

Shanghai studio stages a revival

Best known for a 1983 film, prolific animation house banks on young talent and originality to thrive again

By XU FAN

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In his apartment in downtown Shanghai, the animated-film director Qian Yunda carefully takes out a folder filled with drafts of scripts and plans of sets for the 1983 animated movie, *Secrets of the Heavenly Book*.

Tens of millions of Chinese have become well acquainted with the film's characters, but Qian begins reeling off behind-the-scenes tales about them that few would know.

When Qian starts telling these stories there is no stopping him. In fact, he takes you on a journey through time into the years in which the Chinese animation industry took off and thrived.

Qian, 88, was one of the earliest Chinese animators who received government sponsorship to study overseas, and he has devoted his life to the homegrown animation industry.

For more than 30 years he worked for Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the longest running and largest studio of its kind in China.

The studio, which this year celebrates the 60th anniversary of its founding, has been a prolific contributor to China's animated movie industry, turning out 500 movies and TV series with a total running time of 40,000 minutes. It has won more than 200 awards in China and elsewhere.

Among those works have been highly acclaimed classics in which traditional Chinese art forms, such as ink and wash painting, puppet show and paper-cut, have been used. These have made the studio a beacon that has drawn worldwide attention to the Chinese animation industry.

As it has done that, Qian has been tightly bonded to its ups and downs like no other person.

Born in East China's Jiangsu province in 1929, Qian studied fine arts at the Central South Academy of Arts in Wuhan, in the central Hubei province, from which he graduated in 1950.

In 1954 he was recommended by the celebrated painter Wu Zuoren to study animation in Czechoslovakia, the only student in China to receive the honor that year.

Czechoslovakia had classics that influenced a generation of Chinese, such as the animated TV series *The Little Mole* and the live-action movie *The Good Soldier Schweik*.

"I knew very little about animation before going to Czechoslovakia," Qian said.

Much to his surprise, Czech people preferred the animated film *The Good Soldier Schweik* to its live action version, he recalled.

Seeing some of the most popular



Qian Yunda, 88, is one of the earliest Chinese animators to have worked for Shanghai Animation Film Studio. Qian has devoted his life to the homegrown animation industry. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: *Secrets of the Heavenly Book* and *Nyu Wa Patches up the Sky* are two of the studio's critically acclaimed animated films. The studio's tradition is to highlight Chinese elements in its movies.

animated productions, many relating to war, Qian began to be fascinated by animation, with which he felt it was easier to tell serious stories in an ultrarealistic, upbeat way.

"The magic of animation is that it can be audience-friendly and handle serious subjects in an appealing way," Qian said.

After he returned to China in 1959, he worked for the Shanghai studio for almost 40 years, during which time he directed about 10 animated short films, features and TV series.

Qian said quality works need to be "unique, funny and beautifully crafted" — a slogan the Shanghai studio has worn with pride since the 1960s.

Other critically acclaimed animated movies of his include *Caoyuan Yingxiong Xiaojiemei* (Hero Sisters on the Prairie), based on a true story, and *Nyu Wa Patches up the Sky*, inspired by a Chinese myth about the origin of humans.

Secrets of the Heavenly Book, an 89-minute feature about three fox spirits stealing the titular book, is one of his best-known directorial works.

The movie was inspired by the BBC, which coproduced it with the

Shanghai studio in the early 1980s. But the original tale by a foreign scriptwriter disappointed the Chinese side.

"There were too many characters from a wide range of mythologies that were ultimately irrelevant," Qian said. "In addition, the plotline was very confused, with too many twists and turns for Chinese audiences."

The Shanghai studio suggested that Chinese artists rewrite the tale, based on the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) fantasy *Pingyao Zhuan* (Legends of Conquering Monsters).

The BBC agreed but later quit the project over financial concerns.

Having already taken advantage of one-third of total funding, the Shanghai studio decided to fully finance the movie and assigned Qian and Wang Shuchen, another veteran animator, to codirect it.

Looking for inspiration, Qian and the crew went to Chengde, in the northern Hebei province, where China's largest surviving royal garden and some Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) royal temples are located. They stayed there for more than two months, interviewing monks and sketching ancient complexes.

Due to its blend of Chinese culture, impressive characters and light moments, *Secrets of the Heavenly Book* has been hugely popular since it premiered in 1983.

It has been rebroadcast many times, and scores 9 out of 10 on China's popular film review site Douban.com.

But the fortunes of Shanghai Animation Film Studio, most of whose productions were box office hits until the 1990s, began to wane as rapid changes started to take place in China.

Li Baochuan, an animation history expert at Hangzhou Normal University in the eastern Zhejiang province, said the studio's activities slowed as it has faced a lack of direction and a shortage of talent.

This is mainly because since reform and opening-up policies were introduced in the 1970s, Chinese mainland enterprises have been radically overhauled, having to at least partially make ends meet independent of State support.

"In the early days the studio's bosses and animators were all top talent," Li said.

However, many great animators left in the late 1980s, lured by much

more attractive financial rewards offered by privately owned animation companies in Hong Kong or Taiwan with offices in Shenzhen.

"In Shanghai most animators were earning about 300 yuan (\$45) a month, whereas in Shenzhen they were earning 10 times that. In fact, the best of them could earn 10,000 yuan a month."

However, the careers of those who took the well-paid jobs were hampered because most were employed to do lower-end tasks.

"Western animators were brought in to design the roles and sets, which are the most creative, significant part of an animated production," Li said.

"The Chinese animators were hired to draw the content following Western concepts. Such work is highly labor- and time-intensive, but it does little to improve your creativity."

Speaking of the future of the Chinese animation industry, Qian believes emerging young talent and a focus on originality may bring a revival.

Su Da, one of the studio's fastest-rising young directors, exemplifies his hope. Her latest animated feature, *Dear Tutu*, has become popular among family audiences since it opened across the country on July 28. The 90-minute-movie is a tribute to the 60th anniversary of Shanghai Animation Film Studio.

Dear Tutu tells of a naughty boy who wins a cooking competition, and is based on a popular 130-episode animated TV series that has aired since 2004.

Su has spent five years polishing the stories, and said she has been inspired by her son and supported by her father, Su Taixi, an artist in Nanjing in East China's Jiangsu province who designed some of the 200-odd characters.

Su Da, who has worked in the Shanghai studio since the mid-1990s, said she hopes to continue the studio's distinctive tradition: To highlight Chinese elements in the movie.

"Tutu's tale reflects the everyday lives of Chinese families and expresses Chinese emotions. With some of the designs inspired from traditional art forms such as paper-cut and shadow puppet, we hope the movie has a unique aesthetic style."

The biggest challenge for the Chinese animated industry is a lack of "highly competent hard-working people and a good environment for creation", she said.

Chinese animators should look to their Hollywood counterparts as models, people who are totally dedicated to turning out quality works.

"Animation is a very time-consuming thing, and if we want to produce something good enough to develop into a franchise, one thing we need is patience."