

# Invented Visual Traditions and *Donghua* in Postwar China<sup>\*</sup>

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## 1. Introduction: Defining Chinese *Donghua*

It is no simple task to study the etymology of today's animation, which includes a broad range of not only main-stream commercial animation, but also those considered to be more experimental. To trace animation to its origins becomes complicated as our exploration must take into consideration how so large a quantity of animated films are produced within such vastly different socio-cultural contexts. Chinese animation stands as a particularly strong example: adopting newly introduced Western

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media technology and applying it to their specific realities, such as rapid urbanization or acts of war during the early twentieth century, China is now placed to contend for first place in the global animation industry. At each moment within their history, Chinese animated films were designated by different names which indicate and define specific artistic animation forms: in Republican China *katong*, a transliteration of the English word “cartoon,” was in popular use so that the first Chinese feature animated film entitled *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) was advertised as a “sound *katong*.” After the 1949 foundation of People’s Republic of China, Chinese animation was given a new name which perfectly corresponded to the new era. Te Wei, who was one of the most prominent animators in China and later became the head of state-owned Shanghai Animation Film Studio in the late 1950s, coined a generic term *meishu dianying*, which is a compound word of “fine arts” and “cinema,” to embrace varied genres of animated forms from the classic cell-animated films to ink-painting animation, paper-cut or paper-folding animation, puppet animation, etc. Among them, Te Wei particularly proposed to call cell animation *donghua*, which literally translates to “moving pictures” in Chinese, in order to distinguish conventional hand-drawn technique of cell animation from those of non-drawing stop-motion animations.

In fact, the term *donghua* has multiple layers of transcultural routes, originating from the Japanese term *dōga*. Simply put, two Japanese animation masters played a major role in the process of transmitting *dōga* from an earlier time period: Masaoka Kenzō introduced *dōga* in 1937 when he set up the Japanese Dōga Institute in Kyoto, and Mochinaga Tadahito passed this Japanese term on to China in the late 1940s (Ono

1987: 83). Mochinaga in particular, holds a unique position in the history of both Japanese and Chinese animated films. After his significant achievements in Japanese animation circles, Mochinaga traveled to China in 1945 to work at the Manchuria Film Association, which was the largest film studio in East Asia at that time, and chose to remain in China after the war. Given the Chinese name Fan Ming, and credited as director, Mochinaga actively took part in almost every area of filmmaking, including his and China's first stop-motion puppet animation (Ono 1999). When he worked with Te Wei in China in the late 1940s, Mochinaga introduced the Japanese term *dōga*, out of which the Chinese translation *donghua*, a reference to cell animation, gradually expanded throughout the golden era of Chinese animation in 1960s. Today it is the standard term for all types of animation in China (Du 2012: 1-2).

In this article, I will adopt the term *donghua* in order to explore the historiographic trajectory in which Chinese animated films have been engaging, along with the socio-cultural transformation of Chinese modern society in the postwar era, and accompanied by the formation of a national identity within refashioned visual cultures and critiques. By revealing the struggle for the creativity and diversity of animation language, I aim to understand the invisible narratives behind the untranslatable specificities of both terms and the related socio-cultural significances.

## **2. Time and Space of *Donghua* in Postwar China**

Visual culture, whether drawn, printed or photographed, plays an

integral role in human history and thus must be examined in terms of when, where, and how the visualized items were produced and disseminated, and how these factors in turn formed and confined the interpretative space in which they could be “read.” Given the diversity of the social web of human relations, the meaning of any specific image needs to be considered equally discursive, and its interpretation can possibly change with each individual reading. Therefore, a straightforward visual analysis of a picture cannot ascertain an expression of political interest, social status, education level, and the like. In terms of a spatio-temporal topology, images are internally structured to form a certain impression or narrative, while externally the contextual structures control its meaning; and internal graphic structures and external social structures, which allowed people in the past to make sense of what they were looking at constantly reconstruct frameworks, help us in the present to appreciate how those same people looked at an image and used it to organize their environment. The challenge of writing cultural historiography through visual texts thus begins by defining which structures and principles were most relevant to the society in question, and how those structures and principles were understood and configured through the visual text that does suggest the measures people took to control their world (Flath 2004: 150-153).

