

URBAN LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ANIMATION

Background

Animation or 'fine art film' has been an important aspect of China's visual mass culture for decades. Since the 1980s diversification of the market and the advent of digital technologies has allowed the medium to become more diverse than ever before.

Key Issues

I argue that contemporary animation is a uniquely urban art form; it thrives in the interconnected multi-platform environment of the city. What role does animation play in the post-socialist Chinese city, and what role does the city play in Mainland Chinese animation?

Significance

China is rapidly becoming an urban country – since 2012 over 50% of the population have lived in cities. Animation is an expressive and adaptable medium, which makes it an important lens through which to explore Mainland China's urban transformation.



There are so many uncertainties and possibilities to be imagined in such a dynamic and lively space as the city's borderlands. What some might call surrealism is often the reality there... The cultural landscapes of the city's edges and the people who live there are one of the main sources and inspirations for my work.

Liu Jian 刘健, Animator

Methodology

- Primary Source I: animations watched on CD/DVD, at screenings and exhibitions, and online.
- Primary Source II: interviews with practising animators about their work and the significance of the urban.
- Secondary Sources: academic and cultural texts across a wide range of disciplines, including art history, animation studies, film studies and urban studies.

Findings

- Though animation is everywhere in Chinese cities, cities do not always feature prominently in Chinese animation. Most mainstream animated films are still set in pastoral/fantasy settings.
- The urban is mostly portrayed in 'new media' or avant-garde animation, as well as small-screen online animation made by students and amateurs. These animations often make use of abstract, surreal or symbolic imagery to express the subjective, non-indexical realities of urban life.
- Fantastic and futuristic imagery features heavily. Human figures are overwhelmed by their urban environments.
- There is a preoccupation amongst practitioners with the 'Chineseness' of Chinese animation; many are concerned that their work is either too transnational or otherwise fails to tell contemporary stories that will truly resonate with Chinese audiences.

Challenges & Limitations

- My research focussed on the work and opinions of individual artists and critics rather than broader trends or larger organisations.
- I approached the topic from an animation studies rather than an urban studies perspective, which inevitably limited the scope of my knowledge about the broader effects of urbanisation in China.
- During the study I only visited the Eastern, coastal cities of Shanghai and Beijing. Although I spoke to artists from further afield, I was presented with a highly developed and transnational image of contemporary Chinese visual culture.
- I spoke to animation practitioners rather than audiences. I might get a wholly different perspective from the other side — perhaps audiences are totally uninterested in watching urban animations.

Further Research

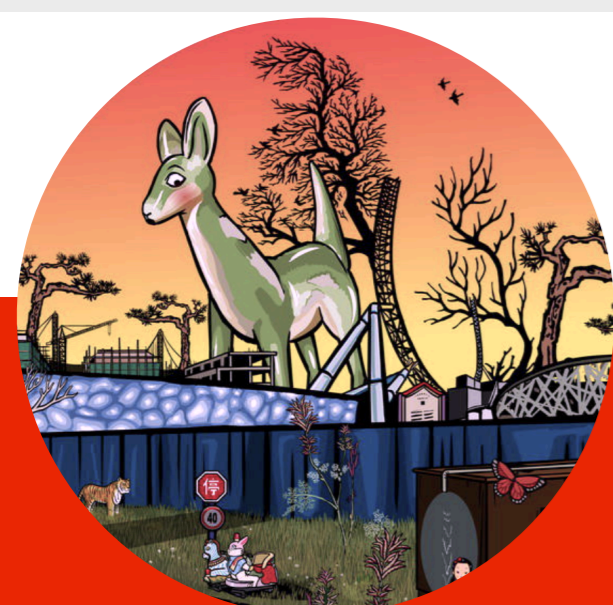
- A fruitful next step would be to approach the topic from an urban studies perspective and to explore it using a different methodology.
- A wider pool of primary resources could offer a broader range of insights. For example, an increased investigation into Mainland China's 'second' and 'third-tier' cities is needed, as is a study of urban animation in Hong Kong and Taiwan, which differs greatly from that of Mainland China.
- This project primarily focussed on auteur animation created by individuals. An analysis of animations created for mass entertainment, propaganda, public service or advertising purposes could yield interesting results.
- I could also further explore some of the conceptual divisions I discovered within Chinese animation, e.g. between 新媒体艺术 ('new media art'), 美术电影 ('fine art film'), 卡通 ('cartoons') and 动漫 ('manga and anime').



Above: A still from 'the Spring of Huangjueping' by Zhang Xiaotao (2016)



Above: A still from 'Savage Growth' by Bu Hua (2008)



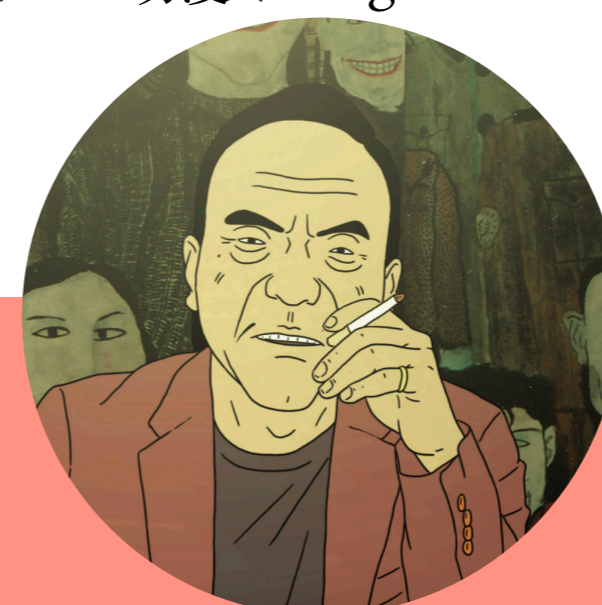
BU HUA 卜桦

Bu Hua has been producing animation since the early days of Chinese online video-sharing. Her animation is bright and cartoonish, but deals with serious themes such as urban demolition and relocation.



ZHANG XIAOTAO 张小涛

Zhang Xiaotao is a fine artist from Sichuan. Originally a painter, his most recent works use experimental animation to convey the realities of life in post-socialist China using symbolic and expressionistic imagery.



LIU JIAN 刘健

Liu Jian won Mainland China its first Grand Prix at Annecy International Animation Festival with his feature *Piercing I* about migrant workers during the 2008 financial crisis. Liu Jian created the film almost single-handedly.



Laidlaw Scholars

Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

