animations are funny and exaggerated. (Wan) Wan said they should innovate the Chinese style animation. In the article of Wan Laiming, "About the creation of the *Havoc in Heaven*", he talked about the art of this film. "We invited Mr. Zhang Guanyu to be the art designer of the *Havoc in Heaven*. His character design is natural, imaginary and dynamic." (Wan)

Zhang Guanyu studied stage art in the Academy of Shanghai New Stage Theater when he was 15. In his 20s, he became one of the art editors of a magazine called *Film and Opera Magazine*. It was the earliest magazine to introduce film, animation and animation production progress to Chinese audiences. From 1920 to 1930, Zhang Guanyu's comic became a hit. A large amount of his caricatures, current-affairs cartoon and humorous comics with his unique art and decorative style captivated the audience. (Tang) With the combination of traditional Chinese opera, Chinese folk art and western modernism, he became the premier comic artist in Shanghai. In the 1940s, after the Second Sino-Japanese War, Zhang Guanyu was the film art director in many film production companies in Chongqing and Hong Kong. From the 1950s, he turned back from Hong Kong to Beijing and became an art educator in the Central Academy of Art and Design. In addition to teaching, he also took charge of many art-directing works such as the opera *Quyuan* and *Mei Lanfang*. In 1958, he created a strip comic called *New Journey to the West*. It was the prototype of the character design of Sun Wukong in *Havoc in Heaven*. We can find the heroic spirit in Sun Wukong, a man who was chasing freedom. In his preface of this comic book, Zhang Guanyu said, "The ancient novel *Journey to the West* has been researched by many generations. People highly praised the main character Sun Wukong, a monkey with human characteristics. He has a revolutionary wild spirit and is not afraid of authority." (Tang)



5. Character Design of *Havoc in Heaven* by Zhang Guanyu

Zhang Guangyu took charge of all the character design of the *Havoc in Heaven*. He had deep artistic sensibilities, not only with the rich experience in film and animation but also a deep understanding of Chinese classic literature and traditional art. The characters have absorbed the Chinese folk year paintings, Chinese paper-cut art, facial makeup in Peking Opera, door-god, etc. such as Sun Wukong, the Jade Emperor, and Four heavenly Kings. Like Sun Wukong, Zhang took the example by the facial makeup in Peking Opera and exaggerated his human personality. In order to make this character more believable, the whole department spent three months to learn the Peking Opera. They invited one of the famous actors in Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe to learn the hand and martial arts movement in opera acting. With the firsthand experience, they made Sun Wukong more dynamic and more believable in detail. (Wan)



6. Chinese Door-god Painting

7. Character Design of Sun Wukong by Zhang Guangyu

8. Facial Makeup of Peking Opera

Wan Laiming also mentioned the environment should fit the plot and personality of character, assimilate the fine tradition of the folk traditional art, as well as decorative, imaginary and distinctive from the things on earth. (Wan) “Like the environment in heaven, with the hazy cloud and mist, it shows a gray and low, outwardly strong but

inwardly weak feeling. For the Flower and Fruit Mountain, it shows happiness, paradise and a vivifying feeling. In the depth of environment, empty is better than full, false is better than true, so that can show more mythical atmosphere.”(Wan) The clouds in animation left them a big problem. At that time, all clouds showed in the animation of Soviet and America is like cotton. They don't think it's suitable for the mythical *Havoc in Heaven*. They were trying to find clouds in traditional arts from Chinese architecture, mural and sculpture. Finally they found a clay-sculptured cloud under a Buddhist goddess Guan Yin's lotus base in Beijing Biyun Temple. It has wishful-head and cloudy pattern. (Wan) Their spirit of hard researching for detail is very astonishing.



9. Clouds in *Havoc in Heaven*

10. Clouds as Chinese Traditional Decoration

Made in 1962, with only eight people to finish all the art and movements by hand, *Havoc in Heaven* is the best Chinese animation in that age. Even the famous comic artist Osamu Tezuka who was called “The Father of Japanese Manga” said he was inspired by The Wan Brothers and their animation in order to walk up the road of manga creation. (Tang) After *Havoc in Heaven*, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio made *Little Tadpole finds Mom*, *Reed Pie* and other Chinese ink animations, which astonished all the people at that time.

In 1965 the studio was closed by a government declaration under Mao Zedong's order.

This was part of the Cultural Revolution that affected China for several years. The studio's staff was sent to serve on collective farms as laborers. During these years almost no animation can be allowed to shown anywhere. (*Wikipedia*)

During ten years of the torture of artists, after the Cultural Revolution in 1977, China became a lost country of culture. There are no more people willing to support animation and any art creation. The first thing is to make enough money that can support their life and family. Although Shanghai Animation Film Studio can be reassembled, there is no artist who wants to starve for money. Western and Japanese animation start getting into China at 1980s, with the big rush of other culture, Chinese animation lost its position. There is no more great animation after that.

It is a sad, but an inspiring story. We were not defeated by Japanese at war, but occupied by their culture after 10 years self-playing “Revolution”. It is time to look back to see how many precious art forms we have lost.

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