Due to a lack of understanding of their own socio-cultural contexts, the visual art of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has often received poor reception in non-communist countries, and is easily dismissed wholesale as pure propaganda or routine social realism. However, the PRC’s visual culture certainly has its own functions, aspirations, and

criteria so that we first need to try to see it from the point of view of their concerns, and not ours (Laing 1988). That is the reason I begin this study with the examination of the specific time and space of *donghua* in postwar China where an unprecedented large scale of political changes and cultural reform was abruptly generated.

### 2.1. Mao's Yan'an Style: "New Wine into Old Bottles"

In 1949 when Chairman Mao Zedong victoriously declared the establishment of the PRC at the conclusion of the long conflict between the Nationalist Government of Kuomintang and the Communists, his announcement carried powerful symbolic significance, not only signaling that the nation had broken from its humiliating past of political instability, economic decline and social dislocation, but the declaration also promoted the long-desired peace and unity which was to be achieved through economic production, social development and political strength. Building a "new society," which was the most significant rhetoric dominating Chinese Communist border regions, particularly during the wartime in Yan'an, required the rise of new political-cultural forms as fashioned by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and implemented its ever-tightening rule to reshape Chinese society according to its images in the first decade of the PRC. With the Soviet model before them and ten years of planning and preparation in Yan'an, the Communists moved quickly to put their cultural policies into effect. The Party particularly defined its own identity and affirmed its legitimacy to rule through the visual and symbolic manifestation of state-sponsored political culture. Now they had

to exert this control over all artists throughout the entire country.

In fact, the new host of the CCP-initiated political culture was based on wartime models which were designed to highlight and advance the Party's political goals. Because it was specifically the enormous outlying countryside that carried prominence as the mainstay of national tactile defense against enemy invasion, the resistance potential of the vast peasant masses and the potency of their culture as a propaganda tool was therefore accorded proper attention. In an attempt to reach the illiterate masses inland, wartime intellectuals increasingly appropriated elements from traditional art forms. At the 1938 discussion of how best to communicate with the largely illiterate populace to win support for the war cause, Lao She, president of the All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists, stated the challenge as "the question of pouring new wine into old bottles" (FitzGerald 2013: 11).

Mao's famous speeches at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art contained the same basic guidelines for art under the PRC.<sup>2</sup> Chairman Mao consistently portrayed his party as the incarnation of nationalism and the embodiment of China's hope, always with rural China as its foundation. Calling for the "sinicization" of Marxism, Mao claimed that "national forms" should represent the "fresh lively Chinese style and spirit the common people of China love." Indeed, his famous philosophy of "use the past to serve the present" was put into practice through many varied ways during the time of postwar China:

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<sup>2</sup> See Mao's Yan'an Talks at: [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3\\_08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm)

We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilize the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people.

Mao also pointed out the class basis of art and insisted that art must serve the masses including the workers, peasants, and soldiers. He said that the “rich legacy and the good traditions” in literature and art from China’s past and from foreign countries should be readily taken over as long as they serve the masses. The old forms should be “remolded and infused with new content” to “become something revolutionary in the service of the people.” Further, he criticized that the artists largely have overlooked the “nascent literature and art” of the workers, peasants, and soldiers, such as folk songs, folk tales, or murals. According to Mao, the origin of all art is the life of the people: everyday phenomena, contradictions, and struggles. Based upon the life of the masses, art is to be inspirational and educational; it should be a means of instructing the masses that they can and should strive to improve their lot. Thus, Mao stressed that the artist must be linked with the masses. In Chinese Communist priorities, artists are expected to forego their prior privileged status and align themselves with the peasants and workers:

China’s revolutionary writers and artists, writers and artists of promise, must go among the masses; they must for a long period of

time unreservedly and whole-heartedly go among the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, go into the heat of the struggle, go to the only source, the broadest and richest source, in order to observe, experience, study and analyze all the different kinds of people, all the classes, all the masses, all the vivid patterns of life and struggle, all the raw materials of literature and art. Only then can they proceed to creative work.

The definite criteria of art laid down by Mao in the Yan'an talk can be summarized as the implementation of such philosophy of pouring new wine into "people's" old bottles as to organize art exhibitions, to publish art journals, to promote the study of the Chinese cultural heritage, to send young artists to people's remote villages, and to encourage the masses to take up art by themselves.

