

SPOTLIGHT

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Once upon a time, at the end of the best fairy tales, they all lived happily ever after. And then along came the animation film franchise, in which case, if you wanted to know what happened in the end, you would just have to wait for the sequel.

So, will the Chinese animation film industry — like many of the heroes and heroines it has produced over the years, at times standing tall, at times brought low, championing good and enduring the bad — stand tall once again?

The latest warrior riding the horse of high expectations for a return to the halcyon days for the industry is *Da Huifa* (Grand Sentinel), released in China on July 13.

The film's box office takings have been unimpressive, less than 90 million yuan (\$13.5 million) in a month, whereas in the corresponding period last year the Chinese animation *Big Fish & Begonia* took 560 million yuan, and a year earlier the animation *Monkey King: Hero is Back* took 950 million yuan.

However, there is a consensus among critics that *Da Huifa*'s plot is stronger and much more reflective than those of the earlier two films. On the Chinese rating and review website Douban, *Da Huifa* has an overall rating of 8 out of 10, more than 90,000 reviewers rating it above 8. *Kung Fu Panda 3*, which came out last year, has a rating of 7.7.

The Chinese-style drawing in *Da Huifa* and the violence throughout the film also got people talking about it.

Which brings us back to talk of the good old days. "The standard of Chinese animation has certainly declined compared with where it stood between the 1940s and 1960s," said Lu Shengzhang, 71, former dean of the school of animation at the Communication University of China in Beijing.

"In those days, animations made by Shanghai Animation Film Studio were acclaimed throughout the world."

The first Chinese feature animation, *Princess Iron Fan*, was produced in 1941, four years after Disney's groundbreaking animation *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which remains one of the highest grossing films of all time.

"It was under the influence of *Princess Iron Fan* that Osamu Tezuka, Japan's father of manga and the creator of *Astro Boy*, abandoned his medical studies and instead pursued a career in cartoons and animation," Lu said.

In 1961 another animation, *Havoc in Heaven* by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, based on the *Monkey King* story in the Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West*, was released. With a soundtrack of traditional Chinese music and characters consisting of Peking Opera figures, the film would become a milestone that defined Chinese animation, winning numerous awards at home and abroad.

"The production of animation movies felt the effects of the 'cultural revolution' (1966-76), but there were many more good works to come, such as *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) and *Three Monks* (1980)," Lu said.

"However, in the 1980s, Chinese animation began to go into gradual decline."

The country abandoned the central planned economy in 1978, but it was not until 16 years later that the animation industry fully embraced the market.

Those years of lost opportunity resulted in a dearth of talent in the industry, with the old hands becoming even older and few young people being trained to fill the breach when they eventually departed.

Many Chinese who grew up in the late 1980s and 1990s cheerfully recall childhood days when they saw Japanese cartoon characters such as *Astro Boy*, *Doraemon*, *Saint Seiya* and *Sailor Moon*.



Big Fish & Begonia.



A Fishboy's Story.

Television sets were then starting to become part of Chinese living rooms, and TV stations made imported animation series a staple of their programming. One of the rare popular Chinese TV series was *Calabash Brothers*, a paper-cut animation aired in 1987.

Like many in China who became cartoon aficionados in that era, Zhang Liyan, the director of *Calabash Brothers*, who last year made a sequel to celebrate its 30th anniversary, gained his inspiration from Japan.

Zhang, 45, was greatly influenced by the Japanese animated TV series *Dragon Ball* when he was preparing to enroll for art college in 1990.

"It had a huge impact on me," said Zhang, who had studied Chinese painting when he was a child. "It opened my eyes, making me realize there was another way of drawing."

Tradition guides new animators

Moviegoers and creative-drawing aficionados are hoping for a lasting revival of China's cartoon feature film industry



A Fishboy's Story: Tortoise from the Sea by Zhang Liyan.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Monkey King: Hero is Back.



Kiki and Kaka.

When an animation studio came scouting for recruits among students in his school, the response was overwhelming, he said. "Almost half the class applied, including me."

After two years of study and work, Zhang learned how to make animation and opened his own company in the mid-1990s.

In 2003, Zhang was given the opportunity to study traditional Chinese animation at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio.

"These old artists showed me how to make animation using puppet or paper-cut characters. Not only did they teach me so much, but their wisdom and dedication inspired me."

Since then he has made several animations in the traditional Chinese style, using ink and brush, puppet and paper-cut.

Zhang's ambition to revive traditional Chinese

animation is materializing in his project *A Fishboy's Story: Tortoise from the Sea*, an animated film featuring Chinese paper-cutting techniques that he hopes will go on the big screen next year.

In the film, Zhang's team has used computers to replicate the texture and feel of paper-cut characters, and has set the story in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), telling how a young fisherman overcomes his fear of water and of his adventure with a huge tortoise.

Tradition is guiding other animators as well. "Chinese early animations were not commercial products," said Li Guanyu, 37, the head of the animation department at Communication University of Shanxi. "These animations were art."

Li, founder of Shrub Culture, an animation studio in North China's Shanxi province, said that when he was a child he was fond of Japanese manga and Chinese traditional picture-story books.

He opened a student cartoon club and sold comic books when he was still in college in Taiyuan, Shanxi province.

In 2002 he obtained a degree in graphic design and went to Beijing, where he worked with various companies for a year, before studying at Shanghai Animation Film Studio for six months.

His excitement was clear as he recalled that experience.

"Despite their age, the old artists taught us the very details of the animations they made," he said. "I was fond of animation before and did not foresee how far I would go on this road, but after seeing the enduring passion of the older practitioners I realized that making good animations is worth a lifetime."

At the moment, Li's studio is working on an animated TV series, *Kiki and Kaka*.

The main characters are two tigers in the form of cloth dolls, a traditional craft in Shanxi listed as a national cultural heritage in 2008.

"My children liked it," said Li, a father of two. "They have watched it over and over again."

Since 2000, the government has given more attention to the state of the animation industry, aware that the country's screens were dominated by foreign characters for more than a decade.

In 2000 the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued a guideline on importing and broadcasting foreign animation, setting a ratio of 6 to 4 for aired domestic and foreign animations, and limiting the airtime of foreign animations to less than one-fourth of each children's program.

In 2004 the administration issued advice on developing the country's animation industry, encouraging more productions, airtime, financial incentives and management.

There were more than 45,000 movie screens in China by the end of June, surpassing that in the United States, and making China the country with the most movie screens. Last year, animated movies pulled in 7 billion yuan, about 15 percent of the country's total box office.

A growing subculture of animation, comics and games has spread among young Chinese, and the works they hanker after, including original Chinese animations, are among the highlights at expos around the country every year.

Earlier this year, a series of short animations titled *Chinese Choir* was well received on the video website Bilibili, the largest online group of young Chinese animation, comic and games fanatics.

Each video, telling the story of an ancient Chinese poem with traditional music, has received hundreds of thousands of clicks.

Enthusiastic comments from viewers — such as "The Chinese-style drawing is so cool"; "This is true Chinese animation" and "We support original Chinese cartoons" — suggest that the story of the country's animation industry will indeed have a happy ending.