Thus, the fundamental principle of Mao's Yan'an style is to be traditionalist in form and socialist in content: socialist content is breaking down the old regime and creating the new nation by waging a struggle to achieve the independence of the masses who have become the masters of their own destiny; traditional form is what is liked by the people of a given country and suits their lasting sentiments and tastes. The important conditions advanced by the PRC as a creative method can be successfully carried out only by the unity of socialist content and traditional form. Therefore, creating works of art which are traditionalist in form and socialist in content fully embodies the CCP's and the Chinese people's spirit all together.

## 2.2. The CCP's Art Bureaucracy: Art for People, Art by People

When the greatest upheaval in modern Chinese history ended with the restoration of order and the birth of hope, the Communist Party shifted rapidly to carry out their long-prepared cultural model since the Yan'an era. Artists from both Communist and Kuomintang areas were summoned to the first National Congress of Literature and Art Workers, convened in July 1949, in order to hear the official policy toward the arts. This event was so important that it was addressed not only by chief officers for the propaganda division, but also by the Chairman Mao himself. At the same time, the Chinese Artists Association (CAA) was set up under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture to recruit, organize, reeducate, and support artists, i.e., “mental workers,” when the government adopted policies that protect them and make use of them to serve the People's Republic to the best of their ability (Sullivan 1996: 129).

It is important to understand the bureaucratic context from which art emerged in the early period of PRC. In her pioneering book *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, Julia F. Andrews clearly pointed out that such administrative structure as three different organizations were activated to promote the Party's policy in the visual arts and control new production and distribution. Among these organizations including the art academy system, the Chinese Artists Association, and the art publishing system, the CAA is the national professional institution based on the exclusive and thus highly prestigious membership. Although it appears officially no more than a voluntary professional organization for artists, the CAA is an actual organ of the Propaganda Department of

the CCP. One obvious function of the CAA was to offer artists the means to professional success by exercising effective control over the combination of its elite exhibitions and its publications, which could offer artists the only means to reach a public audience at that time (Andrews 1994: 4, 7).

Hence, on examining the new cultural field of China and their art bureaucracy, it is critical to comprehend the CAA's main ideological focus, which was openly exposed as well as imposed on contemporary artists. In his keynote address to the Congress in 1949, Zhou Yang, a leading party theorist, was specific about the kind of art that would be given high priority by the party: works considered part of the folk tradition, and of the popular forms like cartoons. Claiming that "[t]he Liberated Area woodcuts, New Year's pictures, picture story books, etc., are all rich in Chinese style and flavor," he placed a strong emphasis on "traditional" forms of art which clearly excluded Western modernism. Another example of public announcement demonstrating the CAA's philosophy in the early days of the PRC would be the 1950 address by the first Premier Zhou Enlai. In front of the staff and students of the Beijing Academy, he had urged them to get out of their studios, take their art to the countryside, and teach the peasants while learning from them: "In the past, the poses of 'models' were adopted from Greek sculptures. They were usually reclining figures. They expressed the Greek idea of the 'sleeping Venus.' Now, the models have to stand up, with tools in their hand. They express the beauty of the working class..." (Sullivan 1996: 131, 133)

The CAA's directivity and activity also changed with the temporal axis

embracing both internal and external background of the PRC. While the political reeducation campaign intensified, undoubtedly helped by the wave of patriotic anti-American fervor roused by the Korean War, the conclusion of the war in 1953 eliminated the perceived need for artists to make military propaganda, thus pointing to a shift from the wartime foundations of the new Chinese art. In China as a whole, the same year was dominated by preparation for the first five-year economic development plan, with a focus on industrialization and technological improvement, which marked an important transition from a rigid emphasis on popularized subjects and forms to the administration of art as a professional, specialized undertaking (Andrews 1994: 110). Consequently, the national CAA became extremely active between 1953 and 1957, particularly in the areas of organizing exhibitions and publishing art criticism, both of which were useful for rewarding the attainments of individual artists and critics. Other artists, more optimistic about the new government, willingly bent their artistic activities to its needs in the first years after the founding of the People's Republic. Indeed, the styles and subjects of the official art were extremely limited. This uniformity in artistic expression is all the more striking when one considers the extremely varied backgrounds of the artists who made the pictures. During the early 1950s, their work briefly converged in a single party-sponsored propaganda style.

To sum up, the cultural field of postwar China enthusiastically reflects two major premises, such as “art for people” and “art by people,” while the latter was even more deliberately cultivated by the Chinese cultural authorities for some years after the end of war. Michael Sullivan, a Chinese art historian and collector, sharply argued that such a tradition

hardly existed in China, but rather the peasant painting movement was an intended creation of the cultural arm of the Communist Party (1996: 147). Chinese peasant painting particularly developed into an organized movement during the Great Leap Forward of 1958, when once again various groups of artists and students were sent to the country to mobilize the peasants for the great experiment of the rural communities. However, this rural art movement collapsed in the chaos and demoralization that accompanied severe famine due to the failure of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s.

### **3. Mapping Visual Culture in Postwar China: *Guohua*, *Nianhua*, and *Donghua***

#### **3.1. *Guohua*. Old but New**

What we should discuss are these two questions: (1) How does our painting accept the legacy of national painting? (2) How do we use the tools we originally had (Chinese brush, ink, color, paper, and silk) to paint new things? This is the problem of how people living now can make so-called *guohua* [...] To paint new paintings you must have new feelings, you must have feelings toward living, laboring, struggling people. Even if painting scenery, you have feelings toward nature, which has close relationships to people and society. To be a great painter, you must have thought and at least a clear awareness of your own work. What am I giving to the people? What do I wish to say to the people? (Ai 1953; quoted in Andrews 1994: 113-117)

The most commonly used Chinese term to describe paintings using the traditional Chinese media is *guohua*. The dictionary definition of *guohua* is “traditional Chinese painting,” though translated literally it means “national painting.” In some contexts *guohua* may be an abbreviation for *zhongguohua*, Chinese painting. In the People’s Republic of China, *guohua* and *zhongguohua* commonly refer to works painted with traditional Chinese pigments on a ground of traditional paper or silk. The terms thus describe the medium and ground of the painting rather than the style. In practice, a range of possible meanings for the term exists, which makes it difficult to translate accurately. Some painters use traditional materials to paint untraditional subjects or employ their materials in untraditional ways. Social realism *guohua* painting is the best example of the genre, that is, nontraditional in style but traditional in materials, so that most *guohua* works executed on Chinese paper or silk with predominantly Chinese pigments (Andrews 1994: 50).

The period 1953-1957 was critical for the development of Chinese art. Once artistic standards were centralized, development of new forms of Chinese socialist realism within limits were encouraged. Opposing both less confident and conservative views of *guohua*, it was announced that the tradition of Chinese painting was not only about its brush and ink but also for its realism to depict the society and its people. Revolutionary China, one might expect, would have had no use for traditional painting, which was considered as an inheritance from feudal culture from the older scholar class. Initially when Jiang Feng became acting president of the Central Academy in 1953, he created a new department to promote a synthesis of Western color and Chinese ink, which he called *caimohua*,

color and ink painting. However, armed with Mao's exhortation of "new wine into old bottles," which advocated the idea that *guobua* was uniquely Chinese with a long tradition, and it remained in the eyes of many far superior to Western art, the Party set out to woo the leading traditionalists and began an attack on Jiang Feng that eventually led to his downfall (Sullivan 1996: 139).

Moreover, the *guobua* painters had to accommodate the new artistic order. They were told to forget about landscapes, bamboo, and birds and flowers, and to paint figures instead. They were seriously forced to draw the model from life under the Party's dogma which even insisted that the ancient paintings, such as Dunhuang art, always made the human figure their main theme, and that landscape was not the criterion for judging the quality of an artist. A new emphasis was placed on figure painting, with fundamental technical training devoted to drawing plaster casts of famous sculptures and human models, watercolor painting, and oil painting. Ai Qing, an eminent poet as well as an active member of cultural committee of the CCP, rejects the traditional means of learning *guobua*, which was to copy old paintings, and instead proposes a method already in effect in China's academies, i.e., drawing from life: "In painting people one must paint living people. In painting landscapes one must paint real mountains and rivers. You must paint your own paintings" (1953).

One solution to the problem of how to make *guobua* relevant in a revolutionary society was to stress the symbolic meaning of traditional motifs: Red stood for the Communist victory, or for the blood of martyrs. Even a naive expression of landscape became politically respectable if it purported to illustrate a line from one of Mao's poems.

Although they were not at all new in themselves, collaborative pictures were created to heap cumulative praise on the new regime (Sullivan 1996: 140).

Largely acceptable generalization about painting in the period 1953-1957 is that young artists learned oil painting while old artists revived *guobua*, which was to be improved by replacing most traditional subjects and styles with modern figurative scenes executed in a realistic mode. Among numerous *guobua* masters during the early PRC, Jiang Zhaohe was famous for employing Chinese ink in a very Western manner. In terms of both the postures and the modeling techniques, his style was unprecedented in the Chinese tradition. Indeed, Jiang's paintings might serve as proof that painting in the traditional Chinese medium could take an extremely Westernized form yet still retain traditional compositional conventions. His way of preserving black outlines seems to symbolize a deliberate link with China's artistic past, as was his habit of setting figures against a flat and plain background (Andrews 1994: 110, 141). In brief, Jiang created with the *guobua* medium naturalistic effects that others might achieve only with charcoal and pencil (see Figure 1).

On the other hand, *guobua* figure painters in the new style thus borrowed useful techniques from the Chinese tradition. For example, Zhou Changgu's *Two Lambs* of 1954 (see Figure 2) is so like Chinese in appearance, which includes the vertical format, the flat white background, the moist brush-touch, that may be found in Chinese painting of previous eras. However, the portrait-like rendering of the face and the new theme of contented national minorities such as a Tibetan girl are all very much in tune with contemporary official art (Andrews 1994: 145).



Figure 1. Jiang Zhaohe, *Telling Uncle Soldier My Grades*, 1953.



Figure 2. Zhou Changgu, *Two Lambs*, 1954.

Expansion of the technical vocabulary to include the more spontaneous ink effects, which are usually associated with the Chinese tradition of *xieyi* painting, was an important step toward reviving traditional painting, since ink on absorbent Chinese paper presented technical challenges not encountered in most Western media. Wu Hufan's *Celebrate the Success of Our Atomic Bomb Explosion* of 1965 (see Figure 3) perhaps satisfied such an obligation in a kind of drastic measures. While this painting of the mushroom cloud is one of the most beautiful demonstrations of brushwork eminently qualified with lively strokes and subtly varied ink tones, to be found during the period, what it executed with casual, lively strokes and subtly varied ink tones, the peculiar and ominous subject matter

unwittingly tells of a destructive shift in art policy and marks the extreme of the *guohua* revival (Andrews 1994: 145, 303-305).



Figure 3. Wu Hufan, *Celebrate the Success of Our Atomic Bomb Explosion*, 1965.

The new *guohua* thus overcame at least three obstacles thought to block development of the old: it challenged national painting methods by drawing from life; and it grew to be universally accepted in its depiction of the new society and its people.

### 3.2. *Nianhua*. From New Year to New Day

It is clear that in the early founding days of the PRC, a wealth of

popular and folk art forms played a critical role in winning support for the new regime. *Nianhua*, or New Year pictures of block-print representation in China would be another powerful example for visualizing the new-wine-into-old-bottles philosophy in postwar China. Whereas Communist artists largely employed cartoons or *lianhuanhua* to denounce their enemies, they used *nianhua* to exalt a new socialist regime and to pay tribute to government policies. While the new *nianhua* campaign initiated by the Ministry of Culture in 1949 was a continuation of the Yan'an practice in one sense, it also differed in a number of ways. Technically, the new prints, which differed from traditional peasant woodblock *nianhua*, were painted by professional artists and then produced by an offset machine to allow for greater flexibility in production and more freedom in design and color variation. Politically, the campaign would now be conducted systematically under the nation-wide supervision of the government. And, most importantly, it now had a sense of legitimacy. Indeed, the *nianhua* reform was one of the most extensive art campaigns ever mounted within the CCP-controlling cultural field to create a shared ideological universe (Hung 2011: 14, 185). Such political reformation eventually brought about the problematic transition from a period in which the *nianhua* print was one of the standard means of mass producing text, to a time when technology and ideology almost eradicated the original means and messages of *nianhua* printing, and refashioned them to remind of an ideal Chinese life, not only in the New Year's season but rather on everyday base.

Although subjects and styles of the traditional *nianhua* vary, a specific protocol has been observed for the time and space of *nianhua*, i.e.,

“when” to produce and “where” to place *nianhua* in the Chinese daily life. As its original name in Chinese is concerned with the specific occasion of New Year’s Day, these images have been replaced at the beginning of each year. The Stove God print is a typical example: also known as the “Lord of the Family,” or the “Master of the Household,” the Stove God is widely believed to maintain peace and harmony in his household, and to make his annual report on the comings and goings of the family to the Jade Emperor in Heaven, which involves the ritual of removing the poster from the kitchen wall toward the end of each year, burning it, and replace with a new print (Flath 2004: 41-43). In general Stove God prints, the calendar framed by dragons appears above and the image of the god himself, and his wife, are below. While the Stove God had been considered extremely important because of his close link to people’s everyday lives (Hung 2011: 188), a 1949 calendar (see Figure 4) depicted Mao Zedong and Zhu De as the twin coins of the revolution, but by proximity to the lunar calendar they invoke the symbolism of the Stove God and his wife (Flath 2004: 143).



Figure 4. 1949 Calendar, Masses Art Society, 1949.

Similar to the Stove God prints, the Door God prints, another staple of *nianhua*, underwent dramatic changes at the hands of the reformers in the 1950s. Like other military Door Gods, the forms of heavenly officials and the five suns are often compressed into a vertically rectangular space. While the heavenly official supports a child in each huge arm with three boys in the foreground, five youngsters actively bestow riches and benefits by holding one or more symbols of success and happiness. However, a new series of socialist designs and themes began to appear, closely following the ideological rules dictated by the state. Luo Cheng's 1955 piece (see Figure 5) speaks a new political language through the conventional framework. The print represents a pair of well-decorated soldiers standing tall at the center and looking straight ahead, each holding a happy child in his arms. Five children around them are now

expressing a loving attitude in a land of abundance as well as ethnic harmony (Hung 2011: 190-191).



Figure 5. Luo Cheng, *Defend Our Motherland! Protect Peace!*, 1955.

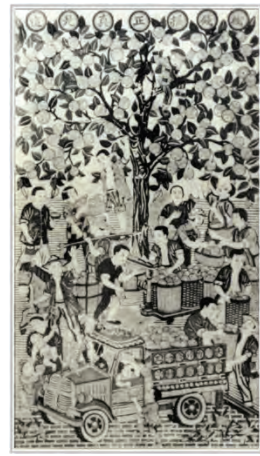


Figure 6. Shi Banghua, *This Is the Real Money Tree*, 1952.

Traditionally a type of *nianhua* known as the money tree, which depicts a tree decorated with coins and gold, was among the village's favorites. The print portrays a fantasy of growing wealth and prosperity. Such an idea did not sit well with the Communist vision of a good society by faithful labor, and thus a new print came out to replace the old one (see Figure 6). Instead of being covered with coins, the new tree is full of apples. The setting is an apple orchard on a collective farm. The picture tells us that we can guarantee good results only through hard work and communal support (Hung 2011: 195).

The state appropriation of a set of folk cultural forms, and the people

who created them, is an important factor in modern Chinese cultural reform. The real push for the official reform movements to produce a growing acceptance of vernacular culture including *nianhua* came with the rise of the CCP and its populist mass line. In reaching out to the vast reserves of Chinese peasants during the Yan'an period, the newly founded arts establishment of the CCP devoted unprecedented resources to make wide use of cultural forms particular to traditional rural culture by placing obvious importance on popular symbolism and media forms through which it was carried. As the very first document to be issued by the new CCP Ministry of Culture confirmed, "new *nianhua* should emphasize laboring people's new, happy and hard-fought lives and their appearance of health and heroism. In art we must fully utilize folk styles, and strive to capture the customs of the masses. [...] new *nianhua* should use them, revise these styles, and make them a tool for popularizing new art," reflecting "not only the wonderful life of Chinese people, but a wonderful future" (Flath 2004: 146, 148).

### 3.3. *Donghua*. New but Old

The emergence of animation in the PRC coincided with the time in 1949 when the Communist troops under Mao defeated and drove the Kuomintang army from mainland China. The Ministry of Culture, under a directive from Zhou Enlai, asked the wartime cartoonist Te Wei to leave for Changchun and form an animation team at the Northeast Film Studio, which housed the most advanced technological facilities, large quantities of celluloid, and leading technicians that had been acquired

from the Manchuria Film Association, which had been the largest film studio in East Asia during wartime. In July 1949, the Animation Division of the Northeast Film Studio achieved recognition as an independent section, with Te Wei as its leader. In order to further develop the animation industry of socialist China, Te Wei appealed to top Party leaders and expressed the hope of moving the Animation Division to Shanghai, the birthplace of Chinese animation, where there existed higher-caliber talent, made up of both older pioneers and younger artists, as well as access to better animation equipment. With the Cultural Bureau granting his wish, the Animation Division of the Northeast Film Studio moved to Shanghai and became a division of the Shanghai Film Studio in March 1950. Later in 1957, officially set up as an independent entity under the control and sponsorship of the Ministry of Culture, the Animation Division became the famous Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the only animation studio in socialist China (Ehrlich and Jin 8-9; Du 70).

With the influence of the 1956 Hundred Flowers Campaign of “let a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought content,” the Shanghai Animation Film Studio took the lead in the golden age of Chinese *donghua* films from 1957 to 1966. In addition to the tremendous credibility given the Shanghai animators by their new official status as the “national” studio, there was an influx of strong encouragement to abandon the foreign model of animation and push to develop their own *donghua* style in order to represent a more true Chinese spirit. During this period the Shanghai Animation Film Studio produced a great deal of quality Chinese *donghua* at a level great enough to attract international attention, specifically based upon the development of a new animation

technique derived from the Chinese traditional art forms such as classical painting and folk art. The major *donghua* works of the day included the paper-cut animation *Piggy Eats the Watermelon* (see Figure 7) and *Waiting for Tomorrow* (see Figure 8), the ink-painting animation *Where Is Mama?* (see Figure 9), and the widely-loved *donghua* feature *Havoc in Heaven* (see Figure 10), which tells the very popular story of the Monkey King based, on *Journey to the West*, and shows the stylized movements and rhythms heavily influenced by Peking Opera's performance.



Figure 7. Wan Guchan, *Piggy Eats the Watermelon*, 1958.



Figure 8. Hu Xionghua, *Waiting for Tomorrow*, 1962.



Figure 9. Te Wei, *Where Is Mama?*, 1960.



Figure 10. Wan Laiming, *Havoc in Heaven*, [1961] 1964.

On the one hand the struggle between the state and the audience, and

between the local market and global capital, continued at the Chinese School of animation since 1949, but on the other, the conception of *donghua* was gradually finalized under the authority of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio which enthusiastically cried out for new national and patriotic sentiments. The discourse of the Chinese School is historically staged in terms which are very similar to those discussed by the CCP concerning “Chinese style and spirit,” a basic doctrine that has dominated all fields of Chinese contemporary arts. Early in 1957, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio introduced the slogan “road to our ethnic style” which marked the theoretical and political origin of the Chinese *donghua* so that the complex relationship between the authoritative, revolutionary filmmaking goals and the individual, artistic endeavors in the early PRC *donghua* films were closely concerned with the principle of national survival rather than with the cultural survival of the animated film (Wu 2009: 35, 38-39).

The tension between what was considered the “foreignness and Chineseness” in animation production has been in existence from the beginning. By using overseas animated film as a reference, but eventually focusing on traditional and ethnic visual arts, the conception of *donghua* was modified and finally realized in a style of nationalization. The classical texts of Chinese visual arts frequently appeared on the screen, since these texts are the literary references that accurately translate the “spiritual essentials” of Chinese culture into animation language. Among numerous cases, special mention must be made to *Where Is Mama?*, Te Wei’s 1960 film, which was much appreciated by global audiences and animation scholars. This unique ink-painting *donghua* animates a verse that

once accompanied a Qi Baishi's ingenious ink painting called *Frogs Croaking out of a Spring for Ten Miles* (see Figure 11), although in the end the story is dramatized ideologically as a journey in search of a missing mother (Wu 2009: 44-45).



Figure 11. Qi Baishi, *Frogs Croaking out of a Spring for Ten Miles*, 1951.  
Regardless of its striking achievement of marking a distinct Chinese

identity on the global stage, it is necessary to trace the origin of ink-painting animation and locate the birth of this art form in its proper socio-historical context (Du 103). The development of Chinese animation did not take place in an isolated vacuum, but was closely related to both the local and the international context. In 1956, China received the first international award for animated films at the Venice Film Festival for *Why Is the Crow Black-Coated*, the first Chinese color animated film. However, to Chinese animators' disappointment, some international judges initially regarded this film as a product of the Soviet Union. Extremely frustrated, Chinese animators felt the need to seek a national style that would be uniquely "Chinese." At that time, the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated and nationalism was on the rise. As a result, the creation of a National Style was not only an aesthetic issue, but also a political one. Besides the revival of *guobua* in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the idea of creating a national style was also inspired by American animated films. After watching some American animated films that were based on oil paintings, contemporary animators came upon the idea of animating traditional ink paintings (Du 111-113, 116-118).

#### **4. Conclusion: A Topology of Chinese Invention of Visual Traditions**

In his 1983 writing, Hobsbawm investigated a modern phenomenon where "traditions" which claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes newly created. Coining the term "invented tradition" to describe a set of cultural practices not only governed by overtly accepted

rules but also infused gradually by repetition, he argued that the peculiarity of invented traditions consists in their factitious continuity from a historic past, which causes a sharp contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to enclose some parts of modern life as invariable. Furthermore, Hobsbawm keenly observed the invention of traditions occurring even more frequently when a rapid transformation of society stirs the social patterns for which old traditions had been designed, or when their institutional carriers no longer prove valid (Hobsbawm 1983: 1-2, 4-5).

As Hobsbawm pointed out, such changes have been particularly remarkable during the last two centuries of turbulence, to which the case of postwar China certainly belongs. As a matter of fact, the Chinese invention of traditions were typically led by their massive bureaucracy to remold tactically selected visual traditions, among those affected are *guohua*, *nianhua*, and *donghua*, as discussed above. Further research is required in order to expand a range of references as well as to apply more interdisciplinary studies of human sciences, such as cultural history and social anthropology, and thus to complete mapping of visual culture in a certain space and time. To begin such additional study I suggest a topological model in order to attempt a macroscopic analysis of visual traditions in postwar China (see Figure 12):

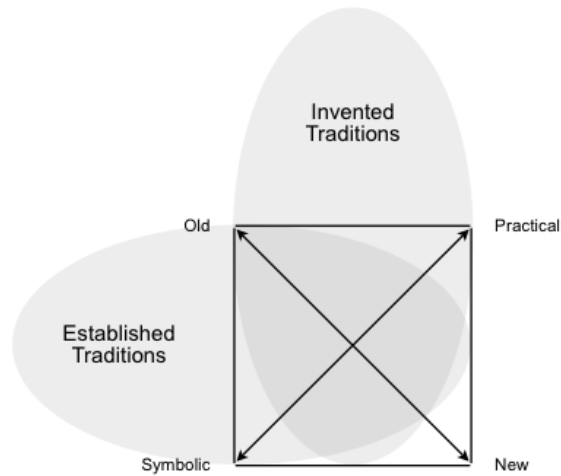


Figure 12. A Topology of Chinese Invention of Visual Traditions.

As Figure 12 presents, there have been two main discourses, i.e., the old vs. the new and the symbolic vs. the practical, constantly conflicting in China during the early twentieth century. I would like to argue that if a large number of traditions in Republican China were established between the old and the symbolic, a great deal of inventions in the postwar years were made by the CCP's art bureaucracy which, on a vast scale, forced the combining of the old and the practical within visual traditions.

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[Abstract]

## Invented Visual Traditions and *Donghua* in Postwar China

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In this article, I will adopt the term *donghua* in order to explore the historiographic trajectory in which Chinese animated films have been engaging, along with the socio-cultural transformation of Chinese modern society in the postwar era, and accompanied by the formation of a national identity within refashioned visual cultures and critiques. By revealing the struggle for the creativity and diversity of *guohua*, *nianhua*, and *donghua*, I aim to map out such invented visual traditions and the related socio-cultural significances in postwar China.

**Keywords:**

invented visual tradition, postwar China, *donghua*, *guohua*, *nianhua*

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